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Elizabeth McLaughlin
mclaughline7@lasalle.edu

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Fast Fashion from a Buddhist Perspective

Elizabeth McLaughlin

Honors 499

Dr. Kling

La Salle University

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between Buddhism and fast fashion is not immediately apparent, nor is it a particularly well-researched area. However, the topic of consumption underlies both topics, relating to each in markedly different ways. Buddhist precepts outline practices of mindful and sustainable consumption within limited means; fast fashion fosters consumption on a massive, global scale. The work of Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, a man with a career in economics that was aided by great concern for the survival and success of humankind, offers clarity to the conversation about Buddhism and fast fashion. He pioneered the field of Buddhist economics, which seeks to maximize human satisfactions by finding the optimal pattern of consumption. By exploring E.F. Schumacher’s Buddhist economics, I will highlight the areas in which fast fashion lacks the “right view.” It is my goal, not only in this paper but also in my life and work, to demonstrate the importance of E.F. Schumacher’s core philosophy — that small is beautiful — with hope to guide the fashion industry onto a better, more sustainable path.

PART I: Buddhist Basics

INTRODUCTION

William James, an American philosopher and psychologist, once said that the essence of any religion “consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” Buddhism dates back to around the fifth century B.C.E., with various sects evolving over time as people moved around and interpreted the Buddha’s teachings in different ways. There are three main branches of Buddhism: Mahayana, Theraveda, and Vajrayana. *Mahayana* is a Sanskrit word meaning “great vehicle,” and it is the largest sect of Buddhism in the world. In essence, Mahayana “is a vision of what Buddhism is

really all about” (Dowley, 2018). Around the first century C.E., the concept of Mahayana appears in the Mahayana sutras; texts that some scholars consider to be the words of the Buddha himself. These texts provide their readers with the way of achieving enlightenment as per the experience and insights from the Buddha. According to Mahayana, those who seek the highest goal of enlightenment do so by attempting to find “freedom from suffering and rebirth” (Dowley, 2018). Those interested in harmoniously adjusting themselves to the unseen order have studied and practiced Buddhism for centuries.

Buddhism offers a prescription for how to engage with the world in a sustainable and enlightened manner. It is frequently cited as the most scientific religion of all. In fact, most Buddhists see no disagreement between science and the teachings of their religion; they find that the two topics overlap, intersect, and mutually agree at the most fundamental levels (Wellcome Global Monitor, 2018). The Buddha himself set out to empirically define the human predicament of suffering, and to offer a prescription for this ubiquitous ailment. This scientific basis of Buddhism makes it a useful tool for analysis of many different concepts, such as economics and fast fashion.

THE BUDDHA AND JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI

The Buddha lived in the 5th century in what is now known as Nepal. His name before achieving enlightenment and thereby becoming “the Buddha” was Siddhartha Gautama. In Sanskrit, *siddha* means “achieved” and *artha* means “what was searched for.” Therefore, the meaning of the Buddha’s birth name is “he who has achieved his goals.” Although the facts of the Buddha’s life are often disputed, it is generally agreed upon that he was born to a wealthy family and enjoyed the rich indulgences of his social caste. Over time, however, he grew

disenchanted by the material world and became an ascetic, seeking spiritual meaning through renunciation. His asceticism was not uncommon for his day; many men would abandon their material possessions and instead rely on alms in an effort to pursue spiritual enlightenment. The Buddha lived a lavish life, but he also lived an impoverished life — and neither brought him what he was searching for: enlightenment. Thus, he sought out what he called the “Middle Way,” a philosophical and material approach to life that was discovered somewhere between exorbitant wealth and debilitating poverty.

Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse (1922) is an allegory of the Buddha’s life that illustrates his struggle with materialism and spirituality. In this book, the main character Siddhartha is not the Buddha himself — rather, he is a man who exists at the same time as the Buddha, but refuses to become a follower of the Buddha’s teachings, believing that he must find “the right path,” or the Middle Way, himself. In essence, the book explores what it means to understand the true nature of reality and to find meaning for oneself. Siddhartha, like the Buddha, amasses great fortune but still feels unfulfilled; he renounces his fortune but still finds himself seeking. Eventually, Siddhartha is able to reckon with the true nature of reality, and in doing so, he ultimately feels at peace.

People from various religions and centuries relate to the story of Siddhartha because it grapples with age-old questions: what is the meaning of life? How and where can one find this meaning? What does it mean to be “fulfilled?” Siddhartha struggles with answering these questions, as did the Buddha, and as do many people throughout time. People struggle with agreeing on an answer to any of these questions; some believe there are no answers at all. Moreover, the desire to ask these questions generally arises from a sense of confusion about the meaning of life or uncomfortability with the unknown; the asker is seeking clarity and peace.

Figures like the Buddha and Jesus Christ are two quintessential askers of this question; they devoted their lives to the search for meaning in a world strife with suffering. In his book *The First and Last Freedom*, Jiddu Krishnamurti, a philosopher and religious figure, opines that both the Buddha and Jesus Christ have indeed found ways to free themselves from confusion and sorrow, but they did not find ways to prevent such ailments. This is because these ailments are parts of life itself; it is not worthwhile to seek out a life in which confusion and sorrow never existed, but rather to seek out a life which accepts and affirms the existence of such states of being. By refusing to accept the existence of suffering, one is in denial about the nature of reality; it is impossible to experience true enlightenment while simultaneously deluding oneself about the truth.

A key part of the path to enlightenment is creative self-understanding; he who lives the Middle Way must do so by his own accord, by wholly understanding the truth about his existence in relation to the world. Jiddu Krishnamurti was a paradigm of creative self-understanding and fulfillment. According to the Krishnamurti Foundation of America, “Krishnamurti claimed no allegiance to any caste, nationality or religion and was bound by no tradition. His purpose was to set humankind unconditionally free from the destructive limitations of conditioned mind.” His aforementioned book gives readers a glimpse into his interpretation of the search for truth and freedom in everyday life. Krishnamurti cites the power of creative self-understanding as the vehicle by which one finds truth and fulfillment: two concepts which are obfuscated and difficult to truly understand. In order to achieve what we are seeking — whether that be truth, fulfillment, or happiness — we must first understand ourselves. “So long as I am ignorant of myself, so long as I am unaware of the total process of myself, I have no basis for thought, for affection, for action” (Krishnamurti, 1997, p. 18). Part of that “total process” of our

existences is the idea that we are constantly seeking permanence within and beyond ourselves. We often fool ourselves that once we achieve happiness or fulfillment, it will be permanent. We do not like the idea that happiness is fleeting or derivative; we prefer to consider it a permanent good in and of itself. But Krishnamurti argues that because happiness *is* derivative — because we always seek happiness *through* some other, material mean — we can never truly or ultimately achieve it. In other words, so long as we externalize a goal of happiness and attach it to anything at all, we are evincing an illusion about the true nature of reality. In fact, it is necessary to understand the truth of impermanence in order to attain whatever it is we are seeking: truth, fulfillment, or happiness.

Although Jiddu Krishnamurti provides a detailed account of his philosophical underpinnings of truth and happiness, he also warns the reader that they must come to an understanding of truth on their own; it is not something that can be taught through a book. Both Krishnamurti and the Buddha would concur that the path to enlightenment is an inherently personal undertaking. Anyone who wishes to embark on a journey similar to that of the Buddha's must do so for and from themselves. The Buddha provides his account of achieving enlightenment; he does not provide a rulebook that guarantees any specific outcome.

