Mindful Coping with Consumerism

We live in a world dominated by consumerism, which Wikipedia describes in this way:

**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_%28economics%29) of goods would grow beyond consumer [demand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demand_%28economics%29), 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_%28culture%29)) 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)

Consumerism as a cultural phenomenon began with the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, particularly in England. After the American civil war, the United States also became industrialized. In both England and the U.S., this transition paralleled the increasing urbanization of the populace, which makes the distribution of goods and services easier and more efficient economically. There is debate among economists and sociologists about the concurrence of capitalism with consumerism, as its development produces the accumulation of wealth among a select few of the populace, while the largest segment is economically deprived, simultaneously. Most of the populace is informed through the media that people who are not wealthy are somehow less important or valuable than the richest segment, and that “He who has the most toys wins”, that is, the ability to buy and display consumer goods and services provides proof of a happy and successful life.

Consumerism became “supercharged” with the expansion of media outlets, first radio, and then much more so with television, which became one of the first desirable acquisitions in the U.S. after WWII. Industrial expansion was accelerated by the need for armaments and other goods that allowed this country to emerge from the Great Depression and enjoy tremendous growth in wealth during the 1950’s and ‘60’s. When the internet became available in the 1990’s, another medium for consumeristic propaganda that led to the world we live in today. Commercial advertising/propaganda is so embedded in contemporary social life that any alternative way of life seems not at all realizable.

Accompanying the onset of consumerism in the 19th century is the impact of burning fossil fuels and extracting resources such as metals and timber from the earth. One of my meditation students told me that she believes the extinction of the human race began with the Industrial Revolution, and that is possibly true. The toxic byproducts of industrialization were largely ignored until the 1960’s, with the advent of Earth Day and the environmental movement. Even today, with the mounting and deeply researched evidence supporting the realities of global warming and the toxification of the earth and waterways, including the oceans, significant influential sectors of the population continue to use propaganda to misinform the public about the validity of scientific research. It is also painfully evident that there are more dramatic, destructive and disruptive storms, fires, floods and other catastrophic events, and yet, the amount of CO2 injected into the atmosphere keeps increasing.

We are hopefully emerging from the covid pandemic—many contemporary commentators are making and argument that the degree of global distress and confusion resulting from consumerism is a pandemic, because the “disease” of 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 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 is dominated by the economic and political power of the wealthy capitalists, who apparently require consumerism to flourish, as evidenced by the amount of money spent by lobbyists in federal and state governments, not just here, but also 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 no effective changes are happening?

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*, 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 Brahma. 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 principles and practices 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”.

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. The theme for the series of talks entitled “How Do You Want to Live?” creates an opening for adapting—we will be forced to adapt as the climate changes and as more societal upheaval develops. My training in psychology informs me that 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 what strongly established consumer patterns seem to be dominant in your 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 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.
* Consciously practice renouncing a variety of consumer behaviors. Ironically, as I write these notes, it is the season that Christians call Lent, during which one practices intentional renunciation. Remember, “Happiness is an Inside Job!”
* 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>

During the Dharma talk associated with these notes, Steve Perlman offered this doc by Global Sustainability Institute

"Potential for Formation of Nodes of Persisting Complexity" <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/15/8161/pdf>