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Buddhist Reflections on “Consumer” and “Consumerism”

Peter Harvey¹

Abstract

This paper starts with a characterization of “consumerism” and the idea of “the consumer.” It then explores Buddhist attitudes on wealth and “Buddhist economics” before drawing on these to develop a critical assessment of consumerism as an ineffective and wasteful route to human happiness.

Consumerism

“Consumption:” in the nineteenth century, this was the name for a wasting disease, especially pulmonary tuberculosis. Now it is a term for the key focus of human economic activity in many lands. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines “consume” thus: “1. *v.t.* Destroy; use up; eat or drink; spend, waste (time, trouble, etc.); (in *p.p.*) entirely preoccupied (*with envy etc.*); . . . 2. *v.i.* Waste away . . .” The word does not actually have positive connotations, yet we seem to have forgotten this. It is interesting that the act of purchasing goods and services, as “consuming,” is likened to an act of eating. This in part suits those who sell goods and

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services, of course, for when we eat something, we destroy it, and have to come back for more. Moreover, we *need* to eat, so likening purchasing goods to obtaining food implies that we have a genuine need for such goods, just as we do for (sufficient) food.

When people are referred to as “consumers” or “the consumer” what does this imply about them? In part, it implies a false reduction of people into consuming-units. On the other hand, it implies an uncomfortable truth about us: we consume the products of the environment and human transformations of natural resources—and in doing this, are increasingly coming to threaten the world’s biosphere, our shared home. Buddhism sees the roots of the world’s problems as “greed, hatred, and delusion,” and the latter can sometimes be in the form of shortsighted stupidity. As Jared Diamond has shown in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, human societies, such as that on Easter Island, have been quite capable of blindly destroying the basis of their own survival; let us hope that we do not do this on a planetary scale.

One also sees a steady trend towards the businessification of everything; the model for any human interaction is the financial transaction. So, for example, students are now “customers” rather than, say, “clients.” Education is seen by some as primarily an avenue by which to make people good producers and consumers. We even see a range of spiritual traditions being plundered so as to be broken up for the saleable tokens and feel-good factors that they may be able to provide.

That said, certain aspects of what is called “consumerism” are positive, as when it leads to campaigning for the protection of people from exploitation by businesses, or from harmful goods, or for the ethical sourcing of goods. But do such things need to be seen as aspects of “consumerism” at all when they are simply about responsible action and seeking to ensure others are responsible? Of course, from the point of view of those who sell “consumer goods” they do come across as “the

consumer,” biting back instead of just using their “teeth” to chew the cud they are provided.

In Buddhist terms, responsible buying can be seen as buying with both eyes open; not only do sellers need to have an eye for both their profit and the ethics of their enterprise (AN.I.129-230), but buyers also need to have an eye for the benefits and possible knock-on harm of what they purchase.

What do people hope to gain from their “consumption”—and do they actually get this? A “consumerist” economy focuses on such things as clothes, cars, houses and home improvements, electrical goods of various kinds, and sources of music. None of these have much wrong with them in themselves, though such things as “gas-guzzling” cars are a selfish and self-indulgent threat to the world’s climate. Consumer goods can be useful, and can bring a certain amount of passing pleasure and happiness to people—but that is all. If they brought genuine satisfaction, people would not need to buy any more until what they had bought had worn out—but a consumer economy actually depends on people not being satisfied with the goods they buy, or at least not satisfied for long.

Of course, it is a fact of human psychology that when we buy something, we may be pleased by it for a time, but then it becomes taken for granted, or damaged, or we become bored with it . . . and we seek something else. It is not cynical to say that humans are like this, but it is very shortsighted just to carry on feeding this cycle without any attempt to step aside from it or dampen it down. The key question here is: does inhabiting this cycle bring genuine happiness, or just an exhausting and frustrating grasping at shadows? Did “retail therapy” ever cure anyone of anything?

