

## Penetrating the Tangle

*Stephanie Kaza*

GOING SHOPPING can be a perilous mental activity these days. As I wander through the department store, I am barraged not only by a daunting array of goods but also by virtually nonstop moralistic thoughts. A new bedspread—*you don't really need this, the old one's good enough*. A stylish dress—*why would a Zen person need this?* A stunning carpet—*was this made by enslaved children?* It goes on and on. The critical voices are all too familiar. As a professor of environmental studies, I am especially plagued by environmental critiques—*if it's not organic, it must be laced with toxic pesticides*. Or *Who knows how far this wood has been shipped and from what decimated forest?*

The koan of consumerism is vast and deep, a tangle within tangles, impossible to completely untangle. Part of the tangle is the resistance, the questioning mind, the nagging thoughts that add up to moral engagement. Sometimes I find myself paralyzed in the co-op, staring at the bounty on the shelves, lost in thoughts of fair trade, farmworkers, and food security. Critiques of consumerism are not new, but as the deluge of products becomes a flood, more and more voices are shouting their concerns.

Some of my own questions come from early training in self-sufficiency in the 1970s; others stem from painful exposure to increasing environmental assault on beloved forests. Still other critiques seem to be part of the

social fabric of being American—a puritanical righteousness, a stubborn resistance to corporate control. Can a Buddhist perspective shed any light on this mix of critiques? As in any mindfulness practice, it helps to be able to identify what is going on. *Resisting, resisting, judging, judging*—these activities of the mind are part of a much bigger historical pattern of moral response to consumerism.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologist Michael Schudson lists five traditional critiques, which provide a preliminary taxonomy of consumer resistance.<sup>2</sup> The first of these is the “Puritan” critique, referring to the early New England colonists who believed people should invest less meaning in material possessions and more meaning in religious pursuits. Puritans felt goods should serve practical human needs but should not be ends of desire themselves. Consumerist attitudes were thought to corrupt people, impairing their capacity for spiritual development.

The “Quaker” critique focuses more on the wasteful nature of the goods themselves. From this perspective, excessive choice and pointless proliferation of products is seen as extravagant and unnecessary. Planned obsolescence, as in the annual new models of cars and computers, is particularly objectionable. If goods cannot be made to endure, keeping the limited resources of the earth in mind, then they should not be made at all. The Quaker critique challenges a core value of consumerism—that more choice is good for consumers and good for the economy.

What Schudson calls the “republican” critique addresses the impact of consumerism on civic society as a whole. In this view a consumerist approach replaces public engagement in politics with private involvement in personal goods. It also shifts a person’s identity away from work (what one does) and toward lifestyle (what one owns), promoting individual pleasure over social justice. Historically, the increasing orientation to consumerism has turned people away from social activity. “People abandoned the town square for the front porch, and then later the front porch for the backyard or the television room.”<sup>3</sup> This trend is corroborated in the *State of the World 2004* report with studies showing that overall social health has declined in the United States in the last thirty years despite higher levels of consumption.<sup>4</sup>

The “Marxist,” or socialist, critique objects primarily to the exploitation of workers in the capitalist economic system. The production of a common cotton T-shirt, for example, means farmworkers are exposed to intensive

toxic pesticides and garment workers in sweatshops work long hours for low wages. From the Marxist perspective, consumerism can also be seen as a distraction or opiate, leading workers to seek satisfaction in goods rather than improve the abusive profit-driven workplace. The last of Schudson's list, the "aristocratic" critique, focuses more attention on aesthetics, attacking mass-produced goods as ugly. That which is rare or exclusive holds the greatest value, thus generating a classist sense of privilege.

