

Beauty and Transformation

Dr Sāgaradevī Barratt

To Cite: Barratt, S. 2024. Beauty and Transformation. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/beauty-transformation-s%C4%81garadev%C4%AB-barratt-f1gxe>. 26th August 2024.

What is it possible to say about beauty?

I have never had to prepare a talk where the subject so swiftly moves beyond my grasp every time I try and pin it down!

But perhaps the ungraspable nature of beauty is a good place to start – beauty is something we can seek to understand and experience more deeply but it cannot be pinned down. I don't want you to feel that during this talk I am going to tell you what beauty is. I intend to explore beauty and we might become more beautiful but what I hope is that this talk is a doorway to your own exploration of beauty. There is not going to be a test on what beauty is, so don't feel you have to capture every word I am saying!

This talk has three sections: I'm going to start by looking at what beauty is; then move onto looking at the significance of beauty for transformation before thinking about how we can develop greater sensitivity to beauty and become more beautiful.

Part 1

Within society at the moment we often hear the term beautiful to describe something that is aesthetically pleasing. This is particularly the case with describing beautiful women, beautiful clothes, beautiful houses. The term has come to be used rather superficially often capturing a specific 'look' usually associated with wealth, youth and what might conventionally be described as 'success'.

Looking at dictionary definitions we find beauty as something that is 'pleasing and attractive' (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.); 'a combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight' (Oxford Dictionary n.d.); 'the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else (as a personality in which high spiritual qualities are manifest)' ([Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) n.d.).

These definitions cover different ways of understanding beauty – ranging from sensory pleasure to spiritual qualities. The last definition in particular starts to point to something a little deeper. And I think despite the way the term is often used conventionally, we all have had some glimpses of deeper experiences of beauty – maybe in nature, with a loved one, a child, looking at a work of art, perhaps even in sad or poignant situations such as funerals. What is it about certain moments or objects or people that mean we find them beautiful? It goes beyond finding something pretty or pleasureable – but what is going on when we experience beauty?

I offered to give this introductory talk on beauty because beauty, particularly the beauty of nature that I experienced watching the moon on the sea as a young person, ignited in me my first sense that all was not quite as it seemed with this life. That there was some deeper truth about the nature of our being. Then at 19 in the beauty of Uganda this wonder was reignited in me. The deep red earth, rich succulent greens and boundless freedom of being 19 and in such a different environment fractured the highly driven academic world I had built for myself in the UK. It felt as though contact with beauty revealed flashes of the deep mystery of my being, it cracked through the façade of my day-to-day experience and made me question the nature of reality, sparking a deep and urgent need for truth that grows in me still.

What is it about beauty that breaks down and takes us beyond our day to day experience? I find the words of Ben Okri really helpful here for making sense of experiences of beauty. He states: '*Beauty leads us all, finally, to the greatest questions of all, to the most significant quest of our lives' (in a Time for New Lives)*'. In an interview with Granta (Okri and Vogel 2011) he develops this saying:

'Whenever we use the word beauty or we feel it, it comes from a sense of something indefinable. The mind can't quite pin down what it was that created that emotion or feeling. It is intangible; a poignant and haunting feeling that reaches places in you that you can't grasp or touch. It is as if some sleeping

self wakes for a moment and expresses a note of wonder at something. It is that note of wonder that does it. Suddenly you become aware that you are more than what you thought you were. You feel a certain sweet inwardness, suddenly sense that the house has more rooms in it than you thought. That is what poetry does. That is what beauty does.'

I hope so far that I have made a convincing case that there is something potentially transformative about the experience of beauty and the emerging sense of wonder and awe that accompanies it. And that this goes far beyond finding some something 'beautiful' in the conventional sense. I will now draw on the work of Sangharakshita, who wrote an essay about beauty and how it might support us to move towards enlightenment.

Part 2

Even if you have only been coming to the Buddhist Centre a little while you may have noticed that there are many different ways of describing the Buddhist path. Lots of different lists and concepts that are all methods of progressing towards the same goal. Sangharakshita encourages us to think of beauty as a doorway through which one can pass to the freedom of enlightenment. That we could think of a spiritual path *'in which the goal is envisaged in terms of ideal beauty and the path in terms of increasing love for that beauty'* (Sangharakshita 2017). He recognises that although this idea is not prominent in historical Buddhism this connection between beauty, love and truth is well recognised in Western literature and by philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus.

This path of beauty can be understood as deepening sensitivity towards and experience of different degrees of beauty *'from the sensuous to the spiritual, and from the spiritual to the Transcendental'* (Sangharakshita 2017). He describes the story of Nanda and the heavenly nymphs (female nature deities) and how after seeing the heavenly beauty of the divine nymphs Nanda compares the beauty of his beloved wife to a monkey that has had its ears and nose cut off! This does not mean that we need to go around telling everyone how ugly they actually are! What it illustrates is that part of the path of beauty is recognising that any beauty we may find in the conditioned existence, in our everyday world, pales into insignificance compared to the beauty of reality itself, the Transcendental.

Rather than thinking that conditioned existence is 'ugly' it might be better instead to think of it as limited, and although we might be frustrated by this it is important to start where we are. We are not enlightened. We live in this conditioned world with its suffering and although the beauty we can experience here may be limited compared to that of the transcendental, this is where we start developing sensitivity to beauty and becoming more beautiful – here and now. This is a crucial step to cultivating a mind capable of knowing the beauty of reality.

Part 3

Sangharakshita's essay is very brief and short on practical details! And he may well not have agreed with everything I am going to say here but hopefully I don't veer too far from the path he has set out.

