

# THE FRAMEWORK OF RIGHT CONSUMPTION

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## ABSTRACT

*The planet is now in a new epoch of its history, the Anthropocene, in which humanity exerts enormous impact on planetary processes. Human activities put a huge pressure on the earth system's structure and functioning with detrimental consequences.*

*The beginning of the age of the great acceleration is dated back to the 1950s, as earth systems trends and socio-economic trends accelerate since the middle of the last century. According to the patterns of great acceleration, socio-economic trends have been deteriorating that changes the future of the planet and the future of humanity.*

*A decisive part of the socio-economic system beside production and distribution is consumption. In the last decades not just world population, but primary energy consumption, water usage, fertilizer and paper consumption, and the consumption of various services have been increased exponentially.*

*In respect to sustainability, the central role of consumption was recognized by the United Nations as "ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns" is included as one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals in the UN Development Programme.*

*Buddhism should and can reflect on the stressing issue of exponentially increasing consumption patterns in the modern world. According to Buddhism, responsible consumption is right (sammā) consumption that*

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*is understood as local, wise and mindful, which gives an opportunity for practicing the virtues of sharing (dāna), contentment (appicchatā) and moderation (mattaññutā).*

*According to the teaching of the Buddha and the conceptions of Buddhist economics, right consumption aims at satisfying basic human needs (food, clothing, shelter and medicine) with minimal environmental impact. Furthermore, simplifying desires appears in right consumption as an important factor to alleviate the pressure on earth systems. Thus right consumption contributes to the Buddhist ideal of peace and harmony in the age of the Anthropocene.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper introduces the Buddhist contributions to the subject of responsible consumption. On the one hand, it presents how the Buddhist approach transcends the traditional notion of sustainable consumption. On the other hand, it demonstrates how Buddhism interprets the notion of responsible consumption. The study recommends some necessary changes in consumption to ensure adaptable consumption patterns for the challenges that humanity faces in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

The first part of the paper introduces the new epoch of the planet's history, the Anthropocene. It investigates the current Earth System trends that drive the planet into a climate catastrophe, and presents the era of the Great Acceleration, in which the magnitude of numerous socio-economic indicators increases exponentially. The second part of the paper introduces the initiative of "Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns", which is part of the United Nations' Development Programme, and one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. The third part of the paper investigates the Buddhist approach to consumption and gives a framework of responsible consumption, which is regarded as right consumption from a Buddhist perspective. The discussion includes the comparison of the United Nations' and the Buddhist approaches of the subject of consumption. The paper ends with short conclusions.

In his paper, Apichai Puntasen (2007) analyzes the implementation of Buddhist teachings in economics. He introduces

the main concepts of Buddhist economics on the three spheres of economics, namely production, distribution and consumption. The frameworks of Buddhist production, Buddhist distribution and Buddhist consumption are integrated in the model of Buddhist economic system that highlights a scenario, which makes the realization of peace and tranquility in economics possible.

Although production and consumption is very closely related in the economic system, this paper investigates in detail only the sphere of consumption, and provides some further insights on how responsible consumption is interpreted from a Buddhist standpoint. Consumption patterns and consumption habits are basically determined by personal decisions. As leading a life in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path is also a personal decision, Buddhism can provide influential contributions to shape the framework of responsible consumption, which can be regarded as right consumption in the Buddhist terminology.

## 2. FROM CLIMATE CHANGE TO CLIMATE CATASTROPHE

In our days humanity faces with the ever-growing consequences of human-induced changes on the Earth System. Steffen et al. (2015a) identified nine processes and systems that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth System. These planetary boundaries include climate change, change in biosphere integrity (biodiversity loss and species extinction), stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows (phosphorus and nitrogen cycles), land-system change (deforestation), freshwater use, atmospheric aerosol loading, and introduction of novel entities (organic pollutants, radioactive materials, nanomaterials, microplastics, etc.). Four of the nine planetary boundaries, namely climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, and biogeochemical flows have been crossed from a safe operating space to a zone of uncertainty or even to a zone of high risks.

