

Article

The Translation of Life: Thinking of Painting in Indian Buddhist Literature

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Abstract: What are paintings? Is there a distinctive mode of experience paintings enable? What is the value of such experience? This essay explores such questions, confining attention for the most part to a few distinctive moments in Indian Buddhist texts. In particular, I focus on invocations of painting in figures of speech, particularly when paintings are invoked to make sense of events or experiences of particular importance. The aim is not to be exhaustive, but to suggest a meta-poetic orientation: On the basis of moments where authors think with figurations of painting, I want to suggest that in Buddhist texts one begins to find a growing regard for the possibilities of re-ordering and transvaluing sense experience. After suggesting the possibility of this on the basis of a preliminary consideration of some figures of speech invoking painting, this essay turns to the reconstruction of what I call aesthetic stances to make sense of the idea of new possibilities in sense experience. I derive the concept of “aesthetic stances” on the basis of a close reading of a pivotal moment in one Buddhist narrative, the defeat of Māra in *The Legend of Aśoka*.

Keywords: painting; aesthetics; Buddhism; experience; aesthetic stance; ambiguity; time

1. Introduction

Painters who use life itself as their subject-matter, working with the object in front of them or constantly in mind, do so in order to translate life into art almost literally, as it were . . . [b]ecause the picture in order to move us must never merely *remind* us of life, but must acquire a life of its own, precisely in order to *reflect* life.

—Lucian Freud, “Some Thoughts on Painting”

As the Buddha, Siddhārtha eventually returned to the city he so dramatically left behind. The experience was confounding for those who loved him, including his father, to take one example—as we are told in the nineteenth chapter of Aśvaghōṣa’s *Life of the Buddha*. There we find his father, Śuddhodhana,

Hastening into the Sage’s presence. Seeing him,
he said nothing—for he could no more call him
“Mendicant” than he could call him “Son.”
As he looked at his mendicant’s robes,
as he contemplated all the various ornaments
on his own body, he sighed; then he wept,
lamenting in an undertone:
“Like a traveler
overcome by thirst and reaching

a distant pool, finding it
 dry, my pain grows overwhelming
 seeing him close by me, this calm,
 with no change of feeling (19.6–19.8).¹

This is heartbreaking enough, to be sure. Consider, however, the image which follows as Śuddhodhana continues his lament:

As I look upon the same form he's always had,
 as one might look at the likeness of a loved one
 in a painting, remembered despite dwelling
 at the end of the world, I feel no delight,
 even as he feels nothing (19.9).

Seeing Siddhārtha as a mendicant, the father says, is like looking at a painting of the son he remembers. The outward form is all that remains.

Of course, he is not looking at a painting. Śuddhodhana uses the image of painting to think about what has happened to his son and what is happening to him. Even though the Buddha is present before his father, the latter feels that his son has changed so profoundly that he is not there; he “[dwells] at the end of the world” despite being there in front of him. This is to look on the analogy in one direction, as it were. On the basis of the analogy, we may also say that to undergo a transformative experience is a little like what happens when one transfers something from life into image.

In thinking with the help of a painting, Siddhārtha's father and Āsvaghoṣa have raised more than a few questions: When do we think of paintings? And why? What are paintings? Is there a distinctive mode of experience paintings enable? (For example, to view a painting appears to be closer here to remembering than seeing.) What is the value of such experience? I'd like to explore such questions in this essay, confining my attention for the most part to a few distinctive moments in Indian Buddhist texts. To begin with, my sources shall be invocations of painting in figures of speech, particularly when paintings are invoked to make sense of events or experience. Initially, I shall use “painting” narrowly to track the use made of “*citra*” in Sanskrit to mean the following: the product of applying color(s) through some medium on a solid surface (such as a plank, wall, canvas, or cloth, and the like) to make available hedonically charged experience of the contents represented through such application.² Some Buddhist texts directly emphasize the need for a surface such as (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 1995, p. 221; Suzuki 1932, verse 98, p. 234; Bodhi 2000, pp. 600, 959); in other contexts, the surface might be mentioned along with application of color when appealing to paintings in similes to stress the gap between the properties of the vehicles of representation and the properties of the seemingly three-dimensional represented contents, underscoring thereby the possible illusoriness of the value-laden content we think we see. Thus, Subha in the *Therīgāthā*, admonishing a rake for his investment in the beauty of her body: “You saw some figures painted on a wall, /colored with yellow that makes their bodies seem lifelike, /but what you saw is the opposite of what you think, /you thought you saw humans when none are there” (Hallisey 2015, verse 396, p. 193).

I should immediately say that I do not aim to be exhaustive, merely indicative. My focus on figures of speech and narrative does not extend to considering historical practices of painting per se in Buddhism

¹ All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. The translation here is after (Johnston 1937, pp. 84–85), consulting the Tibetan of Sa dbang bzang po and Blo gros rgyal po, “Saṅs rgyas kyi spyod pa zes bya ba 'i śān dhags chen po” (T. 1b1–103b2: T.69a3–70a4).

² My goals in this essay are modest and limited, for the most part, to the exploration of very few Indian Buddhist works. Should at some point a comparative focus become desirable, one might begin by taking up Appolonius' definition of painting and his discussion of its epistemological salience in Book II, section XXII of the *Life of Appolonius* (Philostratus 1912, pp. 173–74). It has helped me formulate my own understanding of the use of “*citra*” in Buddhist sources.

(about which there is rather a lot to say; on paintings in ritual, see (Davidson 2019); in life and history, see (Zin 2019; DeCaroli 2015); in narrative and cosmological thought, see (Granoff 2001, 2004, 2020)). My interests, rather, are meta-poetic, if I may put things this way: On the basis of moments where authors think with figurations of painting, I want to suggest that in Indian Buddhist texts one begins to find a growing regard for the possibilities of re-ordering and transvaluing sense experience. I will gloss such a concern as involving “aesthetic” considerations, though I ask the reader to note that this use extends “aesthetics” to include investment in experiential possibilities which go beyond a narrow concern with the generation of pleasurable experiences tied to appraisals of beauty.³

My ultimate goal is to guide the reader to the reconstruction of a concept I call aesthetic stances, a concept I shall derive below in the section “Aesthetic Power” on the basis of a close reading of a pivotal moment in one Buddhist narrative, the defeat of Māra in *The Legend of Aśoka*. Aesthetic stances are often most clearly invoked in narrative precisely with the help of appeals to painting or related aesthetic disciplines. But as we shall see, aesthetic stances in Buddhist narrative appear to involve generalizations of what one might learn from representational arts when applied to what Buddhists appear to have considered to be difficult limit cases: cases where something does not appear to represent something, so much as embody it, or make it present—as when a deity, for example, might be said to overlap with its image, but not necessarily be represented by it.⁴ Or when an actor embodies a role. With the help of the *Legend of Aśoka*, and the dialogue of Upagupta and Māra, I present one Buddhist way of thinking about such cases which would have us see that what might look to be representational in one stance may be described differently in another. I shall distinguish the stances of painters and the stance from which paintings are observed, suggesting how different stances are used in different narratives to model the nature of experiencing and may even, as I show in the conclusion, be used as a source for modelling the virtues involved in living well. Art may become a source for thinking about one’s best life.