This account is called the Four Noble Truths.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths illustrate the essence of Buddhist philosophy and can be generalized as follows: the First and Second Noble Truths summate the Buddha's diagnosis of the human predicament, and the Third and Fourth Truths provide his prescription. Before delving into the Four Truths, it is important to understand some Sanskrit words, which cannot be directly

translated to English, but nonetheless communicate key principles of Buddhist philosophy. *Duhkka* roughly translates to un-satisfactoriness in life, or suffering. The Buddha asserts that *duhkka* pervades life; that we are constantly suffering because of our attachment to things which are impermanent. By attaching our happiness to impermanent things, we are evincing an illusion that the objects of our desire will provide us with lasting happiness or satisfaction. Rather, these impermanent desires represent our inability to reckon with the truth about reality and its pervasive impermanence. Psychologists refer to this as a Hedonic treadmill: constantly chasing but going nowhere (Wright). *Dharma* is another Sanskrit word that means the truth about the way things are, as well as insight on how we should live in recognition of this truth. *Dharma* also refers to the summation of the Buddha's teachings. Another key Buddhist term is *nibbana* or *nirvana*, which loosely translates to the absence of suffering. *Nirvana* is a state of being that one enters once they detach themselves from their tendency to cling onto impermanence — it is that supreme good that William James talked about in his aforementioned quote. By understanding and following the *dharma*, one can escape the trappings of *duhkka* and realize *nirvana*. The Buddha, meaning the “Enlightened One,” experienced this spiritual journey from suffering to enlightenment and decided to share his findings with his fellow human beings, toward which he possessed profound compassion. It is believed that after the Buddha attained enlightenment while sitting under a bodhi tree, he shared his revelations with others in a sermon.

The First Noble Truth: the existence of suffering. *Duhkka*, meaning un-satisfactoriness or suffering, pervades life, but life is not wholly *duhkka* in and of itself. Rather, it is an undercurrent that tends to guide mankind into channels of anxiety, despair, and unfulfillment. Although seemingly grim, this tenet is actually quite useful and ultimately positive: there is a *tendency* to suffer, but that means that there is a *possibility* that the suffering can end — a possibility that is

explored in the later truths. *Duhkka* basically works like this: we want to be happy; we think x will bring us happiness; we attain x , and we are still not happy because now we desire more of x , or even y . The suffering arises from seeking as much permanent happiness as possible via impermanent means. For many, this tendency to cling or to seek is tied to their work; once I get this promotion, I will be better off; once I surpass this amount of income, I will be satisfied. Living in this manner is ultimately evincing an illusion: the promotion will not provide you with unlimited utility; perpetually striving for the *next* promotion *will* deprive you of living in recognition of how things are in the moment. Essentially, by clinging on to impermanent desires, we place greater emphasis on a supposed good than the actual reality-based good that lies before us. By exiting this illusion and recognizing the fluidity of reality, we are actually better situated on the path to happiness than we would otherwise be if we continued to let *dukkha* fool us. Recognizing that reality is impermanent and in a constant state of flux is not only necessary to understanding Buddhism, but also to finding the “middle way” toward enlightenment. The First Truth about life is that suffering pervades it.

The Second Noble Truth: the cause of suffering. We suffer because we crave, and we crave things that will eventually go away, taking our satisfaction along with it. We may achieve some momentary satisfaction, but it must necessarily subside. One measurable indicator of happiness or satisfaction is dopamine, a neurotransmitter that that is referred to in scientific literature as the pleasure chemical or the reward chemical. There is general consensus that dopamine is correlated with pleasure. Take, for example, an experiment in which a monkey is given fruit and its corresponding dopamine levels are measured. In this experiment, the dopamine spike correlated with tasting this delicious fruit lasted only a third of a second. (Wright). Pleasure is fleeting precisely because it motivates the pleasure-seeker to continue

seeking out pleasure; in this case, it motivates the monkey to continue seeking out fruit. If pleasure were not fleeting — if, theoretically, the dopamine spike associated with eating fruit lasted forever — then that monkey would starve and die. It is not a useful evolutionary tool for pleasure to last forever; rather, pleasure is useful insofar as it is fleeting, so that we may continue seeking it out or, in other words, continue living. We tend to regard life as a permanent desire; we want to find fulfillment that affirms the totality of our existence at once. This is the cause of our suffering. However, “If I regard life not as a permanent desire but as a series of temporary desires which are constantly changing, then there is no contradiction” (Krishnamurti, 1997, p. 54). Without contradiction, there exists fulfillment. Ultimately, the desire to live can be limitless and boundless; “there is no fixed point in desire; but the mind establishes a fixed point because it treats everything as a means to arrive” (Krishnamurti, 1997, p. 56). By doing this, we are falling victim to suffering; by recognizing that we do this, we can understand suffering’s cause, or the Second Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth: the end of suffering. In order to end our *duhkka* or suffering, we must abandon our tendency to crave and cling. Plato’s allegory of the cave provides an apt parable for the First, Second, and Third Noble Truths. In the cave, prisoners are chained and isolated from the outside world; this is the essence of the First Noble Truth, or the existence of suffering. The prisoners are fixated on shadows cast on the wall in front of them by puppets (Warmington and Rouse, 1999). These shadows are the cause of an illusion or the cause of their suffering, as are their chains and their condemnation to the cave in the first place. The shadows that the prisoners see are, for example, a shadow of a book or a horse, and they believe these shadows are truly books or horses; they confuse mere projections with reality. That is where the Second Noble Truth comes in: these shadows cause the prisoners to suffer because they deprive

the prisoners from seeing the truth. Moreover, the prisoners' choice to remain fixated on (and deluded by) the shadows is the cause of their suffering just as much as the shadows themselves are. However, in Plato's allegory, the prisoners can turn away from the shadows toward the light, thereby realizing the truth — this is where the Third Noble Truth comes in: the end of suffering. If the prisoners turn around and become free of their chains, they can end their suffering. If one understands the truth contained within the first two Noble Truths, then one can logically arrive at the third: that there is an end to suffering. How to turn around and take off one's chains is explained in the Fourth Noble Truth.

The Fourth Noble Truth: the path to ending suffering, also known as the Eightfold Path. One of Plato's goals in his *Republic* is to explain how and why man ought to turn away from the shadows; how and why man ought to end his suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth, or the Eightfold Path, is Buddha's explanation of how to end suffering. The path consists of "right view; right thought; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration" (Koller, 58). The first two parts are part of the wisdom path (*panna*); the next three part of the ethical conduct path (*sila*); and the last three part of the mental discipline path (*samadhi*). Despite making these distinctions between each part of the path, the Buddha in no way intended for the path to be linear or sequential, nor is any part inaccessible until a prior part has been fulfilled. Rather, each step of the path exists and serves at the same time, working together "to lead one from ignorance toward self-knowledge and enlightenment" (Mark, 2021). By explicating Noble Truths one through three, the Buddha was able to arrive at the Fourth, which set forth his prescription for human suffering.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

After the Buddha achieved enlightenment, he purportedly delivered a sermon under a bodhi tree to all those who cared to listen and learn. By sharing the Eightfold Path with anyone who cared to listen, the Buddha demonstrated his compassion “for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world” (Sri Rahula, 1996). The Buddha believed that “good” and “happiness” can be cultivated by the simultaneous development of compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*panna*). By developing these two faculties while following the Eightfold Path, the individual and the community will flourish. Therefore, it is useful to consider compassion and wisdom as tools with which one navigates the Eightfold Path, a path which in turn sharpens those tools with perseverance and time.