Personally, I find that certain shopping environments verge on the hellish. People seem so fascinated by finding bits of cloth or metal to

possess, though can you really “possess” anything at all?. Here I am reminded of the Buddhist idea that one form of rebirth that can occur, for those in whom greed is strong, is the “hungry ghost,” a being which has a huge appetite but a tiny neck, through which only a small amount of food can pass. Perhaps a modern version of this would be as a ghost who wanders round a closed shopping center/mall, only being able to look, without ever being able to minimally assuage its cravings by being able to buy anything.

A consumerist economy depends on being able to stoke “demand” by creating new desires in people, and presenting them so as to suggest that their “satisfaction” will bring genuine happiness. Buddhism tends to look on things rather differently. The second of the four True Realities for the Spiritually Ennobled (*ariya-saccas*) is *taṇhā*—craving, or demanding desire—and this is seen as a key condition for the painfulness of human life: “Now *this*, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the originating-of-the-painful true reality. It is this craving, giving rise to rebirth, accompanied by delight and attachment, finding delight now here, now there . . .” (SN V. 421). “*Taṇhā*” literally means “thirst”, and clearly refers to demanding desires or drives which are ever on the lookout for gratification, “now here, now there.” These lead to suffering in a number of ways. Firstly, they lead to the suffering of frustration, as their demands for lasting and wholly satisfying fulfillment are perpetually disappointed by a changing and unsatisfactory world, and by the human tendency to always want things to be other than they currently are, so that we do not allow stillness and contentment to arise. Secondly, they motivate people to perform various actions, whose results lead on to further fraught situations, as well as future rebirths, with their attendant sufferings. Thirdly, they lead to quarrels, strife and conflict between individuals and groups. Three types of craving are identified, for: sensual pleasures (*kāma*); attaining and maintaining a certain identity or mode of being, such as in ego-enhancement, as motivates a fair amount of con-

sumerist spending; and getting rid of unpleasant situations, things and people.

Some social critics may look to an anti-consumerist “alternative hedonism,” but I can’t really see how any kind of hedonism—an outlook and related behavior that sees pleasure as the greatest good—can ever bring genuine happiness. Pleasure is by nature fleeting and tends to focus on “me and mine.” Happiness can be a more a pervasive attitude—though it is itself changeable—and be related to more open-hearted and less selfish concerns. However, an appreciation of pleasures when they come along, mindful of their limitations, is fine, as is an ability to enjoy simple pleasures. Moreover, bringing pleasure to others can bring real happiness. Generosity and sharing is certainly a source of happiness, and a challenge to a society that prioritizes personal consumption. In Buddhism, generosity is encouraged by such passages as:

Monks, if people knew, as I know, the [karmic] fruits of sharing gifts, they would not enjoy their use without sharing them, nor would the taint of stinginess obsess the heart. Even if it were their last bit, their last morsel of food, they would not enjoy its use without sharing it if there was someone else to share it with. (It.18).

As Nāgārjuna says:

Through using wealth there is happiness here and now,
Through giving there is happiness in the future,
From wasting it without using it or giving it away,
There is only misery. How could there be happiness?
(RPR.315).

Another important source of happiness is being happy at the good fortune, success, or happiness of others—what in Buddhism is called empathetic joy (*muditā*). This means, for example, that if someone

purchases something, one can be pleased for that person, without feeling miserable that one does not have such an item oneself, so that one now feels to “need” such a thing.

The Buddhist Attitude on Wealth

For Buddhism, a focus on amassing wealth is problematic, but wealth itself is not evil; the important thing is how it is made and used. In his teachings, the Buddha included advice on how best to generate and use income (e.g. SN.IV.331-337):

1. As to how wealth is *made*, it is praiseworthy to do so in an ethical way, bringing harm to no being, and blameworthy to do the opposite. A related Buddhist idea is that of right livelihood, which avoids such things as dishonesty or trading in: weapons (making and selling arms), living beings (e.g. keeping animals for slaughter), meat, alcoholic drink, or poison (AN.III.298). One could of course add to this traditional list. Some would see work in advertising as dishonest, as it encourages greed and deluded expectations.
2. As to *using* the product of one’s work, it is praiseworthy to use it: to give ease and pleasure to oneself and to share it with others, and to use it for generous, karmically fruitful action. Correspondingly, it is blameworthy to be miserly with oneself or mean with others.
3. Even if wealth is made in a moral way, and used to benefit oneself and others, one is still blameworthy if one’s *attitude* to one’s wealth is greed and longing,

with no contentment or heed for spiritual development.

