

Beautifully true¹

Axiology

The No Ce'dam Sutta (S 14.33)—the “If it were not for this” Discourse—is a short teaching on the meaning and purpose of the Buddha’s teaching. The Sutta theme is that of the 4 great elements (*mahā, bhūta, rūpa*)—earth, water, fire and wind. Philosophically, this is a discourse in Buddhist **axiology**—the early Buddhist theory of value and values. As we shall see, in early Buddhism, the “theory of *values*” (plural) refers to the ethics-based axiology, and the “theory of *value*” (singular) refers to the aesthetics-based axiology.

Axiology² is the philosophical study or theory of *value* and of *values*, an important aspect of Buddhist morality.³ It is defined as “the study of the nature, types, and criteria of values and of value judgments, especially in ethics.”⁴ Axiology studies mainly two kinds of values, that is, those of ethics and of aesthetics. In other words, ethics and aesthetics—goodness and beauty—are closely intertwined. They are like two ways of looking at the same reality: the former sees true peace; the latter, true joy.

Ethics

Ethics investigates the concepts of “good” (*kusala*) and “right” (*sammā*) in individual and social conduct. Basically, “good” means what helps us to grow emotionally and spiritually into true individuals (*sappurisa*), that is, as emotionally independent persons capable of inspiring happiness and goodness in others. “Right” when applied to an action means that it benefits both us and others without hurting the environment, and is of the greatest benefit for the greatest number of beings, if not, all life. Early Buddhist ethics, then, is a life-centred ethics.⁵

From here, we go into another important area—**the theory of values** (*dhamma*)—which is the ethics-based axiology underpinning the practice of **the 5 precepts**. The first precept, as we know, is based on the value of life. The other precepts each have their own value, here given within parentheses, thus: not stealing (happiness), abstaining from sexual misconduct (freedom), not lying (truth), and avoiding intoxication and addiction (wisdom).⁶

All this is the first of the 3 trainings (*sikkha-t, taya*) of early Buddhism, that of **training in moral virtue** (*sīla, sikkhā*). Essentially, the early Buddhist moral training concerns the restraint and shaping of our action and speech to be harmonious and conducive towards mental cultivation (*sam-ādhi, sikkhā*), the second training. Both these trainings are the bases for the training in insight

¹ This reflection is an offprint from **the No Ce'dam Sutta** (S 14.33), [SD 50.16](#) (1.1.1).

² **Axiology**, from the Greek ἀξία, *axiā*, “value, worth” and -λογία, *-logos*, “word; study”: the philosophical study of values.

³ “Theory of value” (OED).

⁴ Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary. For a helpful intro, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axiology>.

⁵ On the 5 values, see [SD 1.5](#) (2) Table.

⁶ On the 5 values, see [SD 1.5](#) (2) Table.

wisdom (*paññā, sikkhā*),⁷ all of which (that is, the 3 trainings as a whole) are the bases of right knowledge and right freedom.⁸

Aesthetics

Aesthetics studies the concepts of “beauty” (*sobha*) and “harmony” (*sama*). Philosophically, we can see the idea of beauty as the dynamic process and spiritual state connected with the second training—that of concentration training (*samādhi sikkhā*) or mental cultivation. Theoretically, this is the harmonizing of the mind—of knowing, shaping and freeing our mind.

To know our mind is to see it as being habitually impermanent, changing, becoming other; to shape it means to train it to avoid energy-sapping distractions and wisdom-sapping hindrances; and to free it is to let it naturally rise beyond the physical senses, so that the mind fully focuses on itself: this is known as dhyana (*jhāna*).⁹ This calm and clear mind then works to attain arhathood.¹⁰

Aesthetics is essentially *the study and theory of beauty*—at least as philosophy—but as early Buddhist spirituality, aesthetics necessarily encompasses the understanding and cultivation of *both beauty and truth*. The reason for this necessary unity is quite simple: beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all we can know, and all we need to know.¹¹ What constitutes **beauty** is that it expresses the truth, that is, *true reality*, which is hidden from us by the very senses that are supposed to reveal them to us.

Art

Art, in the sense of aesthetics, then, is the exploration, discovery, expression and enjoyment of what is truly beautiful and beautifully true. The “*truly beautiful*” is how the Artist expresses his vision and experience of true reality. The “*beautifully true*” is the quality and essence of what has been expressed by the Artist.¹²

We have already noted that “beauty” refers to our moral virtue that is the well cultivated body, and “truth” to the experience of the well cultivated mind. These are the first two of the 3 trainings, and these two are the bases for wisdom training, which embodies both beauty and truth. The cultivation of wisdom entails the arising of both calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).¹³ When both are experienced harmoniously, then we live *joyful* and *insightful* lives heading for the path of awakening, or even walking on that path.

R491 Revisioning Buddhism 174

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2017

⁷ On the 3 trainings, see *Sīla samādhi paññā*, [SD 21.6](#).

⁸ All this gives full expression to the noble eightfold path, making it the 10 rightness (*sammatta*): [SD 10.16](#), esp (1.2.2). On right knowledge (*sammā,ñāṇa*) and right freedom (*sammā,vimutti*), see [SD 10.16](#) (9-10).

⁹ See **Dhyana**, [SD 8.4](#).

¹⁰ On how arhathood is attained in this way, see [SD 8.4](#) (12.6).

¹¹ This is from Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), where he writes: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” See [SD 40a.4](#) (8.2); [SD 40a.1](#) (8.1.2); also Piya Tan, Reflection, “[No views frees](#),” R255, 2012.

¹² On Buddhist aesthetics (beauty and truth), see [SD 46.5](#) (2.4.2).

¹³ On calm and insight, see *Samatha and Vipassanā*, [SD 41.1](#).