As will become clearer below, I will not derive my analytic vocabulary from the sophisticated toolkit of aesthetic theory in Sanskrit, but from narratives themselves (see also n12 below). In the next section, I will discuss certain more common questions that have framed and organized appeals to painting in Buddhist thought and narrative. I do so to help bring into view the distinctiveness of the questions we shall then go on to track, and to give some indication of how the rest of the essay is structured.

2. The Mind Like a Painter and the Mind of a Painter

Why should we think of Siddhārtha as being like a painting at all? Did Śuddhodana really believe that he had become transferred into another medium by becoming a Buddha? Siddhārtha’s father intimates that being in the presence of a portrait can be an activity rich with feeling. Readers might wonder whether he also believes that *being in a painting*, or being a painting, to be devoid of affect. Is that also partly why he believes it appropriate to say of Siddhārtha that he has become like a painting of himself?

While painting is often invoked at moments of transformation, it may be an ambiguous image for a change which admits of competing interpretations. Paintings, through the trope of stillness, could metaphorically represent diminished persons (Kachru 2015); beyond metaphor, they may have been understood as ritual ways to entrap or bind persons through likenesses (DeCaroli 2015, p. 61). But self-likeness can also signal being at a threshold of culturally valuable transformation. Consider the following description of how an elephant, Bhadrā, came across a Buddha in the wild:

³ Though perhaps not common, such extension is not unprecedented. For arguments to extend “aesthetics” to cover any hedonic response to sensory experience, see (Shimamura and Palmer 2012, pp. 3–4); for the use of “aesthetics” to indicate a (historically variable) “configuration of sense experience that creates new modes of sense perception” see (Rancière 2006, p. 9).

⁴ My thanks to a reviewer for suggesting clarity on this point.

Now in the Vindhya Hills Bhadrā caught sight of a Pratyekabuddha. As he sat cross-legged on a rock in the shade of a tree, his eyes motionless in meditation, his body wrapped in a robe red as the eyes of an excited partridge, he looked like a figure in a painting. She brought him some lilies from a pond to do him homage. (Khoroché 2017, p. 106)

A “pratyekabuddha” is a type of enlightened being who does not contribute to social community through teaching. Look at the way he here comes into focus. His robe, recall, is the color of the unstill eye of the partridge. A simile in Sanskrit is an incomplete likeness: x is like y only with respect to some P, and nothing else. But one can use a simile to suggest more than is said by considering salient contrasts, such as that formed by the un-stillness of the partridge’s eye and the motionless eye of the meditating Buddha, or even his unmoving body. The eye of the partridge adds frenetic energy to a vista that is otherwise withdrawn into stillness.⁵ Its complement does not lie within the visual scene, but in the eye of the observer, Bhadrā, and the subsequent movement of homage.

Perhaps these movements on the “fringe” intimate invisible movements of change, as the person likened to an image may really be more like an image coming alive, a state of particular interest for so long in medieval India (Granoff 2004). The analogy to painting can be multi-dimensional depending on background commitments and contexts. In the *Mānimekhalai*, for example, the heroine meets a spirit who resides in an image carved into a pillar. This spirit, reminiscent of Paul Klee, is tasked with “unveiling things hidden” (DeCaroli 2015, p. 69).⁶ One thing in particular which he seeks to explain is “why figures painted in a fresco or images modelled in clay or sculpted in stone or wood sometimes have the power to speak.” (DeCaroli 2015, p. 69). With such an image we must confront the ontological possibility that paintings, and reflections or resemblances—likenesses all—need not be less real. To be sure, much will depend on where we look, within philosophy or narrative. But one must keep open the possibility, as with Jain and Buddhist narratives, that not only might likenesses, reflections, and beings crafted of the very stuff of the visible enjoy a different mode of reality, more so than other things they may even express something of what reality with a capital “R” is really like cf. (Granoff 2001, p. 93, n39).

If the real, secret lives of paintings (and statues) comes to be a commonplace in Medieval Indian culture, paintings may also be invoked to exemplify illusion (see below). What we must appreciate is this: appeals to painting might emphasize the painting, the content of the painting, or emphasize the experience of the painting from the side of the subject. Take a charming detail used by the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Suzuki 1932, p. 236) in a verse to highlight the nature of the eye-catching details of the visible world: for men infused with unknowing, the manifest world is like the illusion of an elephant [generated by a magician], like eye-catching golden leaves [in a painting]” (10.126; Vaidya 1963, p. 115).

The reference to the variegate golden leaves in a painting might function in one of several ways. One may emphasize what is being depicted, the golden leaves; the vehicle depicting them (the painting in which they are a detail); or the experience of them on the part of the person. Interestingly enough, in this simile, it is the hallmark of our unknowing that we overlook vehicles for content, focusing on *what* is presented to us and not *how*.

I will have more to say about this in a moment. For now, consider our experience of what is presented to us—the domain par excellence for the thematization of painting and the confounding nature of what is manifest. The way in which our attention is directed by figurative appeals to painting has less to do with detail than with the fact of there being anything experientially manifest to us at all. To thematize ourselves as mere observers of what is manifest, however, might make us too passive. Sometimes, the analogy would have it that we are not so much like observers of paintings as we are

⁵ I am put in mind here of Stella Kramrisch’s description of the painting of Padmapāṇi in cave 1 at Ajanta; in particular, I think of her saying of the ribbons on the bodhisattva’s crown that they are as if “tossed by a gale of stillness” (Kramrisch 1994, p. 301).

⁶ Paul Klee began his *Creative Confession* (Klee 1987, p. 60) by saying that “Art does not reproduce the visible, but makes visible (*Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar*).”

painters, and our way of being in the world may be likened to a painting, as in this extended figure in the (second) *Gaddula Sutta* (PTS S iii 151–152):

It's just as when—there being dye, lac, yellow orpiment, indigo, or crimson—a dyer or painter would fashion the appearance (*abhinimmineyya*) the form of a woman or a man, complete in all its parts, on a well-polished panel or wall, or on a piece of cloth; in the same way, an untutored, run-of-the-mill person, when bringing about (*abhinibbattento*), brings about sensibilia ... affective appraisal ... labeling ... dispositions ... conscious discernment.

There is a possible emphasis on vanity (Ñāṇananda 2015, pp. 117–18), but the point here is not necessarily that we are free artists of ourselves. The extended figure keeps the verbs of creation apart: artists manipulate appearances through processes of disclosure and manifestation (*abhi-ni-mā*) while in the process we ourselves *become* what we contrive to bring about (*abhinibbattati*). What paintings and our lives have in common is this: paintings are sketched and then filled in, and just so, our lives too are constrained to unfold in certain ways ((Ñāṇananda 2016, p. 86), discussing S.ii.101). While this image would not seek to have us reduce our way of being in the world to the manipulation of what is manifest, it does underscore a telling proximity. Note the reference to cloth-dyers as well as to painters. Paintings can sometimes appear to be creatures of distance, as when we feel as if they are best taken in when we are at a distance from them and still. But we often evince more intimate relations with the arts which environ us. Phyllis Granoff, in private communication, has brought to my attention the robe which Udāyin is said to have sewed for an anonymous nun (*Vinaya* iv.60; (Horner 2004, p. 285)). Udāyin is a monk who, by turns artful and helpless, serves as the comic relief of the Pāli Books of Discipline (*Vinaya*). In this instance, the skills which Udāyin taught himself and which he brought to bear in the making of this robe included dyeing as well as painting: he secretly dyed into the middle of the robe a *patibhānacitta*, which in this case the commentary interprets as an illustration, made with various colors artfully combined, of heterosexual lovers interrupted in the act (*vippakata-methuna*).⁷ To be sure, paintings of men and women (*patibhānacitta*), as I. B. Horner noted, could be found in picture galleries and possibly at a distance from spectators ((Horner 2004, n5, p. 285); *Vinaya* iv. 298); but this belies the way in which paintings, and the perspicuous light (*pati-bhā*) which they shed on the desires of social actors and the often mute dramas through which sensing bodies could be led and disciplined, excited and fulfilled, were also *lived with*: In the residences of monks (*Vinaya* ii.151), and even woven into the fabric of one's clothes. Inside and out: for the intelligibility of the ancient world, one must not think of the technology of the book so much as of murals.

