

Kalyāṇa (1 of 5): Introduction to Beauty in the Dharma

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 20, 2020

With this Monday dharma, I'll introduce the topic for this week: beauty. Beauty is not often associated with the Dharma or meditation, especially in the usual Buddhist circles I'm in. Meditation is usually associated with wonderful qualities like calm, concentration, attentiveness, and clarity. To associate it with beauty is something the Buddha did – not very often, but he certainly did. He talked about someone who was proficient in meditation as being, “skilled in the beauty of meditation.” The word here for meditation is *samādhi*, so, “skilled in the beauty of *samādhi*.”

To discover, to align with, or to attune ourselves to the beauty of meditation can be a guide and a support to help us find our way in meditation. To discover this beauty is one of the wonderful aspects of meditation. We can call this “Dharma beauty.” If we want something broader in meaning, we could say “spiritual beauty.” We are discovering and tapping into something important. This can be a companion, foundation, and guide to our freedom.

Certainly, it is freedom from that which is not beautiful. If – not as a moral judgment, but as a felt experience – we actually tune into them, then things like hostility, possessiveness, and conceit can be reference points for what is not beautiful.

But there is beauty. Rather than looking at our inner dispositions and tendencies in moralistic terms, what happens if we look at them from the point of view of:

Are they beautiful, or are they not beautiful?

What is it to live in beauty, sit in beauty, walk in beauty, stand in beauty, and lie down in beauty?

The idea that beauty is an important part of the Dharma is characterized by the Buddha's often repeated saying: "The Dharma is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end." That puts the Dharma right in the context of this idea of beauty.

Often when people talk about the Dharma, they associate it with truth, the teachings, the natural order of things, and even liberation. But there's a way in which things like calm, concentration, freedom, and truth can be easily appropriated as *mine*, as in, "This is the truth." And we stick to our fixed views:

I know what's true here.

I'm calm, and look how great I am because I'm calm.

I'm supposed to be calm or concentrated.

Our practice is so often seen through the filter of self. The idea of beauty doesn't lend itself so easily to being appropriated for self-centered purposes. It's more difficult to think of inner beauty as *mine* or as:

I've attained it.

I've made it.

This is the right beauty.

There's a wonderful, impersonal, non-possessive quality in the notion of beauty. It tends to be independent of our habits of identity, self-reference, and personal appropriation of things.

The word translated here as 'beauty' or 'beautiful' is *kalyāṇa*. The Dharma is: "*kalyāṇa* in the beginning, *kalyāṇa* in the middle, and *kalyāṇa* in the end." *Kalyāṇa* is most commonly translated as 'good.' The Dharma is: "good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end."

Of course, good is good. You can't argue with that. I don't want to argue that good is not good. To call it 'good' is good. But I believe that 'good' limits our understanding. What 'good' means is relatively abstract and vague. It almost needs to be explained further. People might ask, "In what way is it good?"

The word *kalyāṇa* appears in the Buddha's teachings hundreds of times. Most translators translate it as 'good,' and we see the word 'good' peppered throughout the early teachings. For me, when I read the word 'good,' I thought it was nice, but it didn't really touch me in a deeper way. But when I came to realize that the word *kalyāṇa* also means 'beautiful,' and began rereading the teachings of the Buddha – rather than having those teachings peppered with the word 'good,' they were peppered with the word 'beautiful' or 'beauty.' And I had a whole different feeling for the teaching, because as 'beautiful,' it touches my affect. There is a different kind of sensitivity. As 'beauty,' the word is more emotional, and much richer than a word of the intellect.

Maybe the word 'good' is not intellectual, like the word 'truth' is. Asking, "What is the Buddha's truth?" or "What is the Buddha's teaching?" tend to be intellectual questions. But what if we ask ourselves:

What is the beauty the Buddha was pointing to?

What was beautiful for the Buddha?

Can we participate in that beauty?

Can we align ourselves with that beauty?

Can we live in that beauty?

If you go to the Pali-English dictionaries, you'll see that the first definition for the word *kalyāṇa* is 'beautiful.' But it also means things like 'virtue' and 'virtuous,' 'good'

and ‘goodness,’ ‘excellent’ and ‘excellence.’ It has a richer range of meanings.