Perhaps the strongest critique of consumerism today is being mounted by environmentalists. Thirty years ago concerns about population growth and the earth's limited resources were the primary topics of environmental debate. But since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the global South has made it clear that the wasteful consumption of the North is of equal concern. It points out that the North is generating far more significant ecological damage with its high use of water, oil, minerals, and timber. Some have described this as casting an "ecological shadow" on the middle-income and poor classes who bear the burden of the hidden economic and moral costs to the environment. Environmentalists point to industrial nations' oversized ecological footprint. This is the land necessary to sustain current levels of resource consumption and waste discharge. The average American has a thirty-acre footprint—if everyone lived like this, we would need five more planets to support human existence. Though world population may level off by midcentury, environmentalists are concerned that consumption will only keep growing as more and more of the world's population enters the consumer class.<sup>5</sup>

### BUDDHIST CRITIQUES

What can Buddhism contribute to these critiques of consumerism? Are Buddhist critiques simply a variation on the commonly expressed critiques above? Or can Buddhism offer a new approach that is helpful in today's galloping rush to consume the planet? Reflecting on this from my own perspective as a Zen student committed to environmentalism, I believe Buddhism offers something distinctive and very useful. As a new religion in the West with growing popularity, Buddhism holds the potential for not only challenging global consumerism but also for offering a practice path to liberation through the very thick of the tangle.

Sorting through my own questioning voices, I find three critiques that clearly derive from a Buddhist orientation.<sup>6</sup> The first critique focuses on the role of consumerism in the process of personal identity formation. The usual idea of self is seen as a significant delusion in Buddhist thought. Consumers in today's marketplace are urged to build a sense of self around what they buy. Consumer goods are symbols of status, political or religious views, social group, sexuality—all of which solidify a sense of self. "I am what I have" has become the operative slogan, using shopping to define identity. Advertising aggressively promotes self-involvement, playing on people's needs for security and happiness. When self-identity depends on products, the need for social acceptance can fuel addictions to brand names, to styles, and even to shopping itself. Consumerism can actually have a negative effect on self-identity, preventing the mind from engaging in more positive life-affirming activity.

From a Buddhist perspective, ego-based views of self are fundamentally mistaken, promoting ignorance and suffering. Deep identification with the separate self as autonomous and fixed prevents us from experiencing the world as relational and co-creative, always in dynamic flux. Material accumulation strongly reinforces this mistaken view. The more we relate to material objects as real and permanent, the more deeply we tend to think of ourselves as a fixed self with specific identity. More attachment, more need for consumer goods to prop up our identity. Or you could take the (false) position that *nothing* is real or permanent. If nothing is real, then nothing matters, so why not indulge in whatever momentary pleasure you like? With this logic you can successfully avoid engaging the actual relationships of the world that shape and condition your life. If nothing matters, why be concerned about the suffering behind consumer products?

A second Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes, rationalizes, and condones harming. The foundational principle behind all Buddhist ethics is nonharming, or *ahimsa*, expressed as the first of the five precepts: "do not kill," or "do no harm." Monks were taught not to destroy "the life of any living being down to a worm or an ant."<sup>7</sup> This precept reflects the Buddhist understanding of interdependence—that the flourishing of life is a complex and ever-changing web of relationality. Killing or harming another being in the web has serious consequences, especially if you do so with the intention to harm. Such an act would show obvious disregard for the true nature of reality.

### *Penetrating the Tangle*

While consumer good manufacturers may not intentionally choose to cause harm, their actions nonetheless often leave death and injury in their wake. In some cases the choice is deliberate—to clear-cut forests, to pollute waterways, to abuse workers on the production line. Producers justify tremendous harm to many forms of life to meet the bottom line of profit and gain. Slavery is not uncommon even today.<sup>8</sup> Harmful actions produce negative karma, leading to lower rebirths and increased suffering, while minimizing harm leads to positive karma and less suffering for self and others.

