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BEAUTIFUL BODHISATTVAS: THE AESTHETICS OF SPIRITUAL EXEMPLARITY

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ABSTRACT
The world’s spiritual traditions incorporate a variety of types of exemplar, persons who exemplify a life of aspiration to, or attainment of, spiritual goods. Within Buddhism, the range of exemplars includes monastics, bodhisattvas, the Zen masters and the Buddha himself. Spiritual exemplars are typically described as having a distinctive form of bodily beauty, closely related to their ethical and spiritual qualities, that manifests as a form of radiance, luminosity or charisma. Drawing on recent work on beauty, virtue and the body in the Buddhist tradition, I propose an aesthetics of spiritual exemplarity, arguing that certain spiritual traditions – including Buddhism – are distinctive by virtue of their capacity to generate new forms of experiences of embodied moral beauty.

The spiritual, the aesthetic and the exemplary

There are many different aesthetic dimensions to spiritual forms of life. Typically, the focus of philosophers is on art, music, architecture and practices, among others things, either in themselves or when integrated, for instance in forms of ritual (Bennett-Hunter 2014). Such objects and practices matter, of course, but attending to them should not occlude a further focus – namely, spiritual persons. For a start, spiritual persons are centrally involved in the production of those objects and the performance of those practices – seeing artworks, chanting, singing, processing. But more fundamentally, the members of spiritual forms of life can, themselves, be objects of aesthetic experience and appreciation. Attention to testimonies from and anthropological studies of various of the world’s spiritual traditions shows that many of the exemplary members of spiritual communities are typically reported to be beautiful, in distinctive ways that are taken to be integral to their exemplarity.

By ‘spiritual exemplar’, I refer to those persons whose lives are distinctive and admirable because they are ones devoted to an aspiration to, if not attainment,
of some set of spiritual goods – enlightenment, godliness, holiness and so on. There is surprisingly little literature, at least within philosophy of religion, on the range and nature of such exemplars, not least their aesthetic dimensions (see Kidd 2017). An honourable exception to this neglect is the work of Mark Wynn on the phenomenology of the spiritual life. In his recent book, *Renewing the Senses*, the spiritually enlightened sage – an exemplar – is characterised as a living representative of ‘an ideal of life to which other human beings should aspire’. Among the distinguishing features of a sage is, argues Wynn, is a profound ‘transformation’ of ‘the subjective quality of their experience’, of how the world figures for them in experience. Careful phenomenological attention to first-person accounts of spiritual life indicates that the ‘attainment of … spiritual awakening may engender, and may in part consist in, a renewal of the appearance of the sensory world’. The transformation is a positive one: the world is ‘invested with new beauty and radiance’, taking on a ‘luminous quality’, as one feels enlivened and ‘quickened’ (Wynn 2013, 127, 64f, 26).

Compelling as Wynn’s account is, its focus is on transformations of a spiritual exemplar’s experience of the world, rather than any transformation of them as an object of experience. It befits his phenomenological method to focus on their first-person experience, but we can also ask how ‘spiritual enlightenment’ might transform them as an object of others’ experience. Can the spiritual exemplar also become newly ‘beautiful’, ‘radiant’ or aesthetically transformed? How might the beauty of exemplars be related to the aesthetic dimensions of spiritual art, music, practice and life? And might careful reflection on the aesthetics of spiritual persons enhance our appreciation of the nature of the variety of spiritual life-forms?

Inspired by such possibilities, I want to propose, in what follows, an aesthetics of spiritual exemplarity. Its basis is the recent articulation by Linda Zagzebski of ‘exemplarism’, an ethical theory that places exemplars of virtue at its heart. I argue that her account contains a latent sensitivity to the aesthetics of exemplarity, of a sort worth drawing out. My main claims are, first, that spiritual exemplars can enjoy a distinctive form of ‘inner beauty’, conceived as the bodily expression of virtues or excellences of character. Second, that many spiritual traditions are especially apt to enable the cultivation, perception and appreciation of this inner beauty – a claim I develop with specific reference to the Buddhist tradition.

**Exemplarism, admiration and attraction**

Exemplarism is a foundational ethical theory, developed by Zagzebski in recent years, built on the core claim that we primarily learn ethical or spiritual excellences or qualities through encounters with those people who exemplify them to an advanced degree. A person can be an exemplar of different things – a virtue, a role or a way of life. A friend may be an exemplar of courage, a colleague an exemplar of the role of Professor of Philosophy, and some special persons may
be exemplars of a whole way of life – as Jesus or Kongzi were of a Christian or Confucian way of life. Exemplars fall into at least four types. Some are intimates, living persons we can meet, interact, live and work with. Some are contemporaries, living but not directly known to us. Some may be historical figures, like Plato, or fictional characters, maybe the hero of an edifying existentialist novel or Bildungsroman (see Zagzebski 2006, 2017).