Right view refers to the entirety of the Four Noble Truths, which explain things as they are. According to Buddhism, there are two types of understanding or viewing: “knowing accordingly” (*anubodha*) and “penetration” (*pativedha*). The former refers to what the prisoners saw in the shadows on the wall: they understood what they saw to be a book or a horse, but they could not truly understand the actual form of those objects. Accordingly, this type of understanding requires minimal introspection and deep thought. The other type of understanding, or penetration, is what one employs to have the right view; it is viewing a thing “in its true nature, without name and label. This penetration is possible only when the mind is free from all impurities” (Sri Rahula, 1996). In essence, right view is possible only when one understands the impermanence of reality, as well as our inclination toward clinging to the impermanence in order to seek out a permanent state of happiness. Krishnamurti explains the importance of right view in his book *The First and Last Freedom*: “A man who is truly content is the man who understands what *is*, gives the right significance to what *is*” (Krishnamurti, 1997, p. 11). Moreover, in order

to truly have the right view, one must be free from fear of what is; “If you want to know what you are you cannot imagine or have belief in something which you are not” (Krishnamurti, 1997, p. 15). Through cultivating right view, there is no illusion of the shadows: the source of the shadows is at the forefront of understanding; the individual has turned toward the light. Right view is the “forerunner” of the Eightfold Path because it is with right view that “one discerns wrong action as wrong action, and right action as right action” (Davis, 2011).

Right action is part of the ethical conduct path. Right action reflects Buddhism’s deep reverence for the interconnectedness of life and discourages the reader from destroying life. The Buddha describes three specific components of right action: “abstaining from taking life, abstaining from taking what is not given, and abstaining from sexual misconduct” (Bodhi, 1999). According to Buddhist philosophy, “taking what is not given means appropriating the rightful belongings of others with thievish intent” (Bodhi, 1999). Thich Nhat Hanh wrote in “Right Action: Waking Up to Loving Kindness” that right action relies on an awareness of suffering in the world. By being attuned to the pervasiveness of *duhkka*, one can seek ways to alleviate *duhkka* for themselves and those around them. Hanh goes on to state that “Right Action is also the practice of mindful consuming, bringing to your body and mind only the kinds of foods that are safe and healthy” (1995). Partaking in the fruits of wrong action — whether that be eating food or wearing clothes that were produced by excess toil or waste — is another way of supporting suffering; it provides no real, true utility since it is directly linked to suffering. “Right Action is also linked to Right Livelihood,” since our livelihood requires us to act in a certain manner that is customary of whatever field of work we pursue (Hanh, 1995).

Right livelihood joins right action as parts of the ethical conduct path. Hanh offers, “There are those who earn their living by way of wrong action – manufacturing weapons, killing,

depriving others of their chance to live, destroying the environment, exploiting nature and people, including children. There are those who earn their living by producing items that bring us toxins. They may earn a lot of money, but it is wrong livelihood” (Hanh, 1995). Throughout the course of his life, the Buddha witnessed many instances of wrong livelihood. He grew discontented with the proliferation of greed among his fellow people; he interpreted their greedy lifestyles as an illustration of *duhkka* and our tendency to cling to impermanent things in order to achieve happiness or stability. “Right livelihood is concerned with ensuring that one earns a one’s living in a righteous way... that wealth should be gained in accordance with certain standards... only by legal means, not illegally; one should acquire it peacefully, without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others” (Bodhi, 1999). It is important to note that livelihood and work are essential parts of a fulfilled life; when one’s livelihood is harmful or induces suffering, then it is considered wrong and thereby a hindrance to fulfillment. According to J.C. Kumarappa, “If the nature of the work is properly appreciated and applied, it will stand in the same relation to the higher faculties as food is to the physical body. It nourishes and enlivens the higher man and urges him to produce the best he is capable of. It directs his free will along the proper course and disciplines the animal in him into progressive channels. It furnishes an excellent background for man to display his scale of values and develop his personality” (1997).

An example of the opposite of right livelihood would be Adam Smith’s pin factory, in which the ultimate goal is to produce a good with the highest level of efficiency by relegating man’s work to the simplest, most minute of tasks. A worker in Smith’s pin factory has no “chance to utilize and develop his faculties;” he is unable to “overcome his ego-centeredness by joining with other people in a common task” (Schumacher, 1973). According to the Buddha, a

worker in the pin factory is deprived of his right to right livelihood; a deprivation that increases in frequency as factories like Smith's become more widespread and specialized. The Buddha recognized a person's livelihood as an opportunity for developing their faculties (with right view and through right action) which will lead them to truth, happiness, and enlightenment.

Part II: Buddhist Economics

E.F. SCHUMACHER

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher was a German-British economist who pioneered the field of Buddhist economics. Born in Germany in 1911, he eventually moved to England in opposition to Hitler and the rising power of Nazi Germany. In England, he was interned on a farm as an enemy alien; during this time, he wrote an essay entitled "Multilateral Clearing." This essay explicated the shortcomings of a bilateral economic system, wherein countries are either in surplus, deficits, or balanced. Rather, Schumacher argued, world peace is more closely attainable when world trade is organized on a multilateral basis. This essay caught the attention of John Maynard Keynes, who, in turn, helped Schumacher get released from the internment farm. From there, Schumacher got a job at Oxford in the economics department. He went on to become the Chief Economic Advisor to the British National Coal Board from 1950 to 1970. Schumacher was sent to Myanmar, then known as Burma, to advise the Myanma people and their government on how to develop their economy by using technological and scientific advancements; essentially, his job was to westernize the economy in Myanmar.

Shortly after arriving in Myanmar, Schumacher realized that the Myanma way of life was not compatible with a Western style of development; rather, they had their own system, which he called "Buddhist economics" (Schumacher, 1973). In 1973, Schumacher published his book,

“Small is Beautiful,” which became a seminal work in the field of Buddhist economics. His thesis was that “neoclassical economics was dead and inhumane; that more production of goods would not make people happy, that large-scale technologies were dehumanizing and morally wrong, and that ‘man is small, and, therefore, small is beautiful’” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 8). He, like the Buddha, espoused a “middle way” of life, specifically with respect to economics; a way, he posited, that is more sustainable and enriching than what is provided by modern economics.

Schumacher wrote his essay, “Multilateral Clearing,” in 1948. It is one of his earliest works and reflects his view that economics ought to unite and provide for everyone, not just a select few. The essay was published in *Economica*, Vol. X, No. 38, at the London School of Economics. In the essay, Schumacher is clearly impacted by the context of his writing: World War II. He opines that war has underlying causes which are partly due to praising surplus countries and condemning deficit countries. These two types of countries — surplus and deficit, strong and weak — have an unbalanced relationship that tends to favor the former. Schumacher proposes a central banking and clearing system “which would ensure that all short-term imbalances tended toward long-term balance.” In fact, Schumacher argues, some form of multilateral clearing already existed at present in Europe; Germany forced surplus countries to “agree to the necessary exchanges of uncleared balances so that in the end the countries which have achieved balance (or: to the extent that they have achieved balance) are relieved of all claims and liabilities arising out of the different bilateral clearings, and the surplus countries simply remain as the creditors of the deficit countries.” Therefore, multilateral clearing is possible, but Schumacher was opposed to its imposition by force. Rather, through international clearing unions, multilateral trade could work.