The common references in Buddhist texts that imply that the mind is like a painter of the world, or that our experience of the world is as of a painting (Hamar 2014, p. 175),⁸ may conceal a possibly misleading suggestion. Painting (like dyeing) is a skill-based guided activity. Yet, when the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna-sūtra* says that “mind is the skillful painter . . . ” (Hamar 2014, p. 178) it need not imply an activity undertaken by a person for a reason through the exercise of skill. The analogy can imply that, to be sure, as when the same text conceives of the practice of yoga as “the painting of images by the mind” (7.12.7, quoted in (Mallinson and Singelton 2017, p. 307)); on this analogy, the brush is conceived to be the possible mental states achieved in meditation, the images the possible contents, leaving us as the agents of this skill-based activity. The *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* may be read as a work engaged with a sustained transformation of attitudes to aesthetic possibilities for experience through contemplative exercise see (Stuart 2015). My point is not to negate this link between painting and skill-based transformation through activity. It is, instead, to suggest that appeals to figurations of painting may be more underdetermined than the above usage, when taken on its own, might suggest.

⁷ Here, I follow the commentary quoted in (Horner 2004, n5, p. 285).

⁸ For a discussion of the commentaries on the Avataṃsaka which develop the image of painting and debate the status of the mind (personal or impersonal absolute) which is being analogized, see (Hamar 2014, pp. 180–86).

A similar analogy in another textual context can be used to suggest our being under the sway of sub-agential forces like desire and our being in thrall of the products of painting rather than in control of the process. Then again, perhaps the ambivalence about the degree to which our experience is broadly cognitive or passive is the point. Consider the following two analogies used by the Haribhatta:

- (1) Picturing her thus with the paintbrushes of his fancy, he thought of her constantly with yearning (Khoroché 2017, p. 158).
- (2) ... The paintbrush of desire never wearies of painting the house of the mind (Khoroché 2017, p. 32).

Who holds the paintbrush, as it were? Do we ourselves hold it, or do our desires? Who guides our imaginative capacities in action?

In addition to the possible ambivalence described above, there are two further lessons in Haribhatta's images. The image of the "paintbrush of desire [which] never wearies of painting the house of the mind" is introduced to explain the basic furniture of calculative rationality: "This much is done, but that is still to do" (Khoroché 2017, p. 32), etc. Desire, then, need not mean something "blind," something without content, or something whose intelligibility lies entirely outside of the order of practical reasons. What both images underscore, furthermore, is this: desire makes of our world a niche, which process is facilitated in such arts as painting: in doing so, painting creates a scaffolding for mind, "a house." We will take up this sense of painting as a certain mode of habitation in the world below.

In an early image we are warned, however, that the diversity of the mind cannot be captured in any painting, however ramified, however beautiful. Speaking of a travelling picture, a work that was taken from town to town, the Buddha is said to have said: "Even that picture has been thought out in its diverse detail by mind ... the mind is more diverse than that picture" (after (Bodhi 2000, p. 958); n207, 1087–1088). The analogy may even underscore continuity; there is an affinity between mind and art: *citta* in Pāli is both thought (Sanskrit: *citta*) and painting (Sanskrit: *citra*), what is variegated; as is the affinity between mind and art contained in the use of the participle *cittita*, which can mean what is thought out as well as what is diversified.

When speaking of paintings, the world, and mind as ramified, the emphasis appears to be on manifest and color-filled appearance. Is it reductive to consider painting and the manifest as a whole only in terms of color? Sometime in the first century of the first millennium of the common era, the philosopher Plutarch wrote to Marcus Sedatius in *How To Study Poetry (de audiendis poetis)*: "In painting," he said, "colour is more exciting than line because it is colour that represents flesh and deceives the eye" (Russell and Winterbottom 1989, p. 194; Plutarch 1927, p. 5). Despite the Buddha in the *Lankāvatāra* averring that a painting is made and completed with color in order to draw sentient beings in (2.118, cf. (Suzuki 1932, p. 44))—the teaching being like a painting, perhaps, because the truth is beyond words, even as the painting exists neither in the color nor the material support—it is unclear that a Buddhist philosopher would concur with Plutarch entirely. Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* suggests that though we do speak as if the visible stuff itself were "lovely" or "pleasant," this is a license of usage: in truth, such predicates are not applicable to the purely sensory contact of visual capacity and visual stimulus (on verse I.42; (Hall 1983, p. 159)). No purely sensory datum—understood as being shorn of meaning—could sustain the kind of complex aesthetic responses which Plutarch is interested in, nor need the erotic exhaust aesthetics—even for Buddhists, as we shall see below.

We have already seen that there can be an emphasis on color in Buddhist images of painting (see also Granoff 2020); more generally, Buddhist texts can emphasize those features which are correlated with the capture of attention by sensory stimuli. But one need not only take up the perspective of an untutored observer deceived into mistaking a part or all that she sees. Set aside also the mind as a painter. As was perhaps already intimated by the perspectival depth of a painting with golden leaves for its arresting detail, we might also consider the mind of a painter who can see through the painting.

This is an under-emphasized image. In the *Lankāvatāra* (2.117; cf. (Suzuki 1932, pp. 43–44)), we are invited to consider what a mind of a master-painter (*citrācārya*) or his apprentice (*citrāntevāsika*)—the

view from within a workshop of color, more generally—might entail. To take one example: the master knows that the painting is not in the color (or any one item which goes into making it up). For now, all we need is that painting is an example for a complex effect which cannot be realized analytically into well-founded parts (2.117 in (Suzuki 1932, pp. 43–44)). Such a master’s eye will be comparatively less likely to be arrested in only one part of the painting.

If there is something like seeing a painting, as Siddhārtha’s father believed, then it will matter who is doing the seeing, and what the criteria for success are. This is the lesson from within the workshop of color, and it is a theme which is considered important enough to work into some of the more dramatic moments of Buddhist narrative, such as Śuddhodhana’s glimpse of Siddhārtha as the Buddha; or Upagupta’s conversion of the arch nemesis of Buddhism, the lord of the sensible, Māra. We shall consider each in a separate section below and use them to generate the notion of an aesthetic stance. We shall also consider two less well-known moments: Somendra’s introduction to his father’s run-away bestseller, Kṣemendra’s *Avadānakalpalatā* (*Flowering Vine of Past Lives of the Buddha*), and the beginning of Haribhatta’s *Jātakamāla*, or *Garland of Birth Stories*. These will help us flesh out, among other things, the sense of dwelling with paintings, to which I have alluded above, and important dis-analogies between paintings and other residents of the world of imaginative creations. I will end with Haribhatta’s use of an image that would have painting or, more precisely, the painter’s vocation teach Buddhists something important about the source of the virtues necessary for living well.

