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The Theragāthā Model of Aesthetic Appreciation
Texts taken from accesstoinsight.org.

Some Primary Sources on Buddhist Nature Appreciation

Theragāthā: The Theragāthā consists of 264 poems attributed to various monks from the original Buddhist Sangha (order), describing their path to enlightenment. Here are some examples of them using nature as a source of insight. They are grouped by tradition according to length

Single Verse Poems, Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2004)

Vanavaccha (v. 13)

The color of blue-dark clouds,
glistening,
cooled with the waters
of clear-flowing streams
covered with ladybugs:
those rocky crags
refresh me.

Singalapita (v. 18)

There was an heir to the One Awakened,
a monk in the Bhesakala forest,
who suffused this whole earth
with the perception of
"bones."
Quickly, I'd say, he abandoned
sensual passion.

Cittaka (v.22)

Peacocks,
crested, blue, with gorgeous necks,
cry out
in the Karamvi woods,
thrilled by the cold wind.
They awaken the sleeper
to meditate.

Sirivaddha (v. 41)

Lightning lands on the cleft
between Vebhara & Pandava,
but,
having gone to the cleft in the mountains,
he's absorbed in jhana — the son
of the one without compare,
the one who is Such.

[Jhana: Mental absorption]

Rāmaṇeyyaka (v. 49)

Even with all the whistles & whistling,
the calls of the birds,
this, my mind, doesn't waver,
for my delight is in
oneness.

Vimala (v. 50)

The earth's sprinkled
with rain, wind
is blowing, lightning
wanders the sky,
but my thoughts are stilled,
well-centered
my mind.

Vanavaccha (v. 113)

With clear waters &
 massive boulders,
frequented by monkeys &
 deer,
covered with moss &
 water weeds,
those rocky crags refresh me.

Longer Poems

Bhūta (v. 524-6) Trans. Andrew Olendzki (2005)

When the thundering storm cloud roars out in the mist,
And torrents of rain fill the paths of the birds,
Nestled in a mountain cave, the monk meditates.
— No greater contentment than this can be found.

When along the rivers the tumbling flowers bloom
In winding wreaths adorned with verdant color,
Seated on the bank, glad-minded, he meditates.
— No greater contentment than this can be found.

When in the depths of night, in a lonely forest,
The rain-deva drizzles and the fanged beasts cry,
Nestled in a mountain cave, the monk meditates.
— No greater contentment than this can be found.

Olendzki's note: Three entirely different moods are portrayed so sensitively in the first three stanzas of this poem by the monk Bhuta — the first wild and clamorous, the second bright and benevolent, the third dark and mysterious. Constant among these dramatic changes of nature is the meditating monk, content in any setting.

Ekavihariya (Dwelling Alone) (v. 537-546, Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2004)

If, in front or behind,
there is no one else,
it's extremely pleasant
for one staying alone
in the forest.

Come then! Alone
I will go to the wilderness
 praised by the Awakened One
 pleasant for a resolute monk
 dwelling alone.

Alone,
astute in my goal,
I'll quickly enter the grove

— refreshing,
giving rapture
to meditators —
the haunt
of elephants in rut.

When the Cool Forest's in full flower,
in a cool mountain gorge,
having bathed my limbs
I'll walk back & forth.
alone.

Ah, when will I dwell,
alone and free from companions,
in the refreshing great forest —
my task done,
fermentation-free?

As I desire to do this,
may my purpose succeed.
I myself
will bring it about.
No one can do it
for anyone else.

I myself
bind on my armor.
I will enter the grove
and will not emerge
without having attained
fermentations' end.

While soft breezes blow —
cool,
heavily, fragrantly scented —
I'll make ignorance burst,
as I sit on a mountaintop.

In the forest covered with blossoms
or perhaps on a cool hillside,
blessed with the bliss of release,
on Giribbaja I'll delight.

I am now he
whose resolves are fulfilled
like the moon on a full-moon night.
With all fermentations
totally ended,
there is now no further becoming.

Sāriputra (verses 991, 992, 998 Trans. Andrew Olendzki 2005)

In the village or the forest,
In the lowlands or the highlands;
Wherever the worthy ones dwell
— That terrain would be found pleasing.

So pleasing (they find) the forests,
Wherein most people are not pleased.

Rid of passion, they will be pleased
— They do not pursue mere pleasure!

Settled at the root of a tree,
With shaven head, clad in a robe,
The elder foremost in wisdom
— Upatissa just meditates.

Kassapa–Mahā (verses 1058-1061) Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (1998)

Where some are exhausted
climbing the mountain,
there
the Awakened One's heir
— mindful, alert,
buoyed by his psychic power —
Kassapa climbs.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhana
with no sustenance/clinging,
having abandoned terror
& fear.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhana
with no sustenance/clinging,
unbound
among those who burn.

Returning from his alms round,
climbing the peak,
Kassapa does jhana
with no sustenance/clinging,
free of fermentation,
his duty
done.

Tālapuṭa (verses 1132–37, Trans Bhikkhu Khantipalo 1983)

Mountains, seas, rivers, and this wealthy world,
four quarters, points between, the nadir and the
heavens
all the Three Becomings unstable and oppressed.
Where, mind, having gone will you happily delight?

Firm, firm in my aim! What will you do, my mind?
No longer in your power, mind, nor your follower.
None would even handle a double-ended sack,
let be a thing filled full and flowing with nine
streams.

Whether peak or slopes or fair open space
or forest besprinkled with fresh showers in the rains,
where frequently are found boar and antelope,
there will you delight to a grotto-lodging gone.

