

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

*Review of Mindfulness in the Marketplace:  
Compassionate Response to Consumerism*

*Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Response to Consumerism.*

Allen Badiner (ed.), Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2002. 264 pages. ISBN

1888375248 (paperback).

Reviewed by Eric Sean Nelson

Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy

University of Toledo

esnel@yahoo.com

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: d.keown@gold.ac.uk

In a world facing increasing environmental degradation and decreasing quality of life, even as the availability and quantity of goods and services expands at an incredible pace in privileged regions, does a way of life and thought originating in an obscure region of India around 2500 years ago—and advocating spiritual awakening, peace, and compassion towards all—have anything to say to us in our current need?

The thirty-five essays gathered in this excellent and insightful volume, of which I can only discuss a few, address some of the ways in which Buddhism (traditional and western, contemplative and engaged) is relevant to the analysis of our deeply rooted problems. Buddhism is one of our remaining hopes and resources in developing an appropriate response to mindless consumption by confronting it with mindful compassion. What these papers share across different traditions, interpretations, and cultures, is a belief in the power of generosity to make a difference.

As Allen Badiner points out in his introduction, Buddhism does not simply criticize or provide an oblivious escape from consumerism. Instead it shows individuals and communities how their choices and actions matter in a context dominated by the logic of production and consumption. Encouraging this recognition is accordingly the purpose of the volume. Since Buddhism calls us to recognize the interdependence of things and avoid doing harm, whether through action or inaction, economics informed by Buddhism means the achievement of appropriate ends through minimal and least destructive means. Thus, a number of these essays show how Buddhism can be relevant to economics and ecology precisely because of its minimalism. It is this minimalism which makes Buddhism such a powerful response to the maximalism that directs contemporary life.

Since the social, spiritual, and natural costs of profit and consumption can be stunningly high, this volume challenges its readers to consider whether ‘being less’ can be solved by ‘having more’ or whether we can ‘be more by having less’. Moderation of desire might just lead to greater happiness and well-being than the endless and endlessly dissatisfied pursuit of desire.

Judith Brown shows that the Buddha’s original insight into desire and suffering is precisely the one that we need to heed today: “we want, therefore we consume; we want, therefore we suffer” (4). Want cannot be satisfied if it is not fulfilled, and it is not fulfilled if there is always more to want. Since desire is without end, the pursuit of desire can lead not only to individual unhappiness but to a devastated world. Buddhism in general and western Buddhism in particular, because of the social context, is thus called to serve the world rather than itself by placing into question this destructive cycle. It can do so precisely by unfolding and applying its insights into the nature of desire and consumption that dominate modern life. However, according to Brown, this analysis offered by Buddhism has to be applied to itself as well, since Buddhism too can and has become a commodity and object of more subtle psychological and spiritual forms of materialism. The implication is that Buddhism is in this sense intrinsically self-deconstructing, since it challenges its own reification and places our own practices into question such that we have to place ourselves at risk through the practice of compassion and generosity.

The dangers of Buddhism being reduced to another commodity are also discussed by L.D. Ness, who argues for making the western more Buddhist rather than westernizing Buddhism in order to address the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Stephen

Prothero articulates the ways in which “baby-boomer Buddhism” has more to do with consumerism and commodity-fetishism, and indeed with a postcolonial construct of the “east” that says more about the “west” than about Buddhism itself. This trade subverts Buddhism by selling it as another banal product of an empty and superficial American spirituality, long transformed by the quest for wealth and power. Although this danger is real, it should also be noted that Buddhism has flourished by having the appropriate and skillful means adopted that lead to taking into account its time and place. The migration of Buddhism in Asia also shows periods of popular appeal and superficial devotion. More importantly, misunderstandings and banalities are part of the initial exposure and developing encounter that transmission across cultures necessarily involves. Buddhism became most firmly entrenched in Asia in cultures that were able to appropriate it and transform it without losing its core. It is equally important to check the old with the living experience as it is the new with the content of what is being transmitted.

The importance of generosity, of how one responds to one’s own self-interest given the priority that one should give to the interest of the other, is explored in further detail in a significant essay by Stephen Batchelor. He analyzes consumerism from the perspective of the ideal social value of the four brahmavihāra qualities of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (63-64). Sulak Sivaraksa also finds alternatives to consumerism in the brahmavihāra (four sublime abodes) in relation to the four dhammas of sharing, sincere speech, constructive action, and equality. These moral insights provide a basis and motivation for the efforts of socially engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism might sound strange to those who interpret Buddhism as merely contemplative, as Gnostic or nihilistic. Yet its activism and critique of destructive social institutions and practices are deeply rooted in the Buddhist ideal of compassion.