Given their diversity, there are different modes of encounter available, depending on the status of the exemplar. First, personal encounters, where one can directly interact with the exemplar, meeting and talking with them, maybe even spending time with them in close sustained association. Think of the communities that gathered around Jesus, the Buddha, and other spiritual exemplars – small groups of disciples, devoted to a charismatic moral teacher, living in close association in pursuit of a shared way of life. But not all exemplars can be personally encountered, for social, geographical or historical reasons. Second, then, is the mode of testimonial encounter. A typical response of many of us to meeting some exemplar is, of course, to excitedly come back and tell stories about them – recounting their words, deeds and actions. Depending on the detail of the testimonies, we can encounter those exemplars. Sometimes, though, people are not content to just tell these stories; they elect to record them, in the fairly fixed form of narratives – creative, artistic and often literary accounts of an exemplar. Think, here, of the typical style and content of many the world’s great spiritual writings. The Gospels of the New Testament, the Islamic Hadith and the Udāna and Avadāna – detailing the ‘inspired utterances’ and exploits of the Buddha – contain dense, detailed descriptions of the character, conduct, habits, acts and speech of their respective exemplars. Although there are, of course, also accounts of their arguments and doctrines, what they primarily offer are characterisations of their lived moral and spiritual practice – a form of moral portraiture, of a sort no longer typical in philosophical literature (see Olberding 2012, 91f).

Within Zagzebski’s account of moral persuasion, such encounters, whatever their form, must do at least two things. First, activate our admiration for the exemplar, provoking an emotional reaction to them. Seeing their actions, hearing their words, reading about their life, we perceive in them some dimension of the good, for which we admire them. Under certain conditions, one can be led to want to take on or share in that goodness, by taking the exemplar as a model. The second aim of the encounters, then, is to enable emulation of the exemplar. Initially this is likely to take a fairly crude, robotic form – copying how they walk, talk or act – but over time, it can become subtler, more refined. Through emulation, one comes to authentically internalise the habits, values, feelings and motivations of an exemplar, which, if translated into one’s own actions, speech and manner, manifests as the virtues that one began by admiring. An effective encounter with an exemplar affords this affectively rich, empirically textured relationship that is, argues Zagzebski, foundational to ethical self-development.
Admiration is a central component of exemplarism, which, says Zagzebski, ‘a moral theory based on the emotion of admiration’, with exemplars as ‘supremely admirable persons’ (2017, 31, 2). To admire a person is to recognise them as manifesting or exemplifying some aspect of the good – a character trait, role, or way of life. Such admiration is an emotional response that can be either theoretical or pre-theoretical, and, while often spontaneous, can be trained. The possibility of trained admiration matters, since Zagzebski indicates several ways that admiration can tend to degenerate into corrupted forms. One is that our experiences of admiration are not always fitting: we can admire the wrong people, or admire the right people but for the wrong reasons – perhaps admiring a moral hero for their popularity rather than their virtue, say. So the ideal is reflective admiration, where admiration is justified by reasons that survive critical scrutiny (see Zagzebski 2017, ch.2).

A second limitation is that admiration can easily degenerate into dogmatic idolisation, mindless fawning or daunting incapacitation. Indeed, to become an exemplar brings with it temptations, including the danger of abusing the power one gains over others (see Zagzebski 2017, ch.3). Think, here, of defrocked priests, exposed gurus and others who abused the admiration and esteem others afforded them. Third, some admirable people can be ‘invisible’. Some virtues are self-concealing, insofar as their exercise tends to render them unnoticed – modesty, perhaps, or reticence. In other cases, an exercise of a virtue might be invisible. Courage can be seen in public acts of heroism, but might also be invisible: a student with chronic social anxiety problems may be exercising tremendous courage by just sitting in a lecture hall, but their virtue is, in that situation, invisible, at least except to those who know their situation well.

