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Buddhism and Waste: The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption

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A Review of *Buddhism and Waste: The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption*

Mark Speece [1]

Buddhism and Waste: The Excess, Discard, and Afterlife of Buddhist Consumption. Edited by Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg. Bloomsbury Studies in Material Religion. London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 208 pages, ISBN 978-1-3501-9553-0 (hardback), $115, 978-1-3501-9554-4 (e-book), $103.50.

Buddhism and Waste is a timely collection of contributions demonstrating both the problem of waste in the Buddhist world and efforts to counter it. Consumer waste is a prominent issue in sustainability discussions, but it gets somewhat less attention in the literature than many other sustainable consumption topics (Sesini). The goal is that anything not used or no longer needed should be recycled or reworked for further use in some other process, somewhere, to avoid any waste at all (Camilleri). This, of course, is still largely an ideal. *Buddhism and Waste* demonstrates a range of waste problems. Many Buddhist initiatives are working on such issues, but Buddhism has not solved them. This is hardly a criticism—implementation in the sustainability field has not, either. The book very usefully demonstrates that solutions to waste require changes in consumption patterns; purely technical or logistics solutions will not solve this. Much

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Buddhist effort at countering rampant consumerism focuses on reducing emotional attachment to physical goods. This is a spiritual goal, certainly compatible with sustainability philosophy, but often not entirely consistent with sustainability implementation in the physical world.

Trine Brox introduces the book by immediately countering the frequent misperception of Buddhism as nonmaterialistic and other-worldly. Whatever the tradition, doctrine is usually some version of a middle way, somewhere between the extremes of either wealth or poverty. However, material expression of Buddhist identity in the modern consumerist world can easily become excessive. Other than in the language used to rationalize it, personal consumption of Buddhist tokens, or merit-making through giving to monks and temples (to note two common examples), can be indistinguishable on the surface from conspicuous consumption in more mundane spheres of consumers' lives. The book focuses largely on waste from this sort of conspicuous consumption, and frequently examines environmental consequences.

This is important in the broader sustainability discussion, but environment is only one of the three pillars of sustainability, which also includes social and economic aspects (Clune and Zehnder). The three-pillar framework essentially conceptualizes the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs (Dalampira and Nastis): "The 17 SDGs are integrated—they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability" ("The SDGs in Action"). One mild criticism might be that only a few chapters touch on broader implications beyond purely environmental matters. Integration should be a familiar concept, even if not in sustainability language. This is interconnectedness, fundamental doctrine in most traditions, and frequently cited in discussing economics, as in Payutto's early work, in which he prescribes that "Buddhist economics would investigate how a given economic activity affects the three interconnected spheres of human existence: the individual, society, and nature or the environment" (9).

We should note, however, that scholarly research in management areas is often similarly weak on such integration. For example, nearly 80 percent of 331 articles from 2000 to 2021 in a recent Scopus search on sustainable branding discussed only one pillar, usually either environmental or social. Only 2 percent of the articles discussed all three. Proportions did not change for just the most recent five years (Chavalittumrong and Speece 4). We stress sustainability here to encourage cross-field collaboration on many issues common to both. And, there is something to be said for thoroughly understanding specific issues in one pillar first, and then working out the interconnections. This book excels at highlighting several largely unrecognized perspectives on waste and environmental impact.

Brox introduces several chapters dealing with conspicuous consumption of goods associated with Buddhist identity. This may waste resources through using far more than are actually needed, diverting attention away from possibly more useful allocations. Material goods can also break or deteriorate physically, and they can lose spiritual potency. Generational shift even plays a role. Material manifestations of spirituality may not mean much to later generations, whose values, or way of expressing those values, can change. Disposal is often on different terms from mundane waste, needing some ritual elements, and not always consistent with the goal of reducing environmental pressure.

Jane Caple's chapter on Buddhist excess and waste in Tibet tackles this conspicuous consumption. When China loosened up its fairly heavy-handed control after 1978, material expression of Buddhist identity reemerged strongly. Debate about excessive materialization of giving to temples and monks also reemerged. Conspicuous consumption proclaiming Buddhist identity is also found in regions other than Tibet (e.g., Thailand; Scott). Most Buddhist societies face such issues regarding the "symbolic economy" (e.g., again, Thailand; Askew). Caple's description will be familiar to those with experience in other Buddhist contexts. To those without such experience, this chapter (and many following ones) is a good case study as it is representative more widely.

Caple describes the moral issues in Tibetan debate about the conspicuous consumption ushered in by economic development after the extreme austerity of the chaotic Mao years. Many critics considered it highly wasteful, sometimes tying it explicitly to sustainability (though not in three-pillar terminology). Religious giving was actually just one example of this trend. With more freedom to express religious identity, consumption of religious goods became common, what Vitell et al. might call "extrinsic motivation," using religion to fulfil needs such as social relationships or personal comfort.

