



The Buddha and Consumerism

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This talk was inspired by Penetrating the Tangle by Stephanie Kaza in Hooked!ⁱ

Reflection: What are your current intentions regarding consuming goods and services? Have these changed from the past? If so, how?

Consumerism comes from the verb consume, which is rooted in the Latin word *consumere*, meaning to use up or to waste.ⁱⁱ Although consumerism has several meanings, for the purposes of this talk, we will use the definition of consumerism as a “social and economic order that encourages an acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts.”ⁱⁱⁱ This definition supports the theory that spending money and consuming goods is good for the economy. What is good for the economy may not be good for the consumer as we shall explore.

This talk is not about the do’s and don’ts about consuming. Rather, we are looking at what are our intentions about consuming goods and services and how to develop our own actions based on these intentions.

From Stephanie Kaza: “Going shopping can be a perilous mental activity these days. As I wander through the department store, I am barraged not only by a daunting array of goods but also by virtually nonstop moralistic thoughts. A new bedspread—you don’t really need this, the old one’s good enough. A stylish dress—why would a Zen person need this? A stunning carpet—was this made by enslaved children? It goes on and on. The critical voices are all too familiar. As a professor of environmental studies, I am especially plagued by environmental critiques—if it’s not organic, it must be laced with toxic pesticides. Or who knows how far this wood has been shipped and from what decimated forest? The koan of consumerism is vast and deep, a tangle within tangles, impossible to completely untangle. Part of the tangle is the resistance, the questioning mind, the nagging thoughts that add up to moral engagement. Sometimes I find myself paralyzed in the co-op, staring at the bounty on the shelves, lost in thoughts of fair trade, farmworkers, and food security. Critiques of consumerism are not new, but as the deluge of products becomes a flood, more and more voices are shouting their concerns.”^{iv}

What are current beliefs and concerns about consumerism?

Sociologist Michael Schudson lists several traditional consumerist concerns, which provide a preliminary classification of views or intentions about how consumers should consume: puritan, Quaker, republican, socialist, aristocratic.^v There is also the environmental view.

Puritan view

The puritan view refers to the early New England colonists who believed people should invest less meaning in material possessions and more meaning in religious pursuits. Puritans felt goods should serve practical human needs but should not be ends of desire themselves. Consumerist attitudes were thought to corrupt people, impairing their capacity for spiritual development.

Quaker view

The Quaker view focuses more on the wasteful nature of the goods themselves. From this perspective, excessive choice and pointless proliferation of products is seen as extravagant and unnecessary. Planned obsolescence, as in the annual new models of cars and computers, is particularly objectionable. If goods cannot be made to endure, keeping the limited resources of the earth in mind, then they should not be made at all. The Quaker critique challenges a core value of consumerism—that more choice is good for consumers and good for the economy.

Republican view

The republican view addresses the impact of consumerism on civic society as a whole. In this view a consumerist approach replaces public engagement in politics with private involvement in personal goods. It also shifts a person's identity away from work (what one does) and toward lifestyle (what one owns), promoting individual pleasure over social justice. Historically, the increasing orientation to consumerism has turned people away from social activity. This trend is corroborated in the State of the World 2004 report with studies showing that overall social health has declined in the United States in the last thirty years despite higher levels of consumption.

Socialist view

The socialist view objects primarily to the exploitation of workers in the capitalist economy. The production of a common cotton T-shirt, for example, means farmworkers are exposed to intensive toxic pesticides and garment workers in sweatshops work long hours for low wages. From the Marxist perspective, consumerism can also be seen as a distraction or opiate, leading workers to seek satisfaction in goods rather than improve the abusive profit-driven workplace.

Aristocratic view

The aristocratic intention focuses more attention on aesthetics, attacking mass-produced goods as ugly. That which is rare or exclusive holds the greatest value, thus generating a classist sense of privilege.

Environmentalist view

The environmentalist view focuses on the wasteful consumption of the northern hemisphere. It points out that the North is generating far more significant ecological damage with its high use of water, oil, minerals, and timber. Some have described this as casting an "ecological shadow" on the middle-income and poor classes who bear the burden of the hidden economic and moral costs to the environment. Environmentalists point to industrial nations' oversized ecological footprint. This is the land necessary to sustain current levels of resource consumption and waste discharge. The average American has a thirty-acre footprint—if everyone lived like this, we would need five more planets to support human existence. Though world population may level off by midcentury, environmentalists are concerned that

consumption will only keep growing as more and more of the world's population enters the consumer class.