Perhaps the strongest Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes desire and dissatisfaction, the very source of suffering, as explained in the Four Noble Truths. The state of dissatisfaction—clinging, craving, impulse, thirst, attachment, compulsion—could not be more opposite to contentment and equanimity. Craving in its most fundamental sense is the desire for existence. Just to want to exist or be alive is a basic biological drive. Often identified in terms of karma and rebirth, craving is the “thirst that gives rise to repeated existence.” Marketers play on this strategically, stimulating this desire to be alive through delicious foods, powerful cars, and exotic vacations. Craving also includes aversion, the desire for *nonexistence*. In this case one craves relief or escape from what is unpleasant or undesirable—mosquitoes, for example, or a heat wave or maybe just bad body odor. Marketers take advantage of this too, offering a parade of products that profess to relieve almost any form of human suffering.

Early Buddhist teachings describe the results of desire in terms of four types of clinging or attachment.<sup>9</sup> The first is clinging to sensing and sense objects. Graphic examples are consumer addictions such as tobacco or alcohol and their attendant sensory pleasures. The second is clinging to views and values that reinforce a sense of self. The desire to promote one's views or sense of what is “right” can afflict consumers (as well as their critics). The third result of desire is clinging to actions. Attachment can develop around behaviors necessary to support consumer values. Choosing what to wear, what and what not to eat, and who to please all become part of the consumer's identity, carefully analyzed by market specialists. The fourth, self-clinging, means literally clinging to one's own sense of identity as subjectively experienced. This is the attempt to bridge the sense of fragmentation that arises from experiencing things as separate. Paradoxically, identity building exacerbates the gap it is trying to eliminate and thus can never bring satisfaction.

## Practicing with Desire

Of the three Buddhist critiques, we can see that some overlap with traditional critiques yet also offer distinctive contributions to this discussion. The Buddhist critique that consumerism promotes a false sense of self might parallel the Puritan critique of material goods as distractions from spiritual development. The Buddhist concern for nonharming would reinforce the Marxist critique regarding worker exploitation. But the Buddhist focus on desire in promoting an endless cycle of suffering may be the most penetrating critique. Awakening or enlightenment rests on realizing the all-pervasive nature of this existence-based drive. Taking up the study of desire in the form of consumerism offers an endless field for spiritual practice. With the structure of this critique firmly in mind, the consumer beset by desire can plunge into the tangle, seeking insight in the midst of confusion.

## BUDDHIST METHODS FOR LIBERATION

What, then, are some useful liberative methods to relieve the suffering of consumerism? Taking consumerism as the context, we can look to traditional methods of insight and practice for cultivating enlightenment. Here I offer one approach for each Buddhist critique of consumerism. The first provides exposure to the process of identity formation; the second offers guidelines for nonharming; and the third describes the specific links that perpetuate desire.

### *Exposing Identity Formation*

The first Buddhist critique points out that the problem with consumerism is its constant reinforcement of ego identity. Misunderstanding the self as either fixed or insubstantial misses the empty nature of self. This is almost impossible to grasp through armchair reflection. You need a more vigorous method to challenge the false views of the consumer self.

In Dogen's well-known verse from the *Genjokoan*, we find one approach to dismantling these false views:

*To study the Buddha way is to study the self  
To study the self is to forget the self*

*Penetrating the Tangle*

*To forget the self is to be confirmed by the myriad things  
To be confirmed by the myriad things is to drop off  
body and mind of self and others.<sup>10</sup>*

Zen priest Shohaku Okumura explains that the original Japanese word for “study” in Dogen’s text was *narau*. This derives from *nareru*, which means “to become familiar or intimate with.”<sup>11</sup> Dogen approaches this in the biggest sense—studying one’s mind, body, sense organs, speech, and social relations as deeply conditioned by self-centered needs. Studying and forgetting the self, in Dogen’s view, is fundamental to becoming authentically human.

How does one study the consumer-constructed self? Suppose I really love drinking tea. (I do.) I can study how my self is constructed around drinking tea. I can observe my preferences for a certain brand or tea shop. I can study my pleasure: What delights me about the act of drinking tea? Is it the flavors, the stimulation, the social company? (All of the above.) I can study my memories of drinking tea and see how they add up to a specific subjective identity as a tea drinker conditioned over time.

