

The Appropriate Consumption Culture Of Buddhists In Current Thai Society According To Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Wishes

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to study the appropriate consumption culture of Buddhists in current Thai society according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's wishes. In this study, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Taking a quantitative approach, researchers had 69 people/monks complete a questionnaire, whereas researchers used focus group techniques, inviting experts for discussion for a more qualitative approach. From the study, researchers found three of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's most important wishes to include: 1) making Buddhists and members of all religions connect with the most essential significance of their religions; 2) fostering a good understanding between religions; and 3) furthering all of mankind by helping individuals to separate themselves from materialism. If Buddhists can apply these ideas to their lives, it will promote their happiness and assist them in surviving in a capitalist society by living their lives economically.

Keywords: Consumption culture; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Wishes

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, consumption has become a cultural way of life in Thailand, even among Buddhists, and is associated with items required for daily living, particularly with the four necessities of life; namely, food, clothing, lodging, and medicine. An appropriate consumption culture must be fostered in the Dhamma as a means of avoiding excessive consumption behavior.

Buddhist consumption is also known as Buddhist economics. The basic model of economic activity is controlled by scarcity, which requires choice. Choice involves an opportunity cost, as selecting one item means foregoing another. The final goal is maximum satisfaction. In addition, Angsuvat & Pracha (2010) stated that consumption is natural behavior among all mortal creatures. It is an innate instinct of all living beings to stay alive. Apart from air, we must consume four basic substances – food, clothing, shelter, and medicine – in order to sustain our physical and mental wellbeing.

The appropriate consumption culture of Buddhists of the Dhamma practice is to live and walk along the middle path. The search for sufficiency passed on by Western culture has influenced Thai Buddhists' consumption patterns for some time now, resulting in a dynamic consumption culture among Buddhists.

In Thailand, the idea of Buddhist consumption stems from a monk named Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (May 27, 1906 – May 25, 1993), an ascetic philosopher of the 20th century. Known as an innovative reinterpreter of Buddhist doctrine and Thai folk beliefs, Buddhadasa fostered a reformation in conventional religious perceptions within his homeland of Thailand, as well as abroad. While a formalized upasampanna ascetic, or "monk," having submitted to

mandatory government religious controls at twenty years of age, Buddhadasa developed a personal view that rejected specific religious identification and principally considered all faiths as one (i-dhamma, 2008).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's maxim regarding cultural consumption behavior is "to eat the same as the cat (use only one dish to eat), to bathe in the ditch (bathe naturally, rather than in a bathroom), to sleep in the sty (stay in only one room), and to listen to the mosquito singing (sleep without a mosquito net)". This maxim offers practical suggestions for meeting daily living requirements that are suitable to making progress in the mind by living in accordance with the rule of nature; namely, "to live as normally as possible but to act as a wise person." Furthermore, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's most important three wishes include Buddhists and members of all religions: 1) connecting with the essence of their own religion, 2) fostering a good understanding among religions, and 3) guiding the world away from materialism (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1994: 152)

The researchers consider Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's model of cultural consumption behavior used in the practice of Dhamma to be worthy of study. His ideas about cultural consumption behavior may prove beneficial to Buddhist consumption culture in current Thai society. They can serve as guidelines for solving problems associated with consumption culture, and following his way of life may prove useful to people living in Thai society.

OBJECTIVE

To study the concepts of appropriate Buddhist consumption culture in current Thai society by living according to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, researchers utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. The population that researchers surveyed are made up of individuals who respect and have faith in the concepts promoted by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. In terms of quantitative methods, we gathered data using a questionnaire that was presented to 69 people/monks (made up of 35 monks, 20 academics, two doctors, and 12 other individuals). As for qualitative methods, the researchers made use of focus group techniques, which involved inviting experts, who are very familiar with the concepts presented by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in order to discuss the ways in which people can live in accordance with these concepts.

In analyzing the data, researchers used descriptive statistics of the percentage, frequency, median, mean, and standard deviation to analyze the quantitative data and content analysis to analyze the qualitative data.

RESULTS

The study indicated that current Thai society's basic circumstances with regard to the overall perception of society and the environment is quite good (with a mean of 3.45 and a standard deviation of 0.33). The overall perception of the economic situation is also good (with a mean of 4.37 and a standard deviation of 0.48). The overall perception of the political situation is moderately good (with a mean of 2.97 and a standard deviation of 0.76), while the overall perception of the educational situation is good (with a mean of 3.11 and a standard deviation of 0.37).