Herman Daily adds: "There are limits to the total amount of resources that the human economy can consume from the ecosystem that contains it; for the ecosystem—both as a supplier of resources and as absorber of waste products—is itself limited. The earth ecosystem is finite, nongrowing, and materially closed. Though it is open to the flow of solar energy, that flow is also nongrowing and finite, even if quite large and currently underutilized. Historically, the limits of the ecosystem were not binding upon economic growth, because the economy was small relative to the total ecosystem. The world was "empty." But now it is "full," and the limits are more and more binding—not necessarily like brick walls, but more like tightly stretched rubber bands.

The total flow of resource consumption, or throughput, is the product of population times per capital consumption. John Stuart Mill, writing in 1857, foresaw that increasing the resource flow, and thus moving from an empty to a full world, would eliminate more and more of life's pleasantness and eventually lead to impossible demands upon the earth."^{vi}

Another concern with consumerism is the evolution of the throw-away society. "As a consequence of economic growth, we have seen both increased production and increased product waste during the last century. Between the start of New York City waste collections in 1905 and 2005 there was a tenfold rise in "product waste" (packaging and old products), from 92 to 1,242 pounds (42 to 563 kilograms) per person per year. Containers and packaging now represent 32 percent of all municipal solid waste. Non-durable goods (defined as products in use for less than three years) constitute 27 percent, while durable goods comprise 16 percent."^{vii}

"Packaging waste, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), defined containers and packaging as products that are assumed to be discarded the same year the products they contain are purchased. The majority of the solid waste are packaging products, estimating to be about 77.9 million tons of generation in 2015 (29.7 percent of total generation). Packaging can come in all shapes and forms ranging from Amazon boxes to soda cans and are used to store, transport, contain, and protect goods to keep customer satisfaction. Packaging waste is a dominant contributor in today's world and responsible for half of the waste in the globe."^{viii}

Continue to reflect on your intentions about consuming goods and services. What counsel would the Buddha give you? We will discuss this next week.

What was the Buddha's view on consumerism?

In the With Rasiya Sutta, the Buddha notes: "Now, consider the pleasure seeker who seeks wealth using legitimate, non-coercive means, and who makes themselves happy and pleased, and shares it and makes merit. And they enjoy that wealth untied, uninfatuated, unattached, seeing the drawbacks, and understanding the escape. This pleasure seeker may be praised on four grounds. What are the four grounds for praise? They seek wealth using legitimate, non-coercive means. This is the first ground for praise. They make themselves happy and pleased. This is the second ground for praise. They share it and make merit. This is the third ground for praise. They enjoy that wealth untied, uninfatuated, unattached,

seeing the drawbacks, and understanding the escape. This is the fourth ground for praise. This pleasure seeker may be praised on these four grounds.”^{ix}

Bhikkhu Bodhi explains: “In his advice to the village headman Rasiya (SN 42:12) the Buddha describes three praiseworthy qualities in a householder who enjoys sense pleasures: he acquires wealth righteously; he makes himself happy and comfortable with the wealth thus earned; and he shares his wealth and does meritorious deeds. The practice of meritorious deeds introduces a spiritual dimension to the proper employment of wealth, a dimension based on the recognition that greater happiness comes from giving than from gaining. To give is not only a way to reduce our greed and attachment, not only a way to acquire merit productive of future benefits, but a directly visible source of joy which provides immediate confirmation of the central pillar on which the entire Dhamma rests: that the path to happiness is one of relinquishment rather than one of accumulation.

But while the Buddha praises the virtuous householder who possesses the above three qualities, he does not stop there. He introduces a fourth quality which distinguishes the virtuous lay followers into two groups: on one side, those who enjoy sense pleasures while remaining tied to them, blind to the danger and unaware of an escape; on the other, those who enjoy sense pleasures without being tied to them, seeing the danger and aware of an escape. It is the second of these that the Buddha declares superior. This pronouncement offers us an insight into the Buddha's final solution to the challenge posed by consumerism. The final solution is not a limp compromise between indulgence and virtue but a bold, decisive step in the direction of detachment, an inner renunciation that enables one to rise above the whole round of production and consumption even while living within its boundaries. The incentive for this movement comes from seeing the danger: that there is no stable happiness to be gained by the pursuit of sense pleasures, that sense pleasures "give little satisfaction and are productive of much suffering." Its completion comes from recognizing an escape: that the removal of desire and lust brings an unshakable peace and freedom that is not contingent upon external circumstances.”^x

What are some of the pitfalls in consumption?

As the Buddha noted above: “They enjoy that wealth untied, uninfatuated, unattached, seeing the drawbacks, and understanding the escape. In other words, we must be mindful about our consumption. That is the only way to see the drawbacks, understand the escape and remain unattached. This does not mean that we don't consume but that we do so mindfully. Kaza notes three pitfalls from the Buddha's teachings that we can avoid by being mindful.

