

Kalyāṇa (3 of 5) Beautiful Actions

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Gil Fronsdal

This morning, I'm going to continue the theme of beauty and the beautiful in the teachings of the Buddha. As I said on Monday, if we translate *kalyāṇa* as “beautiful,” which is the first dictionary definition of the word, it brings alive a wonderful perspective of the Buddha's teachings. Buddhist practice is to connect to, awaken, become aware of, and grow what is beautiful. Meditation is to become skilled in beauty.

For today's perspective on this topic of beauty, I want to talk about action – the actions that we do and how the Buddha talks about beautiful actions and deeds. I find it particularly relevant today on Earth Day because human actions have a huge impact on the world. How to we act, what we consume, and what we do with our consumption can cause a lot of damage on this Earth. There is also an opportunity to mitigate or perhaps

lessen the damage we do and allow the Earth to come back to some kind of homeostasis.

Human action is quite important. The impact that our actions have on ourselves is a hugely important part of human life. Buddhism is not only about sitting in meditation and getting quiet. It's also about learning to have choice, wisdom, and care around the actions that we live by. Those actions can be guided by the idea of beauty.

I felt very lucky that in my early years of practice, I was practicing Zen in monasteries in this country and Japan. Maybe it wasn't as explicit as it could have been in my experience, but Zen practice and training had a lot to do with how we did things. There was a lot of emphasis on not doing, having no idea of gaining, not being caught in desires, and not trying to become someone great or wonderful. It was a really deep coming home to ourselves.

But also inseparable from Zen practice, there was the idea of action and doing things. In the monasteries, there was a lot of doing that we did. We would sweep, clean, work, chant, and be together in community. Those things were seen as an integral part of the practice as much as meditation practice. There was modeling and instructions that when we acted, to do it

wholeheartedly and be fully engaged in the activity at hand.

That was a slow thing for me to learn because there were many things I didn't want to do or I would do half-heartedly. I would try to get through them quickly to get onto the next thing. Sometimes people would explain to me what I was doing and would encourage me to be more wholehearted in what I did.

An example would be in Japan I had the job of carrying the food from the kitchen to the dining room table where we ate. There were about 30 monks, so there was one very long, low table where we sat cross-legged. When I brought the food, I would sometimes carry the pot or bowl with just one hand. "No, no, no, Gil-san. Don't do that." If a person is going to carry something, they carry it with both hands as if it's the most important thing of the moment. The idea is to really care for it, really be there for that carrying and not do it casually, like carrying it is an incidental thing. Really be there and hold it.

When you drink tea in Zen, you don't pick up the tea and keep talking. You pick the tea up with both hands, and with both hands, you would drink it. The idea is to do it with both hands, with all of yourself, to really be there. I learned a lot about that in the kitchen in the monastery – to be there fully for the activity of chopping

carrots, onions, or whatever it was. Sometimes there were five gallons of onions to chop, so it was a chance for it to be just me and the onions, just be there fully.

In doing this, something began to thaw and open in me – the resistance, half-heartedness, and impatience I had. I started to find a wonderful engagement. Some people might say concentration. I was fully involved in the activity I was doing that it became really enjoyable as I did it. It became something I got wonderfully engaged in and became free in the process of the action. My actions started to feel, at least from the inside out, beautiful.

Sometimes I'd see other people in the Zen monasteries and watch how they swept, ate, or did certain things. There was a sense of beauty, elegance, and simplicity. Some people would do heavy work, and you had a feeling that when they engaged in the heavy work, no extra muscles were used. They were there and doing it in a complete way, but there was no extra, unnecessary strain.

It turns out in the teachings of the Buddha, action (*kamma* or karma) is really key. The Buddha said that there were three kinds of actions to care for – actions of body, speech, and mind. What we think is an action. It's not just physical action that's important. The teachings of karma are teachings about action – that our actions

of body, speech, and mind have consequences. We can be the caretakers of those consequences. If we want to have good consequences, then do good karma or good action. If we want bad karma or bad consequences, then do bad consequences, bad karma, or bad actions. That's usually how it's talked about – good and bad. If you read the suttas, it's peppered with the Buddha talking about good and bad karma or at least if he was speaking English that seems to be what he was saying.

