



The face I had before the world was made

Why art, Buddhism and beauty go hand in hand – a journey in the company of James Hillman, Sangharakshita and W. B. Yeats

The first book to be written from a Western perspective on the subject of Buddhism and the arts was *Art and Meditation*, by the well known German devotee of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Govinda, originally published in 1936. In this he says:

*Art and meditation are creative states of the human mind. Both are nourished by the same source, but it may seem that they are moving in different directions: art towards the realm of sense-impressions, meditation towards the overcoming of forms and sense-impressions. But the difference pertains only to accidentals, not to the essentials.*¹

So in Lama Govinda's view meditation and art are based in equally creative (or *skilful* to use traditional Buddhist terminology) states of mind. The one works by concentrating directly on inner states, the other moves outward to the world of the senses. The common ground is what is fundamental, the difference is one of method not principle. This is an inspiring, holistic way to look at the place of the arts in Buddhist practice. Appreciating or creating art is a way of working on the mind, of cultivating more insightful, expansive and grounded states of consciousness. Meditation, one might say, is the royal road to higher states of being, the mind working directly on the mind. But the arts present a very attractive, engaging means, a tool to work on our mental states by means of impressions 'out there' in the world of the senses; that world to which we are all so attached, so 'hooked up'. By means of the arts we use this attraction *outwards* to draw us *into* a world of meaningfully arranged forms, a world of beauty and significance, which partakes equally of the inner and outer life, and reminds us of who we truly are. This simultaneous movement: towards external sense impressions imbued with a sense of inner purpose and significance is precisely what the arts can do at their best.

Now, this definition might suggest that for Buddhists the best kind of art to immerse oneself in would arise directly from the Buddhist tradition. Here one would hope to find meaningful forms which emerge directly from the creative states of mind cultivated in meditation. There is, or should be, a smooth transition between these two ways of working. However, for westerners our actual experience is not always quite so simple. We may find, for example, that our interest in the tradition of *thangka* (Tibetan icon) painting is a bit limited; those highly stylized figures with four arms or several heads, and strange remote expressions don't move us deeply; meanwhile our love and appreciation of western art, the Impressionists perhaps, is strong and fulfilling.

Further we may suspect that while Monet was not so far as we know a meditator, his water lily paintings, for example, embody and express a highly refined, contemplative state of mind. However, if we look at the arts as a tool for cultivating creative states of mind there is no contradiction. For some *thangkas* may not be a very effective tool; they may be an attractive item to have on one's shrine but they don't stir us in our depths, or communicate deep insights into human nature; they appear to be painted in a foreign language, so to speak. Meanwhile we might gain a huge amount of benefit in terms of uplifting, skilful states by cultivating our interest in Monet, or Rothko or whichever western artists we find inspiring.

However, a word of caution here. Perhaps I have used words suggesting uplifting, refined beauty rather too much. It might start to seem as if only western art which was definitely religious, like a mass by Bach, or produced by someone of a refined and saintly temperament like Monet in his old age, was suitable for Buddhists. In fact one of the great advantages of art from our own culture is that it engages with our often stronger, more instinctual energies and reflects them back to us. A Shakespearean tragedy does this, as it explores the consequences of pride or jealousy, and so for that matter does jazz at its best, with its dangerous, dark power. In respect of insight into our humanity in all of its imperfection, so-called secular art often has the most to offer. Indeed, it has a great deal more to offer than sacred art of the more stereotyped and formalized sort, such as those sentimental paintings of the virgin Mary so popular in Italy, in which the original impetus - of profound experience of the sacred in feminine form - has been buried under centuries of tradition.