Those who still upheld Party doctrine felt it was wasteful to spend so much on mere religious symbolism rather than on improving basic living standards. Emerging capitalist sentiment offered very similar criticism, even if more oriented toward individual rather than collective living standards. These criticisms make sense in philosophies which devalue spirituality, but there are, of course, also very valid arguments for allocating at least some resources to supporting spirituality. Caple, however, is also clear that an important undercurrent of justification is not personal benefit at all, but to visibly assert Tibetan culture in the face of perceived Chinese efforts to eradicate it. This goal, by its nature, must be conspicuous.

The communist and capitalist critiques focus on misallocation of resources that could (to critics) be better used elsewhere. But conspicuous consumption also leads to actual physical waste. Some gifts are beyond what can actually be used and must be thrown away, such as vast oversupply of food for festivals. Excessive personal consumption of religious objects similarly leads to waste. Caple points out that reformist figures, including the Dalai Lama, have been trying to bring these issues into balance. The basic practices are not seen as inherently wasteful, but become so when excessive. Essentially, such reformists seem to be aiming at strengthening a middle-way mentality.

Hannah Gould's chapter on minimalism in Buddhist art starts with a story about the opposite of overvaluing material goods. She cites a Zen

kōan about a traveling Zen (Ch'an) Master (Jap. *Tanka Tennen*, Chin. *Tanhsia T'ien-jan*) during the Tang Dynasty. On a cold stormy night, he stopped in a temple and built a fire with a wooden Buddha statue to warm up. The Abbot was outraged, but Tanka essentially pointed out that a wooden statue is a material good with no inherent value. (There are other stories about the seemingly irreverent Tanka—and many Zen *kōans* pointing out the folly of purely conventional thinking.) No less a modern authority than D. T. Suzuki affirms Tanka's view. However, he then also says that novices should not do this, but show Buddhist icons some respect. Suzuki seems to be saying, yes, but . . .—middle way.

Gould very usefully applies this to minimalism—"less is more" is not at all the same as "nothing is more." Minimalism (as Buddhism), has a "middle path" between asceticism and "over-the-top" consumerism (59): it is engaged with the material world but sees little value, and lots of downside, in excessive material possessions. She usefully notes that other religions have their own minimalist currents, and that the concept also has some nonreligious roots. But there is a good case that Zen has had major influence, providing a prominent, long-established philosophical foundation for minimalism with a Japanese flavor.

Gould shows how currents of modern Zen have helped shape Japanese minimalist thinking. This includes mindfulness about the purpose of material possessions and cultivating nonattachment, especially to objects which simply clutter up the physical and mental landscape for little useful purpose. One needs sufficient possessions to lead a reasonably comfortable life, both materially and emotionally, but beyond that, there is little need for more. This orientation is widely familiar in Buddhism, as, for example, in Thai concepts of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Song). Zen's impact beyond Japan, however, is often (not always) indirect in this sphere, through the spread of Japanese minimalism widely among people who may not even be aware of the Zen foundations.

Long-practiced minimalism produces relatively little waste, but the process of decluttering to achieve a minimalist lifestyle can produce a lot. Rituals can absolve one of guilt for discarding things that once had meaning, but there is often little mental connection to what happens once physical goods become simply trash. Gould points out that another prominent Japanese movement, *mottainai*, also with some Zen roots, has fairly strong concern for what happens to discarded objects, with strong orientation toward actions like reuse, repurposing, and repair. But it has a relatively small role in Japanese minimalism. Mindfulness may be prominent, but it aims more toward understanding the need and methods for reducing attachment to excessive material possessions than about carefully considering sustainability impacts.

One might be forgiven for an impression that this minimalism somewhat cherry-picks aspects of Buddhism. Many Buddhist currents (including Zen) have a strong sustainability orientation (Cheng; Vu), without neglecting the importance of personal mental development. The sustainability literature itself typically connects mindfulness to awareness of impact on one or more of the three pillars of sustainability (Fischer et al.; Wamsler et al.). However, in this version of minimalism, it is hard to see mindfulness extending beyond one's (conventional) self into recognition of the fundamental interconnections among individual, society, and environment common in more strongly sustainability-oriented Buddhist thinking (Speece).

Jeff Wilson's "Afterlives of Butsudan" (Buddhist alters) examines what happens to sacred objects when they are no longer needed in North American ethnic Japanese communities. Butsudan have been a feature in Japanese culture for centuries, serving multiple religious and social functions. Japanese migrants to Hawaiʻi and then beyond incorporated Butsudan into their households once they became established enough to afford them. In addition to functions they fulfilled in Japan, they also helped reinforce a sense of Japanese cultural identity. Nowadays, however, after several generations in North America, many ethnic Japanese may no

longer follow traditional Japanese Buddhist practice (even if they remain Buddhist), or may not have room in their homes for a prominent display. The Butsudan are still seen as deserving respect and cannot simply become trash to throw out.