Looking closely at any one of these aspects of my self as a consumer of tea, I see how dependent my idea of self is on conditions outside my “self.” Time of day, quality of tea, source of the water, mind of the tea preparer—all of these contribute to my experience of tea. There is no such thing as my separate self enjoying the separate tea. It is all happening at once. Observing the endlessly connected web of tea conditions and relations, I go beyond the small self. I see myself as part of the co-creating universe, my inflated self-identity as tea drinker busted. The delusion crumbles.

“Self and all others are working together. The working done by self and all others are called our actions.”<sup>12</sup> Okumura points out that we think “we” are “driving” a “car.” But actually the “car” is “driving” “us.” The car we drive is being driven by the oil economy, its parts produced across the globe. Our driving is the action of highway builders, car designers, city planners, and congressional policy makers. All these beings contribute to our existence, poking us to let go of confused views of a separate self.

But how is this “dropping off body and mind?” Dogen’s teacher Nyojo said, “Dropping off body and mind is zazen. When we just practice zazen, we part from the five desires and get rid of the five coverings.”<sup>13</sup> The five desires come from contact with the five sense organs, generating a false

### Practicing with Desire

sense of self that is attached to the pleasures or aversions we experience with our senses. The five coverings are the hindrances of greed, anger, sleepiness, distraction, and doubt that keep our minds from functioning in a healthy way. Discarding sensory attachment and hindrances is one path to deflating the consumer self. Studying deeply the myriad aspects of my consumer identity, I see into the delusion of self as consumer, of self as anything separate from anything else.

The insights from studying one type of attachment can be applied from one context of consumerism to another. Studying my self as tea drinker gives me practice experience to study my self as consumer and producer of knowledge, for example. (I am quite attached to my books.) Seeing how self-construction works, I am less gullible to the consumer industry and its endless hooks (including the hooks of books). I can check my psychological conditioning as I lean toward various book purchases. But this self-examination is not in itself the experience of enlightenment. Zazen provides a deeper ground for awakening to the actual experience of the selfless state. This more profound level of insight only strengthens your capacity for seeing through the lures of the consumer self.

### *Practicing Nonharming*

The second Buddhist critique of consumerism is that it promotes harming. This critique raises questions of right and wrong—how do you decide what is harmful in the realm of consumerism? The Buddhist texts on ethical behavior offer specific guidance in the form of the Five Precepts: not killing, not stealing, not abusing sexuality, not lying, and not using or selling intoxicants. The precepts represent practices of restraint, calling for personal responsibility for reducing environmental and human suffering. Taken together they indicate choices one can make to avoid harming others.

I will work primarily with the first precept here, though each precept can apply to aspects of consumerism. The first precept is the practice to abstain from “destroying, causing to be destroyed, or sanctioning the destruction of a living being.”<sup>14</sup> A living being is anything that has life, from a small insect to a complex forest. Clearly, every act of consuming raises the issue of harm—just to stay alive we have to eat food that has been killed or harvested. Accepting this paradox, we nonetheless can choose



*how much* harm we want to be responsible for. For example, many people practice vegetarianism because they don't support the harming of animals from industrial agriculture.<sup>15</sup> Others eat organic fruits and vegetables to reduce harm to soil from chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Some avoid fast food because of labor exploitation and human health impacts.

Consumer awareness movements are now promoting "chain of custody" verification that can document the source and treatment of material goods. Forest certification and green building are two arenas where knowledge of production processes have given consumers the option to choose more ethically produced goods. Buying locally often shortens the chain, making it easier to track harmful impacts. Under pressure from students and the Environmental Council, my campus at the University of Vermont is now including green building standards in new capital projects. Our neighboring campus at Middlebury College has used locally certified wood products throughout its new science building.