So, in an age which is increasingly polarised between the secular world view and militant, fundamentalist versions of religion there is something very attractive about a secular pursuit which may nonetheless express spiritual values. A way of being 'spiritual' without temples, creeds or formalised rituals. This is exactly what art provides in the modern world. You could call this a 'religion of art.' Now, this does sound rather old fashioned, very like something that John Ruskin might have said, that great Victorian writer on aesthetics and the moral life. As if the edifice of St Pancras Station, the masterpiece of the Victorian Gothic-revival which Ruskin championed, were staring down on us from a great height. Wonderful and grand (to my mind it is one of the most inspiring buildings in London) but not to everyone's taste perhaps. I will return to the tensions this image suggests later, but for now the important thing to note is that the keynote of such a 'religion' (let's call it a path of self-

development) would indeed be the kind of disciplined receptivity one needs for successful meditation or prayer. One can in fact train oneself in receptivity to art. By bringing a state of mind and heart that is ready to be changed, you can surrender to experiences of colour, form, language, rhythm and harmony that touch you deeply and leave you wanting to further develop your capacity for sensitive appreciation.

Sangharakshita the founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order, who in is in fact an admirer of Victorian art, wrote an essay entitled 'The Religion of Art' when he was a young man, in the 1950s. At the time he was living as a monk in the foothills of the Himalayas and immersing himself in his Buddhist practice, but also in the beauties of the natural world and of English Romantic poetry. In this seminal essay on art and beauty as a path to self transcendence, he coined an evocative phrase to talk about this conscious training in receptivity. He calls it 'a conscious surrender to the beautiful'. It is worth savouring this phrase, for it encapsulates much of Sangharakshita's thinking about the arts in the Buddhist life.

In the same essay he makes a useful distinction regarding what we might surrender ourselves to. There is a difference, he says, between:

... false art which purveys the stale taste of egoistic human desires, and true art which caters to our deepest spiritual needs, the rich and substantial diet, the unique savour, the unsurpassed relish of emotions, which are an initiation into the mysteries of egolessness.²

By egolessness he means, of course, non-dual Reality, Sunyata or the unconditioned.

So that I would say is the essence of art as a Buddhist practice. One is looking for things that seem to have that 'unique savour of freedom' and taking them in, appreciating them more and more deeply. It doesn't matter if they are 'sacred' or 'secular' Eastern or Western, that is what one is looking for, 'the taste of freedom' to use the Buddha's epithet for the dharma. Of course it doesn't mean you cease to appreciate culture which you find simply to be relaxing and pleasurable in a much more ordinary way. Perhaps 'False Art' is a bit pejorative (Sangharakshita was very idealistic young man when he wrote this!) We all need a bit of pleasure and relaxation. But the point is that we can understand the distinction. Some art makes us feel nice and nothing more. Some art takes us to very special places full of meaning and inspiration. We can seek out the more refined kind of beauty, with its sense of spiritual exhilaration, when appropriate.

So far so good, in theory. But there is a problem which should not be ignored. The kind of art appreciation I am putting forward has sublime beauty as its aim, its *raison d'être*. But there is, in our society, a problem with beauty or rather with our attitudes to it. It is likely, if we are honest with ourselves, that we are not entirely comfortable with beauty as a supreme value. For beauty in the arts often seems to be tainted with a sense of something that ought to be 'good for you'. And at the same very time, perhaps, is felt to be something useless, fey or flighty, not grounded in the gritty realities of life. This ambivalence is immediately apparent in the common reactions to so called 'high art'. That is art that seems somehow remote and unapproachable; all the great masterpieces of Western art that one has found impossible to like – be it Bach, Wagner, Picasso, Tolstoy or even neo-Gothic buildings, the list of possible candidates is endless - and allowed a vague but pervasive sense of guilt, resentment and inferiority to creep in as a result. The rest of this essay will explore this dilemma and various possible solutions or manoeuvres to ease it.

Such mixed responses are not surprising for very idea of beauty comes with an immense baggage from the past. It has been taken up by so many movements, defined in so many ways, going right back to Plato's notion of the ascent to absolute beauty, beyond time and change. Furthermore, our recent cultural history is one of being suspicious of beauty, particularly in the fine arts, regarding things that have an immediate appeal for the eye, or the ear, as being in some way suspect or superficial. For at least one hundred years, since Ruskin's death in fact, artists, academics, critics just about any one with any credibility, have had scarcely a good word to say for beauty, if indeed they have bothered to mention it at all. Even to use the word is to lay yourself open to the suspicion that you are in some way naive, or sentimental and lost in the past. And when it comes to producing art, as we know, modern artists will often go out of their way to produce images which are shocking, even disgusting. The idea that beauty could be an end in itself, something to search for, to make sacrifices for, something of great value, is seen at best, as Romantic indulgence, or nostalgia; at worst as a reactionary refusal to engage with the realities of life, most probably arising from dubious right wing tendencies in one's politics.