3. Paintings and Drinking from a Mirage

Siddhārtha’s father, I claimed above, used a painting to think about his experience of seeing his son again. Consider the value ascribed to a painting and the modality of engaging with a painting. Consider that we typically look on a portrait when the original is no longer present. To look on a portrait, on this view, is to exercise something more like memory than perception. Our perception of *x*—if *x* is painting like—does not stop at what is present: for *x* bears a relation to something which is no longer present. In entertaining this, we go beyond the present.

Perhaps in English it is better to speak of imagining *x* or casting for *x* in thought. In Sanskrit, memory can range backwards in time as well as be drawn into the future (Shulman 1998). To look on a painting is to potentially range in time. What matters is that there be ground to range over. There must be an appreciable gap between a likeness and its original. Which is why the exercise is thwarted in Śuddhodhana’s case.

The original is there, but as if in a painting of itself. This is to drain the prospect of the exercise of looking of its intelligibility and felicity. It savors of frustration: like a parched traveler, says Śuddhodhana, seeking a mirage and finding nothing. Kālidāsa also uses the figure of thirst and mirage in connection with painting. When, in Act Six of *The Recognition of Śakuntala* the once cursed and now cured King recollects his abandoned love, we are told that he was moved to paint Śakuntalā and the scene of their first encounter. The King says of the incomplete painting (verse 16; cf. (Johnson 2001, p. 81)):

I rejected my love when she stood before me,
 Yet now I’m obsessed by her portrait:
 I crossed the stream of living water
 To drink from a mirage.

A mirage is an optical effect that does not survive approach. Kālidāsa as well as Aśvagoṣa intimate that the success of representation in painting is an optical effect like a mirage in that it is born of distance from the original. They also suggest that the illusion is a motivated one, perhaps on account of being correlated with desire in such a way that makes the illusion one which is likely to be entertained and which makes its (inevitable) disappearance upon engagement a source of frustration.

Going beyond the analogy of likening a painting to a parched person approaching a mirage, painting may have to do with our attempts to avoid time. “Stream” is the word in Kālidāsa’s verse

above on which to seize. Neither we, nor our targets of desire, ever stay still. The act of painting, then, may serve as a literal and figural attempt at recovery or fixity in time. As the comic relief says: “It’s too late for the river now but there’s no dispelling the mirage” (Johnson 2001, p. 81).

Even so, they would not recognize Śuddhodhana’s sense that paintings are devoid of feeling. Humans, and their feelings, may enter paintings. The comic relief speaks of the emotion of the artist reliably conveyed in the subject matter (Johnson 2001, p. 80)—the feeling, once in the painter, can be moved into the open by virtue of the painting, and so available to the onlooker, be it the painter or someone else. That is a real effect, though to see it, one must have a mind capable of looking from painting to its source, rather than from painting to its content. In some directions, what a painting reveals or discloses of itself is true; and in others, perhaps, it is illusory. We need the mind of a painter, or more generally, a mind which possess the right hermeneutic tools. The characters in the play, for example, can look on paintings as containing—we might say revealing—feelings because of their feel for the embodied conditions under which a work is produced and the constituting materials of which a painting is made: where sweat smears the paper, or a tear blisters the paint. This is the way that Lucian Freud talked of painting when he said that in it “a secret becomes known to everyone who views the picture through the intensity with which it is felt (Freud 1954, p. 23).”⁹

There is a further sense on which we humans may be said to enter paintings. As the King loses himself in his painting of a scene from his past, reliving his newly remembered days, some onlookers, like Sānumatī, marvel at what paintings and the experience of paintings may disclose to the painter when one forgets the boundary between life and representation (Johnson 2001, p. 83). Others, like the comic relief, look on at the scene as if presented with a kind of madness (Johnson 2001, p. 83): “He’s gone mad. And I’ll go mad too, if this goes on much longer.” This is said in an aside when the King threatens a bee which lives in his portrait of his beloved. To the King, he says, “It’s only a bee in a picture.” The King replies: “What picture?” But this experience of the non-representational presence of his beloved, and his immersion in the experience of the virtual, are soon disturbed—soon, to speak with the King, “she’s nothing but paint” (Johnson 2001, p. 83).

There are conditions under which portraits can come alive in our regard as we lose ourselves in them—that may or may not be madness. In the play, we are encouraged to see that we do not only live when we are awake. Dreams are an available experiential context as well, and we do not only live in the present. We dwell with and so in the past, and even in the future, whether or not we always acknowledge this. What if the line between our collective lives and our private immersion in virtual experience sustained by representations, is like the difference between dreaming and waking, or the difference between what is past and present? Are these distinctions best treated as the distinction between what is true and what is not? Is our life in dreams, or the past, any less real?

4. Aesthetic Power

What is it that allows one to enter into a scene—a particular arrangement of what is manifest—in the right way, as the comic relief intimates he can do in the presence of the painting of someone else’s memory and the emotion it captures: “I’m almost stumbling through the hills and hollows just by looking at it” (Johnson 2001, p. 80). Sometimes there are no impediments to our registering the presence of what is manifest before us in painting. The mind of Siddhārtha’s father, however, is blanked by looking on his living son who was so transformed that he seemed as if only a painting of his former self. Some arrangements of the manifest defeat presence.

⁹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue the use of paintings in Sanskrit literature as epistemological devices. In the work of playwrights like Bhavabhūti, scenes involving painting can become an occasion for reflexive attention on the part of dramatists to the nature of representation; while on the part of characters in the play, paintings of past events or portraits can come to serve as tools of self-discovery, presenting again what one has forgotten, repressed or what one never knew about oneself. Among the best (and now most accessible) examples of this I know is Bhavabhūti’s *Rama’s Last Act*. See (Bhavabhuti 2007, pp. 97–99) and translator’s introduction, pages 38–39.

To help us understand the divergent experience of paintings and their value we need to explore what we have intimated with the help of the view from within the workshop. I shall call the generalized conception of different vantage points “aesthetic stances.” To flesh this out, I turn to a vignette involving Māra—embodiment of Eros, Death and Time—who, in *The Legend of Aśoka*, once “having gone far into the forest and taken on the form of the Buddha, emerged again like an actor wearing a bright costume” (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 193).

Let us define an aesthetic stance as an orientation which calibrates the values and meanings of experience on the basis of *possible* sensible experience. By “possible sensible experience” I mean to say this: which experiences individuals have available to them, what the causal profile of those experiences and their assigned values might be, are sensitive to contextual factors. Among those contextual factors will be the interpretive tools one brings to experience.

Typically, an aesthetic stance is represented in Sanskrit letters by theatre; the scope of experience is represented by the figure of an actor imbued with agency and often the intent to deceive, and the arts as the means to dissimulate.¹⁰ When emphasizing the effects of artistic transformation, however, one often can find appeals to painting. Thus, the story of Māra goes on to say that the form of the Buddha which he assumed in the clearing—a form which brings peace to the eyes of men (*nayana-sānti-karaṇī narāṇāṇī*) ornamented—or, to dig deep into the etymology of the word “*alaṇ-kr*”—filled out that forest “as though unveiling the fresh colors of a valuable painting” (*pratyagraraṅgam iva citrapataṃ*; (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 193)).

