**Consumerism and the Dharma**

I want to focus this talk on a Buddhist analysis how the Dharma can be effective in supporting our adaptation to the pressing challenges of this era associated with consumerism. This critique is not intended to suggest humanity completely discards consumerism, but rather a more insightful and disciplined application of cultural norms. First, a description of consumerism from Wikipedia:

**Consumerism** is a social and economic order in which the aspirations of many individuals include the acquisition of goods and services beyond those necessary for [survival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subsistence_economy) or traditional displays of [status](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_status). It emerged in Western Europe before the [Industrial Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution) and became widespread around 1900.

We are deeply immersed in a lifestyle organized around consumption. The earliest examples of a consumer culture developed as the industrial revolution began in the 18th century, and the maturation of consumerism began after WWII, and escalated with the onset of television advertising in the 1950’s. Even the oldest of us have been thoroughly culturally indoctrinated. What is your earliest memory of seeing a commercial? What is your earliest memory of a TV show or movie, and how did that experience influence your self-identity and values? How affected are you by internet searches called “clickbait”? How does that experience affect your mood or expectations about what constitutes a good or bad life?

In my research, the search term “consequences of consumerism” elicited this AI response:

Consumerism has many consequences, including:

* **Economic**: Consumerism can lead to personal debt, inflation, and economic crises.
* **Environmental**: Consumerism can lead to the depletion of natural resources, environmental pollution, and climate change.
* **Health**: Consumerism can lead to poor physical health and anxiety and unhappiness.
* **Society**: Consumerism can impact society in the way people dress, live, decorate their house, or the car they have.
* **Waste**: Consumerism can lead to more waste, as people throw out goods to "refresh" their closets.
* **Shipping**: Consumerist shopping habits can lead to increased traffic on roads and at sea, pollution from packaging waste, and spikes in carbon emissions.

We are conditioned to consume not just material goods and services, but also information. The information is distributed through mass media—tv, the internet, etc.—and the information is carefully researched by psychologically sophisticated marketing professionals, organized to literally capitalize on greed, hatred and ignorance. Contemporary political organizations make significant use of carefully researched advertising during their various campaigns, and news media relies on “If it bleeds it leads” headlines or top stories, followed by commercials that more or less subtly provide desirable things to buy that will at least distract from the distress and confusion reported by the media.

We are deeply conditioned consumers of media entertainment—product placement provides a visual reminder of a particular beverage or vehicle that the sellers of these products actually pay the production companies to be placed in the set. How a person is supposed to look and act influences a person's self-image and place in society—in this way, we are conditioned to consume the suggestion that the actors’ performances are representative of reality, when they are actually carefully directed, rehearsed, revised and edited to create an impactful impression on the audience.

Obviously, the Buddhist concept of greed and hatred are drivers of consumerism, but what about ignorance? Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister for the Nazis, is infamously quoted as saying “If you tell a lie repeatedly, people will believe it.” This is obviously suggesting that people are reliably inattentive or lacking in introspection and therefore can be controlled in an authoritarian society that controls the media that conditions consumption and “industrializes” misinformation.

Humanity is currently confronted with the most radically transformative era in human history, with perhaps catastrophic disruptions that affect us personally as well as in the totality of life on earth. We, as individuals, can’t control the sociocultural and ecological attitudes, behaviors, and consequences of rampant consumerism, but we can decide that attending to and modifying our own beliefs and lifestyle choices can mitigate the dynamic changes we are witnessing world-wide.

As a retired psychotherapist, I know from my training and experience that when a person is confronted with conflicted circumstances, he or she can either be forced into reacting by circumstances or can decide to intentionally change their approach to the situation. Buddhism provides the opportunity to train our minds to intentionally respond to consumerism and its consequences or just react out of long-held habit.

The fundamental Buddhist concepts described as the Four Noble Truths in some ways can be understood as a powerful way to investigate consumerism and be less adversely controlled by the pervasive marketing involved. Here is a brief overview of the Four Noble Truths and the relevance of Buddhist teachings and practices to more effectively adapt our lifestyles:

The Truth of distress and confusion, known as dukkha (doo-kah). It is important to carefully observe and effectively respond to the marketing we are routinely exposed to. We experience distress when watching the latest atrocity or devious misinformation that is upsetting, as well as the distress we experience from wanting to have whatever material object or social status that we are exposed to. We are confused by the contradictory messaging we experience during which we are informed regarding what to be frightened or offended by, interspersed with marketing strategies that encourage buying something material or socially desirable (or both).

The Truth regarding what causes dukkha, which is craving for pleasant experience and to avoid unpleasant experience, coordinated with an internal identification with a particular self-experience and accompanying story line.

The Truth that holds out the real possibility of liberation from dukkha, which, in the case of consumerism, being free from deceptive and destructive marketing influences, at least to a lesser degree, of social, economic and environmental disruption.

The liberating potential of the Truth is called the Noble Eightfold Path, and here are the 8 aggregates as they interact to support adapting effectively to consumer conditioning pressures:

Right Understanding involves direct introspective awareness of the various kinds of consumer conditioning efforts, discovered in commercial advertising and various media presentations on TV, the internet and other modalities.

Right Intention involves orienting the flow of subjective experience to do no harm to self and others, which in this circumstance the ability to cultivate liberation from unnecessary conditioning.

Right Speech involves clearly knowing how carefully crafted and produced marketing propaganda manifests as internal commentary that either justifies unnecessary consumption of material goods or cultural propaganda. This commentary, through the absence of mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort, causes distress and confusion, and is to be renounced.

Right Action involves the ability to act more responsibly in a consumer culture, to avoid doing harm to oneself, others, or the environment.

Right Livelihood is the manifestation of more responsible choices and actions in a consumer culture. We can’t avoid consumerism, but we can mediate the influence of marketing propaganda and practice voluntary simplicity.

Right Effort involves the ability to let go of attachments that are promoted by marketing propaganda. When we are mindful of impulsive reactivity associated with consumer conditioning and consciously decide to let go of the reactivity, we are mitigating the impact of consumer conditioning we are experiencing.

Right Mindfulness is the key element for reorganizing our lifestyle choices in more responsible ways. We must cultivate the ability to perceive how and when marketing propaganda is being presented and align with Right Effort and Right action effectively.

Right Concentration is the ability to stabilize the various aggregates of the Noble Eightfold Path to effectively interrupt consumer conditioning. Right Concentration also cultivates a peaceful and non-reactive mind, which finds satisfaction in more wholesome activities.

I recommend a book that I read in the 1980’s that has had a powerful impact on my lifestyle choices ever since: “Voluntary Simplicity—Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich”, by Duane Elgin. I suggest getting the revised version, published in 2010. The principles and practices of Buddhism are woven into the narrative of the book, and one of the forwards is written by Ram Dass.