The precept of nonharming can also be stated as a positive commitment to practice metta, or lovingkindness. One version of the metta verse is:

*May all beings be free from enmity, affliction, and anxiety, and  
live happily.*

*May all breathing things, all who are born, all individuals of  
whatever kind be free from enmity, affliction, and anxiety—  
may they live happily.*<sup>16</sup>

Actively holding this wish for all beings makes it very difficult to participate in their harm. Quite the opposite—you want all beings to flourish and thrive and be free from the impacts of human excess. I think of the blunt checkerboard of clear-cut forests in my home state of Oregon: it has been so painful to witness the fragmentation of the Northwest forest. Offering the metta verse, I wish for kindness to these forests—may they be free from profiteering and politics, may they live happily.

Traditionally the precepts, including nonharming, have been oriented toward individual conduct; the Buddha did not offer a counterpart set of moral guidelines for institutions. Because social structures (governments, schools, churches, and so on) contribute to consumer-related harming, ethical guidelines for social structures would also be useful. Individuals and institutions influence each other. More conscious standards of restraint in

## Practicing with Desire

public arenas (such as no advertising in schools) can encourage greater personal practice of nonharming, and the reverse can also happen. This means holding social or institutional agents accountable for the impacts of their actions. By taking the initiative here, consumers could reclaim moral integrity that has been eroded by consumerist agendas. It is not necessary for one to have perfected moral practice before asking others to consider their own actions. The point of the precepts is to reduce suffering and to practice interrelationship rather than self-interest.

### *Breaking the Links of Desire*

The third Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes desire and dissatisfaction, the cause of suffering. A classic method for working with desire is the teaching of the *nidanas*, or causation. The Twelve Limbs (or Links) of Co-dependent Origination are sometimes portrayed as a wheel of becoming describing the process of reincarnation and rebirth.<sup>17</sup> But these can also be used to describe common patterns of causation that arise in each moment of desiring or grasping. Consumerism utterly depends on this process, reflecting its completely human nature.

The twelve links follow each other in order: ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness, name and form, six sense fields, contact, feelings, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, death, then on to ignorance, and the cycle continues. The pull of each link, based on the strong experience of the one that precedes it, is so powerful that we are continually in the grip of this metapattern. Release from this cycle of grasping and suffering is what the Buddha called nirvana. As consumerism is a never-ending field of desire, it offers an ideal platform for studying the twelve links.

We can start our study at any point in the cycle; for this discussion, let's begin with *craving*—for the latest Dalai Lama book, for instance. Craving is the experience of being hooked by an object, a thought, or a need and then yearning to grasp it. In the twelve-link cycle, craving depends upon *feelings* that arise following contact with objects in the sense fields. *I see the book, it feels good in the hand, the words feel good in my mind.* Feeling states in Buddhist psychology are categorized as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral/indifferent. It doesn't matter so much whether one is happy, afraid, tender, or irritated; for each feeling, one either wants to perpetuate it (usually the

*Penetrating the Tangle*

pleasant feelings) or get rid of it (usually the unpleasant feelings). Since feelings are impermanent, advertisers or sales agents continually restimulate potential buyers to keep pleasant and unpleasant feelings going. This is done by generating a barrage of *contact* points for the sense organs, such as colorful displays, flashing signs, tantalizing café aromas. The point of contact is where the object of perception (book), the sense organ (eye and hand), and the sense consciousness (sight perception) come together. The bookstore provides the object; I, as consumer, provide the already conditioned sense organs and consciousness. To slow the production of feeling states and the craving arising from feeling, we can reduce the points of shopping-related contact.

The six *sense fields* of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind include both perception and consciousness shaped over time by *name and form*. This is the material form of a being—that is, your body, including your physical sense organs. What you perceive through your sense fields is completely conditioned by your experience. How I read the Dalai Lama's book is conditioned by hearing him speak, seeing his picture, even the memory of meeting him once. Considering the power of the sense fields, I wonder about young children watching hours of television—does their consciousness become dominated by products and brand names?

