

Kalyāṇa (5 of 5) The Beauty of Practice + Q&A

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This is the last talk in the series on *kalyāṇa* – beauty or beautiful. If the word *kalyāṇa* is translated as ‘beauty’ or beautiful, then we see that the Buddha’s teachings are filled with references to beauty. It creates a very different orientation for understanding the teachings of the Buddha than if *kalyāṇa* is translated as ‘good.’ It evokes something that’s more holistic in us. ‘Good’ tends to evoke vague ideas of ethics, morality, or obligation. But ideas of beauty can perhaps awaken, not so much obligation and ethics, but rather something holistic with some connection to aesthetics, emotions, and a wider range of sensitivity. It’s a range of abilities to be aware of and sensitive to that really is tapped into and awakened through mindfulness. Perhaps by referring more to beauty, it’s easier for mindfulness to touch into or be a part of this field of beauty, harmony, peacefulness, goodness, and virtue that can be within us.

The first day this week, we discussed how the Buddha does talk about beauty. He talks about the Dharma being beautiful in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. I think he’s talking here about the path of practice – the deepening and maturing in the Buddha Dharma. It begins by discovering something. For this week, it is discovering this capacity for beauty.

We encounter people who are beautiful friends, *kalyāṇa mitta*. Beautiful friends are those who support us, and point us to the practice. Spend time with a *kalyāṇa mitta*, who knows this kind of beauty. There’s one quote in which the Buddha says:

You should recollect, you should remember beautiful friends in the following way: “It is truly my gain, my good gain, that I have beautiful friends who care for me, who desire my good, who advise me and instruct me.”

In another place where he talks about *kalyāṇa mittas*, he says:

What is beautiful friendship? There is the case where lay people, in whatever town or village they may dwell, spend time with householders or householders’ offspring, young or old, who are advanced in virtue, abounding in faith, abounding in virtue, abounding in generosity, abounding in wisdom. They talk to them, engaging them in discussions.

So here, it’s lay people, people of the world, not even monastics. What makes a person a beautiful friend is that they’re abundant in virtue, faith, generosity, and wisdom. These are beautiful qualities that we all have the capacity to cultivate and develop, and we can be inspired by people that have those qualities. Here we get a sense of what the Buddha puts value in. This is what’s important in the world, much more so than material or athletic success, wealth, knowledge, or even knowing the Dharma a lot. These beautiful qualities of mind and heart is what makes a *kalyāṇa mitta*.

A *kalyāṇa mitta* supports people in engaging in a practice, and one of the ways in which they do that is to establish them on the Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path, the core formulation of the Buddhist practice, is at times called *kalyāṇa lakkha*, a beautiful practice.

Over and over again, there is this idea of beauty as a reference point:

- Where do we look for beauty?
- How do we feel it?
- How do we address and engage in it?
- How are we in harmony with it?
- What flavor of involvement with these things does beauty call upon in us?
- If the reference point is beauty and beautiful, what is that?

I think it calls on and awakens something very precious – a very different orientation.

Sometimes the Buddha talked about good karma using the word *kalyāṇa*. Beautiful karma has a very different feeling than good karma. But we can be a little more nuanced with this. The word *kamma*, the Pali word for karma, literally means ‘action.’ In the teachings of the Buddha, sometimes it really just means ‘action,’ without necessarily any reference point to the idea of karma theory or principles. So you get a very different feeling, if you just simply call it good action, versus acting in beauty or a beautiful action.

Non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion are the causes and conditions for the occurrence of beautiful action. This has a lot to do with the goal of Buddhist practice, which is to come to a place where there’s no greed, hatred, or delusion. The absence of greed, hatred, and delusion is the source for living in the world with beautiful action, beautiful karma.

Becoming established in the beauty of the Dharma, through practice and the Eightfold Path, and then becoming skilled in the beauty of meditation – being in beautiful *samādhi*, the last step of the Eightfold Path. The fact that *samādhi* is associated with beauty is fascinating. It arises when this deep inner capacity for unification, settledness, focus, and concentration is moving towards what’s beautiful. Maybe that evokes a very different motivation to concentrate, than if we were to bear down or focus. The very act of getting concentrated should have some kind of harmony and beauty in it as well.