As a sort of "sacred waste," household disposal often consists of giving it to the temple. This transfer of responsibility is a religious service temples feel they must offer, even if they face storage constraints and must dispose of it themselves. They have multiple ways of handling Butsudan, including storage until space constraints become serious. Burning is probably the most ritually acceptable way of disposal, but in some jurisdictions (notably California), much burning is now banned as a precaution against wildfires. Even when not, the lacquers and plastics in many Butsudan may present air quality hazards. A last resort for some temples is to simply throw them out, usually covertly. Wilson uses Butsudan as a window into understanding the evolution of Japanese Buddhism in North America, showing that spiritual material culture can produce "sacred waste." From a sustainability viewpoint, this is a valuable discussion indicating that "waste" cannot always simply be treated as disposable trash.

Fabio Gygi's chapter on "The Great Heisei Doll Massacre" takes this issue beyond purely Buddhist sacred objects. Dolls have acquired somewhat elevated symbolic status in contemporary Japan, probably more from industry promotion than from any Buddhist tradition. Doll disposal ritual has adopted Buddhist elements nevertheless; and many temples (as well as Shinto shrines) cooperate to bring some religious ideas to people who otherwise might not pay much attention. Symbolically, the disposal ritual returns the dolls to the realm of the purely material, after they have been thanked for their good service to the people who owned them.

Traditionally, the dolls were burnt. Modern practice usually substitutes paper representation so that burning materials such as plastics does not contribute to air pollution. The dolls are usually secretly crushed to go into landfill. The former owners can claim (willful) ignorance of this

more-or-less publicly-known secret, to lessen any mental distress at parting with a formerly valued object. One very useful theme here is that rituals and symbolic understanding can go well beyond purely religious considerations. Ethnography is quite familiar with such issues, which are widely present in many societies in some form. This, of course, suggests that discussion about how to deal with waste in the sustainability literature needs to be broadened—there is very definitely an emotional side to this, which, in Japan, Buddhism (and Shinto) has been able to address.

Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa's chapter on "Reincarnating Sacred Objects" examines involvement of Buddhism in recycling, noting in the beginning that this is quite common throughout the Buddhist world. Recycling is not an entirely new form of engagement responding to modern environmental pressures. Much of the Seven-R framework of sustainable supply chain management (reduce, reuse, recycle, restyle, rewear, redesign, and reimagine; e.g., Henninger et al.) has long been present in Himalayan Buddhist cultures. However, concerns about environmental impacts were usually not the most prominent motivation in earlier times. Sacred objects possess a certain power that does not necessarily dissipate when the object gets old or breaks. Its power can be revived, or the object can be incorporated into new objects to contribute to their power.

Holmes-Tagchungdarpa examines the whole process from the birth of sacred objects to stages throughout their lives. They may never actually die, because they retain residual power which should be reused. This is not just continued use of old, physically worn-out objects. Such objects can also be integrated into new sacred objects and are perceived through the Buddhist concept of rebirth, where the essence continues in a new life. This is strikingly similar to what a product development manager told us in our own recent work on sustainability management in the Thai consumer durables industry: "I think sustainable products are the ones that can be reborn. They can continuously be used and circulated. In other words, they are immortal" (quote from a manager interview in Chavalittumrong and Speece 9). The chapter contains a wealth of detail

about how to ensure that sacred power is not lost, but the manager quote demonstrates that this rebirth concept has relevance far outside this specific context of Tibetan Buddhist ritual.

The chapter also notes that Tibetan Buddhism is in the process of solving some incompatibilities between recycling the power of sacred objects and recycling the physical resources. Often there is no contradiction, but recycling/reincorporation to preserve their power can require extensive resource usage, which may conflict with modern environmental needs. Sometimes the "recycling" works through burning the physical object, which eliminates spiritual pollution and allows the purified residual power to spread widely as the smoke dissipates. This, of course, could be air pollution to more secular thinking. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa notes that even some within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition have argued that some practices need to be updated to avoid these contradictions, but does not go into much detail about how such conversations are progressing.

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko's chapter on "Zombie Rubbish and Mummy Materiality" goes further in examining modern environmental concerns. The issue was not very acute in traditional Mongolian culture, but modern mass production using non- or very slowly degradable materials (notably plastics) has exacerbated the problem. Their sacred character gives old objects sort of an undead zombie existence—neither fully dead nor fully alive. Initially scanning the list of chapters, the title of this one sounded to me a little silly. It is not: the metaphor is quite effective for clarifying the concepts to readers somewhat familiar with these film genres. Abrahms-Kavunenko goes quite a way in demonstrating how this translates into the broader world of the physical environment.