Interestingly, Zagzebski’s account of admiration is sometimes characterised in terms of attraction, a term with overt aesthetic connotations. The feeling of admiration is, she remarks, ‘a kind of attraction that carries with it an impetus to imitate’, and an admired object – a person, perhaps – ‘appears attractive, not repulsive or evaluatively neutral’ (Zagzebski 2017, 55, 35). Elsewhere, Zagzebski (2006, 60) describes the admirable exemplar as ‘imitably attractive’, with a ‘power to move us’. Aside from this general aesthetic vocabulary, there are two specific references to an aestheticised form of admiration:

It is a good thing that there are people whose moral beauty attracts us. We are usually drawn to them initially because we admire something easily observable about them – typically, their acts … physical bearing or speech (Zagzebski 2017, 60)

Another aesthetically inflected form of admiration occurs in a discussion of Kongzi, in the context of a discussion of Amy Olberding’s (2012) exemplarist reading of depictions of Kongzi in the Lunyu:

[Sages] attract our attention because they convey a sense of serenity and emotional tranquility, perhaps holiness. They have the harmony of soul that few of us have attained, and we can see that harmony in their outward demeanor (Zagzebski 2017, 174)
Alongside overt terms like ‘moral beauty’, these remarks are clearly aesthetic in tone and character. Kongzi, for instance, is praised for his ‘high aesthetic sense’, one that manifests itself in a ‘special form of charisma’, a ‘glow of serenity’ (Zagzebski 2017, 174).

On the basis of such remarks, Zagzebski’s exemplarism incorporates a latent sensitivity to the concept of ‘moral beauty’. This is identified David E. Cooper through an aesthetically inflected mode of admiration: call it moral attraction. But the term ‘moral beauty’ is not defined, leaving it unclear how its moral and aesthetic aspects are coherently related. Nor is the use of the aesthetic vocabulary justified, as it ought to be, if it is not to be dismissed as idiomatic or figurative. Nor is there an account of the practices that might allow aspiring exemplars to cultivate, express and perceive moral beauty. Since moral beauty is not a common experience, such practices matter, as they evidently did to Kongzi.

The development of an aesthetics of exemplarity also matters for a further reason. Examination of historical spiritual traditions that fit Zagzebski’s schema – of processes of ethical training involving emulation of outstanding persons – evinces well-developed aesthetics of exemplarity. In the following section, I offer an account of moral beauty, then go on to offer an historical example – Buddhism.

**Inner beauty, virtue and exemplarity**

Cooper (2009, 2010) offers a compelling account of inner beauty, sensitive to its moral dimensions. There is a mode of beauty, he argues, that consists in the bodily expression of virtues, defined broadly to ‘excellences of character’, moral capacities, or powers, as in the Greek term *arête* or the Chinese *de* 德. Such excellences include moral virtues, like compassion or courage, but also a broader array of qualities like equanimity, tranquility and spontaneity. If inner beauty consists in the bodily expression of virtues, then exemplars – paradigms of virtue – are surely the best place to look for it.

Ancient spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western, offer consistent testimonies to the inner beauty of exemplars. Asked about ‘beauty for a monk’, the Buddha explained that it is found in their ‘right conduct, restraint, and perfect … behavior and habits’ (*Dīgha Nikāya*, 1987, 405). The *Buddhacarita* locates the bodily beauty of the Buddha in his ‘gentle disposition’ and the various virtues manifested in his ‘fine countenance’ (Aśvaghoṣa 1894, III.2, IV.3). Indeed, the term often translated as ‘virtue’ – *śīla* – can alternatively be translated as ‘right conduct’ or ‘moral discipline’ (Keown 2016, chs. 2 and 8; Voyce 2015, 304). In the Mahayana tradition, the many ‘marks’ (*lakṣaṇa*) that distinguish a bodhisattva include joyfulness, wisdom and ‘radiance’, the latter an aesthetically toned personal charisma, conferred by enlightenment (*Śikṣāsamucacaya* 194.15–16, 196.4).
Similar thoughts recur in the Ancient Greek traditions. Plato described a ‘beautiful soul’, an ideal pursued and apparently achieved by his late follower, Plotinus. According to his disciples, as well as having attained wisdom and virtue, he was also possessed of a profound form of moral beauty. According to the disciples who lived in close association with Plotinus, when he ‘spoke, his mind was manifest in his countenance, which radiated light’ and was ‘beautiful’ (in Edwards 2000, 23). Many of the later Western monotheistic traditions also recognise forms of inner beauty. Sufis have the conviction, recorded by Rūmī (2012, 11), that the ‘best image [of] beauty in the world’ is to be found in ‘the hearts of perfect men’. A modern Sufi explains that Sufi adepts – their exemplars – are distinctive for their mastery of ‘an art of personality’, that enables them to skilfully express qualities, like sincerity and tactfulness (Khan 2013, ch. 11). The Islamic concept of halal specifies a range of ‘permissible’ behaviours, applying not only to dietary practices, but also to modes of character, appearance and bodily demeanour. When these express virtues like purity and respectfulness, they are experienced as noor – as manifestations of an ‘inner beauty’, which, like a ‘light’, ‘radiates’ from the true Muslim believer. Christianity, too, recognises an ideal of inner beauty. An important dimension of sainthood, argues one theological aesthetician, is that their ‘interior rightness’ shows itself outwardly in an ‘attractive charm’, through which others are ‘captivated and transformed’, at least by those who recognise, if only dimly, that they are in the ‘presence of … spiritual beauty’ (von Balthasar 1982, 200, 32, 34, 33).