Sometimes the fourth *jhāna* is called *sobhana*. *Sobhana* is a different word meaning ‘beauty.’ A mind which is settled, peaceful, and focused is one of the most beautiful, worldly experiences a person can have. A lot of that beauty is not so much that we’re creating or making it, but rather, it’s the beauty of absence. It’s just like if you look into a beautiful body of water that is clear, pure and has no mud. We often refer to that as beautiful water. Or it’s like the sky with an absence of smog, and looking out across the land and seeing the mountains in the distance. There’s a beauty of absence, of being clean and clear. Sometimes things that are really clean have a sense of beauty – clean being the absence of dirt.

As it becomes cleaner and more absent of agitation, preoccupations, greed, hatred, and delusion, the mind also becomes beautiful – maybe not so much because it’s inherently beautiful, but rather because of the clarity and the absence of these things that it is so beautiful and nice.

Finally, as we quiet and free the mind from its agitation, preoccupations, attachments, greed, hatred, and delusion, even its fears and anxiety, part of what becomes clear, settled or open – like water, or skies without smog – is awareness itself, the capacity to know or observe. The Buddha talks about there being a beautiful observer, a beautiful witness we have within. In one of the quotes where he talks about this, he does tie it to our ethics. There’s a poem that states that no matter what we do and act on – whether through body, mind, or thought – we can’t really hide from things that are done badly:

There exists no hiding place for those who have done ill.

So if you’ve acted from greed, hatred, or delusion, or have intentionally harmed people, or broken the precepts, you can’t really hide from having done that. The reason for that, the Buddha says, is because:

You, yourself, will know what is true and what is false. You, yourself, will know what you have done and whether it’s ill or beautiful. You, dear friend, neglect yourself in neglecting the beautiful witnessing within.

This capacity to know and be aware is a beautiful quality. When it’s there, we’ll do the moral accounting and the housecleaning that is necessary for this clearing out, and discovering more of this beauty that we have. What we’re discovering through mindfulness practice is the beautiful witnessing within, and the capacity to see and observe beautifully. The awareness itself becomes beautiful when it’s not agitated, preoccupied or limited.

Then we come to a wonderful, fantastic thing: that the beautiful witnessing can witness that which is beautiful – the beautiful breathing, the beautiful sense of clarity, relaxation, and openness in the body, the beautiful qualities of the mind, the mind's capacity for all kinds of goodness, for freedom, for the absence of greed, hate and delusion. This meeting of the beautiful witness, the beauty within, and the beauty without – what a fantastic meeting that is! Beauty meets beauty.

When there's the most beautiful meeting of beauty and beauty, of beautiful awareness and the beauty that's within, something completely revolutionary can happen. Then we can discover the greatest beauty that is possible for a human being – the radical absence of greed, hate and delusion, and the cessation of attachments and agitation. The tradition says it's not a worldly experience like the fourth *jhāna*, which is the highest worldly beauty.

But the radical cessation of greed, hate and delusion then becomes the preeminent source within us. As the Buddha said:

This is the source, the cause and condition for beautiful actions, for the occurrence of beautiful actions.

This idea that how we live our lives in this world is important – to live in the world for the good of all, through coming from and acting from action that's based on whatever degree we have of absence of attachment, greed, hatred, and delusion. That's the purpose of these whole teachings about the beauty of the Dharma.

The Dharma is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end. At the end, it is most beautiful. May you witness whatever beauty that you know and whatever place of harmony, goodness, virtue, unity, and wholeness that you can tap into. May you recognize what's really good and beautiful about that, and let it be the source from which you live your life.

May you practice in beauty. May you serve this world in beauty. Thank you.

Q & A

Participant 1: "Is there a connection between *viññāna* and *papañca*?"

GE: Well, *viññāna* means 'consciousness.' It's a good question, but I don't really know if I have an answer. *Papañca* is the proliferation of the mind, thinking and objectifying the world a lot. Me here and you there. You need consciousness to do that. You need to have the ability to distinguish between self and other. So I guess one requires the other. But what's interesting in the Dharma is that consciousness is not necessarily seen as a great, wonderful thing. *Viññāna* is also not a great, wonderful thing in Buddhism. So it's a little hard for us to translate *viññāna* as 'consciousness,' because the tendency in English is to see consciousness as a neutral, natural, inherent thing of who we are. Then to see that the Buddha sees that as a problem, and we're looking at the cessation and ending of consciousness, that doesn't make any sense in English. So I think there's a problem with translating *viññāna* as consciousness. But *citta* [mind] is never problematic. *Citta* is not caught up. When the mind, *citta*, is free, there are no problems in the mind.

Participant 2: "Are you continuing these morning meditations next week?"