Humanity exerts enormous impact on essential planetary processes and planetary boundaries. Human impact has become so profound that it has driven the Earth out from the epoch of Holocene, in which human societies have developed in the last eleven thousand years (Steffen et al. 2015b). Based on the altered

circumstances caused by humanity, the new geological epoch of the planet is called the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen 2002, Steffen et al. 2011), a fundamentally distinct epoch with anthropogenic markers (Waters et al. 2016), in which human activities put a huge pressure on the Earth System’s structure and functioning with detrimental consequences.

Based on the twelve global socio-economic indicators like population, real GDP, foreign direct investments, urban population, primary energy use, fertilizer consumption, number of existing large dams, water use, paper production, number of new motor vehicles per year, sum of fixed and mobile phone subscriptions, and number of international tourist arrivals per year, Steffen et al. (2015b) arrive to the conclusion that the prime driver of change in the Earth System is predominantly the global economic system. The magnitude of the twelve socio-economic indicators increased exponentially from the 1950s, which delineates a phenomenon, called the “Great Acceleration”. Earth System trends and socio-economic trends accelerate since the middle of the last century. Many of these indicators are related directly or indirectly to consumption. According to the patterns of Great Acceleration, socio-economic trends and the prevailing consumption patterns have been deteriorating, which worsens the chances of the future of humanity.

The interactions of land, ocean, atmosphere and life together provide those conditions, upon which the future of our societies depends. The knowledge that human activity now rivals geological forces in influencing the trajectory of the Earth System has important implications for both Earth System science and social decision-making (Steffen et al. 2018). Adaptation options can reduce the risks of climate change, and have a central role in the survival of humanity in the Anthropocene (Moufouma-Okia et al. 2018).

The patterns of the Great Acceleration show that socio-economic trends have enormous impact on the Earth System and contribute to transgressing planetary boundaries. A decisive part of the socio-economic system, beside production and distribution is consumption. In the last decades not just world population, but primary energy consumption, water usage, fertilizer and paper

consumption, and the consumption of various services have been increasing exponentially. Overgrown consumption, beside the operating mechanism of the prevailing business models is a core factor, fueling detrimental changes in the Anthropocene. Mainstream business and consumption patterns are the primary causes of altered climatic conditions. Thus, introducing and applying alternative business models in production and introducing responsible consumption are at the core of adaptation. Responsible consumption presupposes new consumer behaviors, which contribute to establish consumption patterns that allow to survive the climate catastrophe by adapting to the altered climatic conditions.

### 3. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Although both production and distribution influence the climatic conditions fundamentally, these stressing issues are exceeding the scope of the paper as it investigates in detail only one part of the economic system, namely consumption. In respect to sustainability, the central role of consumption was recognized by the United Nations (UN) as “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” is one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the UN Development Programme (Goal 12).

Based on global data, the UN warns that currently the consumption of natural resources is increasing. For instance, in case of water, humankind is polluting rivers and lakes faster than nature can recycle and purify, although more than one billion people still do not have access to fresh water. The excessive use of water contributes to the global water stress. Not just the growing use of natural resources, but bad consumption patterns and consumption habits increase general consumption. In case of food, beside substantial environmental impacts in the production phase, households intensify the pressure on the environment through dietary choices and consumption habits. According to global UN data, an estimated one third of all food produced end up rotting in the bins of consumers and retailers, and more than two billion people are overweight globally. The growth of consumption can also be observed by the increase of vehicle ownership, and global air travel. Should the global population reach 9.6 billion by 2050,

the equivalent of almost three planets could be required to provide the natural resources needed to sustain current lifestyles (Goal 12).

The goal of the twelfth SDG is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. In doing so, one of the core objectives is to decouple economic growth from resource use and environmental degradation through improved resource efficiency, while improving people's well-being (Transforming, 2015). Thus, sustainable consumption and production is about promoting resource and energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure, providing access to basic services, green and decent jobs and a better quality of life for all. Its implementation reduce future economic, environmental and social costs, strengthen economic competitiveness and reduce poverty. In general, sustainable consumption and production aims at "doing more and better with less" with the assumption that net welfare gains from economic activities can increase by reducing resource use, degradation and pollution along the whole life cycle, while increasing the quality of life. Realizing sustainable consumption needs to focus also on final consumers, which includes educating them on consumption and lifestyles, and providing them with adequate information through standards and labels (Goal 12).