For Fritjof Capra, the obstacles to environmental sustainability are no longer conceptual or technical but moral-political, especially due to deeply rooted patriarchal values. Helene Norberg-Hodge distinguishes between local orientations, which make explicit human interdependence with nature, and globalized economies, which destroy local diversity through increasing homogenous consumption. The claim to universality and the isolated abstract individual presupposed by such economics constitutes a denial of interdependence and impermanence. Thus, cultural and religious violence, as well as growing dependence without true inter-dependence, are the ironic consequences of globalization itself. As recent developments, they are not fixed elements of human nature but human attitudes about nature that have been cultivated and institutionalized. The solution lies in the turn towards economies of scale which would restore the value of the small and the local. Riane Eisler accordingly focuses on the importance of care-giving values and partnership in opposition to models of hierarchical control. Both essays, along with others, emphasize the possibility of reforming psychological attitudes and economic practices on the basis of Buddhist commitments.

Shinichi Inoue explicates the constructive influence that Buddhism has had on Japanese economic policies and practices. Instead of valorizing or demonizing money, his paper proposes a middle way which emphasizes the compatibility of sustainability, growth, and general well-being. Buddhism does not condemn production or consumption but rather pays close attention to how these are experienced. Thus, he suggests benefiting oneself and others through recognizing the truth of human interdependence and the value of coopera-

tion. Like a number of authors in this volume, he contends that Buddhism brings profit and consumption under moral guidance, thus cultivating desire in such a way as to affirm others and the environment. Duncan Williams also considers how Buddhism is not against making money but is concerned with how people do so and with the question of right livelihood—i.e., one based on the interests of others. The fact that this volume includes papers (such as the last two mentioned) that argue for morally informed profit and consumption as well as some that favor a more radical critique—one which includes both Buddhism itself as a commodity and the role that Buddhism plays in perpetuating some social, political, and economic practices—indicates that this remains a significant issue for Buddhist ethics.

Thich Nhat Hanh's moving contribution recalls the Buddha's Discourse of the Son's Flesh and his analysis of the consumption of the three nutriments: edible food, sensory impressions, and volitions. How one eats (additional papers by Hanh and Kate Lawrence develop the question of diet and how others are effected by what we eat), experiences, and desires make one what one is, and Hanh powerfully explores the destructiveness of the mass production of animals (and how this consumption is self-consumption), the transformation of our senses through technology, media, and entertainment as well as desire through craving and hatred. Although some claim the right to infinite vengeance and punishment after 9/11, he reminds us that such visions consume those who have them. He advocates looking more deeply into ourselves in order to achieve some salutary lucidity and compassion. In the end, he concludes, it is peace that heals.

This call for peace is naïve idealism unless we keep in mind the destructive consequences of violence—no matter how well justified—and the active engagement and hardship that peace requires. In his insightful essay on poverty and the problem of wealth, David Loy addresses this question of naïve idealism. He asks us to consider whether it is naïve to address the concrete sources of human suffering and well-being, as Buddhism does in a rigorous and detailed way, or to behave according to an ideal image of human nature under the illusion of infinitely satisfied desires and endless resources?

According to the Ven. P.A. Payutto, the Buddhist canon distinguishes two kinds of desire: *taphā* and *chanda*. *Taphā* is desire directed at self-interest based on ignorance. *Chanda* is desire directed at true benefit and well-being based on reflection. There are accordingly two kinds of value, artificial and true, and the latter one needs to be cultivated through the practice of cooperation, appropriate consumption, and moderation. Challenging some deeply held prejudices, Payutto concludes that non- and under- consumption and production have to be part of the answer in achieving social and individual contentment.

Jonathan Watts and David Loy critique from a Buddhist perspective the religion of consumption that dominates contemporary life. This ascendancy extends to the world religions, which seem mostly powerless in the face of consumerism and their own commodification, including mainstream Buddhism itself. Like other forms of spirituality, Buddhism has been co-opted and integrated into the global market such that meaningful change is extremely difficult. Bo Lozoff presents a number of the reasons why such change is necessary nevertheless by exploring the impact of consumerism on the well-being of children. David Edwards provides the philosophical basis for this concern by adopting the classic Buddhist argument that the happiness of one cannot be successfully built on the suffering of others but only on the consideration of the happiness of all (115), while Elizabeth Thoman engages the disastrous consequences of the ideology of the American dream for

our individual, natural, and social well-being. She advocates undertaking small actions such as cultivating greater media awareness. This would help check the flow of images in order to step out of the Matrix-like cave and into the light.

A number of the papers in this volume, such as his holiness the Dalai Lama's, articulate the need for greater awareness and ethical responsibility. Others show how Buddhism has (e.g., Joanne Macy's provocative exploration of the Sarvodaya self-empowerment movement in Sri Lanka), or can (e.g., Santikaro Bhikkhu's discussion of using the moral codes of the Vinaya as a model for ethical change) potentially reform ecological and economic practices. Whereas some authors propose an approach that emphasizes social-political change, others focus on the work of moral and spiritual self-transformation. Ultimately, this volume shows that both are needed. The responses of traditional and engaged Buddhism can thus complement each other even in their tension.

The papers in this volume exhibit the rich texture of Buddhist thought and practice, drawing on its ancient heritage as well as contemporary insights in order to respond to some of humanity's deepest challenges. As such, it makes a valuable contribution to Buddhist ethics, engaged Buddhism, and questions of ecology and economy.