The appeal to such similes is not idle; they are available now because of an epochal shift which is the subject of the vignette. In this section, I will develop the plot, and in the following, develop the concept of an aesthetic stance.

Legend has it that Māra was not entirely overcome by the Buddha. He left that for a monk, Upagupta. After being beaten by Upagupta in a contest of magic (involving the manipulation of appearances, suggesting that magic here should also be understood as a variety of aesthetic technology), Māra enters into an agreement to manifest (*vi-darś*) to Upagupta the Buddha’s physical form (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 192; see also (Strong 1992, pp. 104–17)). It turns out that this may well have been Upagupta’s secret desire all along. Today, people use the name of Eminem’s over-zealous fan “Stan” as a verb for potentially inappropriate fandom. It is useful for translating Upagupta’s confession, picking up the implications of “being eager for” (*kutūhala*) in context: “For nothing would gratify me more,” the monk says—“I stan the body of the Buddha” (*priyam adhikam ato hi nāsti me daśabalarūpakutūhala hy ahaṃ*; cf. (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 192)). *The Legend of Aśoka* would have the definitive overcoming of Māra result in a new possibility for sensory experience, one which corresponds to a secret desire that may now be revealed. Aesthetic possibility may answer real and compelling psychological needs.

Māra is not only the embodiment of time. He represents the sovereign power of the entire order of the intelligible sensible world. His overcoming and subsequent conversion, thus, might represent the liberation of the order of the sensible from the sphere of ignorance and eros; it might suggest the ability to place the aesthetic powers of the sensible at the service of Buddhist ends (as Richard Gombrich, basing himself on early sources, has thought either not possible or only so under carefully contrived circumstances, when recontextualized with Buddhist values (Gombrich 2013, p. 141).¹¹ At the same time, while the narrative would have us believe that the aesthetic order has changed, it would appear

¹⁰ This way of exemplifying an aesthetic stance is seen, for example, in a famous verse of Abhinavagupta’s which addresses “the whole realm of phenomena” (*bhāvavāra*), likening it to an actor. Included in his *Tantrāloka* (I 332) and the *Dhvanyālokalocana* (I 13), it is now the subject of a close study in (Bansat-Boudon 2016).

¹¹ A good example of the transvaluation of possibility is given by Māra, first, recollecting how he had earlier tried to deceive (*vañcītum*) Śūra by taking on the form of the Buddha, and then uses the same techniques now for Upagupta see (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 193, n10).

that one has not left all the possible consequences of sensory experience of which the Buddha had warned. To see this, consider the deal which Upagupta struck with Māra.

Māra had warned Upagupta not to bow down before him. Māra believes the caution warranted, because in manifesting the Buddha to Upagupta—while being, as it were, disguised as the Buddha (*buddhanepathyadhāriṇaṃ*)—respect for the Buddha will compel Upagupta to bow to him, Māra (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 192). Upagupta must overlook what Māra and, among modern scholars, Andy Rotman have recognized as the erotics of practice in Buddhist narrative (Rotman 2003). Rotman is speaking of a genre of narratives of which *The Legend of Aśoka* is an example; in these narratives, there is a recognition that certain valorized states of feeling—such as the grace of faith (*prasāda*) for Rotman (Rotman 2003, pp. 556–57), or the adoring estimation and respect exhibited towards to a superior with whom one is related (*gaurava*), according to Māra, to take up the meta-poetic view of a character in the narrative—can compel individuals to action, bypassing deliberation. Such states register and transmit the overriding power of a certain class of sensible objects which are agents of such erotic power: Buddhas, or their images, or memorials, and so on. Can Upagupta keep his cool in the face of aesthetic power?

No. To begin with, he is anxious for the show (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 193), joyful when it begins, and moved to impertinence in the midst of it. Leaping to his feet, he curses, with joy in his heart: “Damn that pitiless impermanence!” cf. (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 194). That is said given his recognition of the inevitable truth to which as a monk he must acquiesce, but which truth has destroyed the beautiful form of the Buddha and thus robbed him of his chance to meet it in person (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 194). Emotions are running high, perhaps even holding him in ambivalence. But his censure elicits his acknowledgment of his distance from the Buddha’s own time. Upagupta is still aware that he is dealing with a likeness and not the real thing (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 194).

He will soon lose even this much of meta-cognitive control over his experience: With a mind “intent on the contemplation of the Buddha . . . he came to think: ‘I am seeing the Blessed One!’” cf. (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 194). “Contemplation” is the right word to translate *smṛti* here, which in other contexts may mean “recollection” and more generally in Buddhist contemplative exercises a variety of attentive mindedness. But “contemplation” may potentially strike a misleading note: even if not remembering the Buddha, exactly, Upagupta is not simply directing his mind at what is present; he is *making present* the Buddha through the force of a particular variety of attention directed at the idea of the Buddha (*buddhāvalambitayā smṛtyā*).

We watched Śuddhodhana transition from seeing to remembering his son; Upagupta moves from recalling the Buddha in contemplation to seeing him. He acts as if he is in the presence of the Buddha himself and not an image (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195). There is an analogy being suggested here. Contemplation and aesthetics are twinned: The sense in which Upagupta can “see” what he was “thinking about” suggests an analogy with the way in which the mind, directed through memory at its intentional content—wherever temporally located, and whatever its existential status—is thought by some Buddhists to be able, under certain circumstances, to make that content experientially present (Swanson 2018, vol. III, p. 1620).

Sure enough, immersed in the aesthetically compelling presence of the Buddha, and as a function of the overriding agency of such experience (*buddhālabhanā*), “he forgot his agreement with Mara (*saṃjñāṃ vismṛtya*)” (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195), “taking recourse,” instead, “to the image of the Buddha (*buddhasaṃjñāmadhiṣṭhāya*)” —“thinking,” in effect, as Strong has it, “that this image *was* the Buddha” (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195). An aesthetic sign mediating what is absent (*saṃjñā*) can block out awareness of contracts with the living (*saṃjñā*). The upshot of which was that like a tree axed at the root, Upagupta fell with his whole body at Māra’s feet.

5. The Lessons of Aesthetic Power

This meta-poetic moment offers us a reflection on aesthetic power. The aesthetic stance will help us make it explicit. An aesthetic stance on experience, the story intimates, involves a kind of twinning, twice over:

- (a) An object x can seem to be y to some S .

And the one who experiences x to be y can seem to double as well:

- (b) S , speaking of x experienced to be y , says first personally that P , where P is a proposition about his experience. And yet he may also be described, third personally, and from a different vantage point, as believing that $\sim P$ or as acting consistent with believing that $\sim P$.

For example, Upagupta is shown as forgetting and saying he forgets. But when questioned by Māra, overwrought, “stammering,” he says he did not forget. Embarrassed, he claims that it is not the case that he does not know (*vid-*)—note the convoluted phrasing—that the “Best of speakers has gone altogether to extinction like a fire swamped by water” (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195). He claims, nonetheless, that being confronted with a figure gorgeous to the eye (*nayana-kāntim ākṛtiṃ*), he bowed down to the Sage, and not to Māra (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195).

