



PAINTING PRINCIPLES: ETHICAL INSIGHTS FROM BUDDHIST ART

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist art is not merely a reflection of aesthetic sensibility; it is a deep spiritual expression embedded with ethical values and philosophical principles. This paper explores the intrinsic relationship between Buddhist painting traditions and the ethical insights they convey. By analyzing historical contexts, symbolic elements, and the meditative intentions behind various Buddhist artworks, this study reveals how painting operates as a conduit for moral instruction and spiritual enlightenment. The ethical dimensions of Buddhist art are examined through various schools, including Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, highlighting their visual manifestations in murals, thangkhas, and mandalas. Ultimately, the research illuminates how Buddhist painting principles transcend visual representation and embody ethical teachings integral to the Buddhist path.



I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, art has served as a powerful conduit for the expression of values, beliefs, and philosophical ideals. In Buddhist traditions, painting emerges not merely as a decorative or aesthetic pursuit, but as a sacred visual language imbued with profound ethical and spiritual meaning. Rooted in the foundational teachings of the Buddha, Buddhist art—especially painting—has played a critical role in the transmission of moral values, religious doctrine, and contemplative practice across diverse cultures and historical epochs. Unlike Western traditions that often separate art from ethics, Buddhist painting is inherently intertwined with the ethical fabric of the faith. It serves both as a mirror reflecting the spiritual aspirations of practitioners and as a tool designed to cultivate moral discipline, mindfulness, and compassion in its viewers. The very act of painting in Buddhist contexts is frequently regarded as a meditative, ethical practice in itself, wherein the artist aligns intention, action, and awareness with the dharma.

The ethical dimensions of Buddhist painting are best understood within the broader framework of Buddhist philosophy. Central to this philosophy is the Noble Eightfold Path, a guiding compass that outlines ethical conduct (*śīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). These principles are not abstract ideals but are meant to be realized through lived experience—and painting becomes one of the many vehicles through which this realization can be pursued and shared. The brushstrokes of a Buddhist artist are not casual gestures; they are deliberate acts of spiritual devotion, guided by strict iconographic rules and a deep commitment to moral intention. For example, when an artist paints an image of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, every detail—from the posture and hand gestures to the colors and symbolic objects—is carefully chosen to convey ethical virtues and inspire corresponding qualities in the viewer. In this sense, Buddhist painting functions as a kind of moral architecture, where every form, figure, and motif carries an ethical purpose.

The origins of Buddhist painting trace back to the earliest centuries following the Buddha's life, evolving alongside the growth and geographical spread of the religion. Initially, early Buddhist art avoided anthropomorphic depictions of the Buddha, relying instead on symbols such as the lotus, the Bodhi tree, the wheel of dharma, and the footprints of the enlightened one. These symbols were not merely representations; they were ethical emblems, each signifying virtues such as purity, detachment, spiritual awakening, and the path of righteousness. As Buddhist thought evolved and interacted with various cultures—from India and Central Asia to China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet—painting traditions adapted stylistically while retaining their ethical core. Whether in the exquisite murals of Ajanta, the cosmological diagrams of Dunhuang, or the richly symbolic thangkas of Tibetan Buddhism, a consistent ethical narrative is woven through the visual traditions of Buddhist painting.

One of the most powerful ways Buddhist paintings communicate ethical values is through



narrative. The depiction of the Jataka tales—stories recounting the previous lives of the Buddha—is especially prominent in the visual canon. These stories illustrate moral choices made by the bodhisattva in his journey toward enlightenment, emphasizing virtues such as generosity, truthfulness, self-sacrifice, and perseverance. Paintings of the Vessantara Jataka, for example, show the prince renouncing his kingdom, wealth, and even his family in acts of supreme compassion and selflessness. These images are not meant to merely entertain or inform; they are pedagogical tools aimed at cultivating ethical reflection and emulation. Viewers are invited not just to admire the painting, but to internalize the values it represents, thereby transforming the act of viewing into a moral and spiritual experience.