His proposition is as follows: each country sets up an independent agency called a National Clearing Fund (NCF). Every participating National Clearing Fund agrees to the rates of exchange for each national currency of each country. Importers make any and all payments in their own national currency to their own NCF. The NCF of the importer informs the NCF of the exporter once payment has been received; then, the NCF of the exporter makes payment to the exporter. Over time, Schumacher states, “we should find that the different National Clearing Funds can be divided into three classes:” where imports are greater than exports; where exports are greater than imports; and where imports equal exports. In the first scenario, the NCF will have received more currency from importers than have disbursed to exporters, so they will have a balance of cash on hand, or what we would typically call a deficit (Schumacher, 1948). In the second scenario, the opposite happens: the NCF will have disbursed more currency to their *exporters* than have received from importers, so they will be left with a debit balance, or surplus (ibid). In the third and final scenario, the NCF will be left with neither a balance of cash on hand nor a debit balance; their state will be the same as it was at the start of the given time period. To counteract their deficit, NCFs of the first scenario would purchase Treasury bills; surplus NCFs would sell Treasury bills. In this manner, the general state of affairs for all participating countries would trend toward balance.

Another key element of multilateral clearing is the International Clearing Office, the proposed central accounting office for all participating NCFs. According to Schumacher, the International Clearing Office would exist in a purely administrative capacity; it would act as a trustee in the pooling of uncleared balances. That way, all the cash balances in the deficit countries would be taken over by the International Clearing Office; the surplus countries would each own a share in the pool of uncleared balances, equal to the size of their respective surpluses

(ibid). Ultimately, this plan for an international clearing union “avoids the dangers and frustration of bilateralism and allows world trade to flow according to whatever economic criteria may exist for the international division of labor, instead of arbitrary criterion on bilateral balance” (ibid). As mentioned earlier, John Maynard Keynes was impressed by E.F. Schumacher’s argument in “Multilateral Clearing” and later incorporated the language from it in his “Plans for an International Clearing Union,” which was later issued by the British government as a White Paper.

Schumacher continued to write pieces on heterodox economics throughout his life. He always remained acutely aware of what was going on around him; the context of his existence permeated his works. In addition to war, he wrote in response to a planet which was “on the heels of a deep worldwide recession, the OPEC oil crisis, and a near quadrupling of commodity prices” (Hawken, 1999, p. 3). Schumacher’s economics and philosophy supports the idea that there is a “geometry of life” that reveals “an optimal scale, size, or relationship inherent in... [but] independent of economic theory” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 14). In other words, there is an unseen relationship between productive capacity and human activity that, when threatened or ignored, produces negative effects for mankind’s quality of life. Given the impending oil crisis, Schumacher was chiefly concerned with how economists approach natural capital and resources. His book made repeat references to “the integrity and flow of ecosystem services flowing into civilizations from living systems” (Schumacher, 1973).

Given his concern with “the growing and widespread destruction of the environment and the toll it is taking on society,” Schumacher incorporated natural resource economics and environmental economics into his personal philosophy (Schumacher, 1973, p. 25). The former type of economics opines that what mankind takes out of the earth is significant; the latter opines

that what mankind puts back into the earth is also significant. For Schumacher, both types of economics are essential: they are part of the same process. He saw the partial cause of environmental destruction to be our tendency to “satisfy non-material needs with material goods;” to seek satisfaction or escape from *duhkka* via earthly objects or incentives.

Schumacher’s Buddhist economics is a heterodox economics that promotes sustainability in all forms. His economics is chiefly concerned with scale; he favors a “production by the masses, rather than mass production” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 56). He was profoundly impacted by Buddhist philosophy; specifically, the Eightfold Path. Schumacher wrote, “Right livelihood is one of the requirements of the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. It is clear, therefore, that there must be such a thing as Buddhist economics” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 37). In both his training as an economist and his experience in Buddhist countries like Myanmar, he witnessed the difference in essence of civilization between economics and Buddhism: the former is a “multiplication of wants,” and the latter is a “purification of human character” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 39). Ultimately, Schumacher defends small as beautiful because “amazingly small means lead to extraordinarily satisfactory results” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 41).

Schumacher’s qualms with modern economics were shared by economists like John Kenneth Galbraith. Schumacher opines in *Small is Beautiful* that part of modern economics’ downfall is its preference of quantification over qualitative differences. “The trouble about valuing means above ends, which, as confirmed by Keynes, is the attitude of modern economics — is that it destroys man’s freedom and power to choose the ends he really favors; the development of means, as it were, dictates the choice of ends” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 36). He employs an analogy of an illness to explain economics: something that is uneconomic is considered an illness, but the doctors (the economists) disagree on the illness’s diagnosis and

cure. Economists disagree on diagnoses and cures partly due to the fact that economics on the whole is too fragmentary; “out of the large number of aspects which in real life have to be seen and judged together before a decision can be taken, economics supplies only one — whether a thing yields a money profit *to those who undertake it* or not” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 28). It is too fragmentary because it fails to consider what Schumacher calls “metaeconomics.” Economics deals with man in his environment, whereas *metaeconomics* deals with man *and* deals with the environment.

Buddhist economics is a metaeconomics. It protects the sanctity of right livelihood by promoting production *by* the masses. It relishes in right view by identifying things as they truly are; “economics deals with goods in accordance with their market value and not in accordance with what they really are” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 29). Schumacher, the Buddha, and Siddhartha would all agree that “what is worse, and destructive of civilization, is the pretense that everything has a price or, in other words, that money is the highest of all values” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 31). In a world governed by Buddhist economics, people — not goods or profit — are at the center. As John Stuart Mill once stated, economics is “not a thing by itself, but a fragment of a greater whole; a branch of social philosophy, so interlinked with all the other branches that its conclusions, even in its own peculiar province, are only true conditionally, subject to interference and counteraction from causes not directly within its scope.” A multilateral approach to economics — a positioning of economics within a broader, more complex web of human interrelations — would pave the grounds for individual creativity and collective prosperity.

SMALL- VERSUS LARGE-SCALE ORGANIZATION

With all of this in mind, Schumacher sought out to develop a theory of large-scale organization. As the name of his book, *Small is Beautiful*, suggests, Schumacher believed that economics efforts carried out on a small scale are more sustainable than those carried out on a large scale. “The fundamental task is to achieve smallness *within* large organization,” he offers, going on to state that, “Once a large organization has come into being, it normally goes through alternative phases of *centralizing* and *decentralizing*, like swings of a pendulum. Whenever one encounters such *opposites*, each of them with persuasive arguments in its favor, it is worth looking into the depth of the problem for something more than compromise, more than a half-and-half solution. Maybe what we really need is not *either-or* but *the-one-and-the-other-at-the-same-time*” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 204).