Whom shall we believe? Shall we acknowledge what Death and Desire, typically a liar, claims to see? Or shall we rely on the erstwhile honest Buddhist monk’s report? The lesson of stances is that we cannot afford to ignore either. Some item x , we have said, is experienced to be y . Māra understands this to mean that y can be described in terms of x , the stuff of which it is made. The truth about x is known to the one who produces the work of art which presents x to be y . Presumably, such a stance can also keep in view y . Yet y , and not x , typically, is all that an observer of the work of art has in view, though there are conditions, as we have seen above, when characters pick up on the relationship between the work of art and the embodied conditions under which it is made.

We might put it like this: Māra is worried that Upagupta is adopting the wrong aesthetic stance because he is sliding from the stance of the painter, who maintains some perspective on the conditions for the production of experience, to the stance of the observer.¹² The observer, as we suggested, is ignorant of the truth of what he sees, and the truth of how an observer might potentially be transformed in the seeing. Furthermore, Māra declares for the priority of the stance of the artist on the basis of the transitivity of identity. If I am seeing y , and y is really x , then I am seeing x : “How is it that I am not revered when you bow down before me?” (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 195).

Upagupta’s answer is an attempt to claim the epistemic merits of the stance of the observer on the basis of broadly cognitive awareness (*saṃjñā*): “. . . Seeing you here, wearing the form of the Lord of the World, I bowed to you, cognizant of the Sugata, but not cognizant of Māra” (*mārasaṃjñāṃ anādrtya nataḥ sugatasamjñāyā*; cf. (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 196)).

Upagupta response involves a sophisticated appeal to phenomenology. “Being experientially directed at x ” with a concept of x —or “being cognizant of x ”—and “being in sensory contact with x ” behave differently. Māra’s claims might work for sensation, but not for complex experiences, in which one’s analysis of content must be guided by modes of presentation. Upagupta is poised to

¹² My inspiration is taken from Sanskrit Buddhist narrative and philosophy rather than Sanskrit aesthetic theory. In the history of Indian aesthetics, it is unclear whether critics worked with the concept of stances on a single comprehensive reality involving observer, aesthetic process, and product, as I am here developing it (Pollock 2016, p. 26). Such stances are, however, commonly explored together in Yogācāra Buddhist thought with the help of the analogy of the magician, the illusion on stage, and the audience. On the analogy, see (Nagao 1991, p. 69). On the epistemic affordances of stances, see Prajñākaramatī: “Just as someone in the audience whose eyes deceived by the power of a spell sees the visible hue of such things as an elephant manifested by the magician, whereas the magician sees its real nature, what is intrinsic to it, or its essence (yathā māyākāra-nirmita-hastyādi-rūpameva mantrādi-sāmarthya-vibhramita-locano janaḥ paśyati, māyākāras tu tatsvabhāvādinijaṃ tat-svarūpam” (Vaidya 1960, p. 180); on Bodhicaryāvatāra 9.5. The magician is analogized to a yogi and the audience to untutored people. My thanks to Eyal Aviv for this reference. In the Laṅkāvatāra (verse 126 in (Suzuki 1932, p. 236)) magic and painting are used as comparable and continuous analogies for sensible experience.

generalize: this feature of the experience of the artwork in fact generalizes to the sphere of culture and values more broadly. Cultured people everywhere recognize the wisdom in focusing on content and not constituting matter; as the author of the *Suhr! lekha* says, “Just as the wise venerate a statue of the Sugata even when it is made out of wood (*dārumayī hy api pratimā sampūjyate*) regardless of how it’s been made; just so, even if the poems are deficient, since they’re based on expressions of the true Dharma, don’t write them off” (See verse 2 in (Tendzin 2002)). Such an attitude may be found even outside of the realm of the wise and art-critics. Upagupta appeals to the phenomenon of cognitive direction in the anthropology of worship: “Men bow down to clay images of the gods, conscious of the fact that what they worship is the god and not the clay cf. (Strong [1983] 1989, p. 196).”

Upagupta’s claim is that where aesthetic and cultural experience is concerned, constitution is not identity. It might make sense, though that last generalization is tenuous: Do people really direct their attention at god and not the god here, located in this spatio-temporal region, exactly overlapping with the figure made of clay? Is Upagupta’s stance honest to his own experience? Not without folding into his account a place for ambivalence, the two-fold twinning, which I outlined above.

We might now describe it like this: we are partly rational creatures directed by our narrowly specified cognitive attitudes (such as beliefs) and reasons. (When Upagupta, for example, says that he knows the truth about the Buddha, or is in full possession of the normatively evaluable content of his perception: “I am aware of seeing y when I see x”). But the rational does not exhaust our responses. Thus, Upagupta may believe that he is looking on a representation, or an enactment of the Buddha, but—in the words of Tamara Gendler—he may yet *alieve* that he was in the presence of the Buddha—as when he completely forgot Māra, his agreement, and in some way, even the truth of the Buddha’s passing and the truth of impermanence. The artistic transformation invokes or triggers a mechanism which runs along in a way discordant with the explicit avowal—but not because of misrepresentation. Aliefs are a dimension of us: they are contentful, feeling sustaining, action eliciting, and even conscious, but they work differently than beliefs, and they are not disclosed by the contents of beliefs (Gendler 2008).

Part of what Gendler has called alief, the anthropologists of the folklore of children, Iona and Peter Opie (Opie and Opie 2001, p. 206), earlier recognized and called “half belief.” To half believe P is to act as if P were true while disavowing explicit commitment that P is the case. Does, then, Upagupta half believe in the presence of the Buddha? If so, Upagupta need not have disbelieved in impermanence and the Buddha’s passing away in order to have alieved in the presence of the Buddha.

It is less important to capture Upagupta’s ambivalent mental state with a single word than it is to see this. (The word “believe,” as Paul Veyne memorably put it, “can mean so many things,” especially when dealing with the contents of custom and ritual and the products of imagination more generally (Veyne 1988, p. 1).) The kind of multifaced mental states that talk of aliefs or half beliefs seek to elucidate is highlighted in Sanskrit in connection with stories concerned with the overriding power of paintings and other representatives of imaginative creations: according to the narrative, art and the aesthetic orders of the sensible seem to environ us more subtly and to operate on a dimension of our conscious lives more subtle than the debates of philosophers might allow us to see.

6. Paintings in Time and Space

Medieval Indian philosophers debated the following point: are gods identical to the material likenesses which house them (Granoff 2004)? We saw Māra and Upagupta struggle with this very issue. But it raises a question: how is the relationship between the painting and its constituting material realized in figurative appeals to painting?

The author of the *Suhr!lekha* appealed to an extreme view which would have it that the content can and ought to float free of the material properties of the vehicle. When taking up the perspective of the master-painter, analyzing what we are directed at, the painting does not appear to have been present in the constituting parts (2.117; cf. (Suzuki 1932, pp. 43–44)). Can the order of the sensible represented by the artwork float free of its material?

At the same time, the materiality is important to the nature of painting. It is typically invoked in figurations of the world as painting: “Conditioning is an artist; existence its canvas, and it gets wiped out by that fickle lady, transience, as if in pique” (Khoroché 2017, p. 54). Painting is something which survives precariously, subject to environmental pressures as well as whims of other subjects. Again, Haribhatta: “Paint on a picture diminishes, so too man’s lease of life, however well-nursed” (Khoroché 2017, p. 55).