In line with the last point, here, it is said: “Riches ruin the foolish, but not those in the quest of the Beyond; through craving for riches, the foolish one ruins himself as [if he were ruining] others” (*Dhp.*355). The virtues of contentment and few-ness of wishes are praised, and it is said “contentment is the greatest wealth” (*Dhp.* 204). Whether one’s wealth increases or declines, the ideal is to remain calm, and to be regret-free, provided one had attained the wealth in a moral and non-greedy way.

Generally speaking, Buddhism encourages the adoption of a “middle way” between the extremes of:

1. Poverty, where people have insufficient means for a becoming life: “For householders in this world, poverty is suffering” (AN.III.350), “woeful in the world is poverty and debt” (AN.III.352), and “hunger is the greatest illness” (*Dhp.*203),
2. A materialistic seeking of riches for their own sake.

Poverty is seen as encouraging theft, general immorality, and social unrest (DN III.64-68, DN I.134-136). Moreover, in a situation of poverty and conflict, it is more difficult to lead a moral and spiritual life (A III.65-66). Regarding the second extreme, Buddhism sees material welfare as not an end in itself, but only a means to human happiness, and a support for a life of moral and spiritual development. To be ever on the lookout for “more” is to base one’s life on craving and, being without contentment, this makes happiness impossible, for one will never be satisfied. Thus traditional Buddhist values are in tension with the values of an acquisitive, consumerist society. Bruce Morgan reports that in rapidly modernizing Thailand, though there is a general support for economic

development in the *Saṅgha*, the Buddhist monastic order, yet there is equally a concern:

. . . about the kind of restless, endless generation of wants and desires in a dynamic economy, never satisfied and always ascending. It is not the particular standard of living that is in question, but the style, rate and effects of continual changes in standards(72).

It can be seen that societies at many different levels of wealth would be acceptable to Buddhism, but not a continuous striving for more for its own sake.

As Russell Sizemore and Donald Swearer say, “To be non-attached is to possess and use material things but not to be possessed or used by them” (2). The American Buddhist writer David Loy has this to say in his article “The Religion of the Market:”

The final irony in this near-complete commodification of the world comes as little surprise to anyone familiar with what has become addictive behavior for 59 million people in the U.S. (Dominguez and Robin 171). Comparisons that have been made over time and between societies show that there is little difference in self-reported happiness. The fact that we in the developed world are now consuming so much more does not seem to be having much effect on our happiness. (Durning 38-40)

This comes as no surprise to those with a more religious orientation to the world. The best critique of this greed for consumption continues to be provided by traditional religious teachings, which not only serve to ground us but show us how our lives can be transformed. In Buddhism, to cite the example of my own religion, the insa-

tiable desires of the ego-self are the source of the frustration and lack of peace that we experience in our daily lives. Overconsumption, which distracts and intoxicates us, is one of the main symptoms of this problem. Unfortunately for us, such compulsiveness does not allay our anxiety but feeds it. In answer, Buddhism teaches renunciation and generosity. As Shunryu Suzuki-roshi put it, renunciation does not mean giving up the things of this world but accepting that they go away. To see and accept that everything goes away—including ourselves—is necessary in order to live serenely. Only someone whose identity is not tied to acquisition and consumption can truly renounce the world. The sign of renunciation is generosity, which is deeply honored in Buddhism as in all the major religions. True generosity demonstrates not only moral development but insight: “As the need to define and present ourselves diminishes, so do possessiveness and acquisitiveness. Eventually we may come to see that the experience of possessiveness itself rests on delusion. Something is mine only if it is not yours. Yet if we can see that there is no me apart from you, as well as no us apart from the phenomena of the world, the idea of ownership begins to lose its meaning. Fundamentally there can be no acquisitiveness, for nothing is lacking” (Jeffrey 12). Consumerism not only overlooks the superior joy of giving to others, it forecloses the ontological realization of nonduality between myself and others. Such a realization leads to the transformative insight that there is no need to be acquisitive if nothing is lacking.