The last sentence of this quote evokes the Buddhist concept of non-dualism. David Loy, a professor, writer, and Zen teacher, describes nondualism as meaning “not two, that two things we have understood as separate from one another are in fact not separate at all” (Loy, 2018). It is a general yet purposefully vague concept; in order to understand it more fully, it has to be contextualized: “whenever we read ‘nonduality,’ we should ask, ‘okay, what’s the context? What duality is being denied?’” (ibid). Bonnie Myotai Treace, a Buddhist nun, explains how truth is nondual: “there is never a time when truth doesn’t exist that is separate from when it does” (Treace, 2019, p. 21). In other words, nondualism means existing at the same time, which suggests that there is an optimal way in which two seemingly conflicting concepts can exist at the same time. In his book *The First and Last Freedom*, Jiddu Krishnamurti speaks of man as being co-existent with the world; “The world is not something separate from you and me; the world, society, is the relationship that we establish or seek to establish between each other”

(Krishnamurti, 1997). An example of nondualism can be explored within the area of sustainability: there is that which is sustainable, and that which is unsustainable. In order for one to exist, the other must necessarily exist as well. Moreover, nondualism can be applied to the Buddhist concepts of samsara and nirvana. Nāgārjuna, an early Mahayana philosopher, popularized the idea that samsara — the cycle of suffering — and nirvana — liberation from suffering — are nondual. Following with the cave analogy, both the suffering endured by the prisoners in the form of staring at the shadows on the wall, and the light itself — the escape from suffering, exist at the same time; they are nondual.

Schumacher's theory of large scale organization hinges on five principles: The Principle of Subsidiarity; The Principle of Vindication; The Principle of Identification; The Principle of Motivation; and the Principle of the Middle Axiom. The first one, the Principle of Subsidiarity, states that loyalty flows from the smaller units to the largest ones — not vice versa. Because of this, smaller, more manageable units should be implemented and well-maintained with a firm; these units make up the essential structure of the business. He uses an analogy of a man holding balloons: "Each of the balloons has its own buoyancy and lift, and the man himself does not lord it over the balloons, but stands beneath them, yet holding all the strings firmly in his hand. Every balloon is not only an administrative but also an *entrepreneurial* unit" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 206). These small units are essential because "every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social and never destroy and absorb them" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 208). By furnishing help to the organization as a whole, "the center will gain in authority and effectiveness if the freedom and responsibility of the lower formations are carefully preserved, with the result that the organization as a whole will be happier and more prosperous" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 208).

The second principle of large-firm organization is the Principle of Vindication. This states that each subsidiary unit, as explained in the first principle, must be defended against reproach and upheld. In order to uphold this principle, the roles of each subsidiary unit, or “quasi-firm,” as Schumacher calls them, must be clearly and explicitly defined. Then, the quasi-firm’s performance can be efficiently evaluated. If there is a need to change or eliminate a quasi-firm, it must be “specially argued and justified.” This principle reflects Schumacher’s reverence for and desire to protect smaller units, which have a better capacity to value qualitative characteristics, rather than just quantitative factors.

The third principle of large-scale organization is the Principle of Identification. He proposes identification through both a profit/loss account and a balance sheet for each *individual* subsidiary unit or quasi-firm. By creating means of identification via financial statements for each unit, the firm as a whole will be better equipped to manage itself. In this format, profits from each quasi-firm would appear as loans to the center and losses would appear as loans from the center. Recall the balloon analogy from earlier: each balloon would have its own complete identification by way of profit/loss accounts and balance sheets; that way, the man holding the balloons can trace back every action, profit or loss to any individual balloon.

Then comes the Principle of Motivation. According to Schumacher, big firms are out of touch with worker motivation. The larger the firm gets, the more muddled the individual gets; the more obfuscated are their desires, motivations, and goals. “Many have no desire to be [in the workforce], because their work does not interest them, providing them with neither challenge nor satisfaction, and has no merit in their eyes than it leads to a pay-packet at the end of the week” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 212). This is to say that profit is not a sufficient motivator in totality. Schumacher admits that many people are sufficiently motivated to work in order to acquire funds

so that they can live, but they are not motivated beyond the extent to which they simply desire to live. In other words, money as a motivator will get people to show up to work, but it cannot do much else beyond that; it does not always provide them with meaningful work, through which they are able to cultivate the faculties of their minds. John Kenneth Galbraith discusses something similar in a chapter titled “The Specious World of Work,” from his book, *The Economics of Innocent Fraud*: “For many — and this is the common circumstance — [work] is compelled by the most basic command of human life: it is what human beings must do, even suffer, to have a livelihood and its diverse components. It provides against life’s enjoyments and against its grave discomforts or something worse. Though often repetitive, exhausting, without any mental challenge, it is endured to have the necessities and some of the pleasures of living” (Galbraith, 2004, p.17). It is within the Principle of Motivation that Schumacher most clearly elicits the need for right livelihood. If each worker were truly afforded their right to meaningful work, then money as motivation would lose its power; rapacity would be on the decline. In fact, Schumacher might even agree with the idea that money as a primary motivator actually vitiates the experience of work. He would certainly agree that the continued and prolonged practice of using money as the ultimate end will surely lead to an internecine state for both the environment and mankind.

RIGHT VIEW, RIGHT LIVELIHOOD, AND NATURAL CAPITAL

Schumacher’s Buddhist economics sought out to establish “a clear delineation of the destructiveness of man-over-nature models of thinking, organization, and development” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 45). It is unified with “the idea of nature as both mentor and spiritual sanctuary;” as the divine grounds upon which we organize all human affairs. In developing the

field of Buddhist economics, Schumacher aimed to set forward a middle way — a path similar to that of the Buddha — to end suffering. His aim was to end suffering for all, but he recognized that suffering was more pervasive in communities which have been exploited by the system that modern economics upholds. In a White Paper on Overseas Development, he wrote about the aims of foreign aid: “To do what lies within our power to help the developing countries to provide their people with the material opportunities for using their talents, of living a full and happy life and steadily improving their lot” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 135).

In *Small is Beautiful*, he explains the use of human labor as a fundamental source of wealth, and how this source of wealth has contributed to widespread and deep inequality. He explains this in very simple terms. An employee provides an employer with their labor in exchange for compensation. According to Marx, this compensation necessarily has to be below the actual amount of value created by the laborer so that the employer can make profit. In other words, the value above the compensation owed to the laborer represents the surplus value, which goes to the owner of the means of production, as opposed to the laborer himself. In an ideal world, the employer would be able to produce output without employees; he would not have to pay any money to laborers, therefore everything would be his profit. The ideal for the employee is to receive compensation or income without labor; there is no requirement to convert his labor into value that will ultimately benefit the employer. With all of this in mind, Schumacher stresses the importance of the universal agreement that a fundamental source of wealth is human labor. With this in mind, “the starting point of all our considerations is poverty, or rather, a degree of poverty which means misery, and degrades and stultifies the human person; and our first task is to recognize and understand the boundaries and limitations which this degree of poverty imposes” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 139).

Schumacher warns that this degree of poverty is only getting greater in an increasingly connected and globalized economy. Just as in a large firm, individual wants and needs are hard to identify, so too in a global economy are multitudes of people forgotten. “The modern tendency is to see and become conscious of only the visible and to forget the invisible things that are making the visible things possible and keep it going” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 137). To put it in other words, the modern tendency is to lack right view. We fail to see that “it is not a matter of some people being rich and others being poor, both being united by a common way of life: it is a matter of two ways of life existing side by side in such a manner that even the humblest member of the one disposes of a daily income which is a high multiple of the income accruing to even the hardest working member of the other” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 136). A survey by Northwestern Mutual found that 70 percent of Americans identified as middle class in 2017. Contrarily, a report from the Pew Research Center states that only 50 percent of Americans are actually in the middle class — and that number is steadily shrinking. We tend to identify as that which we are not — the exact opposite of right view, and a practice that Jiddu Krishnamurti warns against in his *The First and Last Freedom*. Some Americans cannot properly identify themselves within the class structure; their ability to have compassion for or sympathize with those they have never met in foreign, under-developed countries must be significantly more impaired. Without right view, modern economics espouses illusion.

