# buddha style

A discussion about the Buddha's radical teachings on fashion and forgiveness

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Josh Korda & Otto von Busch,
with illustrations by
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This book records a discussion on a Buddhist approach to fashion. The discussants are Otto von Busch, fashion scholar at Parsons the New School for Design in New York, and Josh Korda, a Buddhist teacher at New York Dharma Punx. The illustrations are by artist and fellow meditator Jesse Bercowetz.

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## Contents

*We are aversive to pain. We are restless.*
*We are craving for pleasure. And we all want more.*

*It is easy today to look to fashion for salvation. We feel fashion can give us what we need. We can be beautiful. We can be seen. We can be popular. We can become a better self. And it is so accessible. It is everywhere.*

*Even if we don't care about clothes, others do. Even if we don't judge others by their looks, others will judge us. Even if we never change our clothes, they still speak of some relation to fashion. We live in a time where we can never escape fashion. It can be both a blessing and a curse.*

*Fashion is a toxicant. Fashion is soaked in the three poisons of greed, aversion and delusion. These three components are immensely powerful forces in human life. They are also core elements which make fashion so successful and essential in today's social life. With today's abundance of cheap fashion, these poisons have seeped into the everyday mind of even those with modest means. With fast fashion and ubiquitous access to fashion media the suffering of dissatisfaction bleeds into the mind of everyone.*

*We are craving for what we do not have, and grasping onto the faint and ephemeral illusion of social appreciation that fashion offers us is like a drug. Fashion is a stimulant for anyone longing for popularity, yet its temporary cure creates evermore suffering and frustration, evermore craving, attachment, and aversion.*

*Can there be liberation?*

*One day some time ago, I happened to discuss pattern making with a friend at a noisy bar. She asked if I had heard of "Buddha Style", which I never had, but it sounded very interesting. Enthusiastically, she started explaining about the huge Do-It-Yourself fashion and sewing community online, where people came together to share patterns, methods and techniques and go against the stream of the fashion's ready-to-wear regime. She said the community was an offshoot from a popular magazine which had been sharing paper patterns for several decades. By now I understood I had misheard "Burda Style" for "Buddha Style", yet this misunderstanding opened for fascinating possibilities. The conversation turned to how we could apply a Buddhist approach to fashion.*

*What could it be? What Would Buddha Wear? I had to ask Josh Korda, the mediation teacher at Dharma Punx New York, the meditation center I frequented at the Bowery.*

*/ OvB*


TRY
IT
You'll like
it

## Introduction

*OvB: To put it very shortly, Buddhism is about the liberation from suffering. What are the timeless types of suffering Buddhism deals with, and what would you say are those that are amplified in our time?*

JK: Well, to start, it's important to clarify that there are two types of suffering:

1) The first type of suffering is inevitable: the difficult experiences in life that one can do nothing about. For example: aging, sickness, death, being separated from those we love, being stuck with difficult people, the daily frustrations of impoliteness, etc.

2) In addition to the stress that the above produces, there's a second type of unnecessary suffering: self-centered thought, why me? How can I stop this from happening?; escapist ideation; obsessive planning and worrying; addiction to distractions; feeding off our emotional resistance and drama; etc.


RAT SHIT

This latter type of suffering is what Buddhism alleviates. And yes, the place and time we live in tends to exaggerate suffering. Our culture celebrates youth, beauty, success, and a type of homogenized happiness based on accumulation and greed; we hide the elderly in assisted living facilities and nursing homes, the sick in hospitals, the dead are whisked away and then dressed up to look like they're sleeping, or cremated out of view. The poor are ghettoized. All of the above sets us up for a lot of suffering when the inevitable setbacks of life occur.

