

Need, Sufficiency and Greed

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

On the positive side, the national debt now laid upon us offers us an opportunity to consider our relationship to consumer goods, indeed everything we spend money on. Some of us, who will have to bear with unemployment, will sadly be forced to do so. So what do we really need? The Buddha defined Four Requisites without which it would be impossible to live the monastic life. Monastics should be happy with the food that is offered to them. But from a lay point of view, what does the body need. Tiramisu? I'm not arguing against tiramisu, you understand. Heaven forbid. But when we look at our eating habits, what do we actually need for nourishment and a healthy body. It is actually surprisingly little and what is more good fresh food is untaxed and therefore, comparatively cheaper than other consumer goods. But it does mean we have to cook for ourselves. As for shelter, the foot of a tree. Well, that's ok in the tropics, but what do we need but a roof over our heads and basic heating. Do we need the fine furnishings? Do we walk around our house in mid-winter in a tea shirt? There was a time when you could buy house coats. Then there's clothing. Monks are to be content with clothing sewn together from rags. Just open up to the fullness of your wardrobe and shoe rack. Make sure you have a glass of water handy. Finally, medicine. The Buddha asked his monastics to be content with fermented cow's urine. I think I'd have to be pretty desperate to go for that one myself. But consider what a wonderful communal gift the NHS is, especially in this day when a sense of compatriotism, of citizen communion is so lacking. Do we take it for granted? Do we find nothing but fault? Supposing we were suddenly given 5 minutes to evacuate because of a tsunami. What would you take with you? Presuming one has considered this before, I dare say we would take only what we really do need. Then there is the idea of sufficiency. This is a bit more lenient. It's the old adage of 'moderation in all things'. We need clothes for work, clothes for leisure and clothes for pottering about. Food is often a case of conviviality and celebration. Shelter is also home. And we should try to get medicine best to cure our ill health. This is not an exhaustive list of 'consumer goods'. One obvious exception is transport. And this reminds us that sufficiency isn't only about a personal struggle with greed, but also about our relationship to the earth and so to other people. If we approach sufficiency from need, we probably have a better measure of moderation. And then there's greed or if you prefer – retail therapy!

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