As for Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes, the first wish refers to attempting to connect with the essence of one's religion, which was perceived to be fairly easily practiced in Thai society (with a mean of 3.52 and a standard deviation of 1.12). The second wish is to foster a good understanding among the religions and was also perceived as fairly easily practiced in Thai society (with a mean of 3.59 and a standard deviation of 0.99). Finally, the third wish involves assisting the world in freeing itself from materialism, which was similarly perceived as quite possible to put into practice in Thai society (with a mean of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 1.20).

Practice guidelines for appropriate consumption culture among Buddhists in current Thai society are in accordance with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes. The guideline from the first wish; namely, to attempt to connect with the essence of one's religion in Thai society was perceived to be followed quite well (with a mean of

3.32 and a standard deviation of 1.15). The guideline for practice applied to the second wish; namely, to foster understanding among religions in Thai society, was also perceived to be followed quite well (with a mean of 3.36 and a standard deviation of 1.04). Similarly, the guideline for practice applied to the third wish; namely, to assist the world in moving away from materialism, was perceived to be adhered to rather well (with a mean of 3.39 and a standard deviation of 1.04).

Next, researchers used a focus group technique, which involved inviting experts, who are quite familiar with the concepts presented by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. They introduced the associated guidelines as described below.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu explained that individuals following the Dhamma should lead a life of value to the individual and to the community. Regardless of what situations they face, individuals should live aligned with nature's concepts by focusing on nature. Furthermore, they should emphasize the meaning of nature, which is found in Dhamma, nature, and all things that are part of nature, ideas which scientists in materialistic society have come to recognize and have discovered. However, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu refers to nature's rules, which are discovered by those people who understand consumption culture and Dhamma exactly as the Buddha does; namely, by emphasizing an understanding of the overall elements as they relate as a whole. Therefore, Buddhist consumption culture must be manifested in accordance with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes until Buddhists are able to completely remove themselves from materialism.

The appropriate consumption culture in current Thai society must employ Dhammanism. By materialism, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is referring to a perspective of a world that strives after sensory happiness. As consumers in Thai society, many Buddhists have set life goals about eating, fulfilling desires, and honor, making their lifestyles like a competition and acting selfishly much of the time.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu completely rejected materialism and instead proposed a set of principles, which differ from materialism and spiritualism, called Dhammanism. The principles of Dhammanism offer a means of joining materialism and spiritualism. People with mature minds are able to control their patterns of consumption, make their consumption behaviors useful to themselves and others by following Dhammanism as the best instrument for the body and mind to adjust the equilibrium until they are able to completely remove themselves from materialism.

Buddhists should adjust their consumption culture to an appropriate equilibrium that is in harmony with nature. In addition, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu teaches Buddhists not to forget about nature and to familiarize themselves with nature's rules. On the other hand, Buddhists should consume according to a criteria of norms that are in equilibrium with nature and should, at times, adjust nature so that it can be in harmony with us. This manner of existence is the best way of living together in the world until reaching a certain calm from proper consumption that is referred to as Nibbana (Calm).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu would like Buddhists to match their lifestyles to nature as much as possible. Improving upon habits that are the least natural by living a lifestyle of mild consumption lifestyle develops wisdom and the mind, as in the following expression, "Act sufficiently, expect little, but perform highly."

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu mentioned in his first wish that "the correct practice must be in the way of Matchimapatipadha") Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1994:77). This sentiment underlines the profound underlying meaning of Buddhism. He taught people to correctly comprehend the word "prudence," which refers to remaining or proceeding on the middle path. It does not imply saving as much as possible, as people generally understand this word. Indeed, in Buddhism, prudence refers to sufficient or moderate consumption that adheres to the Dhamma concept of consumption in Buddhism, as taught to the monks in Dhamma-Mumyasutra by the Lord Buddha in order to teach the Buddhist monks moderation in their consumption of the four basic needs, such as food. Prudence also conforms with concepts of cultural philosophy related to Sufficiency Economy from HM King's ideas and speech based on the Buddhist Dhamma and its guidelines for practicing "sufficient culture."

