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shopping cart

**STEPHANIE KAZA** on buying, being, and becoming

A student of Zen for over thirty years, Stephanie Kaza has been strongly influenced by Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and environmental activist Joanna Macy. Since 1991 she has been a professor in the Environmental Program at the University of Vermont. Buddhist environmental thought and the role of activism in social change have been central both to her teaching there and to her writing.

Kaza's previous books include *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism* (2000, co-edited with Kenneth Kraft), a comprehensive collection of Buddhist writings on environmental themes, and *The Attentive Heart* (1993), meditative reflections on human relations with trees. Her most recent book, *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire,*

*and the Urge to Consume* (2005), is an anthology of provocative essays from dharma teachers and writers that explore Buddhist tools for engaging the challenges of modern consumerism.

In addition to her master's degrees in divinity and education, Stephanie Kaza holds a Ph.D. in biology. This scientific training is reflected in her "truth-seeking urge," and in the emphasis in *Hooked!* upon nonjudgmental clarity. At the same time, Kaza's lifelong devotion to music and her practice of lyrical nature writing complement her scholarly rigor. They express a belief in the power of imagination, and a conviction that "you can invent something new if you need it."

I spoke with Kaza last January over tea in my living room in Bristol, Vermont.

—JOHN ELDER

**How would you define consumerism?** In a practical sense, consumerism is a belief system and culture that promotes consuming as the path to self- and social improvement. It's a complete political and economic ideology, sponsored by sophisticated marketing techniques that generate significant profits while stripping the earth of resources. As a dominant cultural force,

consumerism offers products to address every dissatisfaction while actually creating social conditions that undermine equity and environmental stability.

**When you describe it that way, you make it sound like a well-thought-out, calculated strategy imposed on our society from the top down, an ideology in the**



Nicole Kidman in *Stepford Wives* (2004)

same sense that communism is an ideology. Is that really what you mean? Or is "consumerism" just another word for the powerful forces of desire and clinging, which have been around for as long as there have been human beings? An ideology is a set of ideas that drives action. In the case of the consumerist ideology, the ideas are discussed in corporate board meetings and in advertising suites and in government offices, and they shape decisions about which ads will be placed where and why, and who will control which communication mechanisms, and what kind of energy sources will be developed and which will not, and who will decide the fashions for a preteen kid. The ideas are about getting people to buy stuff, and thus about making money. So that is a reigning ideology—to drive profits up, and to find consumers wherever one can. Consumerism becomes a whole way of seeing the world. And of course, yes, it's built on desire at the individual level. But on top of that, the ideology is saying, "Let's produce desire for more things. And the more desire we produce, the more profits we will make."

**And do you view this as a new ideology, above and beyond the impulse to buy, sell, and trade goods that has always existed in human society? I won't say it's**

new, it's just more exaggerated now. It's much more sophisticated, more technological, more effective, more codified. And it's much more accepted as an established way of doing business. So that now elections, for example, have a lot of the hallmarks of the consumer society, as evidenced by how candidates sell themselves through sound bytes and advertising. Military recruiting is about selling the army to young men. A lot of fairly complicated ethical dilemmas—public dilemmas that could be discussed in public forums—have been boiled down to what seem like competing consumer products.

**If consumerism is indeed on the rise, why is that? Did consumerism as an ideology increase along with the rise of capitalism?** For one thing, extraction and production technologies have become extremely efficient at harvesting resources and generating material goods. In early history, most people did not have disposable income. There was not an option to go and buy luxury goods. You were happy if you got some salt and butter, or something like that. But with the acceleration of communication and transportation in the twentieth century, even a small amount of discretionary income could then be spent on things like TVs, autos, trinkets—goods that reduce our discomfort in life, and that

are attractive and entertaining. So the scale of consumption, and its acceleration, is more rapid in the last quarter century than any other time before.

Also, our society has fully embraced consuming as a way of life. In the past, there was a stronger countervailing force of religion—and/or some kind of secular ethics—that put some restraint on people's desires. In the secular society of the United States, these restraints are at a pretty low ebb. The marketing industry has developed extremely sophisticated techniques for selling products, and even more, for promoting dissatisfaction with your life the way it is. And people around the world want to emulate the material standards of industrialized countries. We are now dealing with a growing consumer class in China and India, which will add an even greater burden to the planet's productive capacity.