Undead zombies may be dangerous, but they have no supernatural powers. They can be dealt with on an individual level fairly easily, but great masses of zombies are a major problem. However problematic an ordinary piece of nondegradable (i.e., undead) plastic trash may be, the

serious problems come from their widespread mass accumulation. A sacred object, on the other hand, can potentially reanimate as a mummy, which can be problematic individually. (There even exist actual, literal mummified remains of lamas who were highly advanced spiritually.) Without careful handling, an undead mummy has some access to the residual power of the sacred object, and may not always use it beneficially (not an issue, of course, with actual mummies of advanced lamas). But the bigger problem is the burden that any mummies (literal or not) place on people to properly care for them. (Think radioactive waste for a more mundane example.) Resources needed for this care have environmental impact, and they divert efforts away from what some critics see as more important sustainability efforts.

Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg starts her discussion on Green vs. Brown Buddhism by describing a growing problem in the material world: increasing trash from both foreign and domestic tourism in Ladakh, as well as from increasingly mass-consumerist local lifestyles. This Brown is mostly trash of the mundane type, and Buddhist organizations are very active in working to reduce the problem. Green Buddhism in Ladakh, such as massive tree-planting campaigns, often gets attention in the international press. By contrast, however critical the problem, stinky Brown waste does not. It is not an aesthetically pleasing topic to international readers. Moreover, a lot of that stinky Brown waste comes from Buddhists, and some activities producing it turns it into marginally sacred waste, which is even more problematic. This is somewhat of a paradox, requiring examination of the common perception that Buddhism is more doctrinally aligned to environmentalism than many other major religions. Some modern engaged Buddhism may result more from aligning to current socioeconomic trends, rather than doctrine.

On the other hand, religious authorities have been skilled at tying both Green and Brown environmentalism to key doctrinal issues, and also at tying Brown activities—activities that aim at reducing ecological degradation—specifically to improving the natural environment, so that it

becomes an aspect of the more pleasing Green. They have also been skilled at attracting international support to help fund larger-scale efforts than purely local volunteerism can support. Many initiatives have included ecotourism activities. These things directly connect the environmental pillar of sustainability to the social and economic pillars, by providing local employment both for environmental cleanup and for a sustainable version of the tourist industry (e.g., K.C. et al.).

Williams-Oerberg also usefully notes that some aspects of Green and Brown can be in conflict. Such contradictions are a common problem in sustainability (Haffar and Searcy). For example, Ladakh lies in a high-altitude cold, arid zone, and most water for farming and family use depends on snowmelt. Many Green-initiative saplings do not survive, and even when they do, they require water that may be needed elsewhere. Locals know this, but note that prominent tree-planting campaigns attract sympathy and international financial support for Green. Brown initiatives, not so much. Worse, there is also a separate segment of Buddhist-oriented tourism, which generates its own Brown waste but is not well connected to ecotourism. Rising living standards also generate more waste as families devote more resources to Buddhist goods. So, Buddhist initiatives help clean up Brown waste, but do not give much attention to the fact that Buddhism helps create much of it.

This review closes with a strong recommendation that people involved in sustainability read this book. The material is interesting enough to readers with any inclination toward understanding different cultures around the world. But those working toward sustainability absolutely must be familiar with the kinds of issues covered here. Personally, though I have some Buddhist Studies background, I approached reading this book from my management perspective and was pleasantly surprised at how relevant it is. It will take a little work for those not versed in Buddhist Studies to translate into more familiar language. One small criticism might be that more should be done to tie this work in with the modern

discussion of sustainability. Only a few chapters explicitly note some of the sustainability debate, and they do so briefly.

However, one cannot really fault any of these authors specifically; unfortunately, silo-ization is rampant in academia. The authors here are better than most at presenting their work to a broader audience of individuals/scholars even slightly receptive to thinking outside their own silos. We noted initially that sustainable consumption is not purely about technical or logistical issues. Understanding religious beliefs and local cultures is essential (Minton et al.), including for dealing specifically with waste problems. Religion and culture themselves are just a subset of a whole range of psychological topics that can have an impact on sustainability (Gurel-Atay et al.). The chapter on dolls, not usually considered religious objects, demonstrates that such psychological concepts transfer well beyond religion. With my Buddhist Studies hat on, I recommend this book as a fun look at the intricacies of lived religion (rather than doctrine; Schedneck) related to sustainable consumption in a number of Buddhist societies. From my affiliation with an institute researching sustainability in a Thai management school, the operative word is not fun, but rather, essential. Fostering a more sustainable world absolutely requires understanding how to work with diverse religious and cultural values. This book demonstrates excellently how such elements can impact sustainability.

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