Mindful Consumerism

Each generation has to contend with the particular circumstances of that era—this included the culture that shaped the historical Buddha’s personality, which was confronted with the transition between a largely agrarian culture and the development of the first city-states. Our era is affected by the most rapid and impactful changes in all of human history. One of the primary elements of our day-to-day lifestyles is the always-present influence of consumerism, an historically radical socio-cultural innovation. Wikipedia provides an overview of consumerism:

**Consumerism** is a [social](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social) and economic order that encourages the acquisition of [goods and services](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goods_and_services) in ever-increasing amounts. With the [industrial revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_revolution), but particularly in the 20th century, [mass production](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_production) led to [overproduction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overproduction)—the [supply](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supply_(economics)) of goods would grow beyond consumer [demand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demand_(economics)), and so manufacturers turned to [planned obsolescence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planned_obsolescence) and [advertising](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advertising) to manipulate consumer spending. In 1899, a book on consumerism published by [Thorstein Veblen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thorstein_Veblen), called [*The Theory of the Leisure Class*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Theory_of_the_Leisure_Class), examined the widespread values and economic institutions emerging along with the widespread "leisure time" in the beginning of the 20th century. In it, Veblen "views the activities and spending habits of this leisure class in terms of conspicuous and vicarious consumption and waste. Both are related to the display of status and not to functionality or usefulness." ....

“…Consumerism has been widely criticized by both individuals who choose other ways of participating in the economy (i.e. choosing [simple living](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_living) or [slow living](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_movement_(culture))) and experts evaluating the effects of modern capitalism on the world. Experts often highlight the connection of consumerism with issues like the [growth imperative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Growth_imperative) and [overconsumption](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overconsumption), which have larger impacts on the environment, including direct effects like [overexploitation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overexploitation) of natural resources or large amounts of waste from disposable goods, and larger effects like [climate change](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change). Similarly, some research and criticism focuses on the sociological effects of consumerism, such as reinforcement of class barriers and creation of inequalities. (Downloaded March 7, 2022)

This phenomenon can be effectively viewed through the lens of the First Noble Truth, *dukkha* (doo-kah), *distress and confusion*. The Second Noble Truth focuses on the causes of dukkha, craving an clinging, which we know as the lifelong conditioning that induces the enchantment embedded in the social phenomena of consumerism. Advertising has been strongly influenced by social psychology research, using focus groups and other methods for understanding how to influence consumer preference and behavior. We are totally immersed in consumer conditioning, and it is seldom investigated mindfully by consumers as to how the conditioning operates and the impact it has on our identities and sense of well-being.

The conditioning is so deeply intertwined within our personalities that we impulsively react to commercial advertising and the “product placement” of performative acting on tv and in movies, often without any conscious awareness of being trained by commercial interests. People wear certain brands of clothing, drive particular vehicles, etc. in order to feel a sense of identification, of belonging to an intentionally created cultural niche. Children are “educated”, that is conditioned as consumers sociologically through advertising before they are old enough to read and go to school.

Through the nearly universal presence of social media, we are being conditioned to “consume” information, and a significant and impactful element of this flood of mental stimulation promotes various sociocultural and political propaganda, which creates a very disruptive level of distress and confusion among various populations around the world. This has been painfully evident through the influence of q-anon and the disabling of culturally stabilizing social norms.

You can be assured that large sums of money have been spent on very sophisticated research seeking to “hook” parts of the brain into paying attention to certain images, largely outside of conscious awareness, which stimulates craving and clinging, essential elements for creating dukkha. An example of the conditioning is represented by the physical appearance of the models within ads. They seldom look like you and me and are always happy when seen consuming whatever product is presented. Professional modelling is very competitive and people who are models spend a great deal of time, effort and money to meet the criteria of the ad agencies; millions of dollars are spent producing them and they are re-recorded and photoshopped to maximize their impact on us, tested by sophisticated focus groups. Implicit in this example is what happens when our minds compare our appearance and/or level of happiness to the models and what they are consuming. This comparison is especially distorted when minorities compare themselves to the skin color, ethnicity or other visible markers of the models or their environment, usually in carefully designed ways to cause insecurity and “not good enough” mindsets. The sets for tv productions often don’t look at all like the environment we live in and this creates a false representation of what a good life looks like.

Also embedded in the consumer culture is ignorance regarding the impact of “…the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts” on the environment. Little consideration is given to the environmental damage that raising cattle causes: trees are cut, monoculture-produced corn feed is distributed, creating the runoff of fertilizer, manure, pesticides and herbicides, causing great harm to the environment hundreds or even thousands of miles from the site. Obesity is at epidemic levels in America and the antibiotics injected into cattle increase the likelihood of drug-resistant diseases in the population.

