

The Concept of Ugliness in Buddhism

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Abstract

This article attempts to investigate the concept of ugliness in Buddhism and to explore the doctrinal reflection on ugliness. The results revealed that ugliness is the displeasing in appearance, which has a synonym as a mischief or *Apakāra*, foulness or *Asubha*. The nature of ugliness can be classified into 4 type viz. 1) *Gati-vipatti*: failure as regards place of birth, 2) *Upadhi-vipatti*: failure as regards the deformed or unfortunate body, 3) *Kāla-vipatti*: failure as regards unfortunate time and 4) *Payoga-vipatti*: failure as regards undertaking. In addition, the ugliness is also referred to the failure in conduct as appeared in the Disciplines or *Vinaya*. As regards the type of ugliness that is called *Vipatti*: failure, it can be divided into 4 categories viz. 1) *Sīla-vipatti*: falling away from moral habit, 2) *Ācāra* *Vipatti*: falling away from good behavior, 3) *Ditṭhi-vipatti*: falling away from right view and 4) *Ājīva-vipatti*: falling away from right mode of livelihood. However, the purposes of ugliness as found in the Buddhist doctrine are to eliminate all sensual pleasures and to stimulate the moral reflection. The moral reflections take place after perceiving the ugliness from the sculpture or painting that reflects the fruition of unwholesome actions. For the sake of better understanding the real nature of ugliness, it can be reflected by five means as 1) reflection on the Five Aggregates, 2) reflection on measuring (or judged) by one's reputation, 3) reflection on the thirty two parts of body and 4) reflection on the *Asubha* meditation and 5) reflection on the higher training in proper conduct.

Keywords: Ugliness; Buddhism

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Introduction

Both the appearance of beauty and ugliness are regarded as something from which the mind needs to be free. (Sarah Shaw 2006: 93)

The study of aesthetics in Buddhism in the past mostly focused only on the beauty, they have abandoned the study of ugliness or the negative side of aesthetics. In fact, the teachings of ugliness has delivered by the Buddha and been found in the Tipitaka and there are important implications to consider the essence of understanding the true nature of life. It demonstrates from many events that the access to the truth begins with awareness of ugliness as the Prince Siddhartha has seen the Four Sights (M.(Thai)2/309/255) which made the realization on the old age, the sickness, and the death. (Somdet Phramahasamanachao Krommaphra Paramanuchit Chinorot, 2554: 83) This leads to questions about the truth of life, and when seeing the priestly monk, he found the way to escape.

It can be seen that Buddhism not only shows the ugliness in the empirical values of life, but also shows ugliness on the aspect of truth, such as seeing the unbeautiful of life that leads to the understanding of Dukkha or suffering and the impermanence. This is a factor leading to the understanding of the Three Characteristics of Existence:- all conditioned things are impermanent, all conditioned things are subject to stress and conflict and all things are not-self or soulless. As in the case of **Cūlapanthaka Thera**, he attained enlightenment by rubbing the white cloth until it turned dark. (Kh. Thag. (Thai) 26/373/300)

Once, the Buddha took Nanda Bhikkhu on a journey to **Tāvatīṣṭha** Heaven. On the way He showed Nanda a burnt she-monkey and asked him whether **Janapadakalayāṇī** were more beautiful than that. He said ‘Yes Lord’. After that the Buddha took him to the **Tāvatīṣṭha** heaven, where Sakka King and his most beautiful nymphs waited on them. Nanda Bhikkhu learnt that these nymphs were far more beautiful than **Janapadakalayāṇī**.

The Buddha promised him that he will get one of those nymphs as his wife, if he would live a monastic life. He was all excitement and willingly agreed. On their way back to Jetavana Monastery, the Buddha related this story to the eighty chief disciples, and when they questioned Nanda Bhikkhu, he felt greatly ashamed of his lustfulness. Summoning all his courage, he strove hard and soon afterward accomplished an Arahantship. Thereupon, he came to the Buddha and absolved him from his promise. (Thag.157f.; J.i.91; ii.92ff.; Ud.iii.2; DhA.i.96 105; UdA.168ff.; SNA.273f. cited in http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/n/nanda.htm)

The Buddha transformed the beautiful woman to the old woman by his supernatural power to **Khemā Therī** until she has realized on the ugliness of the body. (Kh.Ap. (Thai) 33/352/433)