If you go to the Sanskrit-English dictionary, *kalyāṇa* has an even wider range of meanings. I’d like to read that list: “beautiful, agreeable, illustrious, noble, generous, excellent, virtuous, good, beneficial, salutary, auspicious, happy, prosperous, fortunate, and lucky.” Wow, that’s pretty cool! It’s a great list. As in the Pali, ‘beautiful’ is also the first definition in the Sanskrit-English dictionary. There is something about ‘beautiful’ that encompasses, and is very inclusive of so much more.

I like it because it connects this concept of *kalyāṇa* to our human sensibility and experiences, which are much more holistic than the abstract ideas of philosophy, metaphysics, or even ethics. Beauty is an experience of perception, affect, and feeling – not just intellect. The word *kalyāṇa* is also closely associated with virtue and inner goodness. It’s not simply a piece of art that is aesthetic and beautiful, but is related to something very personal – something deep inside, which we can experience.

As my thinking and reading of these texts went in the direction of discovering that the word *kalyāṇa* can mean ‘beautiful,’ for me, this brought to life a very different experience of the Buddha’s teachings. It gave me an

appreciation for what happens in meditation, and what happens as we live our life in a deeply connected way.

A year and a half ago, I found myself strongly drawn to the Navajo concept of “walking in beauty.” Every time I heard the expression, it excited me. It awoke something. It resonated with something in me. Then finally, after letting it percolate in my mind for a long time, I read something about what the Navajo say about this idea. To my surprise, it is at the center of their religious life. I can’t accurately pronounce *hózhó*, the Navajo word translated as ‘beauty,’ although I tried to listen to a Navajo speak it so that I could say it. When the Navajo describe what it means in English, they have a whole series of words, including: “virtue, harmony, the natural order, and goodness.” *Hózhó* includes many words that are really rich. Since many Navajo speak English, they choose ‘beautiful’ to represent the word into English. They also apparently use the same word as a translation for both ‘art’ and ‘religion.’ It’s amazing to have art and religion associated with beauty.

I was excited by this, and wondered where in the Buddha’s teachings one might find a word with such a wide range of holistic meanings, and which also means ‘beautiful.’ For a while, I tried out *dharma*; I thought maybe *dharma* could do that. It has many, many meanings. So I cast about a little bit, and then discovered that the word *kalyāṇa* can mean ‘beautiful.’ I

thought, “Wow!” It came alive for me. I really came to appreciate the rich, emotional, aesthetic, and subjective associations that come with the word ‘beautiful.’

Beauty is not something that is just objective, like the truth, or the Buddha’s teachings. It’s not too subjective either, like taking it as *mine*. It exists in this wonderful interface, which seems not quite personal, but not impersonal either. It’s something almost larger or deeper than self, but certainly deeply connected to subjective experience – to discover, to sit, to practice in the Dharma, and to begin finding what’s beautiful within.

One of the potentials of the Dharma is to be able to discover what’s beautiful outside of us, to have eyes – the inner eye and the physical eye, which are able to see what’s beautiful. Certainly for me, over these years of practice – because of this Dharma practice – I feel much more in touch with what’s beautiful than I ever knew growing up. I was in touch with beauty, but to now have this clear word for it in the Dharma has made it much richer. It is something that I can now relate to more, embody more, and use as a reference or as a teacher in a wonderful way.

I’d like to end by saying that the word ‘beautiful’ gives us a unique and very important orientation to Buddhism, Buddhist practice, and mindfulness practice. Today was meant to be an introduction to the Pali word for

‘beautiful.’ Hopefully the introduction was beautiful enough. We’ll talk more this week about different aspects of it as we go along.

In the meantime, if you’re interested, you might spend part of the next 24 hours reflecting on your relationship with the word ‘beautiful,’ on what I’ve said, and on the idea of living in beauty. What would it mean if you could live in beauty? You could speak with some friends or people you respect, or whose points of view you value. You could ask them what they think “living in beauty” might mean.

Thank you. Until tomorrow.