The reports about the progress towards the SDGs depict a sad picture about ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. Although the core objective is to decouple economic growth from natural resource use, global figures in 2016 pointed to worsening tendencies (Progress, 2017). According to the 2018 report about the progress, more and more countries are developing policies to promote sustainable consumption and production, and more multinationals and other large companies are reporting on sustainability (The Sustainable... 2018). Although there are changes that seem positive at first glance, as the share of renewable energy in final energy consumption has increased, but overall data confirm the Jevons paradox (Alcott 2005), that despite technological advances, energy use continuously grows, as the rate of energy consumption rises due to increasing demand (The Sustainable, 2018).

The UN's goal to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns operates mostly on national and organizational

level. Only two of its eleven targets correspond to the personal level of consumers, namely reducing waste, and providing people the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature (Goal 12). Reducing waste can be done in many ways, from ensuring not to throw away food to reducing the consumption of plastic. Carrying a reusable bag, refusing to use plastic straws, and recycling plastic bottles are also good ways of waste reduction (Responsible... 2018), but raise the question if these measures will be enough to avoid the climate catastrophe or to adapt to the altered climatic conditions.

#### 4. RIGHT (RESPONSIBLE) CONSUMPTION

Buddhism, like any other spiritual tradition, cannot avoid facing the problems of modernity. It has to provide answers to the most pressing questions, if it wants to remain a living tradition (Schmithausen 1997). Thus, Buddhism should reflect – beside others – on the issue of exponentially increasing consumption in the modern world. The following part of the paper discusses the approach and the contributions of Buddhism to the sustainable consumption debate by introducing the corresponding ideas of Buddhist economics, many of which concern the personal behavior in economic life.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to reach enlightenment and put an end to suffering. It is an inner, spiritual development, which requires only a minimum level of material comfort (Zsolnai – Kovács, forthcoming). Buddhism functions on the personal level, as leading a life according to the Noble Eightfold Path means the perfection of oneself to the highest possible stage of perfection.

Fredrick Pryor (1991) argues that in an economic sense there are fundamental differences between wants and needs. Venerable P. A. Payutto (1994) also draws attention to the teaching of the two kinds of wanting, namely *tanhā* and *chanda*, both of which have a fundamental role in consumption. According to Buddhism, *tanhā* means desire for pleasure objects and *chanda* means endeavor for well-being. The former could be called wanting, while the latter is the aspiration for right and skillful. Consumption fueled by *tanhā* or desire-driven consumption leads to obtaining and possessing,

but consumption led by chanda results solely the satisfaction of life's basic needs, which contributes to well-being and forms a solid basis for the further development of human potentialities. Thus, chanda contributes to spiritual development. This point is often overlooked by economists, as modern economic thinking does not make distinction between the two kinds of wanting. Treating them equally leads to a situation in which both of them are to be satisfied by maximizing consumption in the spirit of "the more and the bigger is the better".

Above life's basic needs, one should minimize his or her consumption, thus making minimization the objective function of consumption patterns and consumption habits in the case of desires and desire-driven consumption. Modern economic thinking encourages maximum consumption in order to satisfy desires, but does not deal with what happens after one's desires are satisfied (Payutto 1994). According to the teachings of the Buddha, three kinds of tanhā are inherent parts of human life: they cannot be satisfied, they are ever-emerging, and form the root of suffering (SN 56.11).

Based on the distinction of tanhā and chanda, and on the fact that desires lead to suffering, Buddhism suggests not to multiply but to simplify desires above material needs. It is wise to try to reduce one's desires, as wanting less could bring substantial benefits not only for the person, but also for the community, and for nature (Zsolnai 2007). Thus, the Buddhist approach to desire-driven consumption understands that non-consumption – or the full minimization of consumption – can contribute to well-being. Furthermore, certain demands can be satisfied only through non-consumption, a position which traditional economic thinking would find hard to appreciate (Payutto 1994).