Such examples could be multiplied at length, but their general features are clear enough. Certain persons are exemplars of outstanding ethical or spiritual virtue, living symbols of the spiritual life as conceived within the terms of those traditions. When they are encountered, they are often experienced in profoundly aestheticised ways – as beautiful, radiant and charismatic. Sometimes the beauty is of a conventional physical or erotic sort – the Buddha, reportedly, was extremely handsome – but many others were not. Nor would these spiritual traditions welcome eroticised conceptions of beauty, given their injunctions to disciplined sensual appetites, self-restraint and ‘non-attachment’. So the search is for a conception of beauty that is genuinely bodily, but also inclusive of, or intimately related to, ethical or spiritual qualities.

Cooper offers the required conception of virtue-infused embodied beauty. References to or talk of inner beauty is legitimate when one’s inner qualities – virtue, de, holiness – consistently finds ‘outer’ expression through one’s bodily comportment. A kind act, humble posture, or loving act can be experienced as beautiful if experienced as bodily expressions of a person’s inner character or ‘soul’. The inner expresses itself through the outer, in speech, posture, gestures, facial expressions, bodily demeanour and the like. This virtue-centrism has many historical champions, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western. Its appeal for my purposes is its explanatory power. It explains, first, the moral dimension of
‘inner beauty’, for what is being expressed are the virtues, excellences or ‘interior rightness’ that constitutes one’s character or ‘soul’.

Second, virtue-centrism explains the aesthetic aspect of inner beauty. It might seem odd to talk of inner beauty, since ‘beauty’ and other aesthetic terms are usually reserved for sensory experiences of the outer world – beautiful sunsets seen, sonatas heard and so on. But character or soul is not usually thought of as available for outer sensory experience in this way, until we add a further point, emphasised by Cooper. ‘Inner’ character finds outer expression through perceptible modes of bodily behaviour – kindness seen in a gesture, gentleness heard in a voice, calmness felt in a demeanour and so on.

A third advantage of virtue-centrism is its explanation of the relation between the moral and the aesthetic. A person has inner beauty when our experience of their bodily comportment expressive of their inner beauty elicits pleasure, joy, and satisfaction. Here, at least, is a way to explain Zagzebski’s references to the ‘moral beauty’ of exemplars. A sage who enjoys a rare ‘harmony of soul’, manifested in their ‘outward demeanour’ expresses their inner beauty, since their inner harmony – an excellence or spiritual virtue – shows itself outwardly in their demeanour. An exemplar therefore has inner beauty if they reliably express their inner virtue, de, or ‘rightness’ in outer bodily comportment. There is a ‘looping’ effect between the inner and the outer, a dynamical, stabilised relationship that may itself be an admirable attainment.

If this is right, an important feature of exemplars, at least in certain traditions, is a capacity to manifest inner beauty. Insofar as this inner beauty can be perceived and enjoyed by other people, then admiration of exemplars can sometimes take the form of a distinctive, aesthetically inflected mode of moral attraction to another’s inner beauty.

**Spiritual practices, traditions and beauties**

Experiences of inner beauty are not confined to spiritual traditions. Though not a practising member of any spiritual community, I have had experiences – albeit incipient, fragile and fleeting – of certain people’s inner beauty. But spiritual traditions do contain the resources needed to reliably cultivate, express and perceive inner beauty – fulfilling the conditions of possibility for those beauties, one might say. In what follows, the term spiritual beauty refers to the inner beauty of the exemplars of those traditions.

Spiritual beauty is clearly an achievement – something admirable and difficult. Alongside the general challenges of cultivating virtues, there are specific difficulties a person faces in expressing, perceiving and appreciating virtuous comportment. Both manifestation of one’s own spiritual beauty, and sensitivity to the spiritual beauty of others, requires the cultivation of a variety of capacities and, further, their exercise under appropriately supportive conditions.
The first set of capacities are those required to express effectively one’s virtues, excellences or ‘interior rightness’ through cultivated forms of bodily comportment. Some people, it seems, are naturally good at this, being expressive, able to show in their manner or demeanour their character. But many others are inexpressive, shy or demure, so that cultivating such complex expressive capacities takes effort, training and discipline. In the testimonies cited earlier, this was clear. When the Buddha referred to monks’ ‘perfect … behaviour and habits’, he was referring to disciplined modes of bodily comportment, learned through long practice, including emulation of more advanced practitioners.