The Buddha taught Venerable Vakkali Thera of not to attach the Buddha' body as 'Try not, Vakkali, to satisfy in the body as the fools, the sight of my foul body is useless; he who sees the Dhamma, he it is that see me' (Kh.Ap. (Thai) 33/122/122)

In addition, the ugliness and its contemplation have found in the **Tipiñaka** such as *Asubha* meditation, it is the meditation on the foulness of the 32 parts of the body. (Kh.ThagA.(Thai) 2/315/41 SA. (Thai)1/75/95) One who understands the foulness of the body can realize the truth of life.

The non-beauty is also included the higher training in proper conduct (*Abhisamācāra*) of monks. (Brammagunabhorn, (P.A. Payutto).2551 : 501-502)

For being a good look and to be admired, the *Abhisamācāra* is needed to be practiced by the Buddhist monks. It is a group small training on cutting hair, cutting nails, bathing, dressing, standing, walking, sitting, sleeping, chewing, etc. Regarding the term 'Ungainliness or Unattractive', it refers to the ugliness and it has many meanings and implications such as the quality or state of being extremely unattractive in appearance. (<https://dictionary>.

[cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ugliness\)](https://cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ugliness)

In the Buddhist term, it refers to Pali terminology as *Apākatika* which mean not in proper or natural shape, out of order, disturbed (Dh A ii.7. Cp. *Apāpakra*. p. 66.). The term ‘*Asubha*’ means impurity, ugly and loathsomeness or a corpse (P.A. Payutto. 2555:258)

According to the *Cariyapitaka* Scripture, the term ‘*Asubha*’ refers to *Asubha kammaṭṭhāna* or the meditation on the loathsomeness or a corpse (Dhs. trsl. 70 and Cpd. 121 n. 6. - S iv.111 (asubhato manasikaroti); v.320; Sn 341; Sdhp 368.) There are also synonyms of ugliness such as *Dubbaōōa* which mean bad color that oppose to the word ‘*suvaṇṇa*’ beautiful color or pleasant. (T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, 1925: 662. And A v.61; It 99.) In addition, there is a doctrine of the so called *Vipatti* which match for the essence of ugliness and should be considered viz., *Sīla-vipatti*: falling away from moral habit; failure in morality, *Ācāra-vipatti*: falling away from good behavior; failure in conduct, *Ditṭhi-vipatti*: falling away from right view; failure in views and *Ājīva-vipatti*: falling away from right mode of livelihood; failure in livelihood. (Vin. (Thai) 6/634/336)

These verses, given to the monk Kappa, give a strikingly vivid description of ugliness in the human body. According to the life story given by the commentary, he was the son of a governor and was inclined to great sensory overindulgence. The Buddha perceives him with divine vision, visits him and delivers a discourse larded with similes and metaphors of the most repellent kind.

The ancient Indian equivalent of ‘yuk’ seems to be the intended effect Kappa subsequently became an Arahant. Only one nun, appropriately named *Abhaya*, ‘Fearless’, is described as attaining Arahantship on the basis of examination of a corpse. Nuns were excluded from visiting cemeteries: it was felt then, as to a certain extent now, dangerous for women to travel anywhere alone, so her attainment presumably occurred before the rule

was formulated. (S III 106–9 cited in Sarah Shaw, 2006:105) Buddhaghosa's warning against a woman considering a male dead body, however, suggests that it was sometimes undertaken by women. (Vism VI 42)

An example that found in the Theragatha (Verses of the Elder Monks) showed the ugliness and attainment as follows:

Full of varied stains, a great dung producer,
 Like a mildewed pool, a great boil, a great wound,
 Full of pus and blood, smeared in a cesspit:
 The body trickles water and always oozes, foully.
 Coated with a coat of flesh, dressed in a jacket of skin:
 Putrid, the body is worthless.
 A string of bones joined together, with ties of sinew threads,
 A meeting together of this and that, it makes its posturing.
 Set on a course for death, it hangs around with the king of death.
 Only when he abandons it, right here, does a man go where he wishes.
 The body is covered in ignorance, tied up in a fourfold knot;
 The body is sinking in the flood, caught in a net of sticky inclinations.
 Yoked up to the five hindrances, afflicted with thought,
 Pursued by craving, the very root, covered with the covering of delusion,
 So this body rolls on, set in motion through the machinery of kamma.
 Success ends in failure; diverse in nature, the body fails.
 Silly, blind, ordinary men, who cherish this body:
 They fill up the fearful cemetery; they go once more to becoming.
 Those who steer clear of this body, as if it were a dung-smeared snake,
 Vomiting up the root of it all: they will become cooled, without
 corruptions. (Th 567–76)