GE: Oh yes, they'll continue. I thought of talking next week about the Buddha's teachings on care, *anukampā*. It turns out very surprisingly that *karuṇā* or compassion does not have the central role in the teachings of the Buddha that people often assume. But there's something else that's very comparable, that holds the same place, and which for me is actually more inspiring than compassion. This is *anukampā*, care – which is more fundamental. This idea is not well-known. So I think I'll talk about that for the next five days. The plan is to keep doing this indefinitely. I enjoy these mornings, and I hope you enjoy them too.

Participant 3: "Is the mind that observes the same as the mind that thinks, or are they separate?"

GE: I don't think that we can separate very sharply the thinking mind from the observing mind. There's no absolute separation there. But it is possible for the thinking mind to get quieter, less abstract, and less busy, with fewer stories. There is a quieting of the mind where the thinking gets simpler. There's still cognition. Some people might call the very simple, rudimentary cognition of a mind that seems mostly to just observe or to be aware as having no thoughts. Other people say that as long as there's cognition, that's a kind of thought. I'm more in that camp. So the idea of pure observation without any kind of thoughts at all is a philosophical question. I don't want

to argue it, but I assume that there is always some rudimentary cognition or thinking, even in the simplest and purest forms of observation. But who knows?

Participant 4: "What is emptiness?"

GE: Emptiness is the absence of something. Human beings do a tremendous amount of projecting. We project our ideas, concepts, memories, and associations onto reality. Some of these have to do with our life story or what's happened to us. Some of it is deeper than that, and has to do with fundamental projections such as: permanence, self, a certain kind of happiness in things, and expectations from things. When these projections stop and we're no longer projecting self and permanence onto our experience, that's when there's a possibility for the mind to relax and let go in a very deep way. This relaxing with insight into emptiness is one of the conditions for awakening.

Participant 5: "Do you have advice on whether to change the leg you have furthest forward when sitting regularly?"

GE: I do have advice, but I don't follow it. So I don't know if I should say it. I think a good yoga teacher will probably say that you should regularly change which leg is in front if you're sitting cross-legged, because of the subtle ways in which the body stretches differently depending on which leg is in front. So you stretch evenly in both ways. I do change which leg is in the front, but maybe only once every 10 or 15 years. So I'm not really following my own advice. I think that one of the reasons I don't do it more often is that there's a settling into the posture that happens, a familiarity and ease with it, that supports meditation. So my advice to switch the legs means that I'm a little off-kilter for a while until I get used to it and settle into it. Maybe I'm a little lazy, or I just like to go along with what I have. I only change it if I feel there's a need, like an injured knee. I'm not very satisfied with my answer, but hopefully, you can find your way with that.

Participant 6: "When caught in an angry thought about someone else, what is the best beautiful practice to focus on?"

GE: For the purpose of mindfulness practice, when anger is strong, I think you need to do something different. There are two general ideas. One is that if you're able to have mindfulness which is stronger than the anger, then the mindfulness practice is to turn and look at the anger. Anger usually has an object, something that we're angry about. The mindfulness practice is to turn the attention around 180 degrees, and look at what it's like to be angry. The reason you're angry is not so important for the purposes of mindfulness. It's important for other reasons. But you're better able to look at those reasons after you've gotten settled and calm, and there's no longer any anger. So turn it around 180 degrees. Look at the anger, and then try to look at the anger without any anger, attachments, pushing away, embarrassment, or shame – almost like you've allowed the anger to be there in awareness. The beauty is in how you're equanimous about being angry and how you look at it. If you can't do that, then sometimes in order to settle the mind so that you can have some wisdom and not be so angry, it might be useful to go find something outside that's beautiful. Go out in nature. Read some Dharma quote or poetry that is beautiful and inspiring. Go find a friend who is nice to be with, and is settling for you. Listen to a Dharma talk that's inspiring. Do something that distracts you or changes your mood and how you are. But don't do this to escape the anger. Do it to simply quiet the mind so that you're no longer angry, and then go back and reflect on what happened. Think deeply about the causes and conditions for the anger, what happened, and what needs to be done. Does anything need to change or to be done?

I think I'll stop. I'm feeling like it's enough. I'm sorry for the people who asked questions and didn't get them answered. I love it that people ask questions. I appreciate every one. I'll look at them all when I sit down later. I want to thank you very much for this.

I look forward to continuing this next week and sitting with you. We'll look at this other aspect of what's beautiful: our capacity to care. Thank you very much.