Buddhism offers the methods of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration as parts of the Noble Eightfold Path to change one's preferences and consumption habits. Leading a Buddhist life encompasses meditation practice, which can be used to tackle with ever-emerging tanhā, which is the root of suffering. In his formal model, Serge-Christophe Kolm (1985) connects consumption and meditation. He argues that consumption requires



labor time, as consumers must work in order to earn the necessary money for that. In general, time can be expended on meditation and work. It is recommended that only as much time should be spent with work that allows satisfying life's basic needs. The rest of the time should be expended on meditation, or could be expended on work for transforming the consumption patterns and consumption habits of life's basic needs to reverse the symptoms of the Great Acceleration.

Payutto (1994) asserts that training the mind through meditation contributes to achieve some inner contentment, which is a virtue, related to consumption and satisfaction. Buddhism proposes contentment as a skillful objective. The correct definition of contentment implies the absence of artificial desires. When we are easily satisfied with material things, we save time and energy that might otherwise be wasted on seeking consumer goods. The time and energy we save can be applied to the development of true well-being.

According to Buddhism, pursuing desires leads to suffering, while desires cannot ultimately be satisfied. Therefore, the following part of the paper investigates the Buddhist approach to the consumption of life's basic needs. From now on, the term consumption in the paper is used only in the context of consuming life's four basic requisites, namely food, clothing, housing and medicine. In doing so, those ideas of Buddhist economics will be introduced that concern consumption and the personal behavior in economic life.

In his book "Small is beautiful" Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1973) described the two main characteristics of Buddhist economics as simplicity and non-violence. Both contribute to consume less from the scarce resources of the environment, and lead to realize localization. Schumacher was one of the first, who drew attention to the fundamental difference between renewable and non-renewable resources, and urged the utilization of renewables, which is also an important part of today's sustainability debate.

Pryor (1991) emphasizes the importance of moderation in economics and in consumption, which is in accordance with

the spirit of the Middle Way. Payutto (1994) formulates it even stronger, when he asserts that at the very heart of Buddhism is the wisdom of moderation, and economic activity must be controlled by moderation that consumption for instance is directed to the attainment of well-being rather than maximum satisfaction. According to Peter Daniels (2006), moderation or the willful reduction of the material and energy flows of economy has become vital. The possibility of a successful adaptation depends on reduction, which is consistent with the ethics of Buddhist moderation.

Frugality means low material consumption, simple lifestyle, and the openness of the mind for spiritual goods. Its synonyms are self-restriction, chosen poverty and voluntary simplicity. The Buddha arrived to the conclusion that frugality is a rational virtue, because desires are insatiable in nature, and their simplification contributes to the alleviation of suffering (Bouckaert – Opdebeeck – Zsolnai 2011).

Based on moderation, with the help of meditation practice, the trap of over-consumption can be avoided. One must be aware of how much is enough in the case of life's basic needs, because today's society encourages over-consumption. For instance, a great many people damage their own health by overeating, thus making themselves ill in the long run. Some become deficient in certain vitamins and minerals, despite eating large meals. Apart from harming themselves, their overeating deprives others of food. Thus, the social and environmental costs of over-consumption, such as depletion of natural resources and costs incurred by health care are enormous. On the other hand, Buddhism offers the possibility of realize moderation and contentment by which a balance without over-consumption can be achieved (Payutto 1994).

Richard Welford (2006) asserts that the main characteristics of Buddhist economics are moderation in consumption, and creativity or the positive utilization of human mind. Mindfulness and creativity allows the elimination of simplistic thinking, the most serious problems of modernity that leads to environmental destruction and stems from scientific materialism. As Clair Brown (2017) asserts, applying Buddhist economics at the personal level means applying mindfulness in consumption, working

together with others, and taking the right actions. There are fruitful initiatives of applying mindfulness in consumption in the contemporary world. Ethical consumerism (Boda – Gulyas 2006), for instance is one of the initiatives that are consistent with the Buddhist notion of mindful consumption. Thus, mindfulness is a fundamental part of enjoying life without relying on consumerism, since only disappointment and despair comes from wanting more and cultivating desires (Brown 2017).