So I would like to propose that the notion of beauty could do with being re-evaluated, made relevant once again, and that without it something vital, something necessary is missing from our understanding of life in general, and spiritual practice in particular.

Perhaps we could turn to the poets for help. After all beauty is, or was, supposed to be one of their over-riding pre-occupations. Here is a poem by Yeats, intriguingly titled 'Before the World Was Made', in which he seems to be talking about the act of self contemplation, self adornment, one of the most basic drives for beauty we have. He imagines a beautiful woman, answering her jealous lover, telling him that all her vanity is, in the end, a quest for a deeper beauty, something that cannot be found in the world, her original face:

*If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.*

*What if I look upon a man
As though on my beloved,
Should my blood be cold the while
And my heart unmoved?
Why should he think me cruel
Or that he is betrayed,
I'd have him love the thing that was
Before the world was made.³*

Yeats is suggesting then, that all the tiny acts by which we try to make things pleasing to look at, are more than mere vanity. If we try to adorn ourselves, our house, our garden, we are in fact, even if we do not realise it and go about it indirectly, searching for something that cannot be pinned down and grasped as our own. Echoing a phrase from Zen (Yeats was fascinated by Zen, and had read D. T. Suzuki's famous essays on Zen in the 1920's, sometime before this poem was published) he calls this 'the face I had before the world was made'. And this, I would suggest, is a very helpful move, one we can learn from. Although Yeats had studied Plato and Plotinus (he has arguments with them in some of his poems) he here chooses to talk about beauty in a fresh, direct way: as our original face. In so doing he is bringing together, aesthetically at least, an important strand in our cultural heritage, that of seeing spiritual life as a quest for absolute, eternal beauty, beyond time and change, with

something new: the idea of our 'original face' a metaphor with an 'eastern' flavour to it, challenging, mysterious and stimulating.

Yeats doesn't state it directly in this poem, but if we look at his work overall it becomes clear that he felt that the old Classical idea of eternal beauty was definitely in need of re-stating. He did not want to pour cynical scorn upon those ideas, or obfuscate them with layer upon layer of defensive erudition as his fellow poet Ezra Pound was doing; rather he wanted to look at beauty afresh, find its relevance for the modern age. He did so by exploring in a simple and direct way a conflict that he felt in his own heart between the quest for a perfect intellectual beauty, remote from the world, and something that was impure, but embraced the vicissitudes of life with an open, forgiving heart. In poem after poem he restates, explores, prods and pushes at this central conflict from many different angles. Here is a short excerpt from one, called 'Vacillation'. It is in the form of a dialogue between the impure self and the soul that longs for perfection:

*The soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
The heart. What, be singer born and lack a theme.
The Soul. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?
The heart. Stuck dumb in the simplicity of fire!
The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.
The heart. What theme had Homer but original sin?*

Homer is my example and his un-christened heart! 4

So in this short dialogue Yeats sets out his great theme: should he leave behind the world and seek some sort of perfection, symbolised by the biblical prophet Isaiah, caught up in the fires of God and unable to speak. Or will that leave him cut off from life, with nothing to say, end, in effect, his poetic career? Most often, as here, he comes down on the side of embracing life, symbolised by the pagan Homer and his heroic tales of far from morally perfect gods and heroes. However, he usually closes such poems with at least respectful nod towards Plato and his eternal forms. In another piece he says rather ruefully:

*It seems that I must bid the muse go pack
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things, or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.*

5 ('The Tower')