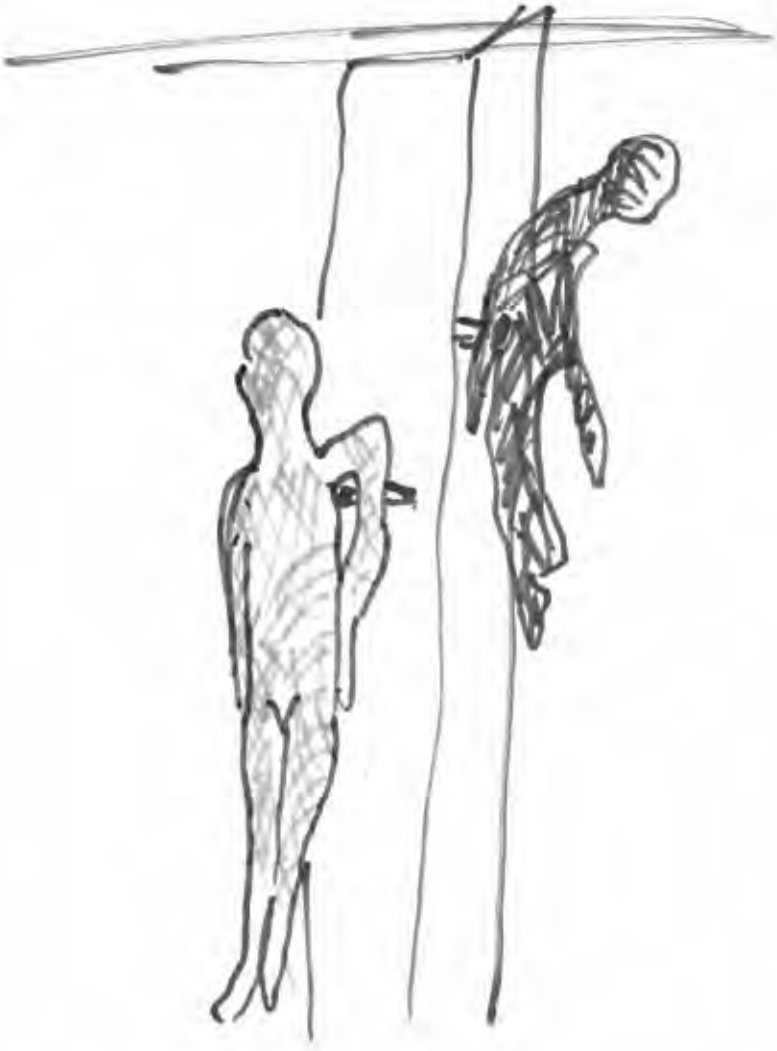
*Yes, fashion is indeed also part of this celebration of youth and homogenized happiness. As I understand it, sometimes "suffering" is translated as dissatisfaction. Most often fashion makes us feel continuously incomplete (without the latest must-haves), and it seems fashion is there to fuel this fire of unsatisfied desires. How should we relate to this kind of suffering or dissatisfaction?*

Craving for quick, easy, sensual pleasure (or 'tanha' in pali) is a default setting for the mind. In addition to lives crammed with responsibilities, the mind in and of itself torments us with unrealistic fears and expectations; worn down and unhappy, we want happiness to be something that comes from the swipe of a credit card. As a result our craving is further fuelled by the unsatisfactory nature ('dukkha') of the short term, conditional pleasures we find in our consumer lifestyles. We're continually frustrated when we seek happiness in what the Buddha called the worldly winds that blow us about: success and fame; accumulation of goods, such as gadgets and fashionable apparel; approval from others; sex, drugs, alcohol and other short term relishes. Such endeavors only temporarily divert our attention from the underlying stress that builds up in our stressful lives:

the myriad responsibilities, vulnerable careers, the shadows of financial uncertainty. Indeed, the result is we do feel there's something missing, as the relief we seek is so rarely found externally.

Sure, fashion marketing might exacerbate our underlying feeling of something missing (Look! The reason you're not beautiful and universally loved is because you don't own a Louis Vuitton this or a Helmut Lang that). But it's hardly the main culprit; again, it's the nature of our default programming.

The way to relate to unsatisfactoriness of external pleasures is to:
1) Look at our priorities. It's essential to reduce the stress that results from workaholism, addictions, unrealistic expectations that relationships will "fix us." We rebalance our lives to include a greater emphasis on endeavors that create lasting peace of mind: friendship, volunteerism, body awareness such as yoga and of course, spiritual practice.
2) Throughout the day work on reducing stress by noting how we can calm the breath and body, how we can refocus the mind on perceptions that don't cause unnecessary tension.
3) Work on developing antidotes to our fear driven, competitive default mind states: we practice forgiveness, kindness, appreciation of other's happiness, compassion.
4) Have a strong moral foundation to our lives that we won't cross. The less harm we cause, the less callous our relationship with strangers, the less shame and guilt we carry.
5) A daily meditation practice, based on learning to find ease internally, regardless of our agitation and inevitable stressors.