A second set of capacities enables one to perceive perspicuously the spiritual beauty of others. Although some people are naturally perceptive, able to accurately ‘read’ the characters of others, many others are not. Moreover, the degree of virtuosity that exemplars express is peculiarly refined, expressing subtlety sophisticated forms of virtue that it can take real discernment to identify. Wynn speaks of the spiritual life as involving ‘training’ and ‘extended initiation into the relevant … perceptual skills’ (Wynn 2013, 92). Cooper writes of ‘edifying initiation into the ways and perceptions of other people’, of how immersion in their ‘traditions, practices and cultural contexts’ can enable ‘beauty of a certain kind to become visible’ (Cooper 2010, 64, 65). Roger Scruton also speaks of a ‘moral presence’, enjoyed only by certain people, that ‘shows itself to the contemplating gaze’ (Scruton 2011, 42). A trained person develops the various attainments – ‘perceptual skills’, ‘ways’ of seeing, ‘contemplating gaze’ – necessary to perceive others’ inner beauty. In such remarks, we find references to the capacities needed to perceive perspicuously inner beauty.

The cultivation of these sets of capacities is not enough, though, to guarantee that one can effectively express and perceive inner beauty. Such capacities also need to be exercise under appropriate conditions, in supportive cultures of appreciation. Call these kaliphilic cultures – from the ancient Greek terms kalos (‘beautiful’, ‘good’, ‘worthy’) and philia (‘love’, ‘affection’, ‘fondness’) – meaning a culture that nourishes the sensibilities, practices, and experiences relevant to beauty, including inner beauty. By contrast, other cultures can be kaliphobic (phobos, in Greek, meaning ‘aversion’ or ‘fear’). Imagine an isolated art-lover, able to make and find beautiful things in the world, but living within a philistine, insensible culture – conditions under which exercising aesthetic capacities is possible, but necessarily impaired.

Certainly it is easy to identify kaliphobic features of modern cultures – think of the many twentieth-century treatments of beauty as something unserious, ‘subjective’, a mere feeling of pleasure. Beauty, for one modern aesthetician, is a ‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’ of pleasure, ‘irreducibly subjective’ and consequently ‘not a serious enough concept’ for aesthetics or indeed art, having ‘completely lost its meaning’ (Kirwan 1999, 112, 114, 117). Such obituaries for beauty are, however, often exaggerated, since what more often occurs are reinterpretations of the nature of beauty, rather than its outright abandonment or rejection (see
Cooper 2005). Still, kaliphobic attitudes and rhetoric are common, particularly when directed at the idea of inner beauty. Think of the typical scepticism or scorn directed at talk of inner beauty. The very idea is regularly derogated as a sort of snide aesthetic consolation prize, awarded to the admirable but unlovely, in a culture where beauty is defined in terms of toned, trimmed, cosmeticised bodies, rather than carefully cultivated characters.

Outside kaliphilic cultures, of course, the capacities for seeing and manifesting inner beauty could still be cultivated and exercised. The persistence of experiences of others’ inner beauty – fragile and fleeting as they may be – is a testament to that, just as a natural sense of beauty will arise even in the captives of philistine cultures. But the capacities can only be fully developed and deployed within a kaliphilic culture, just as the art-lover can only really be nourished and flourish in a world where art is esteemed and encouraged.

It is also easy to identify more general features of a culture of appreciation receptive to inner beauty. A culture must encourage willingness to acknowledge and admire virtue and virtuous people; evince ardent commitment to a rich conception of the good that builds in a sense of inner beauty; and resist cynicism and subjectivism about moral character. Zagzebski notes that a main obstacle to exemplarism, within many modern cultures, is ‘a general cynicism about the admirable that leads to a reluctance to admire anyone’ (Zagzebski 2017, 45). Such cynicism will also occlude one’s capacity to experience moral attraction, too. Insouciance about virtue, beauty, or exemplarity will tend to block an acceptance, let alone an experience, of inner beauty.

Inner beauty requires a suite of capacities, initiation into which enables one to express one’s own and to perceive others’ inner beauty. I want to propose that many spiritual traditions provide both opportunities to develop those capacities and receptive cultures for their effective exercise. Such cultures are therefore kalligenesis, able to generate new forms or experiences of beauty, ones otherwise difficult to manifest, perceive and appreciate.