I am going to describe four areas of practice that might be important for developing increasing love for beauty:

1. Developing a mind capable of perceiving beauty
2. Allowing others creativity to open the door of beauty for us
3. How ritual and the imaginal can help us relate to the beauty of the transcendental
4. Become beautiful through compassion, ethical sensitivity and action

Developing a mind capable of perceiving beauty

Beauty is not just a description - it is something that is experienced, embodied, lived. Beauty is not a property of an object, or person or place beauty arises in the relationship between the object, its context and the mind perceiving it. Buddhism stresses the importance of how our mind shapes the world that appears to us and we need to be aware of this in our exploration of beauty.

What does this mean? Well, have you been in a situation where a person that can appear beautiful to you suddenly becomes unbeautiful? Or a place you have visited and found beautiful, you visit on another day and it's not the same? For some reason that experience of beauty is absent. If the beauty was solely in the object, every time we saw it we would experience it. But it isn't.

The challenge of this, which is ultimately the heart of all Buddhist teaching, is that we cannot expect to sit back and wait for more beautiful things to come into our life. The question we are faced with is how do I develop a mind that is capable of seeing more beauty, creating more beauty and expressing ourselves more beautifully. In effect – how I do become a source of beauty in the world? Practices which develop positive emotion and wisdom such as meditation and ritual clearly have an important role to play here. Mindful awareness is fundamental. When busy and rushing, beauty is usually distant.

It also worth considering that experiences of beauty can be challenging, alarming and uncomfortable because they might threaten our cherished views about things. We need to cultivate a mind that is capable of transformation.

Allowing others creativity to open the door of beauty

When I was younger I used to have a real problem with people (other than me!) being really good at things. I used to find it intimidating. As I have got older (and hopefully a little wiser!) I have become so grateful for talented, creative people because through their work I am exposed to a beauty that I would otherwise be blind to. It is as though they reach beyond themselves to something that only they could see but then present it to us in such a way that we too can share a glimpse.

Great artists, musicians, dancers and writers have the capacity to pull back the curtain on the world revealing something new to us, opening up what we could not have seen without them. Often beauty is an important part of this experience.

Ben Okri captures this in A Way of Being Free:

'When literature works on you, it does so in silence, in your dreams, in wordless moments. Good words enter you and become moods, become the quiet fabric of being. Like music, like painting, literature too wants to transcend its primary condition and become something higher. Art wants to move into silence, into the emotional and spiritual conditions of the world. Statues become melodies, melodies become yearnings, yearnings become actions.'

Can we allow the creativity of others to change us through these glimpses of beauty?

How ritual and the imaginal can help us relate to the beauty of the transcendental

To facilitate a deeper understanding of the degrees of beauty and the limitations of the beauty in our day to day world, we need to cultivate a relationship with the transcendental and its beauty. This may sound a little strange to some of you. But Buddhism invites the development of our imaginal faculty which enables us to envisage ourselves and the world differently beyond our current framing.

This is not about imagination and fantasy but using our minds to open up a landscape of possibility beyond who and what we currently are. Although on the one hand, at our current level of development we cannot perceive the beauty of transcendental directly we can start to explore what is being pointed to. All the rich imagery of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other Buddhist art such as Mandalas and beautiful shrines are suggestive – they can help to sensitise us to a beauty which we cannot yet perceive directly.

On this retreat we will be engaging with ritual and you will have already seen some beautiful images and Rupa's of Ratnasambhava on the shrine, a Buddha that is associated with the beautiful, abundant quality of generosity. Artistic portrayals of the qualities of enlightened mind help to transform our knowing about ethical principles from being largely intellectual to a more relational, emotional and embodied sense that is more likely to effect change in our actions and attitudes.

Become beautiful through compassion, ethical sensitivity and action

As I have already said beauty is not simply something we can perceive - it is something we need to become. The key way in which we become beautiful is through ethical practice. Have you noticed how you can find someone aesthetically beautiful but then they might do something ethically questionable and this completely changes your sense of them? Describing how we should engage in the activities of everyday life, Sangharakshita talks about the qualities of the Japanese tea ceremony and the importance of integrating this approach in all of our actions: 'everything being done with mindfulness and awareness, and therefore with stillness, quietness and beauty'. What might it be like to eat lunch beautifully? Make tea beautifully? Sit exactly where you are right now and listen beautifully? What does that evoke for you? All of us sat here now, being beautiful?

Taking on the ten precepts at ordination and trying to live according to them has been a surprising source of beauty for me. Rather than the precepts being an opportunity for living 'right' or 'being good' they have been an invitation to live in alignment with beauty. To allow beauty to find expression through me and my actions in the world. Seeing others transform their ethical actions is also profoundly beautiful.

And what of compassion? Perhaps it is this that is most beautiful of all. It arises in response to suffering and flows more and more strongly as the nature of our deluded predicament becomes clearer to us. Maybe beauty opens up a greater space within us into which more and more compassion can flow. And this mutual allowing of compassion and beauty shapes us into more ethical beings, wiser beings, more loving beings, more beautiful beings and before we know it - enlightened beings.

References

- Cambridge Dictionary n.d. Beauty. Accessed 20th August 2024 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/beauty>.
- [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beauty) n.d. Beauty. Accessed 20th August 2024 <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beauty>
- Okri, B. 2011. A Time for New Dreams. London: Random House
- Okri, B. 1997. A Way of Being Free. London: Phoenix House
- Okri, B and S. Vogel. Interview: Ben Okri. Granta. April 7, 2011. Accessed 20th August 2024 <http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/Interview-Ben-Okri>
- Oxford Dictionary n.d (via Google). Beauty. Accessed 20th August 2024 <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=beauty+definition>
- Sagharakashita, 2017. Green Tara and the Fourth Laksana. Accessed 20th August 2024 <https://www.sangharakashita.org/articles/green-tara-and-the-fourth-laksana>