Schumacher makes yet another critique of modern economics: its reliance on the machine. He criticized widespread industrialization as a robber of dignified, meaningful, and unalienated work. Schumacher highlighted the key distinction between a tool and a machine: a tool aids a worker without depriving him of the essentially human part of his work, whereas a machine replaces the need for a worker at all, thereby destroying the essentially human aspect of

work. In other words, “the carpet loom is a tool, a contrivance for holding warp threads at a stretch for the pile to be woven round them by the craftsmen’s fingers; but the power loom is a machine, and its significance as a destroyer of culture lies in the fact that it does the essentially human part of the work” (Coomaraswamy, 1997). By valuing the work of the machine over the work of a person, there is a greater emphasis placed on the ultimate good than the process of production of that good. Moreover, valuing goods over people contributes to the prioritization of quantitative factors as measurements of success.

Human labor is just one part of natural capital that is available to producers, the other two being fossil fuels and the tolerance margins of nature. Fossil fuels “are merely a part of the ‘natural capital’ which we steadfastly insist on treating as expendable, as if it were income” (Schumacher, 1973, p. 6). Since fossil fuels are not recyclable, Schumacher warns against treating them as disposable; “once they are gone they are gone forever” (ibid). The tolerance margins of nature refer to the natural world’s ability to rebound against destruction via deforestation, the introduction of man-made substances with which nature is unfamiliar, and other production-related factors and byproducts such as carbon emissions. An example of a manmade creation which nature is unequipped to deal with is plastic, a non-biodegradable material that has been used in a multitude of products and services since its invention in 1907. In 1960, the United States generated 390 thousand tons of plastic, compared with 35,680 thousand tons in 2018 (EPA, 2018). Of the 35,680 thousand tons of plastic generated, 26,970 thousand tons ended up in landfills; a volume of waste which nature is growingly increasingly incapable of handling. Ultimately, Schumacher warns against treating natural capital as inexhaustible because the continued process of treating it as such means that someday, all natural capital will be entirely depleted.

CONSUMER SOVEREIGNTY

“In the conventional economic instruction of the past, the market had special identification with consumer sovereignty — with the controlling power of the consumer in deciding what would be produced, bought and sold. Here, it was said, was the final authority to which the producing firm, the capitalist, was amply subordinate... Product innovation and modification is a major economic function, and no significant manufacturer introduces a new product without cultivating the consumer demand for it. Or forgoes efforts to influence and sustain the demand for an existing product. Here enters the world of advertising and salesmanship, of television, of consumer manipulation. Thus an impairment of consumer market sovereignty” (Galbraith, 2004, p. 6). In this text, Galbraith explains the deterioration of consumer power and sovereignty in the market, exacerbated by advertising designed to dupe consumers into thinking they need a new product, or that they need to replace their current items more quickly than ever before. In fact, consumer power is steadily declining as advertisements and products become more refined, even relying on computer-generated algorithms, entirely independent of human control. Galbraith makes a connection between the buyer in the market and the voter in elections: “As the ballot gives authority to the citizen, so in economic life the demand curve accords authority to the consumer. In both instances there is a significant measure of fraud. With both ballot and buyer, there is formidable, well-financed management of the public response. And so especially in the age of advertising and modern sales promotion” (Galbraith, 2004, p. 12).

This management of public response reflects the dangers associated with “bigness;” the wants of entire groups of people are commanded by cunningly effective advertising, rather than their entirely of their own free will. Moreover, consumer sovereignty has been influenced by

what Marx identifies as “Warenfetischismus,” or commodity fetishism. Marx makes the argument that the capitalist system forces everyone to put economic interests at the heart of their lives. Even if the consumer is sovereign insofar as they have the ability to exercise choice over their commodities, they are still forced to consider commodities at almost every juncture of their daily lives. In other words, consumer sovereignty has been challenged by modern marketing, and consumer fetishism has been amplified.

Galbraith states that gross domestic product is the oft-cited quintessential measure of economic progress and social achievement. “How does the GDP move? Its scale and content are extensively imposed by producers. Good performance is measured by the production of material objects and services. Not education or literature or the arts but the production of automobiles... Here is the modern measure of economic and therewith social achievement” (Galbraith, 2004, p. 15). In instances where the public response is *not* managed; instances where GDP is low, people have still flourished. “The art of Florence, the wonderful civic creation that is Venice, William Shakespeare, Richard Wagner and Charles Darwin, all came from communities with a very low GDP. It was their good fortune that they were free from the constraints of salesmanship and managed public response” (Galbraith, 2004, p. 15). Schumacher would opine here that the attempt of advertising agencies to reach expansive groups of people is actually a hindrance to society as a whole; that smaller is better.

FRIEDMAN DOCTRINE

Milton Friedman’s theory on corporate social responsibility, also known as the Friedman doctrine, represents an entirely different perspective on business than those held by E.F. Schumacher and John Kenneth Galbraith. From Friedman’s perspective, businessmen need not

concern themselves with promoting desirable social ends. In fact, he identifies the “responsibilities for providing employment, eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution” as “pure and unadulterated socialism—” a system which is deeply undesirable compared to a free market. His reasoning is that “in a free enterprise, private property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business,” and therefore, he has no “responsibility” beyond yielding a profit for the owners of that business (Friedman, 1970). However, Friedman’s own words in his 1970 article for the New York Times reveal exactly why his mode of thinking is unsustainable in the long-run: “I have been impressed time and again by the schizophrenic character of many businessmen. They are capable of being extremely far-sighted and clear-headed in matters that are internal to their businesses. They are incredibly short-sighted and muddle-headed in matters that are outside their businesses but affect the possible survival of businesses in general.”

On this front, Schumacher would agree; he would probably even extend the statement to say that these businessmen, as described by Friedman, act in manners that affect not only the possible survival of businesses in general, but also the survival of mankind and nature. Friedman maintains that businesses need and should not be concerned with environmental factors such as pollution; the argument “that he [the businessman] is to make expenditures on reducing pollution beyond the amount that is in the best interests of the corporation or that is required by law in order to contribute to the social objective of improving the environment” is unreasonable and impractical. He goes on to state that because businessmen are trained as businessmen, and not as politicians or economists, they should not be burdened by the concern of rising inflation, for example. “How is he to know what action of his will contribute to that end? He is presumably an

expert in running his company — in producing a product or selling it or financing it. But nothing about his selection makes him an expert on inflation” (Friedman, 1970).

Schumacher would agree that specialization creates employees or businessmen who are particularly adept in their given field. However, Schumacher’s theory of corporate organization would encourage collaboration with inflation experts, or any other kind of expert, by these untrained businessmen, so that the corporation as a whole *can* concern itself with issues pertaining to social responsibility. In Schumacher’s view, the role of the business is much broader; it condemns the constraint of myopia that tends to arise out of a profit-oriented model.

