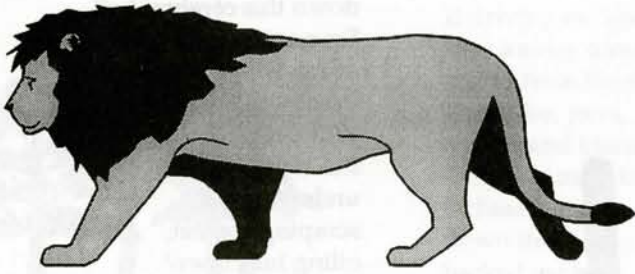


LIONS IN THE WILDERNESS:

EARLY BUDDHIST APPRECIATION OF NATURE

By Andrew Olendzki



This article is extracted from a paper presented on March 9, 1996 at the Harvard Conference in honor of retiring professor Masatoshi Nagatomi.

In East Asia, Buddhism became easily identified with nature poetry—especially in the Ch’an and Zen traditions. The Buddhist concern for being fully present in the moment harmonized nicely with the Chinese poetic tradition of evoking a concrete natural image in touching detail. And in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, the Buddhist teaching of the thorough impermanence of all beauty and of the mysterious deep calm pervading the cosmos both contributed exquisitely to the poetic expressions of such sentiments as *aware* and *yugen*.

But somehow one does not hear so much about nature poetry in the early Buddhist tradition in South Asia, by which I more specifically mean the literature of the Pāli Tipiṭaka.

How could the aesthetic appreciation of nature play any role in the path to enlightenment outlined in this literature? Surely the thorough distrust of all sensory data, along with the pervasive themes of asceticism and renunciation, are so strong in the teachings of Gotama and his immediate followers that even this subtle form of pleasure might be condemned as an insidious outrider from Māra’s domain.

Right at the start, the entire sensory world is recognized as being in flux, and the Indian response to this characteristic of impermanence is not poignant appreciation but full confirmation of *dukkha*—of the suffering and unsatisfactory nature of the phenomenal world. Change is not to be relished, but deplored. This is evident in the standard catechism, coming up often in the Tipiṭaka, which invariably links impermanence and suffering:

“What do you think, monks: Is [the world] permanent or impermanent? Impermanent, Sir. And that which is impermanent, is it suffering or happiness? Surely it is suffering, Sir.” [MN 22.26]

This theme is pervasive: The very changeability of all phenomena, so evident upon a close examination of the natural world, is definitive and even fearful proof of the utter unsatisfactoriness of the world. It is a primary motivation for turning away from the world of the senses and pursuing a life of renunciation. Indeed, this is the very insight that first set Prince Siddhattha on his path to awakening.

Another dramatic confirmation of the potential dangers of the beauty displayed by nature is found in the second noble truth itself, which identifies craving (*tanhā*) as the essential cause of suffering. The word *nandi* or “delight” is often used to describe the “lure” that draws one in to craving, the “hook” that catches and holds one fast, or the “snare” used again and again by Māra to seduce the deer of the forest or the unwary bhikkhu. The word *nandi* is basic to the very definition of suffering in all the explications of the second noble truth. When the question is asked, “What is the noble truth of the arising of suffering?” the answer invariably follows:

“It is craving, which...is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that.” [MN 141.21]

If one delights in this and that wonder of the natural world, then is one hopelessly caught in craving and suffering?

The plot thickens as one enters into some of the details of the Buddhist cognitive model of experience, where pleasure of any kind is so often the immediate cause of craving and therefore of suffering. As the matter is put in one of the classic psychological texts, *The Six Sets of Six*, for example:

“Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises; the meeting of the three is contact (*phasso*); conditioned by contact there is feeling (*vedanā*); and conditioned by feeling there is craving (*tanhā*).” [MN 148.9]

The cognitive model expounded in the Pāli texts clearly links all experience without exception to a feeling—a hedonic tone of either pleasure or pain or neutrality—which in turn conditions our further response of craving. This craving can of course be of two sorts: When a pleasant feeling arises we crave for its continuance and grasp after the pleasure; and when it is an unpleasant feeling that arises we crave for its cessation and react against the displeasure by responses of denial, anger or aversion. Either way the experience of pleasant feeling leads directly to the manifestation of craving, and this is why responses such as delight (*nandi*) are viewed with such dismay. It is this pleasure itself which fuels the desire for more pleasure, and captures us in the net of craving and grasping.

This point is also driven home in the many explanations of the doctrine of interdependent origination where craving is said to be immediately conditioned by feeling.