**Buddhism and beauty**

Many contemporary studies of Buddhism emphasise its sensitivity to the connections between body, beauty, and virtue. Susanne Mrozick’s book, *Virtuous Bodies*, explores the ‘physical dimensions of morality in Buddhist ethics’, the ways that certain kinds of bodies are markers of moral character. Buddhist spiritual disciplines incorporate a set of bodily disciplines – meditation, fasting, trained comportment – whose morally charged character efface familiar Western distinctions between the bodily, ethical and spiritual. Such ‘physiomoral discourse’ aims to cultivate bodhisattvas whose ‘virtuous bodies’ can create ‘profoundly transformative effects’, such as morally energising those considering or pursuing a Buddhist way of life (2007, 6, 124).
The cultivated employment of aestheticised bodily comportment in Buddhism is also a theme of Jeffrey Samuels’ *Attracting the Heart*. It concerns ‘the aesthetics of emotions’ in modern Sri Lankan Buddhist culture; specifically the ways monastics are trained to ‘go beautifully in order to attract the people’s hearts’. The pleasing sight, sound, and demeanour of monks and nuns – smiling, wholesome, tranquil – is meant to arouse ‘longing’ for the ‘holy life’ (Samuels 2010, xxiv, 78–79). Motivated by the fundamental Buddhism imperative of enlightenment, the monastic concern is to attract people to the path to enlightenment – to ‘release’ from the ‘wheel of suffering’. One way to do that is to make those ‘on’ the path – or who are enlightened – themselves attractive, as people whose devotion to ethical and spiritual discipline enables them to ‘go beautifully’ through this world of impermanence.

In such studies, there is clear testimony to an aesthetics of exemplarity, as embedded within and distinctively shaped by a cultural and spiritual tradition. But the attention to the embodied beauty of monastics is only one dimension of Buddhist aesthetics. The inner beauty manifest in what Mrozick (2007, 22f) calls ‘bodied being’ sits within a wider matrix of art, music, literature and of aesthetic practices and products. Moreover, the aesthetic dimensions of Buddhist life vary across its specific traditions and their distinctive enthusiasms. Think of the many ways Zen Buddhism has been shaped by Japanese sensibilities, where a vision of the world as impermanence became coupled to an aesthetic taste for indistinct, changing and shifting phenomena (see Cooper, forthcoming).

It is too large a task for a single paper to identify all of the kalligenesis components of these Buddhist cultures. My more modest aim is to sketch out some general features of a culture or tradition that help to make it kalligenesis and to show their entrenchment in Buddhist cultures. Such features, explains Malcolm Voyce, will be those which help to ensure that ‘moral acts may assume a form of inner and outer beauty’, and do so not accidentally or contingently, but as essential aspects and expressions of ‘process of self-formation’ (2015, 300).

A foundational feature of any kalligenesis culture is *affirmation* of inner beauty as a genuine, admirable, desirable phenomenon. If inner beauty is not affirmed, then it is inevitably more difficult to acknowledge it, let alone to cultivate it in disciplined ways. Affirmation can take basic forms, like acknowledging inner beauty to be genuine, not something to be ignore, dismiss or ‘pass off’. But affirmation can also take more complex forms. Cultivating successfully inner beauty may be affirmed as an integral aspect of a culture’s conception of exemplarity and of the good life, therefore part of a vision of an excellent or flourishing life. If inner beauty is a ‘mark of enlightenment’, then it is something to acknowledge, admire and emulate.

The Buddha’s remark on ‘beauty for a monk’ was an authoritative affirmation of inner beauty, echoed in the cataloguing of types of ‘beautiful consciousness’ and ‘beautiful mental factors’ (*sobhana citta* and *sobhanā cetasikā*). In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha adds that those who are ‘jealous, selfish, or dishonest’
are ‘unattractive’, no matter their ‘eloquence or good features’, whereas a person ‘purged of such things … is really beautiful’ (1987, 262, 263). Closely related is the ideal of ātmabhāva, which Mrozick translates as ‘bodied being’. Among its meanings, it can refer to the ‘corporeal effects of good merit’, the ways a virtuous heartmind manifests in a virtuous body (2007, 137, 23). Modern Buddhist artists and aestheticians talk of a ‘beauty of the mind’, or a ‘beauty of inner reality’, as the expression of virtues in calm, orderly forms of bodily conduct (see Cooper 2017). Alongside these and similar remarks, affirmation is made of the beauty of advanced practitioners’ (Voyce 2015, 211) – of virtuous, enlightened persons – as a central dimension of the Buddhist life.