The first pitfall is that we may not be mindful that we may be consuming to promote our personal identity or “self.”^{xi} Are we purchasing a product because it is functional and useful or because it will elevate our image that we want to project to others? Take the purchase of an automobile for example. Are we buying safe transportation or status? When we attach to an object, we forget its impermanent nature. We expend a lot of energy keeping attached to it. Do we own it, or does it own us?

The second pitfall is not being mindful that we may be harming^{xii}. Are we purchasing goods that were manufactured in factories with harmful conditions to other beings? Are we consuming goods such as alcohol that have the potential to harm others?

The third pitfall is not being mindful of the attachment to desire (one of the five hindrances).^{xiii} Are we feeding our endless need to have more and more possessions for which we have no use? Can we ever get enough? This constant craving can only lead to clinging and dissatisfaction.

Besides being mindful, we need to develop and follow our own moral and ethical intentions about skillful consuming. Remember that intention is an aim or plan; it is not an inflexible resolution that we cannot possibly follow. Having an intention means that we are remain constantly mindful of our consuming and not berating ourselves if we occasionally fail. Instead, we renew our intention and keep on.

How can we have equanimity when so much harm comes from consumerism and we cannot completely avoid the pitfalls? For example, we may buy an article of clothing manufactured with poor working conditions. So we feel remorse and shame when we discover this. The first thing that we do is to be with the experience, not denying or rationalizing it (well, at least the worker are getting paid something rather than being out of work). We accept what happened but don't condone it. We refresh our intent to as mindful as possible.

Nyanaponika Thera, a German-born Sri-Lanka-ordained Theravada monk (1901-1994), noted:

“Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind, rooted in insight.

Looking at the world around us, and looking into our own heart, we see clearly how difficult it is to attain and maintain balance of mind.

Looking into life we notice how it continually moves between contrasts: rise and fall, success and failure, loss and gain, honor and blame. We feel how our heart responds to all this with happiness and sorrow, delight and despair, disappointment and satisfaction, hope and fear. These waves of emotion carry us up and fling us down; and no sooner do we find rest, than we are in the power of a new wave again. How can we expect to get a footing on the crest of the waves? How can we erect the building of our lives in the midst of this ever restless ocean of existence, if not on the Island of Equanimity.

A world where that little share of happiness allotted to beings is mostly secured after many disappointments, failures and defeats;

a world where only the courage to start anew, again and again, promises success;

a world where scanty joy grows amidst sickness, separation and death;

a world where beings who were a short while ago connected with us by sympathetic joy, are at the next moment in want of our compassion — such a world needs equanimity.

But the kind of equanimity required has to be based on vigilant presence of mind, not on indifferent dullness. It has to be the result of hard, deliberate training, not the casual outcome of a passing mood. But equanimity would not deserve its name if it had to be produced by exertion again and again. In such a case it would surely be weakened and finally defeated by the vicissitudes of life. True equanimity,

however, should be able to meet all these severe tests and to regenerate its strength from sources within. It will possess this power of resistance and self-renewal only if it is rooted in insight.

What, now, is the nature of that insight? It is the clear understanding of how all these vicissitudes of life originate, and of our own true nature."^{xiv}

As Krishnamurti said, "The seeing is the doing." We are mindful and we act.

What else can we do about consumerism?

In addition to being mindful of what we do about consuming, we can pay attention to what is happening with consumption in the world. There are steps that we can take such as supporting and/or volunteering with organizations that are in synchrony with our intentions to practice skillful consumption.. By being in contact with like-minded others, we also can learn more about consumerism and other opportunities to act.

ⁱ Kaza, Stephanie *Penetrating the Tangle Hooked!* Shambala 2011

ⁱⁱ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/consumerism>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism#cite_note-1

^{iv} Kaza p. 139

^v Kaza p. 139

^{vi} Daly, Herman E. *Consumption: Value Added, Physical Transformation and Welfare in Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship* edited by David A. Crocker, Toby Linden

^{vii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Throw-away_society#cite_note-3

^{viii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Packaging_waste

^{ix} [With Rasiya Sutta](#) SN 42.12

^x Bhikkhu Bodhi [Walking Even Amidst the Uneven](#)

^{xi} The Five (Brethren) Pañca Sutta (SN 22:59) https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN22_59.html

^{xii} Kaza, Stephanie [First Do No Harm](#)

^{xiii} Hindrances [Nivarana Sutta](#) (AN 9:64)

^{xiv} Nyanaponika Thera [The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity](#)