Finally, we should recognize that one of the key strategies for liberation, as reflected in the Pāli texts, is the “turning away” (*nibbindati*) from sensory pleasures, the “giving up” (*pajahati*) of delight in this or that, the thorough uprooting or cutting off (*chindati*) of the very capacity for the craving that emerges from pleasurable sensory experience. The passages that drive this point home pervade the Pāli literature—here is one example of this type of formulation:

“Seeing [the unsatisfactoriness etc.] of [the world], a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with [the world]. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated.” [MN 22.26]

In light of this context of concern about pleasure and delight, how could there be nature poetry in the early teachings of the Buddha? Surely the aesthetic appreciation of the shape of a mountain, the call of a bird or animal, the fragrance of a blossoming flower, would all be construed as that much indulgence in the pleasurable sensations entering through the eye-door, the ear-door or the nose-door, respectively. Surely the appropriate response by one who has "rightly gone forth into the teaching of the noble ones" is to turn one's attention from such insidious sensory seductions to something more enlightening, like the putrefaction of a corpse in the advanced stages of decomposition, for example. We are reminded of the image of a monk passing through a village with his gaze focused one plough's length in front of him, carefully guarding the sense doors so that nothing too tempting slips into the citadel of his unwavering concentration upon the goal of liberation.

And yet we do find some remarkable and quite beautiful nature poetry attributed to some of the Buddha's most accomplished contemporaries. Most of this is found in the *Theragāthā*, the poems of the early monks, but there are good examples of it elsewhere. Fully one quarter of the verses in the first chapter of this text involve nature imagery. There are exceptionally beautiful poems attributed to Sappaka and Bhuta, for example, two monks who lived on the banks of the Ajakarana river; and Kāludāyīn, the Buddha's childhood companion, evokes lovely images of spring when encouraging Gotama to return to Kapilavatthu after his awakening.

And we find even the Buddha himself pausing on occasion to appreciate beauty, as for example when he comments on the *Cāpāla* shrine just three months before his final passing away at Kusināra: *ramaṇīyaṃ Cāpāliyaṃ cetiyaṃ*, he says to Ānanda. This phrase is usually translated: "Delightful is this *Cāpāla* Shrine!" In fact in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* the Buddha praises the aesthetic beauty of a number of places around Vesāli and Rājagaha, suggesting that such agreeableness might incline a *Tathāgata* to remain in this world for an entire *kalpa*.

How are we to understand this phenomenon in the context of the early Buddhist model of cognition? Is it possible to experience pleasure without getting caught by it? What exactly is the difference between those situations where pleasure gives rise to craving and suffering, and those situations where it does not?

The explanation, I think, is to be found in the fact that—strictly speaking—it is craving which is the direct cause of suffering, not feelings of pleasure themselves. True, that very craving is caused by and dependent upon feelings of pleasure that arise from experience through the sense doors, but it is precisely the accomplishment of the *arahant* that she or he is able to sever this link—she is able to experience a pleasant feeling without that giving rise to a corresponding craving for the pleasant feeling to persist.

The root of craving that has been extirpated by the *arahant* is not the pleasant feeling itself, but the underlying tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion which in most people are triggered by the pleasant feeling. Feelings give rise to cravings, in the teaching of interdependent origination, for example, but only when the underlying tendencies or unhealthy roots are present. For the *arahant* who has extinguished in herself the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion, a pleasant feeling can be experienced—and yes, even appreciated—without providing the conditions sufficient for the arising of craving, grasping and suffering.

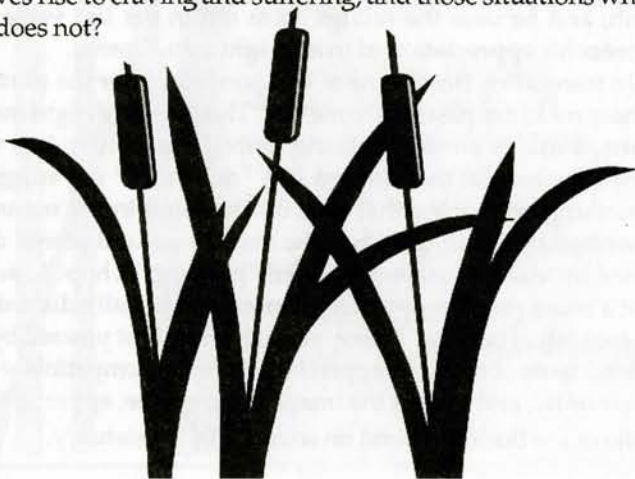
Such a moment of appreciation—for a natural scene, for example—would be characterized by mindfulness and clear comprehension, the conscious awareness of a pleasant visual or auditory sensation arising in dependence on specific objects of visual or auditory experience, and would be held with absolute equanimity.