Schumacher would also disagree with Friedman on “the great virtue of private enterprise” (Friedman, 1970). The latter economist says that its virtue is that “it forces people to be responsible for their own actions and makes it difficult for them to ‘exploit’ other people for either selfish or unselfish purposes. They can do good—but only at their own expense” (ibid). Schumacher would view this virtue from the perspective of the individual, rather than the perspective of the corporation, as Friedman does; he would opine that private competitive enterprises, in fact, force people to endure the consequences of their own actions. Therefore, it may be true that individuals are responsible for their own behavior in society, but individuals and society as a whole must also experience or suffer the consequences of corporate action. Friedman goes on to state that “in a free society, it is hard for ‘good’ people to do ‘good,’ but that is a small price to pay for making it hard for ‘evil’ people to do ‘evil,’ especially since one man’s good is another’s evil” (Friedman, 1970). Schumacher would concur here that Friedman’s “good,” profit, is his “evil.”

Friedman’s infatuation with money and profit is evinced by his argument that corporate social responsibility necessarily imposes an undue financial burden on the businessman. He

states that, “insofar as his actions in accord with his ‘social responsibility’ reduce returns to stockholders, he is spending their money. Insofar as his actions raise the price to customers, he is spending the customers’ money. Insofar as his actions lower the wages of some employees, he is spending their money” (Friedman, 1970). He operates under the base assumption that every action within the realm of corporate social responsibility involves monetary transactions. In fact, Schumacher’s theory of large scale organization is an example of an action that does not require the expenditure of money; rather, it requires a restructuring and reframing of the business itself. Friedman goes on to state that “the stockholders or customers or the employees could separately spend their own money on the particular action if they wished to do so;” that corporations need not bother with socially responsible expenditures because individuals can do it themselves. This perspective misses the key point that the resources possessed by individuals versus those possessed by corporations are entirely different in magnitude and potency. In other words, individuals lack the same kind of financial power and influence that corporations have.

Friedman’s focus on profit as the driving factor of business activity would be recognized by both the Buddha and E.F. Schumacher as lacking right view. In Buddhism, right view means “taking up the whole catastrophe” (Treace, 2019, p. 25). In other words, it is *not* focusing on or prioritizing any one factor above all else. Recall the story of Siddhartha by Herman Hesse, in which the eponymous main character grew increasingly disillusioned by the greedy, profit-driven merchants in his town. Siddhartha tried to live a life that was antithetical to them; he paid no attention to money or profit and lived as an ascetic. He soon realized that the path to enlightenment was found somewhere between the merchants and the ascetics; he had a profound reverence for the Middle Way. Friedman’s doctrine would be fundamentally different if it were filtered through a Buddhist lens.

PART III: Fast Fashion

ITS INCEPTION AND METHODS

Fashion has existed as a form of expression for millennia, providing people with a channel through which they communicate cultural, ideological, and aesthetic meaning. Its role in and impact on society has evolved over time as humans' relationship with fashion changed. "Fashions have been influenced by war, religion, social movements, and scientific discoveries" (Rissman, 2015). For much of human history, fashion trends spread slowly; they were dictated by members of high society who could afford the high ticket price usually associated with quality garments. Since the dawn of the Internet, the ways fashion trends emerge and spread have drastically changed. Consumers from across the world are able to view and share their own personal style with massive audiences. Since the fashion industry is becoming increasingly globalized, the methods by which fashion brands design and produce garments have changed as well.

Since industrialization, the concept of apparel production technology has been at the forefront of fashion production and consumption. Apparel production technology places an emphasis on shortening the time between design and production, thereby bringing clothing to market at a much faster rate. This has given rise to "fast fashion," with fast referring both to the speed with which brands design and produce products, as well as the wearable life of the products themselves. In order to sustain a rapid production model, brands often have to rely on outsourcing labor to impoverished communities in addition to using cheap materials and fabrics. They also have to rely on automatized labor via the use of machines, such as the power loom. The Buddha and E.F. Schumacher would agree that apparel production technology has contributed to the deprivation of right livelihood.

One method that is associated with apparel production technology is the “quick response” method. Its goal is to address the increased rapidity of changing market trends. Clothing brands rely on a faster cycle of production, which “consists of rapid prototyping, small batches with large variety, more efficient transportation and delivery, and floor-ready merchandise” (Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan, 2012). Social media has allowed certain trends to go viral, but they often subside just as quickly as they arrived; brands have to keep up with the increasing pace with which consumers change tastes. In the past, designers generally created lines for two to four seasons: spring/summer, and fall/winter. Now, it is generally accepted that there are 52 seasons in a year; fast fashion brands like Boohoo and H&M release new lines of clothing every week in order to match demand. Galbraith states that corporate power “ordains that social success is more automobiles, more television sets, more diverse apparel” (2004, p. 58). However, the lasting negative impacts of creating so much more apparel are rarely considered; “Negative social effects — pollution, destruction of the landscape, the unprotected health of the citizenry, the threat of military action and death — do not count as such. When measuring achievement, the good and the disastrous can be combined” (2004, p. 58).

In his essay “Buddhist Economics,” Schumacher states that “it would be the height of folly to make material so that it should wear out quickly and the height of barbarity to make anything ugly, shabby, or mean.” At the heart of fast fashion is extremely cheap prices. Take the following dress, from fast fashion brand Shein, for example:

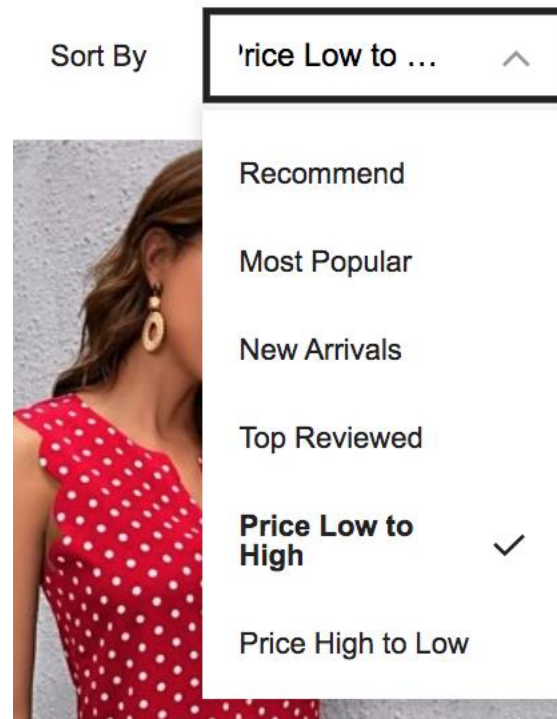


[*1950 Sears Christmas Book, p. 85*](#)

The dress in the middle was sold for \$7.98. Note that it is unique; it cannot come in other colors or prints. \$7.98 is, of course, the cost in 1950, so after accounting for inflation, the cost of that same dress in 2021 would be \$88.29 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). That is 25x as expensive as the dress from Shein.

The explanation for the drastic decrease in the cost of clothing is simple: huge brands like Shein figured out ways to cut the cost of production at the expense of quality, both in the clothes and in the work environments of their employees. Moreover, in the past, you had to sift through a catalog like Sears' to discover what was trending; now, you can go on any number of free phone applications, you can pore over the profiles of any number of social media influencers. Our accessibility to fashion has only increased; it is no longer something relegated to the pages of a magazine or the big screen at the movie theater: fashion trends can pop up at any minute, any

day, all year round. What's more, if you are on the hunt for a good deal, there is a feature on virtually every fast fashion brand's website where you can sort thousands of listings by price: low to high.