By “nothing is lacking,” I think he means that unless one is in genuine poverty, the means to happiness are already available, and do not depend on acquisitive behavior.

Sizemore and Swearer hold that Theravāda Buddhism “offers a ‘middle way,’ or sees the acquisition and renunciation of wealth in a dialectical relationship” (1, and see also Reynolds 63-64, 68). For monks, this means that although the more worthy attract more donations from the laity, their worthiness helps them to remain non-attached to it” (Sizemore and Swearer 3). For lay-people, “Wealth always provides both an opportunity for a new expression and cultivation of non-attachment *and* a temptation towards the kind of anti-dhammic [anti-spiritual] self-indulgence that leads to increased entrapment in the web of worldly existence” (Reynolds 69). For monks as for the laity, “it is not the amount so much as the way the wealth is possessed and used that is subject to moral scrutiny” (Sizemore and Swearer 17).

“Buddhist Economics”

In Asia, a number of Buddhist writers, primarily Theravādins, have sought to articulate a “Buddhist economics” that is different from the capitalist or Marxist-influenced economics that have been the dominant influence on most Asian governments since the Second World War. A stimulus to many of these efforts was a short article on “Buddhist Economics” by the Catholic writer E. F. Schumacher, an advocate of intermediate technology and critic of Western development models who had been an economic adviser in 1950’s Burma prior to its current Marxist/Nationalist phase. The article originally appeared in 1966, but was reproduced in his *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). He pointed out that “modernization,” in practice, often leads to “a collapse of the rural economy, a rising tide of unemployment

in town and country, and a growth of a city proletariat without nourishment for either body or soul” (56). Accordingly, he lamented that the Burmese and others had simply adopted development plans from the West, without pausing “to think that a Buddhist way of life would call for Buddhist economics” (48). He argued that for the right path of development, what is needed is “the Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility” (56), and he sought to develop such a vision by articulating an economics that he saw as implicit in Burmese Buddhist life (48). Unfortunately, the leaders of Burma have, since the 1960s, taken the country down an oppressive path, albeit one that has isolated Burma from the tides of consumerist capitalism that have swept neighboring Thailand.

In Theravādin Thailand and Sri Lanka, the majority of monks and laypeople support a somewhat conservative form of Buddhism that works with the status quo and government development efforts. Nevertheless, there are those who lament the loss of a “Buddhistically defined moral community” due to the onslaught of modernization, westernization and secularization (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 196). Donald Swearer sees these as:

1. Neo-traditionalists: fundamentalist-like movements which advocate a return to an “idealized personal piety that either ignores or misunderstands the nature of systematic economic, social, and cultural problems and tensions.”
2. Liberal reformists who engage with the problems of the modern world and seek to use creative interpretations of traditional beliefs and practices to help solve these. (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 196)

In Thailand, the former include Santi Asoke, a Gandhian-influenced utopian movement that offers a moralistic critique of many aspects of Thai society (Swearer *World* 136-139; Harvey 391-394), and Dhammakāya, a very successful meditation movement that has support among political and military leaders, using the media to spread itself, that emphasizes meditation and moral renewal (Swearer *World* 114-115; Harvey 388-391). The reformers include those who have sought to develop and articulate ideas of “Buddhist economics.”