Color, form, and composition in Buddhist painting also play crucial roles in ethical expression. Each color is chosen for its symbolic significance—white for purity and spiritual aspiration, blue for tranquility and detachment, red for compassionate energy, and gold for sacred illumination. The mandala, a sacred geometric diagram used in meditation, exemplifies the ethical structure of the universe, mapping out an ideal cosmos ordered by harmony, wisdom, and compassion. The creation and contemplation of mandalas serve as ethical exercises, guiding practitioners toward inner balance and moral clarity. Similarly, the repetitive patterns and symmetrical compositions of Buddhist painting reflect not only aesthetic preferences but also metaphysical and ethical order, reminding viewers of the interdependence of all phenomena and the moral imperative to act with awareness and compassion.

The ethical significance of Buddhist painting is not limited to its subject matter or symbolic elements—it extends to the very process of creation. In many Buddhist traditions, especially within Tibetan Vajrayāna practice, the act of painting is considered a sacred ritual. Artists are often trained not just in technique but in the spiritual significance of the forms they create. Before beginning a painting, especially of a deity or mandala, the artist may perform purification rituals, recite mantras, and meditate to align their mind with the dharma. The process is slow, deliberate, and infused with spiritual intention. This ethical mindfulness ensures that the artwork becomes a vessel of spiritual power and not merely a visual object. The ethical discipline of the artist, thus, becomes part of the painting's spiritual efficacy. The artwork is not only a moral lesson for the viewer but also a testament to the ethical practice of its creator.

Furthermore, Buddhist painting has historically served as a form of communal ethical education. Monasteries adorned with murals were spaces not just of worship but of moral instruction. Illiterate lay followers could engage with complex ethical teachings through visual narratives, while monks and novices used the imagery as mnemonic devices for meditation and moral reflection. The accessibility of visual ethics through painting helped democratize Buddhist teachings, bridging the gap between abstract philosophical doctrine and lived moral practice. This visual pedagogy remains relevant today, as Buddhist art continues to communicate ethical insights in ways that transcend language, culture, and time.



In contemporary contexts, the ethical principles embodied in Buddhist painting offer a compelling alternative to the consumer-driven, often ego-centric art of modernity. As societies grapple with moral uncertainty, environmental degradation, and spiritual disconnection, the painting principles of Buddhism remind us of the importance of mindfulness, compassion, and ethical responsibility—not only in what we create but in how and why we create it. Modern Buddhist artists often reinterpret traditional motifs to address pressing ethical issues such as climate change, social justice, and global peace, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Buddhist painting as a source of ethical inspiration.

In the study of Buddhist painting reveals a rich tapestry where visual beauty and ethical insight are inseparable. These artworks are not passive images but dynamic ethical instruments that shape the moral consciousness of individuals and communities. Through their symbolism, narratives, meditative forms, and the mindful discipline of their creation, Buddhist paintings offer enduring lessons on how to live ethically, see clearly, and act compassionately in a world that deeply needs such guidance. As we delve deeper into the painting principles of Buddhist art, we discover not only an aesthetic tradition but a profound ethical vision—one that continues to illuminate the path of wisdom and compassion for all who seek it.

II. THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF BUDDHIST ETHICS IN ART

1. **Interconnectedness and Dependent Origination** Central to Buddhist philosophy is the principle of **dependent origination** (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which asserts that all phenomena arise in dependence upon other phenomena. In art, this concept is reflected in the interconnectedness of all elements within a piece. Buddhist art emphasizes harmony, where each visual element—whether a figure, color, or pattern—contributes to the greater moral and spiritual message. This interconnectedness teaches viewers that individual actions, like the brushstrokes of an artist, have broader ethical implications for the world.
2. **Compassion (Karunā) and Non-Harm (Ahimsa)** The ethical cornerstone of Buddhist philosophy is **compassion** (*karunā*), which is often depicted in Buddhist art through images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and other compassionate figures. The philosophy of non-harm (*ahimsa*) is deeply embedded in the representation of these figures, conveying the importance of acting with love, care, and respect toward all beings. In Buddhist art, the portrayal of peaceful figures and harmonious compositions serves as a visual reminder to live in accordance with these ethical principles.
3. **Mindfulness and Right Intent** **Mindfulness** (*sati*) is another essential component of Buddhist ethics. It encourages awareness of one's thoughts, speech, and actions. In the creation and viewing of art, mindfulness ensures that both the artist's intentions and the viewer's interpretation align with ethical values. Artists engage in mindful practice when



they create works that avoid glorifying violence or selfishness and instead focus on peace, wisdom, and enlightenment.