Fair blue-throated and fair-crested, the peacock fair
of tail,
wing-plumes of many hues, the passengers of air,
greeting the thunder with fair-sounding cries
will bring to you joy meditating in the wood.

When the sky-god rains on the four inch grass
and on full-flowering cloud-like woods,
within the mountains like a log I'll lie
and soft that seat to me as cotton down.

Thus will I do even as a master should:
Let whatever is obtained be enough for me,
that indeed I'll do to you as energetic man
by taming makes supple a catskin bag.

Therīgāthā: With 73 poems, the Therīgāthā is shorter than its male counterpart. It does, however, contain this charming story of a nun who is blocked by a suitor from retiring to the wilderness for solitary contemplation

Subha Jivakambavanika (verses 366-399, Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu 1998)

'What wrong have I done you
that you stand in my way?
It's not proper, my friend,
that a man should touch
a woman gone forth.
I respect the Master's message,
the training pointed out by the one well-gone.
I am pure, without blemish:

Why do you stand in my way?

You — your mind agitated, impassioned;
I — unagitated, unimpassioned,
with a mind entirely freed:

Why do you stand in my way?'

'You are young & not bad-looking,
what need do you have for going forth?

Throw off your ochre robe —

Come, let's delight in the flowering
grove.

A sweetness they exude everywhere,
the towering trees with their pollen.

The beginning of spring is a pleasant season —

Come, let's delight in the flowering
grove.

The trees with their blossoming tips
moan, as it were, in the breeze:

What delight will you have
if you plunge into the grove alone?

Frequented by herds of wild beasts,
disturbed by elephants rutting & aroused:
you want to go

unaccompanied

into the great, lonely, frightening grove?

Like a doll made of gold, you will go about,
like a goddess in the gardens of heaven.

With delicate, smooth Kasi fabrics,
you will shine, O beauty without compare.

I would gladly do your every bidding
if we were to dwell in the glade.
For there is no creature dearer to me
than you, O nymph with the languid
regard.

If you do as I ask, happy, come live in my house.
Dwelling in the calm of a palace,

have women wait on you,
wear delicate Kasi fabrics,
adorn yourself with garlands &
creams.

I will make you many & varied ornaments
of gold, jewels, & pearls.

Climb onto a costly bed,
scented with sandalwood carvings,
with a well-washed coverlet, beautiful,
spread with a woolen quilt, brand new.

Like a blue lotus rising from the water
where no human beings dwell,
you will go to old age with your limbs unseen,
if you stay as you are in the holy life.'

'What do you assume of any essence,
here in this cemetery grower, filled with corpses,
this body destined to break up?

What do you see when you look at me,
you who are out of your mind?'

'Your eyes
are like those of a fawn,
like those of a sprite in the mountains.
Seeing your eyes, my sensual delight
grows all the more.

Like tips they are, of blue lotuses,
in your golden face

— spotless:

Seeing your eyes, my sensual delight

grows all the more.
Even if you should go far away,
I will think only of your pure,
 long-lashed gaze,
for there is nothing dearer to me
 than your eyes, O nymph with the
 languid regard.'

'You want to stray from the road,
you want the moon as a plaything,
you want to jump over Mount Sineru,
you who have designs on one born of the Buddha.
For there is nothing anywhere at all
in the cosmos with its gods,
that would be an object of passion for me.

 I don't even know what that passion
 would be,
 for it's been killed, root & all, by the
 path.

Like embers from a pit — scattered,
like a bowl of poison — evaporated,

 I don't even see what that passion
 would be,
 for it's been killed, root & all, by the
 path.

Try to seduce one who hasn't reflected on this,
or who has not followed the Master's teaching.
But try it with this one who knows
 and you suffer.

For in the midst of praise & blame,
 pleasure & pain,
my mindfulness stands firm.

Knowing the unattractiveness
 of things compounded,
my mind cleaves to nothing at all.

I am a follower of the one well-gone,
riding the vehicle of the eightfold way:
My arrow removed, effluent-free,
I delight, having gone to an empty dwelling.

For I have seen well-painted puppets,
hitched up with sticks & strings,
made to dance in various ways.
When the sticks & strings are removed,
thrown away, scattered, shredded,
smashed into pieces, not to be found,
 in what will the mind there make its
 home?

This body of mine, which is just like that,
when devoid of dhammas doesn't function.
When, devoid of dhammas, it doesn't function,
 in what will the mind there make its
 home?

Like a mural you've seen, painted on a wall,
smeared with yellow orpiment,
there your vision has been distorted,
meaningless your human perception.

Like an evaporated mirage,
like a tree of gold in a dream,
like a magic show in the midst of a crowd —
 you run blind after what is unreal.

Resembling a ball of sealing wax,
set in a hollow,
with a bubble in the middle
and bathed with tears,
eye secretions are born there too:
The parts of the eye
are rolled all together
in various ways.'

Plucking out her lovely eye,
with mind unattached
she felt no regret.

'Here, take this eye. It's yours.'

Straightaway she gave it to him.
Straightaway his passion faded right there,
and he begged her forgiveness.

'Be well, follower of the holy life.

This sort of thing
won't happen again.

Harming a person like you
is like embracing a blazing fire,
It is as if I have seized a poisonous snake.

So may you be well. Forgive me.'

And released from there, the nun
went to the excellent Buddha's presence.
When she saw the mark of his excellent merit,
her eye became
as it was before.