Plotinus, of course, was Plato's most gifted interpreter, he formulated a theory of beauty that has greatly influenced western culture since the late Roman Empire. But what a marvellous image for the decaying body an old man finds himself in, a 'battered kettle at the heel'. Yeats' reluctant sense that he must give up sensuous things did not last long, and until the end of his life he insisted that his path was to 'lie down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag and boneshop of the heart.' (*The Circus animals desertion.*)

The renowned archetypal psychologist James Hillman talks about this same conflict in a more general and abstract way. In a fascinating essay, the 'Practice of Beauty', about the uses of beauty in clinical practice he begins by acknowledging that there is a problem for us with beauty that goes much deeper than the intellectual fashions of the day:

My desire is to show why an idea of beauty is useful, functional, practical. Too often and For too long, when the words Bella and La Belleze appear they raise us to lofty thoughts. This higher idea of beauty, shown immediately by the ... narcoleptic effect of the usual discussions of aesthetics, the disguised moralism that beauty is 'good for you', in fact, is Good itself, have turned an entire century against anything to do with Beauty, classic and romantic, and have banned beauty from painting, music, architecture and poetry, and from criticism too, so that the arts, whose task once was considered to be that of manifesting the beautiful will discuss the idea only to dismiss it, regarding beauty only as the pretty, the simple, the pleasing, the mindless and the easy. Because beauty is conceived so naively, it appears as merely naïve, and can be tolerated only if complicated by discord, shock, violence and harsh terrestrial realities. I therefore feel justified in speaking of the repression of beauty. 6

So that is the nub of the problem. The idea of beauty is pushed away because we feel, perhaps not very consciously, that it is tied up with old Victorian ideas of art being good for you, or even worse the decadent anti-moralism of the late 19th century aesthetic movement: 'art for art's sake'. In sum: that whole bundle of notions which the radical artistic movements of the 20th century all rebelled against in various ways, and in so doing pushed beauty itself out of the picture. And of course, the notion I put forward earlier of art being a path towards selflessness via a conscious surrender could very easily be tainted with this prejudice against Victorian 'moralism'. Now this ambivalence about arguably

moralistic notions of 'high art' is clearly related to much deeper suspicions, explored by Yeats, that the classical western notion of beauty was wrong from the start; that the Platonic vision of spiritual beauty actually denies life, cuts us off in some ideal, realm of pure forms, denies who we really are, down in the 'foul rag and boneshop of the heart'.

So what are we to do about this situation? Given that we don't want to give up on beauty altogether where can we take it? Hillman's answer is rather grand but also very down to earth: we should try to experience each ordinary object or experience of our lives as a Cosmos in itself. By this he means the Greek idea of Kosmos, spelt with a k; it is the word the Greeks used for the fitting arrangement of things, from the widest to the smallest scale; that pleasurable, somehow just 'rightness'; it includes moral connotations but simply in the sense that immoral actions would be unfitting, ugly, disruptive of the Cosmos - in Plotinus' phrase 'not entirely mastered by a pattern'. Here is what Hillman has to say:

Suppose we were to imagine that beauty is permanently given, inherent to the world in its data, there on display always. This inherent radiance lights up more translucently, more intensively within certain events, particularly those events that aim to seize it and reveal it, such as art works. If we use mythological language for this inherent radiance, we would speak of Aphrodite, the golden one, the smiling one, whose smile made the world pleasurable and lovely... This sense of the world as the presence of Aphrodite is already given in the Greek word kosmos, from which our cosmology and cosmonaut. Kosmos when translated from Greek into Latin, became universum, betraying the Roman penchant for general laws, the whole world turning around one (unus). Cosmos, however, does not mean an all embracing system; it is an aesthetic term, best translated into English as fitting order, appropriate, right arrangement, so that attention to particulars takes precedence over universals. Kosmos is also a moral term, as for instance kata kosmon (disordered) in the Iliad (8:179) meaning 'shamefully'. Kosmos embraces such meanings as becomingly, decently, honourably. The aesthetic and the moral blend, as in our everyday language of craft where straight, true right and sound imply both the good and the beautiful. Another group of connotations are discipline, form, fashion. Kosmos was used especially of women in respect of their embellishments, decorations, ornaments, dress, and the word is descriptive of sweet songs and speech. Cosmetics is actually closer to the original word than 'cosmic' which tends to mean vacant, gaseous, vast.⁷