This group of verses is ascribed to the Arahant Kulla, in which he describes seeing the body of a woman cast away, eaten and full of worms. Kulla was born at Sāvatthī in a wealthy family and was often seized by

fits of lustful passion, and so was frequently sent to charnel grounds to meditate. According to the commentaries he attained the first *Jhāna* and then Arahantship.

I, Kulla, going to a burial ground, saw a woman cast away,
 Abandoned in the cemetery, being eaten, and permeated by worms.
 Diseased, impure, rotten: see the body, Kulla!
 Oozing and trickling, it is the delight of fools.
 Taking the teaching as a mirror for the attainment of knowledge
 and vision, I reflected upon this body, empty inside and out.
 As this, so that; as that, so this. As below, so above; as above, so below,
 As by day, so by night; as by night, so by day.
 As before, so it is after; as after, so it is before.

There is not such delight in the five kinds of musical instruments
 As there is for he who is one-pointed, who sees things truly. (Th 393-8)

The objective of ugliness in Buddhism is to comprehend and to eliminate the clinging to sensuality by contemplating on the 32 impurity parts of body or a corpse. (Kh.(Thai) 25/681/4) One should understand that the body is the subject of ugliness or loathsomeness. This will lead to calm down the sensual desire. A person can contemplate on the thirty two modes of body and contemplate on the *Āhārepatikulasaññā*: perception of the loathsomeness of food (Vism.110; Comp.204.)

Content

The Appearance of Ugliness

When discussing the beauty in Buddhism, in this context, it refers to the impurity, impolite and disorder which lead to the disciplinary violation or the key principle that the Buddha taught.

First of all, we need to understand the 10 reasons for laying down the course of training for monks i.e. 1) that is for the excellence of the

unanimous Order, 2) for the comfort of the Order, 3) for the control of shameless persons, 4) for the living in comfort of well-behaved monks, 5) for the restraint of the cankers in the present, 6) for warding off the cankers in the hereafter, 7) for the confidence of those who have not yet gained confidence, 8) for the increase of the confidence of the confident, 9) for the lastingness of the true doctrine and 10) for the support of the discipline. (Vin. III.20; A.V.70 cited in Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto), 2559, p. 241-242)

When the Buddha considered that it was related to the ugliness, especially in the first verse that said, “For the comfort of the Order”. The Buddha did not lay down the course of training before the incident occurred, then it will be made later and the monk who acts as a commandment shall be considered as not guilty.

Therefore, the appearance of ugliness in Buddhist perspective can be found in the *Vipatti* or the failure in morality, in conduct, in views and in livelihood of the monks

Natures of Ugliness in Buddhist Perspective

The natures of ugliness are mostly found in the Vinaya Pitaka (Books of Discipline) and divided into 4 types as: falling away from moral habit, from good behavior, from right view and from right mode of livelihood. For the sake of better understanding, we can learn from the monastic code of training.

The nature of ugliness in morality

It was found in the in the Major Offences or *Pārājika*, when Venerable Sudina had sexual intercourse with his ex-wife. All the Deva had expressed the ugliness on him as: ... Buddhist monks have never been done such evil; he has committed the grave offence of expulsion... (Vin. (Thai)1/17/25) In addition, The Buddha said to Venerable Sudina on the erosion of sexual intercourse as it is the activity of the worldly people and it is not an activity of the monk. It is not for the confidence of those who have not yet gained

confidence and so on.

That is to say the action that does not conform to the *Vinaya* is considered as ugliness.

If the monastic life is not in accordance with the *Vinaya* such as it is also considered as ugliness. As it was found in a case of *Bhikkhunis* who lived under *Thullananda Bhikkhuni*, they have associated with householders on the wrong mode of livelihood. (*Vin (Thai)* 3/721/63) therefore, living by this way is considered as ugliness in Buddhist perspective.