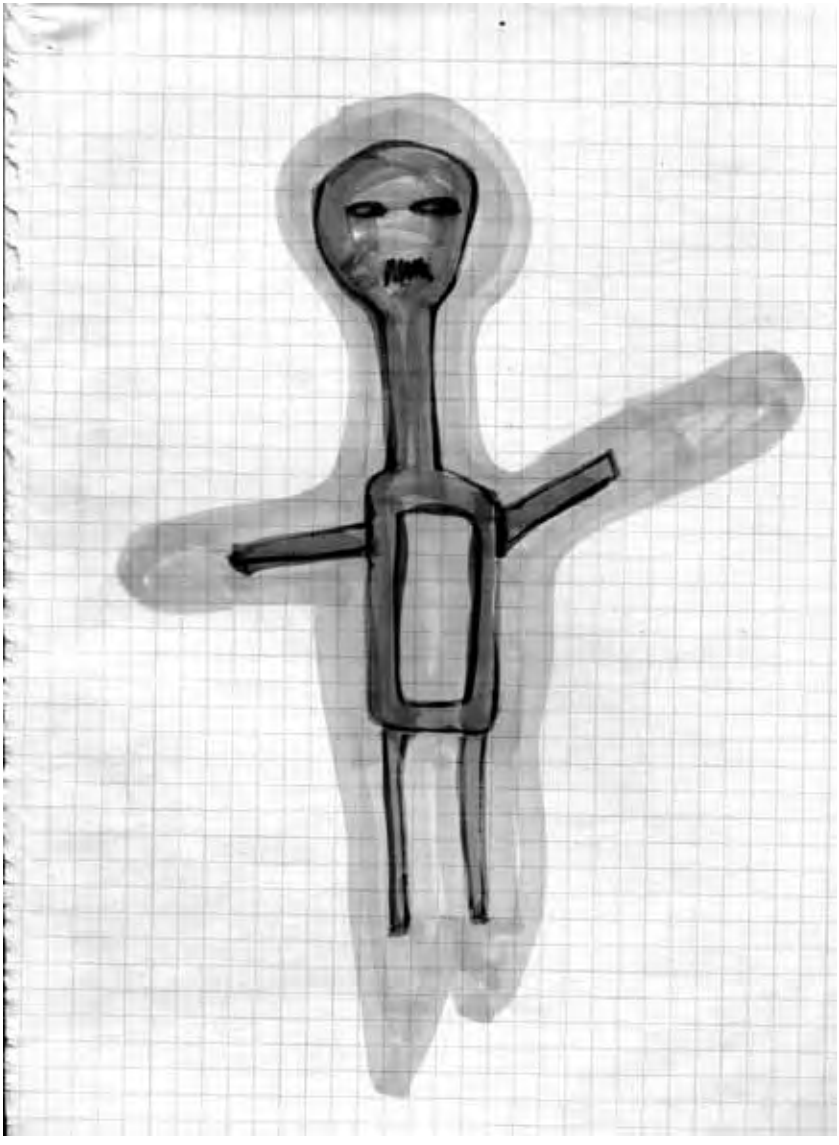


*But in today's complex society it seems hard to really see the cause-and-effect relationships with our life; work and leisure sometimes intermix or ecological disasters from production processes and sweatshops overseas are just some aspects of this. Buying "fair trade" or "eco" seems to sooth some of our conscience, but how can we get a perspective of the harm we cause beyond our immediate surrounding, and how should we relate to that?*

Yes, most Buddhist teachers are well aware of the hardships that result from our consumption. In our economy backbreaking work is what brings food to each meal we eat, each pair of pants we buy. As an overview for humanity, the Buddha used the metaphor of fish in puddle that's drying up, fighting each other over dwindling resources. And so a foundation of spiritual practice is renunciation where possible: reducing our dependence on the world to what's absolutely necessary. This in turn helps us refocus our efforts towards more productive outlets. Rather than mindless shopping and consuming, there are so many less harmful ways to find happiness.

