

## **DHARMIC SHOPPING**

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Practicing Dharma is a way of life, something we do every day, such as showing loving-kindness to co-workers, practicing patience as we drive, engaging in selfless service to others, and speaking the truth. Still, it is easy to forget Dharma when we do very mundane or worldly tasks such as shopping. When we are shopping, we have a lot of worldly things to think about - we have to figure out where, what, and for whom to buy things, decide which is the best product and best price, and remember where we parked our car. Whether we are shopping for something big, such as a house, or for a gift, or for something simple like groceries, there are some Dharma teachings to keep in mind which can make shopping a more spiritual and meritorious experience.

Lord Buddha has given us the following general practical advice, as recorded in the *Dhammapada* verse 24, which can apply to many contexts, including shopping:

*Ever grows the glory of him who is energetic, mindful and pure in conduct, discerning and self-controlled, righteous and heedful.*

We can apply these factors when deciding, first of all, whether to buy an item. Rather than buying on impulse, out of habit, to indulge our senses, or in imitation of our peers, that is, with a dull or passionate mind, instead we can be energetic, heedful and mindful enough to examine our motives when shopping. We discern whether we really need the item or whether we are being a victim of our greed, habit or vanity. If we see that our motives are the latter, then we exercise our self-control to avoid buying it.

We also can apply these factors when choosing which particular product or service to purchase. We now may choose based on the same type or brand we usually purchase, or what is popular, less expensive, advertised, or enticing, that is, with a dull or passionate mind. But instead, we can be energetic, heedful and mindful enough to examine our decision-making process in choosing particular items, and to choose based on dharmic factors.

One such factor to think about when shopping is harmlessness (*avihimsa* in Pali language), which is an example of “Right Thought” (righteous or wholesome thoughts), the second element of the Eight-Fold Path. As the Buddha has said, recorded in the *Samyutta Nikaya I Chapter X Verse 814*:

*One whose mind all day and night takes delight in harmlessness, who has lovingkindness for all beings – for him there is enmity with none.*

So, when we are shopping, we should be heedful of whether our purchase will cause harm in any way to ourselves or to others, discerning whether it is wholesome both for ourselves and for others.

How does a product or service cause harm? We know that obtaining raw materials, manufacture and transport of many products cause damage to the environment, which in turn harm humans and animals. Choosing products and services that cause less damage to the

environment, that is, to “buy green,” reduce our carbon footprint, reduce our excessive consumerism, recycle, and be more socially and environmentally responsible, is becoming more and more common and important as our world population grows. These are not just political or social concepts, but also spiritual values – virtues - of kindness, compassion, harmlessness, heedfulness and self-control. While the Buddha had no need to teach specifically about environmentalism 2500 years ago, his teachings on these virtues are undoubtedly fully applicable to our decisions as consumers in today’s world.

We can look carefully at the label to determine whether the product is “sustainable” regarding the environment, whether it is made from recycled materials or is recyclable, or whether it is from “fair trade.” We can consider whether it is more or less polluting to the environment, and whether it saves energy (e.g., petroleum, electricity, gas). Is the house bigger than we really need, requiring more energy for heating and cooling? Is the car very fuel-efficient, causing less air pollution and waste of petroleum (and money for gas)? Is the toilet paper made from recycled paper? Particularly when making a very large purchase, we can research whether the companies that produce or sell the product are fair to their employees and/or have a good environmental record, and buy from, and thus support, a company that is more helpful and less harmful to the world. When we make a purchase, we are voting with our dollars. Just as we cast our one vote among millions of votes, our small action summed with the small actions of millions of others changes the world. We can find information to help us choose such socially and environmentally responsible products and services by searching on the internet.

We will find, however, that some of these products and services are more expensive, so we might worry that they will be harmful to our bank account and therefore not so helpful to our peace of mind. We do need to realistically consider our financial situation, and whether we are compromising our well being by making such purchases, or whether we are just being miserly, or overly accustomed to buying the less expensive options. On the other hand we should not be obsessive as an environmentalist, taking pride in our actions, or having contempt toward those who do not act as we do. We remember the Buddha’s teaching of the Middle Path, avoiding extremes. The decision-making should not add to our stress level, but should reduce it. The process should be a mindful examination of our thoughts and motives, admitting to our greed, attachment and other faults, so we can eradicate them. Deciding whether to make a purchase based on harmlessness, kindness, compassion and self-control becomes another way to introduce dharmic thoughts into our mundane tasks. Spending a few dollars more on an item which causes less harm is like making a small donation for a kinder and more dharmic world.