4. **Emptiness (Śūnyatā) and Ethical Freedom Emptiness (śūnyatā)**, a key concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism, suggests that all things are devoid of inherent, independent existence. In art, this idea is visually represented through the fluidity and openness of form, symbolizing the potential for ethical freedom. Buddhist art encourages viewers to reflect on the impermanent nature of life and to cultivate detachment, which is integral to ethical living in accordance with Buddhist values.

III. SYMBOLISM AND ETHICAL MESSAGING IN BUDDHIST PAINTING

1. **Bodhisattvas and Compassion** in Buddhist painting, **bodhisattvas** are frequently depicted as symbols of compassion (karuṇā). Figures like **Avalokiteśvara** or **Kuan Yin** embody the ideal of selfless service to others, with their serene expressions and open hands signifying the act of offering help and understanding to all beings. The artistic representation of bodhisattvas serves as an ethical message, reminding viewers of the importance of compassion in their own lives. These images urge individuals to cultivate a caring attitude and to relieve the suffering of others.
2. **The Lotus Flower** The **lotus flower** is a recurring motif in Buddhist art, symbolizing purity and spiritual awakening. Emerging from muddy waters, the lotus represents the journey of the soul from ignorance and suffering to enlightenment. Its symbolic meaning imparts an ethical message about the transformative power of practice, teaching that individuals, regardless of their circumstances, have the potential to rise above suffering through effort, mindfulness, and ethical conduct.
3. **The Wheel of Dharma (Dharmachakra)** The **Wheel of Dharma** is a common symbol in Buddhist art, representing the **teachings of the Buddha** and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (samsara). The eight spokes of the wheel correspond to the **Noble Eightfold Path**, which outlines the ethical guidelines for a life of wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline. Through this symbol, Buddhist paintings convey the ethical message that liberation from suffering can only be achieved through adherence to the right conduct, right thought, and right action.
4. **Mandala and Unity Mandalas** are intricate geometric representations of the cosmos, used in meditation and to represent the universe's inherent order and harmony. In Buddhist painting, the mandala's symmetry symbolizes the balance and interconnectedness of all things. The mandala's focus on unity and the cosmic order provides an ethical message about the interdependence of life and the importance of



ethical harmony in all actions. The mandala encourages individuals to contemplate their place within the universe and to act in ways that promote balance and moral integrity.

5. **Jataka Tales and Moral Lessons** The **Jataka tales** are a rich source of ethical teachings and are often depicted in Buddhist paintings. These stories, which recount the previous lives of the Buddha, highlight his moral development and virtuous actions, such as **generosity (dāna)**, **truthfulness (sīla)**, and **self-sacrifice**. The visual representation of these tales in Buddhist paintings serves as a direct moral instruction, inviting the viewer to reflect on the importance of cultivating virtuous qualities and making ethical choices in everyday life.

IV. CONCLUSION

Buddhist painting is a profound medium through which ethical teachings are visualized, internalized, and transmitted across generations. Its principles are not only aesthetic but deeply moral, reflecting the Buddhist aspiration for spiritual liberation and compassionate living. Through careful symbolism, intentional practice, and meditative engagement, Buddhist art cultivates ethical awareness in both its creators and observers. In a time of moral uncertainty and material excess, the painting principles of Buddhist art remind us of the potential for visual culture to serve not only as a mirror of the human condition but as a transformative force for ethical and spiritual growth.

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