**The increase in disposable income, the increased efficiency of transportation, the improved standard of**



The drive to consume has displaced the psychic space once filled by religion, family, and community.

**living, the greater access to goods that reduce suffering—aren't these good things? Aren't they laudable goals?** They may well be. But in American society, they have been most often pursued by entrepreneurs in the context of an individualistic, capitalistic society—not by a carefully thought-out government or social program. So, for example, if you really thought carefully about transportation as a way to reduce people's discomfort, you would have built up a very well-thought-out train and public transportation system, as they've created in Europe. Whereas the resistance we've had to that in this country has been not just enormous, but calculated. For instance, there was a good public transit system in Los Angeles, and it was systematically dismantled to promote automobile use and highway transportation.

The question is: What ideology is going to drive these decisions that affect people on a very big scale?

And in this country, they've been driven by entrepreneurial corporate owners interested in taking large-scale profits. So where I get very ethically concerned is when the consumerist ideology is taking advantage of people's needs for very basic goods like healthcare and water and energy and transportation and shelter—through individual legal and governmental decisions that haven't protected the consumers' interests, but have protected the corporate interests of those producing the goods for the consumers.

**How has the increase in consumerism affected the human psyche or consciousness?** Kalle Lasn, the author of a book called *Culture Jam*, speaks of "microjolts of commercial pollution" that flood our brains—about three thousand marketing messages per day. This has a tremendous impact on our consciousness. It's a mass cultural experiment that may have penetrating effects we can barely imagine. One

of the biggest impacts is the widespread disease of greed, status envy, overstimulation, and dissatisfaction. Children are especially vulnerable to brainwashing from commercials. We find them developing a sense of identity based on brands before they can barely read. The Buddhist writer and scholar David Loy suggests that the drive to consume has displaced the psychic space once filled by religion, family, and community. More time spent on personal lifestyle pleasures tends to mean less time spent in civic engagement and public life.

**In a curious way, this critique echoes the lament of the religious right—the decline of morals, family values, and so on.** Oh, very much. I really think that this is something we on the left have in common with them. Part of what's tearing their families apart—like ours—are the consumer messages to their kids.

**So what unique insights does Buddhism have to offer in critiquing and countering consumerism?** In my book I suggest three fundamental Buddhist critiques, which are probably obvious to any beginning student of Buddhism. The first focuses on the process of personal-identity formation. The usual idea of self is seen as a significant delusion in Buddhist thought, yet consumers are constantly urged to build a sense of self around what they buy. Consumer goods become symbols of status, political or religious views, social group, and sexuality—all of which solidify a sense of self.

Almost all consumerism tends to actively promote self-involvement, either to solve unpleasant problems (toward which we experience aversion) or to enhance pleasurable states (for which we experience greed). From a Buddhist perspective, that self-involvement only adds to the delusion of a separate autonomous self. Thus, for example, we have the coffee drinker's self-involved pleasure in favorite brands or methods of preparation. The path of liberation from this delusion is to understand the self as a reflection of multiple causes and conditions. A less self-involved view of coffee would include the laborers in Costa Rica, the pesticides and plantation soils, the global economy of coffee (as the second most traded commodity in the world), the traders and shippers, and, of course, our local coffee merchants, who make a living from selling a stimulating beverage that helps us meet the stresses of the day.

**Does defining ourselves by our tastes and wealth—what we buy—differ significantly from building an identity around, say, gender, family, appearance, and the like?** We're all subject to all kinds of conditioning forces throughout our life, from parents to school to religion to markets, et cetera. What's significantly different now is that there are active and extremely aggressive forces all around us wanting us to be shaped more by consumerism than by anything else. It's like living in a constant tornado of consumer messages on everything that you see, in every situation wherever you go. So it's again a scale issue. It could be compared to, say, racism before the civil rights movement in the South, when everywhere you went there were racial messages being given. An hour of religious teaching on Sunday morning can't compete with twenty or thirty or forty hours of television watching a week. So it's the scale of it, and the sophistication of getting the messages into our

minds without the consumer knowing that's what's going on.

Unlearning this conditioning is a challenging process. I think it's not dissimilar to unlearning racism or unlearning sexism, when an entire society collaborates on presenting certain principles and you are expected to adopt them as a member of that society.