In Sri Lanka, Dr. H. N. S. Karunatilake, then Director of Economic Research at the Central Bank, in his *This Confused Society* (1976), sought “to develop an economic system suitable to the modern world based on the discourses made by the Buddha” (iii), though he offered what is in places a rather idealistic vision. He saw Buddhist economic principles as having been exemplified in the reign of the Indian emperor Asoka (268-239 BCE) and the large-scale irrigation works of past Sinhalese civilizations (74). He says, “A Buddhist economic system has its foundations in the development of a co-operative and harmonious effort in group living. Selfishness and acquisitive pursuits have to be eliminated by developing man himself” (29). Also in Sri Lanka, the psychologist and philosopher Padmasiri De Silva, in his *Value Orientations and Nation Building* (1976) booklet, and *The Search for Buddhist Economics* (1975) pamphlet, outlined what he saw as the contribution of Buddhism to social progress in various fields.

In Thailand, Ven. P. A. Payutto, a leading monk-scholar, has developed a vision of Buddhist economics in his *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place*. In this, he criticizes the tendency of modern economics to examine economic transactions in isolation from ethical considerations of the nature of what is sold, and the social and environmental impact of the transactions. He emphasizes the economic impact of unethical behavior, such as a reluctance to invest where there is social

disorder, customer dissatisfaction if shoddy goods are sold, and medical costs and poor worker health if adulterated foodstuffs are sold, as sometimes happens in Thailand (24).

Also in Thailand, a monk who has offered innovative modernist interpretations of central Buddhist teachings, including those of society and economics, was the leading monk-intellectual and meditation master Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993). Though his forest monastery was far from the center of power, yet he has been influential on many college-educated people in Thailand, including judges, teachers, educators and doctors, as well as the democratic student movement of the 1970s (Santikaro 180-182). Buddhadāsa was forthright in his criticism of the “immorality and selfishness of many modern social structures” (Santikaro 147), and compared the wealthy of Bangkok unfavorably with the generosity of people in the countryside (*Me and Mine* 175). Although emphasizing the spiritual core of Buddhism, he felt that there was no separation between this and social concerns (Santikaro 155), for to solve social problems, we must get at the moral defilements that are their basic cause (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 170). Thus he saw such things as hunger, illiteracy and illness as simply symptoms of a lack of true religion and moral principles in society (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 171).

Buddhadāsa felt that all religions, including Buddhism, are fundamentally socialistic, in that their founders aimed at the good of society as a whole. He thus opposed the individualism, linked to capitalism and associated “liberal democracy” that he saw as eating away at Thai society (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 172). Although opposing both capitalism and communism, he came to espouse a kind of religious socialism that he called “Dhammic Socialism” as the solution to society’s problems. For Buddhadāsa, apart from “worldly” forms of socialism in the form of Marxism and communism, which could be violent and malignant, there is true socialism. He saw this as being rooted in *Dhamma*, the interde-

pendent nature of things (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 195). It draws on the fact that humans are social creatures who depend on and should help others, not acting from individual-ism (Santikaro 166-169; Swearer, *Me and Mine* 173). This true socialism entails “not taking more than one’s fair share—using only what is necessary so that the rest is available for other’s use,” as in Buddhist teachings on contentment (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 172). It is living according to nature, taking only what we really need (Swearer, *Me and Mine* 173).

Both Payutto and Buddhādāsa have influenced another key Thai liberal reformer, the lay intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 215), who has also been influenced by the Vietnamese peace activist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 225). Sivaraksa has been described as “a writer and publisher, lecturer, peripatetic international conferee, peace and human rights activist, founder of NGOs [Non-governmental Organizations] Buddhist social critic, and intellectual moralist” (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 200). He has developed an incisive critique of Thailand’s rush to American-influenced capitalist-based modernization and the materialism that it is bringing. For him, “Modern development encourages competition and success whereas Buddhism encourages collaboration and contentedness” (Sivaraksa, *Vision* 182). Although he accepts that modernization in Thailand has some potentially good aspects, in practice he feels that it has mainly brought luxury to the few and poverty to the many, especially farmers and urban workers (*Vision* xv). Rising debt has meant that large numbers of peasants have migrated to Bangkok where