*We all get dressed, so fashion is something we do every day, in one way or another. How do we practice Buddhism in everyday life?*

I'll take your word for it that I do fashion every day; I'm certainly quite unaware of it if I do. If we wish to benefit from our spiritual practice, it's important to develop mindfulness, i.e. checking in regularly with our internal experience: noting if our breath has become clipped and short, taking time to lengthen the exhalations; relaxing the body where the muscles contract (shoulders, belly, jaw, etc.); focusing the mind on



what we're grateful for, pulling it away from the dramas and victimhood stories. We also recommend developing a regular meditation practice, even if it's only 10 minutes in the morning, where we pull away from our external focus and dedicate the mind to uninterrupted internal awareness. Finally, it's essential to practice non-harmfulness to self and others, and lead a life that's balanced, rather than consumed by career, short term pleasure seeking (drugs, alcohol, etc), relationships, family.

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**Identity**

> *We can express some aspects of our personality or world view through fashion. Likewise, we can come to see an aspect of another person through their dress or style, and also some traces of their attitude and skills. But at the same time we can simultaneously "objectify" these signals and make the person only a sum of their visually expressed parts. If we are to take the signals sent through clothing seriously, how can we cultivate an "honest" perspective on our dressed peers?*

The Buddhist perspective somewhat nullifies this line of inquiry, as it views the concept of a core personality or identity as a social construction that has little underlying authenticity. Of course, we all present identity constructions to the world, but that's all they are, roles or masks to accomplish tasks in the world. In a sense we're all like David Bowie, putting on costumes to sell ourselves to others. Bowie, of course, under-

stood it as a game rather than as an expression of some inner authentic truth; so long as we do the same, there's little harm that comes from it.

> *Yet fashion expresses some form of relation to identity. To take an extreme, a doctor's coat helps me identify someone who can help me when I am bleeding. Sometimes we try to use clothing in a similar identifying way, and we may think clothing says something about a person ("That Motörhead-fan might know if Lemmy lives in this house!"). Some tokens may express more personal experiences or commitments, like a pilgrim's symbol or a begging bucket. Could there be a continuum or several "levels" between the total surface of a made-up costume and more deeper or meaningful connections to symbols, even if there is no "core personality"?*

In the social sphere absolutely. Identities and roles are essential to codify and establish, doctors, police, etc. In a monastic setting, a novice monk, or Anagarika, first receives white robes and only follows a basic set of eight precepts; once an Anagarika has established commitment to the monastic path they undertake full ordination and receive the dyed, yellow robes. From that point on there is no distinction in clothing between the highest, most revered abbot and the newest monk.

> *Fashion may also be about affirming, refusing or bending dress or gender codes, and may thus help us communicate. One could say we thus need to submit to some rules in order to break them and transform them. Could there be Buddhist parallels to this?*

It's interesting that, in my research, neither the Buddha nor his followers had an issue with accepting what we now call members of the LGBT community into the order of monastics—the Buddha accepted women as monastics earlier than any other spiritual path that I know of—but he insisted that all monks dress exactly the same way, in robes, so all forms of adornment and gender /sexuality based clothing fabrications were dropped.

Now, for secular Buddhists, gender, class, race and sexual politics can be very important in the worldly domain of establishing rights, freedom of expression and fighting inequalities, and it's very skillful in that arena to present one's 'identity in the social domain.' Such identities DO exist in the social field, but not in the spiritual domain of establishing lasting inner contentment.

In our spiritual practice we exercise dropping identity beliefs, as the core of attaining lasting peace arises through putting down one's externally focused self-expression for awhile and finding peace in one's inner awareness.

This doesn't mean we take off whatever clothing we're wearing when we practice; it simply means that clothing and dress is not an expression of our practice. The key is establishing balance in life: while engaging in the world, absolutely, affirmative expression is very important; while cultivating inner peace, other practices play a prominent role.