**You mentioned three fundamental Buddhist critiques of consumerism. What are the other two?** The second leg of the Buddhist critique of consumerism is that consumerism promotes and condones harming. The foundational principle behind all Buddhist ethics is non-harming or *ahimsa*, expressed in the first precept as "Do not kill" or "Do no harm." While consumer goods manufacturers may not intend to cause harm, the extraction and production processes often leave death and injury in their wake—clear-cutting forests, polluting waterways, abusing workers. Producers justify tremendous harm to many forms of life to meet the bottom line of profit and gain.

**But any time we consume anything we are harming to a certain extent. We eat animals and plants, cut down trees, mine ore. Does that mean that consuming anything is problematic? Or are we again just talking about a matter of scale?** It's the conundrum of the precepts: A human being cannot survive without causing harm. But you try to cause as little as possible. If your bodhisattva vows are to reduce suffering, then you don't want to cause excess suffering.

If you're overwhelmed by this conundrum, you could just start with the principle of not harming and ask the question: This product in my hands, how much harm does it carry? And then choose the product that caused less harm, knowing that you're not going to be able to find one that causes no harm, and you're not going to be able to live if you don't cause some harm yourself.

I teach a class called "Unlearning Consumerism" in which, for example, I have the students keep a food log. They write down everything they've eaten for three days and then next to each thing they make an estimate of how far was it shipped, how much packaging it has, how much energy and time and human labor went into the production. They rate each one on a numerical scale, looking at those three aspects: shipping, packaging, and production. They can very quickly see that some products have a relatively low impact and some have a rela-

tively high impact. So something like a local loaf of bread is pretty low on the scale, whereas a soft drink or almost all beverages—hot chocolate, coffee, tea—have been shipped pretty far and have been highly produced, using many different ingredients, massive factory production, lots of shipping, lots of raw materials like glass.

So they can say, “Well, I could choose to reduce my consumption of these high-impact items and I could choose to increase my consumption of the low-impact items.” So that’s an example of how you could use non-harming as a kind of ethical guideline or mindfulness practice, not as a moral absolute.

**And the third aspect?** The third aspect of the Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes desire and dissatisfaction, the very source of suffering, as explained in the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. The state of dissatisfaction—clinging, craving, impulse, thirst, attachment, compulsion—is the very opposite of contentment and equanimity. Marketers stimulate desire and dissatisfaction very effectively, offering a plethora of products to relieve almost every form of human suffering. What is unique about the Buddhist approach is that it goes to the very root of the urge for more, the desire, the hook that keeps us constantly searching for what will relieve our dissatisfaction.

**You state in the book that it was important to you to include perspectives from Theravada, Tibetan, Zen, and Pure Land traditions. Are there distinctive insights on consumerism that can be drawn from these particular traditions?** I felt a single-author book would be too narrow in approach and might be less accessible to a wider audience. Drawing on a range of teachings and perspectives would represent the tradition more fully and accurately. For example, Theravada teachings seem to be very useful in clarifying what is actually going on in the act of consumption. Mindfulness practice can be very helpful for observing your own behaviors in a shopping mall or while you’re reading a catalog. Ajahn Amaro, a Theravada monk practicing in California, writes about core Buddhist values such as contentment and moderation, which can act as antidotes to greed for more things.

On the other hand, the Zen writers in this book are terrific for cutting through the delusions of attachment to material goods. Sunyana Graef openly recommends that parents get rid of their televisions as one of the best

things they can do for their children. Norman Fischer writes of the very intimate, deeply embodied experience of life that is missed by most consumer activity. He urges us to practice “true materialism” by paying deep attention to the things we encounter every day in our kitchens and at our dinner tables.

The contributors from the Tibetan lineages offer excellent analytical tools for penetrating the worldviews supporting consumerism. The Tibetan sense of logic is developed to such a high degree that it can be very useful for deconstructing individual and social conditioning regarding consumption patterns. Judith Simmer-Brown, for example, points out that economic and cultural globalization is not a given; it can be “unmade” just as it was “made.”