In the eleventh century, Somendra characterizes his father’s work, the polymath Kṣemendra’s *Avadānakalpalatā* with a meditation on the differences among materials. He is speaking of Buddhist dwellings, concealed within which lie treasures:

Our eyes were enamored of the splendor of these walls once dappled with pictures: every one of these monastic dwellings has been ruined with time . . . ¹³

Somendra is writing in a story appended to his father’s work, left incomplete at the inauspicious 107 tales. He is writing, in part, the story of the composition of the work, a work we are told was partly inspired by the depiction of the lives of the Buddha in paintings on the walls of a monastery: “But my father’s work, buttressed with the weight of meaning—a work of merit, delightful and true—this integral of lives rendered with Sarasvatī’s brush and a wide palette, this *dwelling* will not fail; not now, not at the dissolution of an age with the confounding waters, the bright-quick levity of fire.”¹⁴

The work was commissioned and conceived by monks, in the company of Kṣemendra (a Śaiva devotee), partly due to the recognition of the end of the monuments. The word “*vihāra*” which I have translated as “dwelling” is a complex word. Unlike the word “monastery,” “*vihāra*,” whose verbal roots can literally mean “to spend or pass time,” enjoys complex associations with courtly and urban cultures of leisure and *pleasure*. *Vihāras* were beautiful. They were also themselves prospects, chosen for the charms of their location, and the perspectives they offered of the landscapes outside of urban centers. Gregory Schopen summarizes the matter by speaking of them as related to gardens, equally “an object of view and the goal of, quite literally, sight-seeing excursions, especially by ladies” (Schopen 2006, p. 497). They are sites which are wonders and which contain wonders, typically gardens and paintings, and specifically portraits (Lalou 1930; Schopen 2006, pp. 496–97). The *vihāra*, then, is an extension of the world of urban sophisticates, the upper floor of whose dwellings in stories if not in reality “[were] embellished with paintings, glowing in lamplight” (Khoroché 2017, 8.24).

It is of course possible to wonder at the presence of paintings. It is said, for example, that snide comments were made of images of people depicted on the walls of monks’ cells (DeCaroli 2015, p. 57; n29, 200; quoting a variety of sources.) But paintings, metaphorically, and in reality, served to render intelligible the attractiveness of virtue. This is subtly attested to not only in historical record, but in the history of metaphor. As when Mātṛceta in verse 48 of his *Letter to Kaniska* writes, “For the sake of the matchless ladder that leads to heaven and liberation, always gather together in the temples the great works of art that merit produces” (Hahn 1999, p. 29). Such a figure uses painting (and the culture of urban sophistication) to bridge what Peter Brown, speaking of Christianity in Rome in the fourth century C.E., called “the two incommensurables”: this worldly wealth and the afterlife (Brown 2012, pp. 85–86). For Somendra, the order of incommensurability is between an order in time and one which is not. The bridge from painting to literature is one which takes us out of time.

Consider that last line, which invokes a different order of time for the literary work, the end of a cosmic eon. The monasteries themselves, and their paintings and wisdom they embody, have suffered a premature end because of their material constitution. To last, they must be transposed from one medium to another.

¹³ *saṃsakta-netrāmṛta-citra-citrāḥ kālena te te ‘pi vigatā vihārāḥ* (11c–d); (Vaidya 1959, vol. II, p. 566).

¹⁴ Verses 11cd–13ab: *saṃsakta-netrāmṛta-citra-citrāḥ kālena te te ‘pi vigatā vihārāḥ* (11c–d)|*sarasvatitūlikayā vicitra-varna-kramaiḥ samkalitāvadānaḥ*||*tātena yoyam viḥito mahārthaiḥ sannandanapunyamayo vihārah*||*na tasya nāṣo ‘sti yugaksaye ‘pi jalānalollāsaparipravena*|| (13ab)||. In (Vaidya 1959, vol. II, p. 566). From Somendra’s introduction to the story of *Jīmūtavāhana*. This image has not gone unnoticed. See the editors’ remarks in (Das and Vidyabhushana 1888, p. vii; Shukla 1990, p. 80).

Such transposition is not, of course, unique. Anne Carson reminds us that the novelist Longinus (2nd–3rd Century C.E.) prefaces his novel *Daphnis and Chloe* with the statement that he was moved to write the work because he encountered “a painted image of the history of Eros” (Carson [1986] 1998, p. 86). In Longinus’ case, it was a longing for the most beautiful thing he had seen which made him attempt the transposition. He wished to create a seductive rival, thus ensuring that his work would reproduce and enact the nature of Eros. Somendra has characterized his father as invested in a transposition as well. It is one that also mimes its subject matter in a way. The life of an awakening being is self-consciously lived to perdure over time. The genre of stories which do such lives justice is trans-temporal, constituted of surprising connections spanning lifetimes. The word translated above as “integral” (*samkalita*) might be taken to mean more simply “a heap” or “a multitude.” In Indian, mathematics the word is used to mean the sum of a progression and not simply an unstructured multiplicity. The book of these lives is not mere sequence but a progression. Somendra’s verse seems to use the resonance of this to construct the following suggestion of an argument: Just as the life of an awakening being does not come to an end at the end of a single lifetime, the work should not come to an end at the end of an epoch. A Buddha’s life is not parceled out in physically discrete portions: if treated as a causally connected sequence of many lives, it may not be best thought of as something enduring through time by being present, like a substance, in its entirety at every single discrete time. Neither, then, should the text devoted to such a being.

7. Conclusions

It would be wrong to conclude from the case Somendra makes for literature that painting was not valued. Indeed, one might draw quite the opposite conclusion. The case against painting needed to be made because of the outsized influence of painting. It is, in particular, the environing sense of paintings that appears to have invited comparison. We can dwell with paintings and among them; we can even inhabit them, in structures which enclose us, as in murals. Can one live environed in literature this way?

That is the case Somendra wishes to suggest he can make. We find intimations of it elsewhere in Sanskrit literature as well. In the striking opening of the *Gītagovinda*, there is the suggestion that the goddess of speech (*vāg devatā*), or literature more broadly, might make of a poet’s heart and mind a habitation: Palaces are adorned with murals depicting in multifaceted ways as befits visual art the exploits of the gods; a poet’s mind can be like this, in the form of stories of the gods, variegated with the whole array of devices available to poets (*vāg-devatā-carita-citrīta-citta-sadmā*; cf. (Miller 1977, p. 69).¹⁵ This echoes Somendra’s talk of Saravastī’s brush: at some point, a literary work came to be a place, like paintings, within which to dwell.

Haribhatta says this when closing his prologue to his *Garland of Former Lives of the Buddha* (*Jātakamāla*):

A preacher first expounds a saying of the Buddha then, as if lighting up a picture gallery with a lamp, illuminates it further by recounting a story of the Bodhisattva in a former life (*jātaka*), and thereby fills the minds of his audience with enormous joy. (Khoroché 2017, p. 10.)

Haribhatta, like Kṣemendra, hailed from Kashmir see (Hahn 2011, p. v), though he lived much earlier, perhaps flourishing as early as the beginning of the 5th century C.E. This is one of two remarkable images used by Haribhatta in his prologue with which I would like to conclude. This image tells us that to narrate a life is an epistemically significant act, like lighting up a gallery with a lamp. It tells us that the stories themselves, the narrated contents, are like paintings in that gallery. Jointly, they form an epistemic environment, one in which the movement, as it were, of narration, can bring the still

¹⁵ My thanks to Phyllis Granoff for helping me get clearer on my interpretation of this suggestive analogy. Any remaining confusion, of course, is my own.

representations to life and so disclose something of value for our own. The mood is not didactic. Or, at least, discovery can bring with it joy.