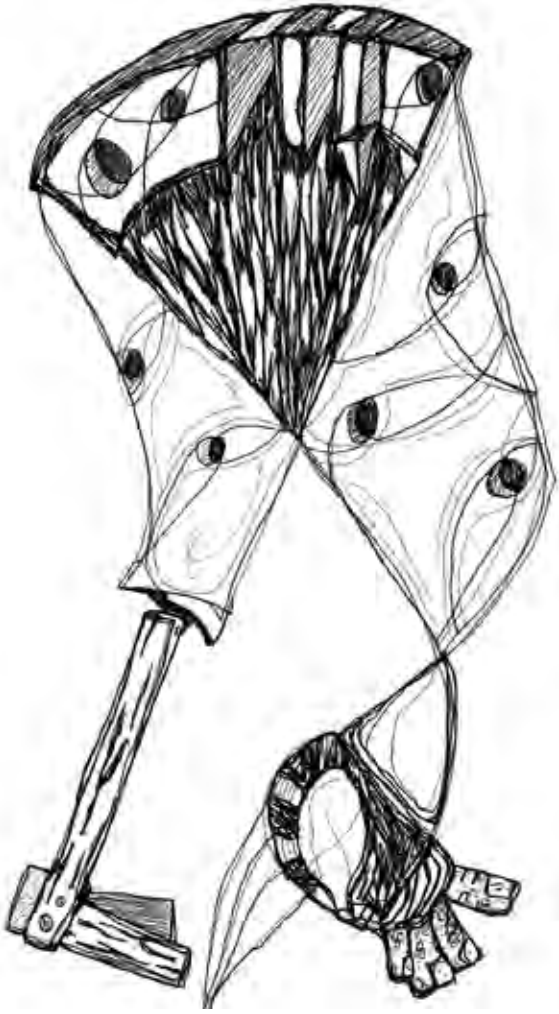
*If we would draw parallels between dress codes as rules, and monastic rules, then following rules has certain deeper goals and mean-*


TAKIN IT IN.
FEELIN IT.
LATTE.
GOING...
GONE...

*ings. What do we gain by following some spiritual rules which may seem very abstract to our everyday? And are there any occasions where Buddhist practitioners are encouraged to question and break rules, perhaps even monastic ones?*

In the Buddha's famous teaching on free inquiry (the Kalamas Sutta) he instructs those interested in his spiritual path to question everything: "Don't practice by reports, by legends, by traditions, by what's in holy books, by logical conjecture, by speculative reasoning, by analogies, by common sense, by probability, or by the thought, 'This is what the Buddha says.' When you experience for yourselves that, 'These acts are unskillful; these acts are worthy of blame; these acts, when adopted & carried out, lead to stress and suffering' — then you should abandon them."

Once we see for ourselves that refraining from addictive cravings and causing harm to ourselves or others cultivates peace of mind, the benefits are plain. It's worth noting that "rules" is not a word I would use to describe the directions of conduct or "precepts" in Buddhist practice. The result of not following a precept is that we have to live with the results. Lay practitioners are not punished or disciplined for falling short of precepts (except if they're on a retreat, in which case they can be given a warning then asked to leave if they repeat a violation). In monastic settings discipline is basically notifying, demotion, suspension from the monastery and finally banishment. In western culture "rules" can denote punishment, corporal or otherwise. And so I avoid the word, as it doesn't fit Buddhist practice.



*We sometimes do not only dress for ourselves (to express/expose ourselves), but also from the respect and love of others. We may take special care of how we dress before we meet someone we love, not only to impress or appear good, but from a feeling of care. Can there be a spiritual element in this interpersonal relationship expressed in dress?*

Traditionally Buddhists, at least in the Theravadan tradition, do not use clothing as a sign of respect; during Visakha Puja, the day of celebration of the life of the Buddha, lay practitioners take off any jewelry and adornments and dress as simply as possible. This follows the emphasis on renunciation as a core spiritual tool. For example putting down one's ingrained material and mundane approaches of establishing identity and conveying social meaning—i.e. dressing as a way to establish oneself as a 'caring' or 'attentive' person.

In Buddhist practice, attempting to find true happiness through external, material appearances leads to a dead end; the body ages, clothes go in and out of fashion, etc. In essence it's a practice that's largely a dead end spiritually, though in the mundane world of seeking approval and friends it can certainly be useful.

As an additional note, in the Sigalovada Sutta, or the teachings to lay practitioners, the Buddha urged moderation in spending, the goal being that unnecessary financial worries would be avoided. Many people keep themselves chained to working stressful jobs to pay off debts that could be avoided. And sometimes people reward themselves for staying in self-destructive employment by numbing themselves through consuming

# HOW TO BUILD A FORT

1. GET SOME MATERIALS
2. BUILD IT
3. HOPE SOME ASSHOLE DOESNT RIP IT DOWN.

goods. Again, the spiritual approach would be to see how little we can do with (an endeavor I invariably fall short of, as I have a penchant for buying hoodies and Vans at my local second hand stores).