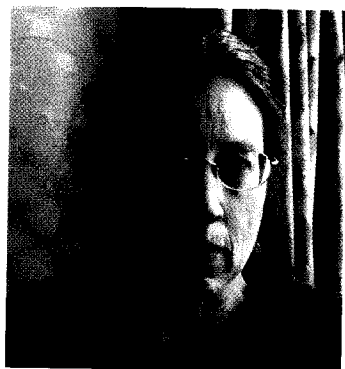
Pure Land teachings offer the wonderful gift of a very positive vision of a future that is truly possible. A pure land on earth would be one that you actually work for so that it is filled with more happiness than suffering. This is something one can wish and pray for with others—a very proactive approach to creating a less consumer-dominated world.

**In her chapter of the book, Diana Winston characterizes the Internet as “for the most part a time-wasting, greed-inducing, glorified shopping channel.” Do you think the Internet is inherently problematic?** One of the biggest liabilities of the Internet is the speed with which computers now process information. Your decision-making time on the computer can be reduced to a nanosecond. Browsing an online shopping site, you can purchase items so much more quickly than ever before. Why take time for reflection or restraint when with a single click the item is yours? Internet shopping has been successful because it supports impulse buying. That is also why fast food places have multiplied so quickly across the landscape. McDonald’s and Burger King know very well that if even 5 to 10 percent of their consumers resisted their impulses, the fast food industry would suffer a serious blow.

**But of course the Internet is also being used for political engagement, information access, communication, community building. . . .** Oh, it’s an incredible tool. It’s very powerful. So in my classes, we might talk about, for example, what might be some guidelines for consuming on the Internet. We might just have a discussion around how quickly should you buy something.

Should you build any waiting period in? Or for what kinds of items might you build a waiting period in? Or which kinds of items would you want to consult somebody else on before you bought them online? Or which kinds of Web purchasing are actually more pleasurable if you go buy them in your own community? My favorite assignment is the three-day technology fast, where students give up the Internet, their car, the television, or some other forms of everyday technology to see how dependent they are on that technology.

**What kinds of other changes do you suggest that people make in their consuming habits?** I did not want this book to be prescriptive. I didn't want people to seize on some standard that any of the authors put out there as the only standard. Because I don't think that's skillful means. I think it's much more skillful



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just to enter the struggle. Don't just adopt some easy thing like "I'll be a vegetarian." Because then you won't look at the source of your plant food. And you won't really think about the ecological impact of shipping your mangoes, say, from South America so you can enjoy them in Seattle. So if there's one recommendation that's consistent throughout the whole book, it's "investigate, go deeper, ask questions about every single thing you consume."

But I will say that the things one should pay the most attention to if you're going to start this investigation are your housing—the ecological footprint of your housing and the energy it uses—and your transportation. A few extra CD covers or soiled diapers are not a big impact. It's not worth getting caught up on plastic bags at the supermarket. But those two things—the research is very clear—are the most important places to make careful consumer decisions: Transportation, and housing and energy. And they're difficult.

Thubten Chodron's contribution to your book raises the issue of spiritual materialism, critiquing those who "collect" spiritual experiences and inflate their egos through associations with highly regarded teachers. Spiritual experience and goods can certainly reinforce a consuming mind too, and it is no surprise to see this happening in a consumer culture. Marketers are successfully targeting spiritual consumers as a market niche and figuring out exactly what fulfills their self-centered yearnings. How many of these products are necessary for spiritual enlightenment? Probably not a one.

**Which leads to an obvious question: Do you experience any ambivalence or unease around the marketing of your own book as a consumer product?** No. I don't have any mixed feelings about that at all, because

I know that this really is a dharma book, a book of skillful means that could reduce a lot of suffering and provide a lot of insight. So it's a good investment.

**So are the tools of consumerism themselves neutral? Is it permissible to use the tools of consumerism—advertising, marketing, hype, PR—to sell something that you feel will actually be to somebody's benefit?** Skillful means is a really important and useful concept in Buddhism—to check very carefully what you can do that will be effective in the system of which you're a part. It would not be very effective for me to take all these words and scratch them out on a chalk tablet, or walk around and sing them like a troubadour and catch a few people's ears, entertaining as that might be.

The book comes at a price. It's paper, it uses trees. So I understand that it's causing some suffering to produce the book. But I hope it's an investment, part of the turning toward a more sane world. ▼