When we shop for food items, obviously we have choices of healthier foods or more indulgent foods, cheaper foods or more expensive foods. Being heedful of our health and wallet, in general we try to choose healthier food that is the least expensive, therefore easing stress on the body and the mind. But if we tend to buy the same familiar products we have bought for years out of habit, or choose items based on the fact that they are less expensive or on sale, we may be missing some opportunities for more dharmic shopping. Cheaper items are likely not healthier for our body than more expensive items, and often are of inferior quality. Food being largely determinative of our health, we may be compromising our health over the long run (costing us more in health care) just to save a few dollars in the short run. Therefore, we should be very mindful and discerning about foods we buy. We may have choices of organic or

conventionally-grown foods. Noticing that organic foods are more expensive, some of us may avoid them. However, there are more dharmic factors to consider than price. Many types of pesticides (fungicides, insecticides, and weed killers) are on or in virtually all foods that we buy (except foods labeled “organic”). These pesticides not only kill their target species, but expose farm workers, wildlife, and livestock to these poisons. Even fish and other aquatic organisms are exposed to these poisons, as agricultural runoff enters streams and rivers. Common sense tells us that the buildup of many pesticides over time in our bodies and in the bodies of other beings eventually weakens, ages and sickens the body. So, buying organic foods is not only healthier for our own bodies, but is a way to express our compassion for other beings, to prevent more killing and harming of other beings, and to support those farmers who choose a more dharmic way of farming.

If we buy organic foods, we may not have to spend more than on conventional foods if we avoid wasting food (e.g. cooking too much, letting things spoil in the refrigerator), eat out less often and eat more moderately. We need not consider organic food purchasing as “all or nothing” – even buying a few organic foods helps reduce the pollutant load in our bodies, and helps support more dharmic farming practices which are kinder to other beings and the environment.

In choosing foods, we may also want to consider purchasing more foods grown locally. This helps to decrease the demand for long-distance trucking, which results in less use of petroleum and less air pollution, and reduces our “carbon footprint.” We should also consider the treatment of poultry, seafood and livestock in our choices of dairy, eggs, fish and meat products. Animals that are “free range” are not cooped up in tiny, cramped unclean spaces, but are free to move naturally, so buying “free range” products support kinder, less harmful treatment of animals. We can avoid fish and seafood species that are overfished or those that are caught by methods that are harmful to other marine life.

We can consider dharmic values in buying gifts for others. Generosity, or giving, is emphasized by the Buddha especially as a way to overcome our greed and miserliness. But in many cases, gift-giving has become just a tradition, a task, an expectation, or a tedious trip to crowded shopping malls, which does not engender deeply generous and loving thoughts, and therefore does not result in significant spiritual development. In order to enhance the virtue and merit of giving, we can be more mindful of our thoughts and heedful of the options we have in selecting a gift. We may be able to support the welfare of other beings (not just the recipient) in selecting a particular gift. We might consider buying gifts from a less privileged society or individual to help them make a better living. For example, we can purchase - even on the internet - jewelry, clothing, art, craft or other gift items made by native (indigenous) people. As the Buddha taught, recorded in the *Majjhima Nikaya 142:14*:

*When a virtuous person to a virtuous person gives, with trusting heart a gift righteously obtained, placing faith that the fruit of action is great, that gift, I say, will come to full fruition.*

We are virtuous, and the gift is “righteously obtained,” and we can then have faith that the “fruit” (merit) of our purchase is good, when we have thoughts of harmlessness, compassion and kindness in buying the gift – being heedful of its effects on other beings.

So, in our dharmic shopping, we support businesses and farmers which are more dharmic, and/or individuals who need our financial help more, and we reduce suffering, pollution and waste of natural resources, bit by bit. By doing so, we make merit, and we set a good example to others, so they make merit, too. In addition, having such caring thoughts for other beings and the environment when making our many decisions on the numerous products and services we purchase, adds up to a lot of kind and compassionate thoughts over time! Our mind becomes purified with such good thoughts. Dharmic shopping and giving become, in the words of the Buddha (*Majjhima Nikaya 46:2*), “a way of undertaking things that is pleasant now and ripens in the future as pleasure.”