This last point is important. Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is described as that quality of mind so perfectly centered and balanced that it is drawn neither towards nor away from any particular object of experience. If the moment of noting with appreciation a beautiful natural scene is followed immediately by a moment of noting a terrible pain wracking the body because of old age or illness, the enlightened mind would not be more inclined to the one over the other.

In either case the experience of the *arahant* exhibits a thoroughgoing non-attachment, for the fires of passion have been quenched. Knowing fully with her wisdom that the clouds or flowers or even the mountains are impermanent, liable to change and passing away, created by the confluence of innumerable interdependent and impersonal conditions, does not preclude the mindful awareness of a moment of aesthetic appreciation. Of course there is simultaneously the awareness that the pleasure itself is conditioned and not owned or possessed by anyone at all. The eye, the cloud, the awareness, the understanding and the pleasure are all a passing manifestation and are intrinsically empty.

How is all this expressed in the literature itself? Let's look for a moment at the poem of the monk Abhaya, from the *Theragāthā*. Abhaya leaves stanzas that describe how the mind gets caught in *samsāra* by attending to a pleasant visual or auditory object. The way he puts it is very interesting:

"Seeing a form, mindfulness becomes confused—for one who pays attention to a charming object. He experiences it with an impassioned mind, and stays clinging to it. His *āsavas* increase, which leads further on to *samsāra*." [Thag98]



The pivotal term in this verse is *sati* or mindfulness, which becomes confused because of the attention directed to a charming object (*rupam disvā sati mutthā*). The result of this confusion is the experiencing of the object with an impassioned mind, and the ensuing tendency to grasp after the object. The visual form itself is innocent of all charges throughout this process—it is the stirring up of passion in the mind that is the real culprit.

We often hear in the Buddhist teachings about the difference between wise and unwise application of attention during the process of experience—*yoniso* and *ayoniso manasikāra*. This is clearly an example of unwise attention, which emerges because of the confusion of mindfulness. But presumably if mindfulness can remain unconfused in the presence of a visual object, through the wise use of attention even to what might to anyone appear as a charming object, then the entire process of perception is purified and the *āsavas* do not increase.

Viewing things in this way, I think, absolves the natural world from contempt in the early Buddhist tradition, and allows for the appreciation of nature in Pali poetry. The proper targets of the ascetic's ire are the three fundamental unhealthy roots of greed, hatred and delusion, and the data of experience is only to be so carefully regulated because of its tendency to trigger the eruption of these latent tendencies in the undeveloped mind.

A perfectly acceptable alternative strategy, then, is the thorough development and establishment of mindfulness to the extent that one can see a form or hear a sound without its becoming confused. Once this is accomplished, the *bhikkhu* has nothing to fear from the gentle pleasures inherent in the appreciation of nature, and indeed the remote forest thicket or cave may be the ideal place to tread the path to freedom.



As Rādhā puts it in his poem, "Just as rain does not penetrate a well-thatched hut, so desire does not penetrate a well-developed mind." (Thag 134)

The monk Cittaka says that "the call of the crested, blue-necked peacocks in the Kāraṃviya forest, urged on by the cool breeze, awakens the sleeper to meditation." (Thag 22)

And Devasabha can say that he will "become fully enlightened, without *āsavas*, while ranging in the foundations of mindfulness and while covered with the flowers of liberation." (Thag 100)

Mahākoṭṭhika is able to "shake off unwholesome thoughts as the wind shakes off the leaves of a tree." (Thag 2)

For Rāmaṇeyyaka, "Amidst the sound of chirping and the cries of the birds, this mind of mine does not waver, for devotion to solitude is mine." (Thag 49)

And Vimāla says, "The earth is sprinkled, the wind blows, lightning flashes in the sky. My thoughts are quieted, my mind is well concentrated." (Thag 50)

The final example of early Buddhist nature poetry I would like to look at are some of the stanzas attributed to Mahā Kassapa, one of the Buddha's most eminent and accomplished Theras. Mahā Kassapa's is one of the longer of the *Theragāthā*'s poems, and for our purpose here I have lifted eight stanzas from the middle of the poem. In the section just preceding this beautiful piece of nature poetry, the Thera tells of receiving a food offering from the hands of a leper who's finger fell off in his bowl in the process. Mahā Kassapa relates that he ate the bowl of food anyway, without disgust or enjoyment. Perhaps this stark contrast of themes helps to illustrate the point made earlier about equanimity.