Rampant unemployment forces many to resort to crime. Young girls work as servants, factory workers, or are forced into prostitution. Children work illegally in small shops under the harshest conditions. Some are even sold

abroad. Men do heavy labor for pathetically low wages.
(Sivaraksa, *Seeds* 32-33)

Modernization has also brought pollution, urban ugliness and slums, and cultural disintegration (*Vision* 20, 57-8). Sivaraksa has thus worked to preserve and perpetuate traditional Thai culture—though he prefers to use the older term, Siamese—but also for necessary changes in society to enhance social justice (*Vision* xxiii). As with Sri Lankan writers and activists such as Karunatilake, he looks back to emperor Asoka, the early *Saṅgha*, and certain pious, benevolent kings of the past as inspiring models for a truly Buddhist society (Swearer, *Sivaraksa* 213).

Buddhists on the Purpose of Economics and a Critique of Consumerism

Writers in the “Buddhist economics” mold frequently emphasize the distinctive goal of the Buddhist approach to economics:

1. Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilization not in a multiplication of human wants but in the purification of human character . . . formed primarily by a man’s work (Schumacher 50).
2. Economic Development must be placed against the wider background of the need to develop a well-rounded personality and a happy human being (De Silva, *Search* 5).

Ven. Payutto holds that consumption should be seen only as “a means to an end, which is the development of human potential” (43) or “well-being within the individual, within society and within the environment” (35). He thus distinguishes between “right consumption” and “wrong consumption,” with the former meaning to use goods and services “to

satisfy the desire for true well-being,” and the latter to use them “to satisfy the desire for pleasing sensations or ego-gratification” (41), limited only by one’s ability to afford what one wants (43). Karunatilake holds that, “The present economic order is based on the thesis that permanent and limitless economic expansion is possible and desirable” (29), though for man “no standard of living satisfies him” (79). This produces a reckless use of non-renewable resources that is unfair to future generations (63), and is based on recognizing craving as a fundamental axiom of economics (18, 28).

Sivaraksa thus criticizes Thailand’s falling for “the religion of consumerism,” the “dominant ethic in the world today” (*Seeds* 3), for:

The religion of consumerism emphasizes greed, hatred and delusion. It teaches people to look down on their own indigenous, self-reliant culture in the name of progress and modernization. We need to live simply, in order to subvert the forces of consumerism and materialism (*Seeds* 114).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong in having expectations rise, but it is harmful when people who were formerly happy are given to believe that they cannot do without a particular good (*Seeds* 30).

These writers thus question the very basis of a life aimed at continually increasing consumption. Sivaraksa says that as people work harder for things they do not need, they become more restless, rushing, and never relaxing (44). More particularly, Schumacher says that although modern economics “tries to maximise consumption by the optimal pattern of productive effort,” Buddhist economics “tries to maximise human satisfactions by the optimal pattern of consumption” (53). He notes that the Burma he knew had few labor-saving devices compared to

the USA, yet also had a much smaller pressure and strain of living (53). Thus, looking at the approach which emphasizes consumption:

A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption . . . Buddhist economics is the systematic study of how to attain given ends with the minimum means. (52, 53)

Likewise, De Silva holds that “all planning for national development must go beyond pure “maximal production” to “optimal human development” (*Value* 36-37).

Peter Timmerman (*Defending*), a Buddhist and director of the Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Toronto, challengingly claims that modern consumerist society is in fact “the least materialistic culture in history” as it does not promote a careful valuing of objects, but attempts to simply use them to satisfy dreams of sexual potency, power, or image, and then discard them. In this, the “desperate need to produce (and to consume) is driven by a kind of panic and mistrust, because it is an attempt to fill a yawning gap in existence with an endless stream of glittering objects.” A mindful approach, however, values the “rich particularity” of things. Schumacher thus holds, based on his observation of Burmese practice, according to which the ideal for clothing, for example, would be to use durable material, without toilsome complicated tailoring, but draping the uncut cloth round the body, and leaving time and effort free for artistic creativity in its embroidery (Schumacher 52).