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu mentioned in his second wish, the desire "to foster a good understanding among the religions." In light of the various races and religions in society, we must follow the current consumption culture in Thai society, meaning that we must follow Ithappattaya's rules (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1994:77). If we practice or

consume in the wrong manner, suffering will result. Similarly, if we practice or consume in a manner that ends suffering, we will not suffer. When consumers develop the essence of Buddhist Dharma, they come to appreciate the truths of the Dhamma in nature. We should not adhere to everything as it is presented to us; it is a part of natural elements. The inherited consumption culture conforms to the behavior changes involved in Green & Krutier's concept of consumption culture. Their research found that the most practical behaviors were perceptible behaviors that are expressed by the body and mind as life skills. These skills, which were begun by consumers, have been imitated and systematically practiced until they became a lifestyle and finally became the appropriate consumption culture (Nua-On, 2009: 28).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu mentioned in the third wish the need to “lead the world away from materialism” (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1994:152). He expected that Buddhists would understand the meaning of materialism exactly and realize that many of the major problems in Thai society are directly affected by materialism, which is caused by modern capitalism and the use of technology and media, which stimulate Buddhists and attract them to materialism. We have now become extremely addicted to materialism, making us incapable of reaching the heart of religion and unable to acknowledge the true meaning of materialism due to ignorance and an obsession with competing for objects or things that tempt and influence consumers' eyes, ears, noses, tongues, bodies, and minds. The mind is not able to harmonize with these objects and cannot understand their meanings, even if consumers believe in the Dharma principles and understand the differences among religions. But problems continue because “the consumers in this world are still slaves to objects as a result of the media and technology in the modern world.” This idea is consistent with the consumption culture concept of materialism, as presented by Raymond Williams. He states that “materialistic consumption culture uses large communication systems, such as print media and television media as an important factor of production.” Consequently, an inappropriate consumption culture has come to penetrate and dominate cultural production under modern capitalism; in particular, the culture of the sign has dominated consumers' minds for a long time. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu said, “a man, who is fascinated with objects, is like a patient who is sick from a spiritual disease” (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 1994:190). He will be like an individual who has disabilities related to his eyes, ears, tongue, body, and mind, which are caused by false views, and continue to fascinate, and he will suffer from this sickness frequently. Killing this disease requires a practice based on Dhamma called intellectual development that is related to the concept of the sign in consumption culture, presented by Jean Baudrillard, who states that “good consumption culture among humans is under the rule of the sign” (Khawnuan, 2007:13). The idea indicates that consumption is not only about the consumption of objects but also about the consumption of signs. The object's sign may also determine the conditions of consumption culture. Finally, consumers cannot withdraw from objects' signs.

In addition, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu explained in the Dhamma that people should lead lives of value to the individual and community. Regardless of what situations they face, people should live in harmony with nature's concepts by emphasizing nature. Moreover, they should focus on the meaning of nature, as represented in the Dhamma, in nature, and in things that are part of nature that scientists in materialistic society have come to recognize and discover. However, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is referring to nature's rules that are discovered by the people who understand consumption culture and the Dhamma exactly as the Buddha and who emphasize developing an understanding of the overall elements in terms of how they relate as a whole. Therefore, Buddhists' consumption culture must be adhere to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes until Buddhists are able to completely remove themselves from materialism.

As previously mentioned, appropriate consumption culture among Buddhists in current Thai society must follow Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes, which are analyzed by Systems Theory as indicated in Figure 1.