Shein website

Gone are the days when fashion brands released collections twice a year. We are in an age of inundation, fueled by our tendency to cycle in and out of trends with impressive speed. Brands like Shein simply have to keep pace with the manufactured demand for their products. As consumers, we often find that we have no other option than to purchase from these brands; when the market is saturated with \$5.00 dresses, justifying spending upwards of \$100.00 on an alternative simply seems undoable. Therein lies the constant cycle of buying garments, wearing them an average of ten times, throwing them away, and then buying something else (Traid, 2021).

BOOHOO GROUP: A CASE STUDY

Boohoo Group, a UK-based fast fashion retailer, was founded in 2006 by Mahmud Kamani and Carol Kane. For the purposes of this paper, it will serve as a case study of fast fashion. Kamani and Kane previously worked with other fast fashion brands such as Primark and New Look before founding Boohoo. According to Boohoo's annual report, it netted £856.9 million in revenue in 2019, which is equivalent to \$1,146,275,130 USD (Morningstar, 2021). The company employs over 2,300 people and operates mainly out of the United Kingdom. It purchases a lot of its products from a garment factory in Leicester, England. It has been evaluated by numerous independent auditing agencies regarding its sustainability and ethics. The remainder of this section will summate the findings of these agencies.

Fashion Revolution is a UK-based not-for-profit social enterprise whose goal is to create "a global fashion industry that conserves and restores the environment and values people over growth and profit" (Fashion Revolution, 2021). Each year, they publish the Fashion Transparency Index that measures and ranks 250 of the world's largest fashion brands that turnover more than \$400 million USD annually. They gather data from brands' public documents on human rights and environmental issues, taking into account 239 indicators of transparency. They evaluate a brand's policies and commitments, governance, supply chain traceability, "know, show & fix," and spotlight issues, such as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, gender and racial equality, and environmental impacts (Fashion Revolution, 2021). The organization gave Boohoo Group a transparency score of 19.7 percent for fiscal year 2020. The average transparency score across all 250 companies was 23 percent. Given their low accountability practices, it is difficult to gather specific data on each branch of operations within Boohoo.

Recall Schumacher's man-with-a-balloon analogy; for Boohoo, the balloons hover so far above the man that it is difficult to identify and examine them up close.

Another independent auditing agency that has evaluated Boohoo's ethical and sustainability practices is the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC), established by Parliament in 1997 and supported by the National Audit Office. The EAC gathers data on UK-based corporations via public committee evidence sessions and provides guidance on their website for those who wish to submit written and oral evidence regarding a company's environmental practices. In its last report, the committee gathered evidence on various questions, ranging from "what actions could government take to improve the collection of fashion," to, "how could employment law and payment of the minimum wage be more effectively enforced within the UK fashion industry?" (Environmental Audit Committee, 2018). The committee reported that Boohoo failed to sign up for the Action, Collaboration, and Transformation labor rights agreement that is working toward establishing a living wage for garment workers. Moreover, the committee "concluded that the current business model for the UK fashion industry is unsustainable," with Boohoo ranking among the "less engaged" retailers, the lowest category of qualification in the report. Boohoo was asked to respond to the EAC report, but failed to do so. Another independent, not-for-profit auditing agency is Ethical Consumer, which was founded in 1989 and relies on a research database 20 years in the making to evaluate companies' ethics across 300 topics. They evaluated Boohoo and gave them the worst possible rating for the following categories: environmental reporting, palm oil sourcing, cotton sourcing, toxic chemicals, supply chain management, animal testing policy, and likely tax avoidance (Ethical Consumer Research Organization, 2021). Schumacher and Galbraith would identify Boohoo as a

hallmark of corporate power; a firm that forgoes the demonstrated social benefits of smallness in favor of production and profit.

Public perceptions of Boohoo Group are poor, both in the formal press and among consumer sentiment expressed on social media. An investigation into the brand revealed that they pay their workers as little as £3.50 an hour (Wheeler, 2020). This has led the public to condemn Boohoo for using near-slave labor. In fact, Priti Patel, the home secretary of the United Kingdom, once stated in a press release, "I will not tolerate sick criminals forcing innocent people into slave labor and a life of exploitation. Let this be a warning to those who are exploiting people in sweatshops like these for their own commercial gain. This is just the start. What you are doing is illegal, it will not be tolerated and we are coming after you." Needless to say, slave labor is mutually exclusive from the Buddhist concept of right livelihood; nobody is cultivating their mental faculties through enriched, meaningful work when that work is forced or grossly underpaid.

Moreover, consumers are critical of Boohoo on social media. In 2017, Boohoo launched their #allgirls ad campaign, geared toward celebrating diversity. Consumers took to social media to criticize Boohoo for their lack of diversity in this campaign, with one commenter stating, "What about plus size girls? Disabled girls? Non-binary girls? Muslim girls? And everyone else?" (Hardy, 2017). In the summer of 2021, I worked for the production company that organized Miami swim week. In my capacity as an unpaid intern, I worked directly with Boohoo in preparation for their swim week debut. I got firsthand experience with how they make decisions within their company. I noticed that virtually all decisions valued expeditiousness above all else; there was little room for debate, questions, or adjustments. Rather, the culture at Boohoo was to move things along as quickly as possible, and to deny the obvious faults within

their products. I worked with a stylist, who was an independent contractor and had never worked with Boohoo before. Together, we contacted local seamstresses to come and fix garments that broke before the show. I recall one instance when a social media influencer came in for her fitting and in the process of putting on her bathing suit, it broke. To be clear, this was a product that would be advertised for the first time at their runway show. It broke before it could even be worn to advertise; before it could even be used for its functional purpose. I recall another instance where we were collecting the garments after a day of casting. I collected the garments in one black trash bag, and I went around the room collecting actual trash in another identical bag. The representative for BoohooMAN asked me, “which one of these bags has the clothes?” I had lost track; I was unsure which bag was which, so I quipped, “I think this one is the trash, but this other one [with the clothes] will probably end up in the landfill in a month anyway.” He laughed and agreed. It was evident that even their employees did not stand behind their products.

During the pandemic, Boohoo’s sales surged 44 percent as people stayed home and shopped online (Ecommerce News, 2020). At the same time, “factory workers were asked to work with little to no social distancing or personal protective equipment” (Hanbury, 2020). The firm did well financially, but Schumacher, Galbraith, and the Buddha would all agree that finances are not a useful metric of progress in isolation. They would also agree that Boohoo lacks right view, which in turn deprives their employees of right livelihood. Ultimately, Boohoo is just one brand in an industry marked by deception and illusion. All things considered, perhaps profit is the only area in which Boohoo excels. If sustainability is the ultimate goal, or, rather, if the goal is to safeguard a future in which economic and social progress can continue on, then companies like Boohoo must reconsider their values and practices.

CONCLUSION

The Buddha set out to identify the human predicament in an attempt to understand how to find relief from it. In doing so, he developed a profoundly impactful and practical philosophy that continues to provide people around the world with tools to understand and cope with suffering. Moreover, Buddhism provides a refreshing and positive lens through which one can view the world of fashion consumption; it explains that there is an optimal pattern of consumption that can maximize human satisfactions within our given means. Buddhist economics, as developed by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, suggests that we ought to organize ourselves in smaller units. When we prioritize smallness, we allow ourselves to consider complex, intricate problems that arise out of production and association; we can understand qualitative differences as well as quantitative ones. Ultimately, when viewed through a Buddhist perspective, the world of fashion could be a lot more sustainable and fulfilling.

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