So Hillman is fully in agreement with Yeats here. He too sees the 'cosmic' significance of everyday adornments, and suggests that we might be constantly on the look out for patterns at all levels of life, displays that please and delight, that seem fitting and right, that seem to be in themselves a whole universe of forms and relations between forms. This sort of notion, he hopes would get us away from the dead end dilemma of beauty as stultifyingly defined as being 'good for you' as if studying Shakespeare was on the National Curriculum for self improvement and spiritual edification. Instead beauty is its own justification. All phenomena are connected in an interrelated whole which we cannot grasp, but the ordered cosmos of a beautiful object or an aesthetically arresting experience is the closest image we have. If we seek out such images regularly they will remind us of who and what we are.

The writer Lawrence Durrell, (who incidentally became interested in Buddhism late in his life) said something similar about the path of artistic creation.

*I spoke of the uselessness of art but added nothing truthful about its consolations. The solace of such work as I do with brain and heart lies in this – that only there, in the silences of the painter or the writer can reality be re-ordered, reworked and made to show its significant side. Our common actions in reality are simply the sackcloth covering which hides the cloth-of-gold – the meaning of the pattern.*⁸

In appreciating someone else's art work we start by tuning into their sense of significance and meaning and feel it resonating with our own hopes and dreams. But Durrell suggests that there is a deeper level, where either through making art for ourselves, or through a passionate endeavour of engagement with arts, we are actually creating or manifesting that deeper purpose, that meaningful cosmos. We are creating ourselves in fact.

Now, so far I have said very little about different kinds of art, or different media, and which might or might not be suitable for developing a sense of the 'fitting arrangement of things' as Hillman suggests. And this whole area, of course, is a minefield. One person's high art is another person's tedium and vice versa. All one can do in the end is to trust one's own experience, but also, have some receptivity to the established canons of what is 'great art'. In the end it comes down to what the Buddha said about the dharma, one must rely on one's own experience, tempered by the 'testimony of the wise'. A poem can communicate far more about this

than bare concepts. So I will finish with Rilke's famous verse about the transformative power of art, in this case the Archaic Torso of Apollo:

*We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned low,*

*gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark centre where procreation flared.*

*Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:*

*would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.*⁹

The function of art, after all, is to encroach on life, this is the final criteria, the touchstone. It is, in the end, an ethical criteria, far removed from the rarefied aesthetic indulgence of 'art for arts sake'. Not that art has to be explicitly ethical but one looks for it having an effect on one's volitions towards what is skilful. The best art has that power from the 'dark centre', as Rilke puts it, intimately linked to our awareness of the primal facts of human life, of sex, death and change. With this power it can challenge complacent perceptions and therefore ultimately (not in any direct way perhaps) selfish behaviour patterns. In the light of someone's vision, expressed in a painting, or a poem or some other way, we experience the joy of a richer and larger life. We are stretched beyond our normal boundaries and brought into contact with new modes of being. It is like the experience of meeting the Buddha we read about time and time again in the Pali suttas. What was upset has been set upright, a light has been brought into a darkened room, nothing is quite the same again.

1. Anagarika Govinda, *Art and Meditation*, Book Faith India: Delhi, 1999 (originally published in 1936). Quoted in the introduction by Dhivan Thomas Jones to *The Religion of Art*, see note 2.

2. Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2010, p. 47. This volume brings together Sangharakshita's three essays on art, beauty and the Buddhist life, with a helpful introduction by Dhivan Thomas Jones.
3. W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2000
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. James Hillman, *The Practice of Beauty*, 2001, reprinted in: Bill Beckley, David Shapiro (Eds.) *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, Allworth Press, 2001.
7. Ibid.
8. Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*, Faber, 2000. (In fact this passage is in the voice of the narrator of this novel, but it appears to express Durrell's own thoughts about the artistic life.)
9. Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. Stephen Mitchell, Vintage, 2013.