A second kalligenesis feature of a culture is the provision of robust practices of expression. These are disciplined behaviours that enable aspirants to express in their bodily comportment their virtues, character or other inner qualities. Nigrōdha – a novice monk – converted King Aśoka to Buddhism through the ‘manifest virtue’ (pasak guṇa) expressed through his measured, tranquil comportment (Sinhala Thūpaṃsa, 91). The Prātimokṣa – the rules governing the conduct of Buddhist monastics – describe a variety of virtues. Interestingly, these are characterised in bodily as well as psychological terms. Faith (śraddhā) involves the ‘removal of [the] mind’s impurities’, manifested in calm conduct free from sign of anxiety. Likewise, tranquility requires a ‘quieting’ of mental ‘disturbances’, shown in demeanour marked by ‘peacefulness and coolness’ (Abhidhammatthasaṅga, 75–87). Training in the virtues involves training in the disciplined manifestation of virtuous qualities in bodily comportment – that is, training in how the virtues look, sound and feel, especially to those with discerning perception.

Closely related are practices of perception, a third feature of kalligenesis cultures. Aspirants, like Buddhist monastics, must engage in practices designed to enable them to more accurately perceive the virtuous inner beauty of others. Mrozick offers many examples of Buddhist practices of perception taken from Santideva’s 7th CE text, Śiksāsamuccaya, the ‘Compendium of Teachings’. One is a meditative practice known as recollecting the Buddha (buddhānusmṛti). It involves visualisation of his body and its mahāpuruṣa lakṣaṇa – the 32 major and eighty minor ‘marks of enlightenment’ – such as his majestic gait, delicate skin, and ‘incomparably beautiful form’ (Śiksāsamuccaya 319.3–4). Monastics therefore attend to the ways his bodily form (rūpa) expresses the ‘marks’ of enlightenment. Such meditative practices are facilitated by a rich tradition of Buddhist art, literature and statuary. Artistic and material cultures therefore enable imaginative encounters with Buddhist exemplars.

Closely related are practices of attentiveness. Buddhist monastics are urged to pay ‘close attention to … physical descriptions of good and bad characters’ from the scriptures or their own and others’ experiences. Such descriptions should include ‘the ways in which living beings respond’, as when a smiling monk elicits the attention of a crowd in a way a more staid one does not (Mrozick 2007,
Another closely related practice involves specific attention to *kalyāṇamitra*, a term typically translated as ‘beautiful friends’. But *kalyāṇa* can mean both beautiful and good, like the Greek *kalos*, so a *kalyāṇamitra* is therefore ‘at once beautiful and good’, for, in them, virtue ‘takes specific bodily form’, which, when perceived, is ‘beautiful’ (Mrozick 2007, 33).

The empirical richness of attending to *kalyāṇamitra* is clear in an account of a young monk, Sudhana. Upon encountering a beautiful friend, Sāradhvaja, he engages in complex scrutiny of him:

[Sudhana] circumambulated him … looking again and again, all the while prostrating, bowing, bowing down, bearing him in mind, thinking about him, meditating on him, soaking him in, making an inspired utterance, exclaiming in admiration, looking at his virtues, penetrating them, not being frightened of them, recollecting them, making them firm in his mind, not giving them up, mentally approaching them, binding them fast to himself, attaining the bodhisattva vow, yearning for his sight, grasping the distinctive characteristic of his voice and so on until he departed from his presence (*Sīkṣāsamuccaya* 39.8-13)

Interestingly, some Buddhist texts also describe types of deviant perceptual practice. The *Visuddhimagga* (12.25, 68) describes various ‘perversions of perception’, such as ‘finding … beauty in the foul’, and offers as correctives means of ‘abandoning … greed for the sense desires’, such as focusing on corpses or rotten flesh.

The range of Buddhist practices of perception are not exhausted by *buddhānusmṛti*, attentiveness, and scrutiny of the comportment of *kalyāṇamitra*. These examples show how monastic communities are designed to enable systematic scrutiny of others’ inner beauty as parts of practices of ‘mutual ripening’. By urging close attention to exemplary figures, whether the Buddha or one’s fellow monastics and ‘beautiful friends’, Buddhist communities enable mastery of practices of perception. Moreover, this shows how admiration and emulation – in Zagzebski’s sense – naturally converge: the Buddhist process of ethical self-cultivation requires a prolonged ‘proximity to those who materialise the bodhisattva ideal [and] proximity to peers who are committed to a similar ethical path’ (Mrozick 2007, 122). Engaging in practices of perception is simultaneously to experience admiration and to engage in emulation. Sudhana, for instance, was at once admiring his ‘beautiful friend’ and also taking him as a model – emulating his voice, posture, ‘distinctive characteristics’, and so on.