*I sometimes think of this way of dressing for someone else, in an act of care, as a form of gift. Gifts can be egoistic, implicitly requiring something in return, but some can also be truly altruistic and come from a deep sense of attentiveness and care. Could we find some Buddhist teaching on our relationship to gifts?*

The Buddha's teachings on giving are many and varied. In general, the motivation behind giving should be purely altruistic, to experience the joy of helping or passing on something of value, rather than out of fear, hoping for a favor in return, obligation to pay back for a gift received or attaining social standing (a reputation). Properly executed, giving feels good before, during and after the act.

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**Impermanence**

*Impermanence is a central experience in Buddhism, and Buddhism is full of metaphors that expose this. Maybe some could help us better understand fashion. Perhaps we could say that fashion is a manifestation of the "monkey mind" or "rutting elephant mind", and if so, how should we approach it?*


BLOOD AND CHEESE

As an example of Sankhara; a compounded fabrication that arises and passes, due to underlying conditions that are transpersonal, historical, etc. While we can enjoy fabrications, a well designed chair, etc, the point is to understand that they're impermanent, they will fall apart, and to mitigate our attachment; lasting peace of mind and happiness lies elsewhere.

> *Impermanence may be at the opposite side of lasting peace while at the core of fashion. Everyone knows fashions are fleeting, so we are not fooled in any way about that. But perhaps we think we are going to keep that designed chair, and become surprised by its impermanence. In that way we might say fashion is honest about its impermanence. Could there be a way for us to use this honest impermanence in meditation? I am thinking about how Buddhists are encouraged to meditate over an image of a corpse, in order to better understand impermanence - could we encourage designers to meditate over last seasons sales as a path towards enlightenment? What other Buddhist exercises may help expose our impermanence?*

From what I've seen, designers tend to feed on drama, stress and adrenaline (running out of time, materials not being up to quality, no one's helping me, etc, etc) as way to stay focused and energized over the long hours that lead up to a presentation deadline. The longtime result is a mind that brings agitation and stress into every facet of life; drama and stress of course demands and feeds on conflict; it takes its toll on relationships, friendships, etc. over the years an inability to enjoy peace.

DIFFERENT LANGAUGE

I'd first suggest exercises that demonstrate how one can be productive and creative without introducing unnecessary hysterical narratives into the mix; breathing deeply, relaxing areas of the body that carry stress, focusing on present efforts without carrying extraneous 'to-do' lists, etc. People find, when they're taught stress reduction techniques, that they can get more work done, and at less of a toll, than when their process involves agitation, moaning, complaining, etc.

Additionally, an occasional meditation asking designers to bring to mind whatever drama or agitation was dominating their lives a year ago, two years ago, etc. Inevitably they'll find that few of the excitations, which seemed so important and essential earlier, are remotely memorable.

> *But fashion is all about forgetting, about moving forward as fast as possible. We could say that fashion is the now breaking into the future, the slightly futuristic extension of "now". It thus creates a very distinct experience of the now dressing in the absolute latest. What is the relationship to the now in Buddhism, and how is it configured?*