In addition, the nature of ugliness can be found in the doctrine of *Abhisamācāra* or the higher training in proper conduct, if monks behave in the negative way (*A. (Thai)* 21/244/364)

The nature of ugliness in behavior

If the monks behaved unfriendly to the nature resources, such as defecation, urine or saliva into the natural water, they would get an offence of wrongdoing. (*Vin. (Thai)* 8/196/195)

The nature of ugliness in view can be defined in the wrong view or *Micchādiṭṭhi*, this can be occurred by two factors i.e. *Paratoghosa*: another's utterance and *Ayonisomanasikāra*: unreasoned attention. (P. A. Payutto), 2559, p.69) The wrong understanding is developed from the ignorance of people who believes that there is no fruition of giving, of worship, of good and evil, of this life, of the life to come, of mother, of father, of spontaneously born creatures and of the monk who practiced the right way and gained the fruition. (P. A. Payutto), 2559, p.69)

The nature of ugliness in livelihood

For monks, they cannot work the work place for their living life as a servant. However, some monks, dissatisfied with the amount and uncertainty of alms, have tried to secure a more comfortable lifestyle by practicing various crafts or trades and expecting a fee. This is called wrong livelihood. An exhaustive list of examples of wrong livelihood can be found in the

discourse of the Buddha called “**Brahmajāla Sutta**” which is in the section of the **Tipiṭaka** called “**Dīgha Nikāya**”. It includes such “priest craft” as: palmistry, fortune-telling, interpreting dreams, determining propitious dates or sites, exorcism, reciting protective charms, incanting malevolent spells (!), foretelling a person’s remaining lifespan, running errands for laypeople, casting astrological charts and so on. Even earning a living in, what would be for a layperson, a good way such as practicing medicine is for a monk wrong livelihood. There is a story in the **Dhammapada Commentary** of such a monk who did very well out of practicing as a doctor. One day, this monk received the most delicious almsfood from a man whom he had just successfully treated. On the way back to the monastery, he met Ven. **Sāriputta**, one of the leading disciples of the Buddha, proudly told of his doctoring and offered some of his delicacies to him. Ven. **Sāriputta** was dismayed and walked away without saying a word. Ven. **Sāriputta** loved the simple tradition of depending on alms and he would not eat what was obtained by breaking the precepts, in this case through practicing a craft for personal gain. When he returned to the monastery and related this incident to the Buddha, the Buddha recited the following stanzas:

“Bhikkhus, a Bhikkhu who is shameless is coarse in thought, word and deed. He is arrogant like unto a crow. He will secure a comfortable living through unlawful means. On the other hand, life for a monk who has a sense of moral shame is not easy.” (Dhammapada 244-245)

In the texts there are several stories where the Buddha, seeing an occasion to be of service, stopped while on alms round to give an inspiring teaching to a layman. The layperson would then run into the house and get some food to offer as a “reward” but the Buddha would always refuse it. He explained that Enlightened Ones do not teach for a fee. Teaching for personal gain is also wrong livelihood. Teaching is a monastic’s way of giving, of serving, and it should never be regarded as a profession, selling the

teachings for material gain.

A corrupt monk who tells fortunes for money, gives talks in exchange for gifts of practices any similar form of wrong livelihood has a special name in Buddhism -- he is called *Alajjī* (rhymes with Apache), meaning “shameless”. Good monks are advised to shun shameless ones and if a group of *Alajjī* monks congregate in a neighborhood the good monks are to go there and send them away (Ajahn Brahmavamso, <https://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebsut032.htm>)

Moreover, the concept of ugliness is also expressed on the Buddhist arts, for the sake of propagating the Buddha’s teaching. The artists create their artworks as the sculpture of hungry ghosts etc. which was influenced from the *Peta Vatthu* Scripture. (Kh.(Thai) 26/1-3/167) And it also appeared in the Thai Buddhist literary works as the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* or the Three Worlds According to King Ruang and *Phra Malai Kham Luang* etc.