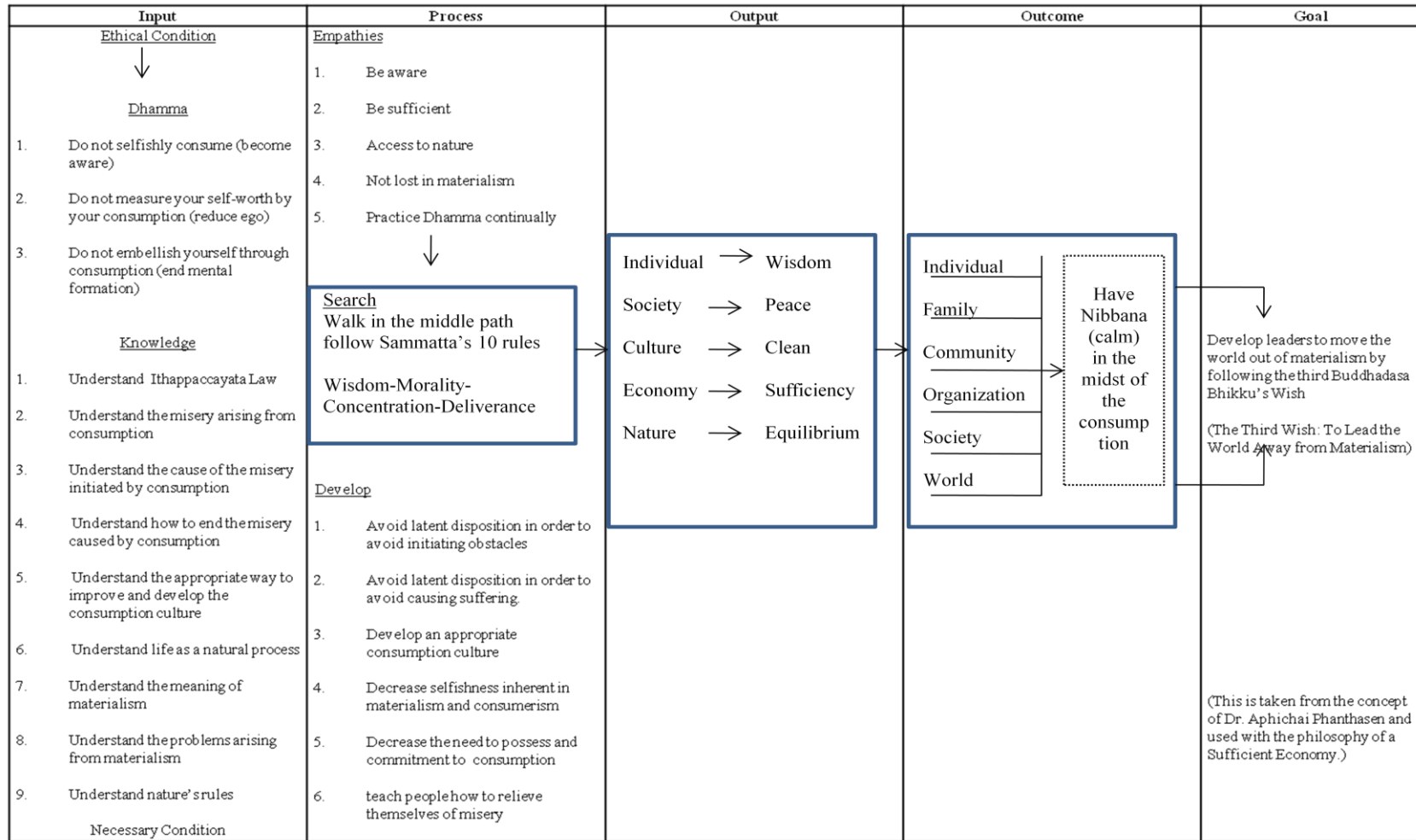


Figure 1: Format of the Buddhist's Appropriate Consumption Culture in Modern Thai Society from 3 Buddhadasa Bhikku's Wishes

DISCUSSION

In this paper, the suggestions of this study focus on two points; namely, on another organization adapting certain management principles and areas of potential future research.

Practical Suggestions

The Ministry of Culture and the National Office of Buddhism should support, promote, and determine a developmental model for an appropriate consumption culture among Buddhists in current Thai society that adheres to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes, while also integrating the concept of a sufficiency economy presented by the HM's King as a road map by which to determine policies and practical plans, including operating plans, monitoring/evaluation, and improvements that focus on effective sufficiency and are effective for Buddhists in Thai society.

Buddhists in Thai society should create a good atmosphere within their consumption culture at the family level and at all levels of the community in Thai society. They should promote and support the creation of an atmosphere that helps consumption culture adhere to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes and integrate the sufficiency economy concept of the HM's King.

The Ministry of Culture and the National Office of Buddhism should support and promote Buddhist monks, Buddhists in all levels of the community, government sectors, and private sectors in presenting their outstanding work, adhering to Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes and integrating the sufficiency economy concept of the HM's King, and applying the principles of Buddhist consumption culture in Thai society in order to motivate the monks, communities, and organizations at all levels of Thai society to develop and use an appropriate consumption culture concept. Such an achievement will decrease consumption rates. In the meantime, the Ministry of Culture and the Office of National Buddhism should offer rewards and praise to individuals, communities, and organizations at all levels of Thai society as a means of sustainably decreasing consumption rates.

Academic Suggestions

A model by which to study appropriate consumption culture among Buddhists in current Thai society should be created from joining Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's three wishes together with the sufficiency economy concept of the HM's King.

A model should be created by which to study the developmental concepts of Buddhist consumers in Thai society who lead an appropriate lifestyle and whose consumption is based on principles of Buddhism. The model should be used to study developmental concepts in order to persuade people in society to remove themselves from materialism, in accordance with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's third wish. A model of an appropriate consumption culture should be created in the area of southern Thailand, specifically in Surat Thani Province, which is an important place for Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and the Dhamma. The model should be created by the researchers' network association of education in Surat Thani, which is located in Southern Thailand, and should cooperate with local governmental organizations, from the district level to the provincial level.

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