A final component of a kalligenesis culture is the deployment of inner beauty as a means of attracting people to the good life. The aesthetically inflected mode of admiration I dubbed moral attraction must, as it were, be put to use in motivating others to engage in ethical or spiritual self-cultivation. Where I speak of ‘attraction’, others may talk of ‘magnetism’, ‘charisma’ or what Zagzebski called ‘a power to move us’. Crucial in this context is the idea that what a ‘beautiful soul’ expresses tends to attract others to that exemplar and, in turn, to the way of life they exemplify. Attracting people to a way of life by beautifying its participants is, of course, especially imperative when the motivations are
ultimately soteriological in character. Indeed, Cooper (2017) proposes attraction is an integral dimension of the inner beauty of exemplars of virtue, taking the form of a ‘magnetism’ or ‘charisma’, that – to recall Samuels’ phrase – ‘attracts the heart’. The attractive power of the inner beauty of Buddhist exemplars is attested to in the texts: the Buddha himself was ‘radiant in his beauty’, which inspired people to ‘devote’ themselves and ‘offer reverence’ to him, while, to take a much later example, the Japanese Zen master, Dōgen, describes how the ‘grace’ and ‘ease’ manifested in the conduct of a true Buddhist ‘attracts others’ (Shōbōgenzō, 45–46).

Many Buddhist texts affirm the importance of beautiful comportment to the soteriological imperative of attracting people to the Eightfold Path that leads to liberation from the ‘wheel of suffering’. Training Buddhist monks to ‘go beautifully in order to attract the people’s hearts’ to the ‘holy life’ is certainly better than their opening with talk of the pervasiveness of suffering in human life. Attraction to inner beauty is a ‘skilful means’ (upāya), better than opening with discourses of suffering apt to repel or disturb. Crucially, such attraction has aesthetic dimensions, since ‘the ideal of looking … beautiful’ is grounded in the conviction that ‘deportment reflects good karma or moral virtue’ (Voyce 2015, 312). Such virtuous comportment has a beautiful, radiant power to attract: a bodhisattva, explains Michael McGhee (2000, 183), ‘embodies … a certain concentration of energy’, that ‘radiates and attracts’. Inner beauty is, therefore, not only an incentive to encourage pursuit of ‘a more enlightened way of living’ (Voyce 2015, 313). It is also a ‘mark’ – a sign or proof – of the attainment of that way of life.

These four features help to make Buddhism a kalligenesis tradition, generative of new forms of beauty. These include experiences of inner beauty. Doubtless there are other kalligenesis features, to be identified by careful historical and sociological work. This would confirm the claim that spiritual traditions tend to build in conditions for cultivating and exercising the capacities required to express, perceive and appreciate inner beauty.

**Conclusions**

The spiritual and the aesthetic can intersect in the manifest inner beauty of spiritual exemplars – spiritual heroes, including Buddhist monastics, bodhisattva and arhats. A consequence at least is that there are two ways that beauty and exemplars relate. The first is that described by Wynn, in the remarks cited earlier. ‘Spiritual enlightenment’, recall, can show itself an in aesthetic transformation of the exemplar’s experience of the world. But spiritual enlightenment can also transform the exemplar as an object of others’ experience – our experience of the exemplar, like theirs of the world, can become ‘altered’ and ‘transformed’, as they, too, become ‘invested with new beauty and radiance’, taking on a ‘luminous quality’.
These two aesthetic transformations are not opposed, but are rather mutually reinforcing. The more one's world comes to be experienced as beautiful, the more this shows in one's demeanour, ‘radiating out’, as McGhee says. If so, then exemplary participation in a spiritual life-form beautifies a person, as well as beautifying – ‘aesthetically transforming’ – their world. Exemplars enable certain beauties to inflow into the world, such that their bodies, as well as the traditions to which they belong, become kalligens – manifestations and sources of new beauty. Wynn at one point remarks that ‘the goodness of a human life’ is ‘a uniquely human contribution to the wider economy of reality’ (Wynn 2013, 197). If my own remarks are right, then there is at least one other ‘uniquely human contribution’ – the uniquely human capacity to allow inner beauty to manifest within, and so inflow into, the world.

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References

Primary texts


**Secondary texts**