This manipulative conditioning is evident on the shelves of American supermarkets—for example, there are many varieties of toothpaste within the many different brands on the shelf—the “new and improved!” products. Furthermore, the article at the Wikipedia site provides two different definitions of consumerism. One represents the legitimate needs of the consumer to be well-informed about the ingredients in the products and to investigate monopolistic activities, providing appropriate regulations to maintain fairness in the marketplace. The other definition of consumerism involves the study of habits of consumption and the sociological patterns that place social value and priorities regarding the goods and services consumed.

We are hopefully emerging from the covid pandemic—many contemporary commentators are making an argument that the degree of global distress and confusion resulting from consumerism is itself a pandemic, because the “disease” of “infectious” consumerism, with the “symptoms” of global warming, social disruption and other detrimental circumstances, knows no international boundaries—and these are the elements of a pandemic.

It is increasingly evident that future generations of humans, along with the flora and fauna of the planet, will be significantly, perhaps catastrophically impacted no matter what effective interventions might be currently enacted; an existential crisis is made even more likely and life-threatening because of the denial and inaction of world governments, particularly in the U.S., which are dominated by the economic and political power of wealthy multinational corporations, who require consumerism to flourish, as evidenced by the amount of money spent by lobbyists in federal and state governments around the world.

This is dukkha on a global scale. It can lead to despairing fatalism, which is to the advantage of the moneyed class, who can afford to more effectively adapt to the changes, at least for a while. The more hopeless and helpless large segments of the populace feel, the more power and control the moneyed elite have through the propaganda of the media and deregulation of industrial and commercial interests and activities. Why vote or take any action as an individual when it seems that effective changes are not happening quickly enough? One of the enduring social conditioning factors is the conservative Christian “messiah complex”, which demands allegiance to a “rescuer God”, who will return to earth to save devotees to particular religious sects. This set the sociocultural conditions to make possible politically autocratic “messiahs”, who use their charisma to advance their own self-serving agendas.

Perhaps the principles and practices of Buddhism, along with other insightful and empowered segments of society, can affect the looming environmental and social consequences of consumerism. Greed, hatred and ignorance, the “three poisons” of Buddhist teachings, are not only rampant in human society; consumerism literally capitalizes on these characteristics.

These poisons are effectively described through the Buddhist concepts of *craving and clinging*. The Pali word for *craving* is *tanha* (tahn-hah), which is translated as *an unquenchable thirst*, the innate drive within each of us for sensual and psychological gratification. We assume that owning some object or experiencing some event will create an enduring, happy self, and this is fundamentally wrong. Perhaps the most noticeable evidence of this hunger is the prevalence of obesity in the industrialized, consumer world.

Supporting and reinforcing the dysfunctional process of undisciplined emotional urgency is the cognitive process of *clinging*, *upadana* (oo-pah-dah-nah), translated as *sustenance* or *fuel*. The Buddha adapted the term from the fuel that was used to keep Brahminic ritual fires burning perpetually, to appease the gods. The “gods” of this era are represented through the various ways we identify ourselves as servants of consumerism. He realized that we must keep fueling the sense of an autonomous/enduring self through craving and clinging, a self-reinforcing internal narrative that justifies undisciplined consumption, no matter what the personal, social and environmental cost. Freedom from dukkha, that is, the distress and confusion resulting from tanha and upadana, can only be accomplished through the training provided through the introspective awareness and self-discipline manifested through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. We are not separated from the environment—our consumer choices affect the environment and sense of well-being, and the toxic effects emerging from the by-products of overproduction and overconsumption affect society and every person in some way. For example, from an article in the New York Times published March 8, 2022:

By some estimates, humans have manufactured about [8.3 billion metric tons of plastic](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.1700782), only nine percent of which has ever been recycled. About 11 million metric tons of this plastic end up in the ocean every year, and without intervention, this number is expected to triple by 2040, according to the council. When these plastics break down, they can be eaten by marine animals, stunting their growth and causing reproductive problems. They have also been found in human organs, including placentas, as well as in soils and plants.

We are immersed in advertising that creates an idealized version of oneself that is guaranteed to be happy when purchasing a certain item or experiencing an event. The item or event does not inherently contain happiness, but some substances do change a person physiologically, such as opiates or cocaine, producing euphoria, either sedating or exciting the mind and body. Even if the product or experience doesn’t contain chemicals that activate a pleasant feeling, levels of exciting neurochemicals can be stimulated in the body in anticipation of happiness—consider the thrills experienced while riding a roller coaster, or the pleasant feelings induced while watching a sporting event on tv—and this experience can be strongly conditioned through repetition. This kind of reinforcement is provided by sociocultural approval— “That was a great football game, wasn’t it?!”—or through other means such as commercial advertising or product placement in films, such as the appearance of a certain brand of soda during a scene.