Name and form are conditioned by previous experiences that mold *consciousness* and the material form it takes. Such conditioning is well documented for alcoholism and other addictions. Repeated use of alcohol changes people physiologically so they are more attracted to the states induced by alcohol. Apply this conditioning to other forms of excess consumption and you can extend the addictive cycle to luxury foods, designer clothing, and television serials. Advertisers do their best to capture teenage consumer consciousness by imprinting brand-name loyalties for cigarettes, beer, and hygiene products at an early age. Teen product companies even hire teen trendsetters, passing out free samples to establish brand loyalty. Resisting the slogans of consumerism becomes one way to break the conditioning that is being so aggressively promoted.<sup>18</sup> Culture-wide consumer consciousness eventually results in long-term *karmic formations*, which will require culture-wide attention to transform.

Turning back to craving, we can see how craving perpetuates the other limbs. In craving pleasant experiences, one grasps after their continuation; in craving the absence of unpleasant experiences, one grasps after their

cessation. These forms of grasping are especially strong where the ego or sense of "I" attaches to what is craved or avoided. Marketers are masterful at using human grasping to create specialty niches; even green consumers and dharma practitioners are now well-established market groups.<sup>19</sup> No one is immune from having his or her identity needs worked for profit. Breaking the energy in this part of the cycle is especially challenging. *Grasping* generates *becoming*: the more one grasps after consumer goods or values, the more one becomes a consumer, leading to "birth" of the self-identified ego that defines life primarily as consumption. Thus we have the phenomena of suburban "mall rats," Tupperware queens, and eBay treasure hunters.

Eventually, of course, the consumer must confront the twelfth limb—*death*—when the self can no longer be propped up by possessions. Fueled by *ignorance* of the nature of dependent origination (compounded by massive denial in consumer culture), karmic traces carry over from previous actions or lifetimes. Consider the alcoholic father who models the pattern of alcohol abuse to his son, or the shopaholic mother who fosters an appetite for fashion in her daughter. From generation to generation, consumer consciousness flourishes, feeding the cycle of causation driven by desire.

Observing the nature of co-dependent origination can provide a penetrating tool for analyzing consumerism. The cycle can also be studied in terms of cessation as well as origination. Breaking the driving energy from one link to the next slows down the desire-generating cycle. If you reduce contact with consumer stimulants such as television, your sense fields are less flooded with product messages. If you overcome a debilitating addiction, that craving has less impact on your consciousness. The point here is not that the cycle of causation can be brought to a halt, since beings keep taking form and are conditioned just by existing. But by applying mindfulness, one can observe the process and even learn to unhook from the craving. Each moment of consumption can thus be an opportunity for insight, tasting, if only in a small way, the freedom from grasping and dissatisfaction.

#### PRAGMATIC RELIEF

The Buddha told his followers that his teachings should offer pragmatic relief for their suffering. If they weren't useful in everyday life, then the teachings were not of value. It seems to me that Buddhist methods of working

*Penetrating the Tangle*

with consumerism offer very practical methods to address the suffering it generates. Consumerism is a dominant practice field of our times; if the Buddha's teachings have merit, they can be applied to untangle the complex web of all-consuming relations.

For me, this work is an ongoing personal experiment in resisting the invasion of consumer economics and consciousness. Does Buddhism help relieve the suffering of consumerism for me personally? The critiquing voices are never far away, but now I see them as wake-up calls, each one an opportunity for liberation. Hearing about slavery on cocoa plantations, I vow to practice nonharming and reduce my desire for chocolate. Reading about pesticides on strawberries, I vow to support my local organic farmers in the interdependent web. Studying the privilege that comes with first world status, I vow to study the twelve links that perpetuate global poverty.

Practicing deeply with consumerism may provide a very wide Dharma-gate to awakening. Endless desire, endless suffering, endless cycles of consuming. The tangle fills the whole universe—how far into the tangle can the Buddha eye see?