There is another point to be made. Somendra intimated that painting, unlike what was made of words, was bound to a certain order of time; its materiality rendered it subject to degradation. But just as the *Laṅkāvatāra* argued that painting is not contained within its parts, painting is an activity not exhausted by its products. This allow us another valuation with respect to time, one which Haribhatta provides in his first appeal to art in the prologue.

To prepare for it, I would like to consider the philosopher Robert Nozick's observation that a portrait differs from a photograph in terms of the quantities of time each embodies (Nozick 1989, p. 13). A snapshot shows us what was captured at one moment of time. A portrait takes time to make and to view. Over the extended hours it can take to make, a painter can interweave and collocate different psychological and physical features of the subject and light and line available at different times. The process is not mechanical. The master painter also incorporates understanding of the subject beyond what the visible surface shows based on behaviors observed over time. Finally, "the painter concentrates a person over an extended time into a presence at one moment that, however, cannot be taken in fully in a moment" (Nozick 1989, p. 13).

Why does this matter? Did the portrait artist in ancient India ever thus try to capture a likeness? The evidence is unclear, as portraits of individuals and not types do appear in narrative (Dehejia 1998; Granoff 2001); it is perhaps clear, however, that "verisimilitude . . . was not the ruling principle in commemorative portrait figures of aristocratic or royal ancestors" (Dehejia 1998, p. 41).¹⁶ I raise the issue of portraiture here and Nozick's observations not to stress verisimilitude. I wish to stress that the activity of painting as a craft involves a salutary focus on repetition:¹⁷ it is repetition of a form associated with the original over a long period of time which concentrates a person into a stable image. That is how Haribhatta chose to emphasize the virtues of *the painting* of portraits in the prologue (Verse 5 in (Khoroché 2017, p. 9)):

In the course of recounting the Buddha's deeds before he was born as Śuddhodhana's son, I will surely become adept at celebrating his wonderful virtues. With a mind unencumbered, thanks to the fluency gained through constant practice, does the artist not draw a lovely form?

I cite Haribhatta in conclusion because he offers us a very different way of calibrating the relationship of art, literature and life. In his prologue the virtues of painting serve as the exemplar for the virtues necessary to understanding two distinct spheres of activity. The explicit analogy is this: We may think of the act of composition here in terms of an example provided by art. But there is also the further implicit suggestion—we may think of life itself that way.

The genre of literature at issue here—the many lives lived by the awakening being in pursuit of moral and cognitive excellence—is understood by Haribhatta as portraiture, involving by way of preparation and execution going over, again and again, the same form. That is surely not obvious. Somendra, introducing Kṣemendra's work, described the genre as "an integral of lives." I argued that it suggested continuity and development. But does it connote the kind of repetition Haribhatta has invoked? The Buddhist philosopher Buddhaghōṣa thought of the lives as the ripening or maturing

¹⁶ I owe to a learned reviewer a very helpful note which I reproduce here with very light editing for compression. The upshot of the note is that while there is truth in maintaining that prototypes for a subject in a portrait or painting would have come from idealizations or people alive at the painter's time (and not necessarily from the time of the subject), there may yet be portraits of individuals based on actual likenesses in some Indian paintings: "[A]mong many mural paintings in the cave no. 17 [we find] the story of Udāyin and Gupta . . . They are portrayed as having a happy time in their palace in the presence of many servants; and among them . . . is [one serving them wine and] dressed like Sasanian . . . holding a Sasanian wine jar. His discreet intrusion into the image is quite remarkable. There are many other representations of Persians of this type in Ajanta's paintings. It can still be said that no one in the 5th century CE knew what Udāyin and Gupta looked like, but the painter was in direct contact with the Persian merchant who may have commissioned the painting." For the painting, the reviewer cites (Schlingloff 2013, pp. 399–401). I am extremely grateful for this note and reference.

¹⁷ I thank an anonymous referee for urging clarity on this point.

(*paripācita*) of excellences, such as, for example, the variety of knowledge embodied in Abhidhamma (Heim 2014, p. 184). That suggests a process of development, or transformation. Repetition is key, though perhaps not on its own sufficient.

Notably, Dharmakīrti and Kumāriḷa when debating the idea of infinite perfection entailed by the notion of a being like the Buddha, take up the idea of repetition—specifically, they consider the notion that repetition (as in exercise) can develop a faculty or capacity indefinitely beyond natural limits (Inami 1986, *Tattvasaṅgraha* v.3167–68; Kataoka 2003, p. 14). I will follow Dharmakīrti’s analysis (outlined by Franco 1997, p. 6). Here, effortful repetition of some activity *p*, based on some support *Y*, increases the facility with which *p* can be carried out and the capacity of the faculty involved in *p*. (These conditions also serve to limit it. Because of effort, and because of its basis, it cannot be infinite.)

For Dharmakīrti, not unlike Buddhaghosa, the process of perfection is spontaneous and unguided. It is a process of transformation. One of his examples is oxidation (*jāraṇa*; see (Franco 1997, p. 7)): Once begun, such a process continues indefinitely because it does not depend on repeated *effort*. Thus, despite involving repetition, it becomes unlike portraiture, which involves repetition of effort. But portraiture also involves epistemic development, as Nozick points out. Its epistemic gains are not simply additive but disclosive: What was there at the beginning may not be seen until later. It is in this way that sketching, perhaps not unlike memorizing a text, but quite unlike oxidization, involves bringing something into view by means of time.

But there is also the suggestion that life—the lives of the best among us—can be thought of in aesthetic terms. Here, the source for the aesthetic interpretation of life does not devolve from consideration of sensible experience but discipline. We ought to live, in this view, as if our live now were a studied exercise, a sketch of a life to come.

It is possible that Haribhatta had once been a painter (Khoroché 2017, p. 7; n6, 228); perhaps this drives his comfort in so valuing art as a source for interpreting the ethical discipline of awakening beings. Buddhism in general does not appear to have always been so comfortable with it (Gombrich 2013). But as we saw above with the story of the conquest of Māra, in time, different aesthetic stances and different valuations of such stances came to be available to Buddhists to experience and to pursue.

Whatever the reason, Haribhatta turns on its head the worry with which I began, that life can seem to approximate a painting too closely. We may consider the continuity of life and painting not only when we are dispossessed of sensibility, feeling, and activity, as Śuddhodhana thought was true of the Buddha. Rather, it can be because life, like the making of art, takes time. To bring ourselves into being through ethical discipline, and to observe ourselves come into being, takes time. This attitude to time is unlike memory of past events; but the studied repetition involved with sketching an ideal again and again might be a little like memory of what is present; or the variety of presence of mind, or mindfulness, theorized in Buddhist scholasticism as the ability to keep what is before one from dropping from view. But this might be to grasp the connection the wrong way around: we might have to make the most of such connections by reinterpreting the familiar, Buddhism, with the relatively unfamiliar. For, if I read the bold promise of Haribhatta’s analogy, it is the craft and virtues in painting which can provide Buddhists with the virtues and the experiences to make sense of their attempt to bring into being possible (and possibly beautiful) lives.

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