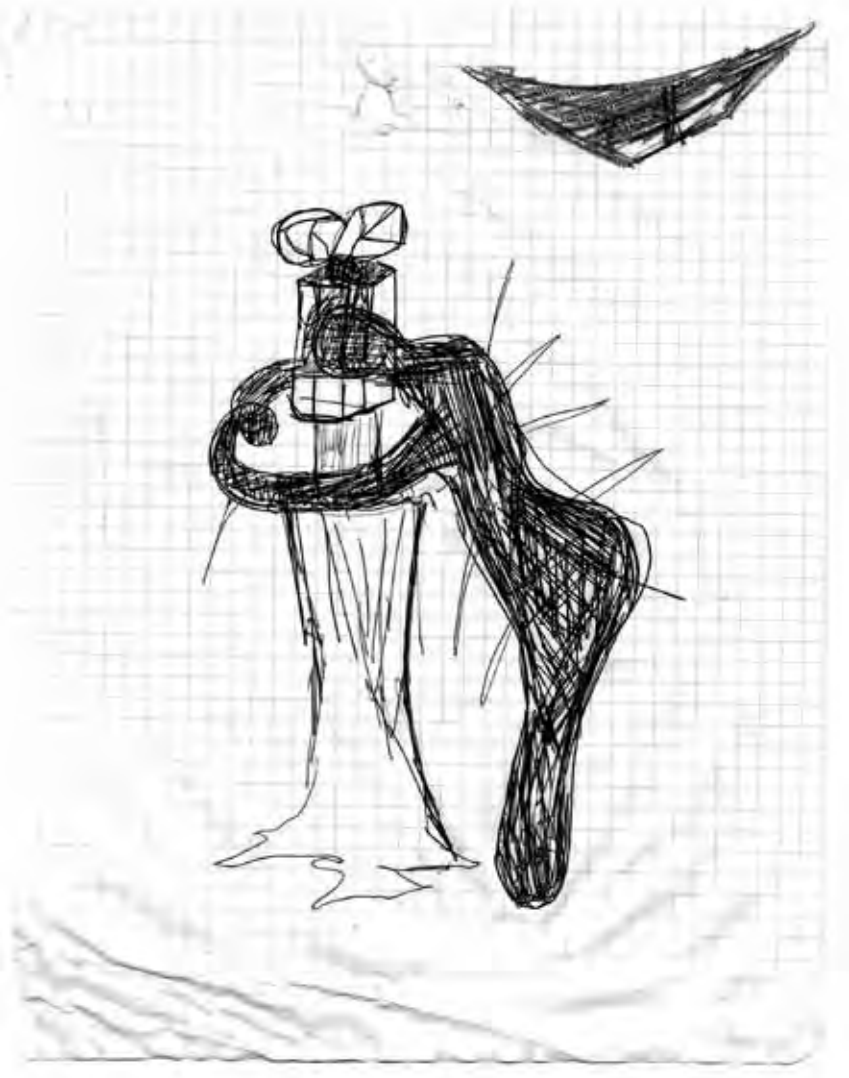
Well, there isn't any other time than now to relieve one of stress and suffering. Planning to do it in the future is an avoidance strategy that guarantees even more unhappiness and affliction. I don't see Buddhist practice as anticipatory, other than one comes to understand that craving or clinging today will undoubtedly lead to even more uncomfortable mind states in the future.

*Well, the future is always in fashion. Paradoxically, reincarnation is a central theme to both Buddhism and fashion as both expose the nature of life cycles and endless "returns" ("the 70's is back!). How does Buddhism approach reincarnation?*

I'm personally agnostic on rebirth. The Buddha never taught that it was essential to believe in anything other than being harmless; the rest we have to see for ourselves. In the Kalamas Sutta he taught "so, if there is no rebirth after death, if there aren't any 'next life karmic results' ("fruits" in the Buddha's teaching) of our actions, rightly or wrongly done, then here, in my present life, I'll live with ease—free from hostility, ill will, trouble—if I don't cause harm."

*The mirror is an important feature in fashion. It is the surface through which we observe our dressed self, and also project our desires upon with an immediate response to impermanence. We can literally see ourselves aging, even if we still feel young. In Buddhism the mirror also is common in metaphors, perhaps most famously in the image of the moon reflected in a pond. Could you expound a little on the role of the mirror in Buddhism, and what does the mirror image mean?*

One's reflection is used in two ways in the Suttas; the first is as a metaphor for self-awareness: "One should be aware of one's mind just as someone fond of ornaments, examining the reflection of their own face in a bright mirror or a bowl of clear water would know 'blemished' if it were blemished, or 'unblemished' if it were not." (dn.11) The second is the possibility of self-obsession and attachment to beauty: "Just as if some-



one, fond of adornment, contemplating their image in a mirror, or in a bowl of clear water, would look with possessiveness, or not without possessiveness."