My training in providing recovery counseling for those afflicted by addiction informs me that for many addicts, the anticipation of getting high is actually more potent in generating excitement than the actual experience of intoxication! I reviewed elements of what can be called “process addiction” during the Dharma talk of March 2, 2022, which is entitled “Buddhism and Addiction”, and can be found in the Orlandoinsightmeditationgroup.org archives. The Third Noble Truth can represent liberation from the dukkha of consumerism on multiple levels—personally, societally, and environmentally. The Fourth Noble Truth, known as the Noble Eightfold Path, provides a conceptual and behavioral system to support that liberation. The Path is subdivided into three aggregates:

Wisdom, which in this context means realizing the cause-and-effect consequences of unbridled consumerism, along with the ability to manifest kindness, compassion, generosity and tolerance for the rich diversity of all beings that inhabit this planet.

Virtue, which includes the ability to introspectively be aware of and beneficially regulate how our internal and external speech, behaviors and lifestyles either support liberation or further the disruption of life on the planet

Training, which involves the discipline of mindful self-awareness through cultivating stability of attention, investigation of what is forming in the mind, and channeling the focus of attention and behavior away from destructive consumption in order to consume resources and information that fosters liberation from dukkha.

What practical steps can be taken to reevaluate and redirect our lifestyle choices in ways that are less afflicted by the dukkha associated with consumerism? Of course, the basic practices involved in daily mindfulness of breathing meditation provides a foundation for insights and disciplines that facilitate cultivating a contemporary version of part of the Virtue aggregate within the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood. I personally prefer to use the term Right Lifestyle, as this is more relevant to the complexities of contemporary culture. We can’t turn back to the old ways, as the previously unchallenged lifestyle choices created the problems. We can, however, operate within our “sphere of influence” to change how we prioritize our purchases and develop our beliefs. My training in psychology informs me that *proactively intending to live differently is less stressful than being forced to adapt*!

Here are some exercises and contemplations to consider in this adaptive process—a contemporary “Middle Way” as describe by the Buddha, between forced austerity or blatant overconsumption:

* Contemplate which strongly established consumer patterns seem to be dominant in your life. It might be useful to compile a list of your patterns and then later review them regarding their impact on life. Are they as important as you are accustomed to believing? How many streaming services do you really need? How important is fast food in your life? (Many fast-food services provide food that adversely impacts the environment and adds unwholesome calories to one’s diet—topics for future Dharma talks.) What is your “carbon footprint” on the planet, both in terms of internal combustion engines and wanton use of electricity?
* Actively contemplate how the various forms of commercial and social indoctrination are impacting us—on tv, the internet, and how we perceive the status of others due to their possessions, etc. Cultivate a “cost/benefit analysis" on your social media time. What negative personal, social or environmental consequences occur as a result of acting on the consumer patterns?
* Using the protocol established by the Four Noble Truths, contemplate where the dukkha--distress and confusion—are found in your consuming routines. First Noble Truth: What is the nature of the distress? Where do you feel tense inside with desire for the object or experience? Second Noble Truth: Understand the conditioned nature of the desire. We all seek pleasure and to avoid pain; how does the desire associated with consumer behavior play out in the “selfing story” of your personality? Is giving in to the desire that necessary to be happy? Third Noble Truth: Contemplate the potential benefits of not acting on the craving and clinging associated with the consumption of the object or the experience. Fourth Noble Truth: Cultivate and use the Noble Eightfold Path practices to recondition the mind away from mindless consumption—see the next item for example.
* Use the Awakening Factors of Mindfulness and Investigation of Mental Formations to gain insight into the ways that commercials, social media and product placement in entertainment are designed to coerce beliefs and actions that are unwholesome. Combine this introspective awareness with the Awakening Factor of Energy/Right Effort to channel attention away from impulsive consumption and toward a more sustainable and compassionate lifestyle.
* There is a protocol in the commentaries regarding the First Foundation of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness called “The Four Clear Comprehensions” that provides a model for an effective Decision Tree:

1. Is your goal or value regarding consumption worthy of action? What will be the consequences of that action regarding your economic, social or environmental values?
2. What is the most suitable means for achieving the goal or realizing the value?
3. Monitor your behaviors regarding the goal or value.
4. Keep in mind the ultimate goal of liberating the mind or the world from dukkha.

I intend to present a Dharma talk on the Four Clear Comprehensions during the next meeting, on December 14, 2022.

* Consciously practice renouncing a variety of consumer behaviors. Ironically, as I write these notes, it is the season that Christians celebrate as Christmas; this opportunity to celebrate of the birth of an Awakened being has been sacrificed to consumerism. It would be more appropriate to celebrate the renewal of one’s commitment to kindness and compassion during this period.
* Read various publications that describe alternative lifestyle choices that counter consumerism, such as “Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Life That Is Outwardly Simple and Inwardly Rich” by Duane Elgin, a book I read decades ago that significantly shaped my lifestyle adaptations. I am confident that internet searches on *alternative lifestyles and the environment* will provide some leads. Here are websites on the topic: <http://www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com/> <http://simplicitycollective.com/start-here/what-is-voluntary-simplicity-2>