Immediately after these excerpted verses about nature is a stanza, which I do include here, expressing an appreciation of *dhamma* and of *samādhi*. This disclaimer, in close juxtaposition to the praise of nature, is not uncommon in this genre of Pali poetry. It is as if to confirm that the poet is not getting lost in the pleasure and hooked by craving, that all this sentiment on the glories of nature—likened by Mahā Kassapa to music being played on five instruments—pales in comparison to the unsullied pleasure of true insight into *dhamma*.

The poem describes the beauty of nature in the Magadha hills where Mahā Kassapa spent his old age, and each verse has a repeating chorus describing his appreciation of the sights, sounds and textures of the natural splendors around him. The chorus is: *te selā ramayanti maṃ*, which K.R. Norman translates as "Those rocks delight me." But given all that has been said above, I think we need to be careful how we use a word like "delight" in this context. As we have seen, the word most commonly used to translate delight is *nandi*, and this is specifically identified as one of the "hooks" that bind pleasure to craving.

In fact it appears that the verb used in the chorus, *ramayati*, is very carefully chosen by the poet, and may well be reserved for this special usage in much of the Pāli of the Tipiṭaka. Based on the root *ram*—to enjoy, to be pleased or contented—it is the same word attributed to the Buddha himself in his remark about the *Cāpāla* shrine, and is commonly found describing delight in meditation or delight in the *dhamma*. Mahā Kassapa plays with this word considerably in his poem. In addition to its repetition as *ramayanti*, applied to the rocky crags in the chorus, he uses *rammā* several times as an adjective to describe the earth and the call of elephants; he employs the common compound *manoramā*, "pleasing to the mind," for a patch of earth; and he uses the related form *rati* in the last verse to express his appreciation of true insight into *dhamma*.

In translating the chorus of this poem, I prefer the phrase "These rocks are pleasing to me" to "Those rocks delight me." Perhaps this is an unnecessarily subtle distinction; but we should be careful that a word like "delightful" not suggest something entrancing that stirs up the mind in the manner described by Abhaya. When the various natural scenes depicted by Mahā Kassapa are labeled "pleasing," I hope to suggest a more passive—possibly a more emotionally distant—on-looking of beauty. To me, at least, an *arahant* pleased by a refined sense of aesthetic appreciation is not incompatible with equanimity, and evokes the image of the gentle, appreciative smile of the Buddha found on so much of his statuary.

Mahā Kassapa: At Home in the Mountains

Theragāthā 1062-65 & 1068-71

*karerimālāvitatā
bhūmibhāgā manoramā
kuñjarābhirudā rammā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*nīlabbhavaṇṇā rucirā
vārisitā sucindharā
indagopakasañchannā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*nīlabbhakūṭasadisā
kūṭāgāvararūpamā
vāranābhirudā rammā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*abhivutthā rammatalā
nagā isibhi sevītā
abbhunnaditā sikhīhi
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*ummāpuppavasamānā
gaganā v' abhachādītā
nānāgaṇākiṇṇādijā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*anākiṇṇā gahaṭṭhehi
mīgasamghanisevitā
nānāgaṇākiṇṇādijā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*acchodikā puthusilā
gonāṅgulamiḡāyutā
ambusevālasañchannā
te selā ramayanti maṃ*

*na pañcaṅgikena turiyena
rati me hoti tādīsī
yathā ekaggacittassa
sammā dhammaṃ vipassato*

Strung with garlands of flowering vines,
This patch of earth delights the mind;
The lovely calls of elephants sound—
These rocky crags do please me so!

The shimmering hue of darkening clouds,
Cool waters in pure streams flowing;
Enveloped by Indra's ladybugs—
These rocky crags do please me so!

Like the lofty peaks of looming clouds,
Like the most refined of palaces;
The lovely calls of tuskers sound—
These rocky crags do please me so!

The lovely ground is rained upon,
The hills are full of holy seers;
Resounding with the cry of peacocks—
These rocky crags do please me so!

Being clothed in flaxen flowers,
As the sky is covered in clouds;
Strewn with flocks of various birds—
These rocky crags do please me so!

Not occupied by village folk,
But visited by herds of deer;
Strewn with flocks of various birds—
These rocky crags do please me so!

With clear waters and broad boulders,
Holding troops of monkey and deer;
Covered with moist carpets of moss—
These rocky crags do please me so!

[But] there is not so much contentment
For me in the five-fold music,
As in truly seeing Dhamma
With a well-concentrated mind.