There are times when the Buddha speaks about good karma that when it's translated that way in English, it turns out the Pali word for it is *kalyāṇa* – “beautiful action.” So when karma teachings and concerns switch from being concerns about good karma to beautiful karma, there's a very different feeling about what we're doing here. Good has a very strong association with morality and ethics, and that's a magnet for all kinds of cultural and religious ways that we've been conditioned to understand good, bad, right, wrong, ethical, and unethical. It can become heavy very quickly, obligatory, and kind of depressing even – “Oh no, I have to be good.”

But instead, if the language is beautiful karma – to do karma that's good – the Buddha said that a doer of beauty reaps beauty. The idea of karma is an ancient idea in many places and cultures that you reap what you sow. So the actions are what you sow and what you

reap are the consequences of that. And here the Buddha says a doer of beauty reaps beauty. So how does that orient you to your lived life and how you behave in the world if instead of focusing so much on doing good, you're focusing on doing beauty?

Some people will protest that beauty is indulging in something, and that good is where the rightness is, where the duty is, and where we are doing right things for the world and we're supposed to do something good. But, what if beauty is just another word for good? That it can't be good unless it's beautiful?

If we want to do good for the world, maybe there has to be some beauty in it. There has to be some wholeheartedness, fullness, and clarity, where we don't do things with limitations. We don't do things with a burden. We don't do things with resentment. We don't do things with a sense of obligation and pushing, like "This is a heavy duty." We learn how to let go of resistance. We learn how to come from a freedom. We learn to come from joy, inspiration, compassion, and care that are part of a beautiful heart.

So, if you want to do good, why not look and see if that can be done beautifully as well? What would it mean for you to do something in a beautiful way? Perhaps, it can mean that you do it in a beautiful, physical way. People can see you and say, "That's a beautiful thing the

person is doing.” But beauty in Buddhism is an inner beauty. We’re doing it in a way that expresses the goodness, beauty, virtue, generosity, wisdom, peacefulness, and harmony that we have and can discover within ourselves.

The teachings of karma also have the idea of consequences – that there are traces left by our actions in what we say, do, and even think. Those traces can live, for example, in our memories. The Buddha has a teaching that if a person sits down to be quiet, meditate, or lay down in bed, the traces of their actions will come along and visit. If a person has done bad or ill actions, actions that are unhealthy or harmful, then those actions (body, speech, and mind) will come and cover a person over, spread through, and envelop a person, just as a shadow of a great mountain in the evening covers over, spreads, and envelops the Earth. So the sun is setting behind the mountain, and the shadow of the mountain spreads across everything.

The idea of shadow is an interesting metaphor here because it’s not really substantial. It’s not something you can touch. You can see it. It’s really the absence of light. So when we’ve done ill actions, they’ll catch up to us sooner or later. If they’re really bad, when we sit and meditate, somehow the inner psyche will churn up the things that are unresolved, the things that we feel bad about, the things that have created a kind of negative

trace in our memories and psyche. They have to come up and be resolved, worked through, or be disavowed, or to learn something and be changed for the better. But they are like shadows and things get dark.

If we extend this metaphor, it's a little bit different than what the Buddha said, then he uses the word beautiful actions (of body, speech and mind). So, if a person's sitting in a chair or on a bed or resting on the ground, then the beautiful actions they did in the past – beautiful bodily, verbal, and mental conduct – will cover them, spread over them, and envelop them like the sun coming up and shining across the Earth in the morning. This is the kind of pleasure and joy that wise people feel in this life. If we do beautiful actions, then we will have beautiful results. That's a teaching of karma.

So that's for you to think about and reflect on. Maybe that gives you a different perspective on how to live your life and live this life on Earth Day. Maybe it's a day to live in beauty. If that beauty is connected to what's best in our hearts, then I'm sure it will be best for the world as well. May you live a beautiful life. Thank you.