Based on the basic teachings of Buddhism, responsible or right consumption has nothing to do with the satisfaction of desires. It focuses rather on the satisfaction of life's basic needs. According to the ideas of Buddhist economics, right consumption gives an opportunity to realize the Buddhist values of non-violence, moderation, frugality (simplicity), mindfulness and creativity. All of these values are constituent parts of the objective function of right consumption in the case of life's basic needs. Practicing these values regarding to consumption can contribute to facilitate environmental preservation, and minimize the ultimate environmental impact of consumption.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The approach of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals to sustainable consumption and production patterns is a scientific-technical one (Mitroff 1998), in which economic growth is assumed as an axiom of achieving sustainability by enhancing efficiency through introducing new technologies.

Its core objective is to decouple economic growth from resource use and environmental degradation. It uses the vocabulary of economics like sustainable infrastructure, access to basic services, green and decent jobs, and economic competitiveness. It monitors the progress of sustainability with economic terms like economic, environmental and social costs, and resource and energy efficiency. On the personal level regarding consumption the importance of education and waste reduction is also emphasized by the terms of the economic paradigm like introducing standards and labels.

The goal to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns is executed in a top-down approach from the level of

nations and organizations. Nevertheless, the question still stands if this initiative will be able to help humanity succeeding in adapting to the altered climatic conditions in the epoch of the Anthropocene.

The Buddhist approach of responsible consumption expands the UN's scientific-technical analysis of the subject with an existential-spiritual dimension, affecting significantly also the systemic and interpersonal-social dimensions of the problem (Mitroff 1998).

The objective of right consumption is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to radically reducing or totally eliminating the desire-driven consumption, and on the other hand, to apply the values of non-violence, moderation, frugality (simplicity), mindfulness and creativity in the case of the consumption of life's basic needs, namely food, clothing, housing and medicine. Consumption, driven by Buddhist values contributes to environmental preservation, and minimizes the environmental impact.

The starting point of the arguments regarding right consumption is human nature, and the nature of desires. The Buddhist approach of consumption strives to explain the problem and give a possible solution at the personal level, thus presenting a bottom-up approach of the subject. Right consumption complements and transcends the conventional notion of sustainability, as due to the impermanent nature of phenomena, achieving sustainability is hardly possible according to Buddhism (Kovács 2011).

The conventional approaches of sustainable consumption patterns and consumption habits deal basically with the question of how to achieve sustainability. The Buddhist interpretation includes not simply the methods of right consumption, but presupposes a radical quantitative reduction or the total elimination of desire-driven consumption. The contemporary condition of the Earth System and the climatic conditions do not allow human beings to pursue their desires freely, or hardly allow anymore to practice moderation in the case of desire-driven consumption practices. Thus, not simply moderation or contentment, but the complete minimization should be the objective function of the reduction in the case of desire-driven consumption.

The Buddhist approach of responsible consumption proposes

a radical reduction or the total elimination of desire-driven consumption in the first place, than allows people to practice certain Buddhist values regarding the consumption of life's basic needs, thus effectuating the notion of right consumption in practice.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The possibility of a coming climate catastrophe in the epoch of the Anthropocene makes it necessary for humanity to adapt to the altered climatic conditions of the near future in every possible way. The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations include some promising initiatives to achieve adaptation, although they have their own limitations.

The paper introduced the approach, by which Buddhism contributes to the sustainability consumption debate. The traditional, primarily scientific-technical approach of the subject is complemented by an existential-spiritual point of view. On the first place, Buddhism urges the radical reduction or the total elimination of desire-driven consumption, by which relieving personal, social and environmental suffering becomes possible. Furthermore, right consumption gives an opportunity to implement the Buddhist values of non-violence, moderation, frugality (simplicity), mindfulness and creativity in the consumption of life's basic needs. Thus, right consumption does not entail desire-driven consumption, but focuses only on life's basic needs, thus it can be a significant part of the adaptation model in the altered climatic conditions.

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