Furthermore, the purpose of moral inferiority has been expressed in the form of Buddhist arts for long times in Thailand. Most people do not understand much because the form of sculpture or painting is shown as ugly and deform. In cases where these sculptures are made to express emotions, intellect, moral thought or, perhaps, also called the moral beauty. As Aristotle’s idea, he noted that human virtues were as beautiful and even the argument that education can train people to love the beauty of the virtues and he continues to say that true beauty is the beauty of behavior. (Diessner, R., Iyer, R., Smith, M. M., & Haidt, J., 2013: 139) Karl Rosenkranz, a German philosopher also mentioned that the ugliness is the negative of beauty and it is a dynamic of aesthetics. (Rosenkranz, Karl, Andrei Pop, and Mechtilde Widrich, 2015: 100)

Regarding the reflection of ugliness in Buddhism, there are 5 criteria as 1) Reflection on Five Aggregates, 2) Reflection on measuring (or judged) by one’s reputation, 3) Reflection on the Thirty Two Parts of Human’s Body,

4) Reflection on the Asubha Meditation and 5) Reflection on higher training in proper conduct.

1) Reflection on Five Aggregates: as the Buddha told to Vakkali Thera 'Try not, Vakkali, to satisfy in the body as the fools, the sight of my foul body is useless; he who sees the Dhamma, he it is that see me.' (Kh. Ap.33/122/122.) And this verse was expressed by the Lord Buddha to Rupa Nanda Therī as: '*This body was made into a city of bones; Plastered with flesh and blood; It is a place of old aged, of death, of ego, and of denigration.*' (Kh.Dh.(Thai) 25/148/78)

2) Reflection on measuring (or judged) by one's reputation or *Pamāñika*: the beauty or the ugly can be existed and judged by four ways as 1) *Rūpa-pamāṇa*: one who measures by form or outward appearance or one whose faith depends on good appearance, 2) *Ghosa-pamāṇa*: one who measures by voice or reputation; one whose faith depends on sweet voice or good reputation, 3) *Lūkha-pamāṇa*: one who measures or judges by shabbiness, mediocrity or hard life or one whose faith depends on shabbiness or ascetic or self-denying practices and 4) *Dhamma-pamāṇa*: one who measures or judges by the teaching or righteous behavior or one whose faith depends on right teachings and practices. (A.II.71; Pug.7,53; DhA.114; SnA.242.)

3) Reflection on the Thirty Two Appearance of Human's Body: The contemplation of body parts by using each part as the object to observe in the practice of insight meditation to understand the true nature of body, to see the body made of 4 primary elements, to see each body part as it really is, to distinguish them from delusion and attachment of the beauty. (Sobhanamahathera (Mahsī Sayadaw). 2549 : 180-182)

4) Reflection on the Asubha Meditation: Asubha meditation is the meditation on the foulness of the body. It is designed to decrease our attachment to our bodies and decrease lust. One must concentrate on an

image of the body in various stages of decomposition, and then relate that image to his/her own body. (Sarah Shaw, 2005:101)

5) Reflection on the higher training in proper conduct or *Abhisamācāra*: the beauty or ugliness can be considered by the small rule of trainings or the so called *Ākappavattasampanna* or to be accomplished in manner and duties. One the Buddha says ‘*Bhikkhu* who is not accomplished his duties; he is called an impurity...and would not attained *Nibbāna*... one who accomplished the duties will attain *Nibbāna*. (Vin. (Thai) 7/382/277)

Conclusion

The study of ugliness in Buddhism can be found in places as: in the Five Aggregates, in *Pamāṇika*, in the Thirty Two Parts of Human’s Body, in the Asubha and in the *Abhisamācāra*. Therefore, firstly, one should understand the beauty that appears in the Five Aggregates and to understand that Five Aggregates are impermanent, then he/she will understand the ugliness. The *Pamāṇika* can be a tool for judging people on beauty or ugly by the body appearance, voice etc. To the *Abhisamācāra*, there are many details of the manor rules of training on physical and behavioral. On the other hand, if monks do not follow those rules, they will be considered as the ungainliness in virtue, unsuitable one and ungrateful to the Sangha Community. The Asubha is considered as the most concrete of ugliness in the Buddhist perspective and it is a type of meditation practice by contemplates on the ugliness of the human body. Therefore, we can divide the ugliness into two types: 1) the ugliness that appeared by the nature and 2) the ugliness that manifested by behavior.

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