The Thai writer Susanna Satha-Anand, who is influenced by Buddhādāsa, holds that in Western economics

. . . desires are the given. It is not within the realm of economics to “control or question” desires. It is the essence of economics to *satisfy* desires. In contrast, Buddhism seeks to *bridle* [i.e. moderate] desires as a way to happiness,

for reducing one’s desires makes it easier to achieve satisfaction (7). Here, Ven. Payutto usefully distinguishes craving (*taṇhā*), which is directed at attaining pleasure, and purpose (*chanda*), which (when not infected by craving) aims at well-being based on wisdom. When driven by the first, economic behavior is unskillful, but if the latter guides it, it will be skillful (34-35). He sees modern economics as based on the assumption that people’s aim is to seek happiness through the satisfaction of craving, which means that the goal is always over the horizon, as craving can never attain lasting satisfaction.

A common theme is a criticism of taking a country’s Gross National Product and per capita income as the key measure of its economic success. For one thing, these measures overlook the question of how goods or income are distributed (Karunatilake 45), so that 80% of an increase may go to 10% of the population (Sivaraksa *Vision* 59). For another, GNP figures include in their calculations unnecessary goods (Karunatilake 40) and harmful products such as armaments, alcohol, dangerous drugs and chemicals, and animal slaughter (84). As Helena Norberg-Hodge, a champion of the traditional Ladakhi Buddhist culture of the far North of India, emphasizes, a focus on GNP also registers, as positive, economic transactions that are wasteful and disruptive of traditional patterns of self-sufficiency (147). Sivaraksa holds that emphasizing quantitative measures of development focuses attention on economic factors, such as increased production, as well as political factors, with economists’ emphasis on increased goods fostering greed, and politicians’ emphasis on power fostering ill-will. Both work together and

measure results in terms of quantity, thus fostering ignorance (Sivaraksa *Vision* 57).

Conclusion

In affluent countries, we are becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of a “consumer lifestyle.” In Buddhist terms, we have given craving free reign, and so some can clearly see that this does not lead to happiness. Many in developing countries are still seeking to emulate our lifestyle, buying into the “shoddy goods” of the ideology it is based on. However, the biosphere would not be able to sustain most people living at our level of consumption. In that context, our options seem to be:

- Fighting to hold onto to what we have, generating more and more conflict in the world.
- Simply abandoning our affluence, so that others can have their turn at experiencing its pleasures and pains; or
- Reflecting on the limitations of consumerism, and getting this message across to developing countries, linking up with those in developing nations who already see the problems, so that they do not just emulate our mistakes, but can learn from them. This would help the world to have a globally sustainable lifestyle, which takes account of the benefits of moderation and respect for our shared home—and is also more just and peaceful.

In Buddhist terms what are needed are such qualities as generosity and moral responsibility, calm and stillness, kindness and compassion, non-grasping and non-attachment, and awareness of the impermanence of

things and pleasures, their limitations as well as benefits. However, this all needs to be done in a light way that is open to the joy that these qualities can also bring.

Abbreviations

- AN *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Āṅguttara Nikāya*, Boston, Wisdom, 2012. Reference to vol. and page number of the PTS text in Pāli.
- Dhp *Dhammapada*—various translations—references to verse number.
- DN *Dīgha Nikāya*, translated by M. Walshe, *Thus Have I heard, the Long Discourses of the Buddha*, London: Wisdom Publications, 1987. Reference to vol. and page number of the PTS text in Pāli.
- It. *Itivuttaka*, translated by P. Masefield, *The Itivuttaka*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001,. Reference to vol. and page number of the PTS text in Pāli.
- PRP *Rāja-parikathā-ratnamāla* (of Nāgārjuna), reference to verse number. Translated in Nagarjuna and the Seventh Dalai Lama, *The Precious Garland and the Song of Four Mindfulnesses*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975.
- SN *Samyutta Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000. Reference to vol. and page number of the PTS text in Pāli.

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