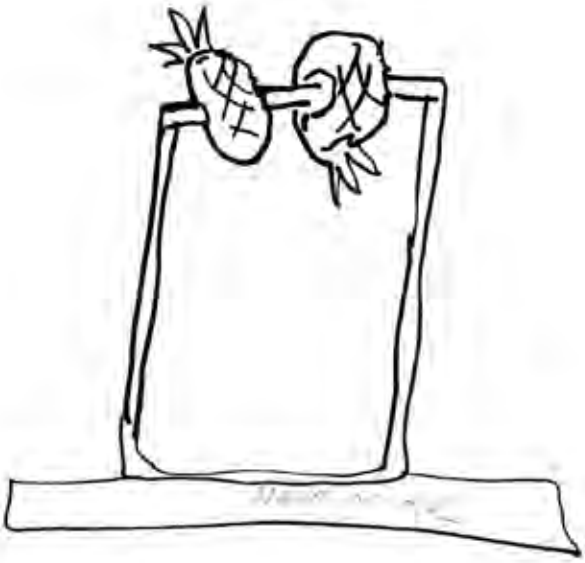
*The mirror in fashion can also represent the striving for perfection. But we will never reach the true perfection. How should we best relate to our doom of imperfection?*

Of course any perfection that's achieved externally, whether in appearance to others or in our careers, relationships, family life, etc, will be temporary, as the conditions it relies upon are changing. Beauty relies upon the body, which ages; careers and approval hunting depend upon factors beyond our control, namely other people.

But lasting peace of mind is available to everyone, if they put in the effort. Once we've experienced inner peace, the hunt for perfection tends to switch towards one's spiritual endeavors. Practitioners can get hard on themselves for awhile: "I'm not perfectly compassionate with others, I got frustrated today..." etc. But eventually, with time, such striving falls away, and we're left with a self view grounded in acceptance.

*Are there any other Buddhist metaphors you think may express issues related to fashion?*

Ha, well the Buddha used fashion as a metaphor for one of the five ways of relieving obsessive, worrying thoughts (MN 20) "Just as someone who's fond of adornment would be repelled and dismayed if the carcass of a dog were hung from their neck, in the same way we should relate to thoughts of



craving, hatred or self-centered delusion arise while developing inner peace."

*A dog carcass necklace is the new anti-fashion! Speaking of the new, fashion also somehow speaks of the zeitgeist, clothes are steeped in the "now". But some clothes are also ageless, yet come from a very specific time, circumstance and zeitgeist. Also Dharma Punx emerge from a specific zeitgeist, approaching some the burning issues of our time. Are there similarities in how Buddhism and fashion may approach the zeitgeist?*

I personally don't view Dharma Punx as emerging from a specific historical zeitgeist as much as a timeless revolt against the dominant, hegemonic, socially approved emphasis on materialism, power, careerism, accumulation, etc as the sources of security and happiness. In this sense we're very much in line, for example, with the Beats of the 1950s who sought out Buddhism as a response to dominant materialism. The clothing or look of each era doesn't matter; it's the underlying ethos of renunciation that matters.

*Even if the goals are timeless and also the practice itself, we often use metaphors of our time when we explain our methods and practices, and thus somewhat influence the messages. Could we find examples of this in Buddhism?*

Absolutely. When I teach the Dharma I use everything from neuroscience and clinical psychology findings to references to pop culture and recent historical events; the references are contemporary and cultural. The lay practice itself is more trans-

SNOW BALL

ELEPANT DUNG

cultural and transhistorical, but it does evolve over the years, absolutely. The 'memes' or cultural ideas that float around profoundly influence behavior. There are too many ways to list comprehensively, but for a few: 1) Many people arrive at Buddhist centers with fixed ideas about what Buddhism is, based on the availability of books, etc; 2) The role of the Internet in providing Dharma can undermine the power of gathering with other practitioners; 3) It's easier today for practitioners to grasp Anatta, or the lack of a core, static identity, than it would've been previously, as the undermining of "identity beliefs" is more prevalent than it was 25 years ago.

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**Imitation**

*Fashion is basically about sameness and imitation, we replicate the style and behavior of people we adore (and not often people we despise), but there is no "essence" that we can access, only surface expressions and actions - is there a Buddhist approach to imitation, sameness and lack of essence in this sense?*

Well, naturally, the sameness that's established in monastic dress codes—everyone wears dyed rags, has their heads shaved and puts aside adornments—plays a very important spiritual role. It diminishes the energies spent on seeking happiness through external, material appearances. Sameness also acknowledges the universal nature of suffering and the libera-

GUILT TRIP ME

WHY DON'T YOU . . .

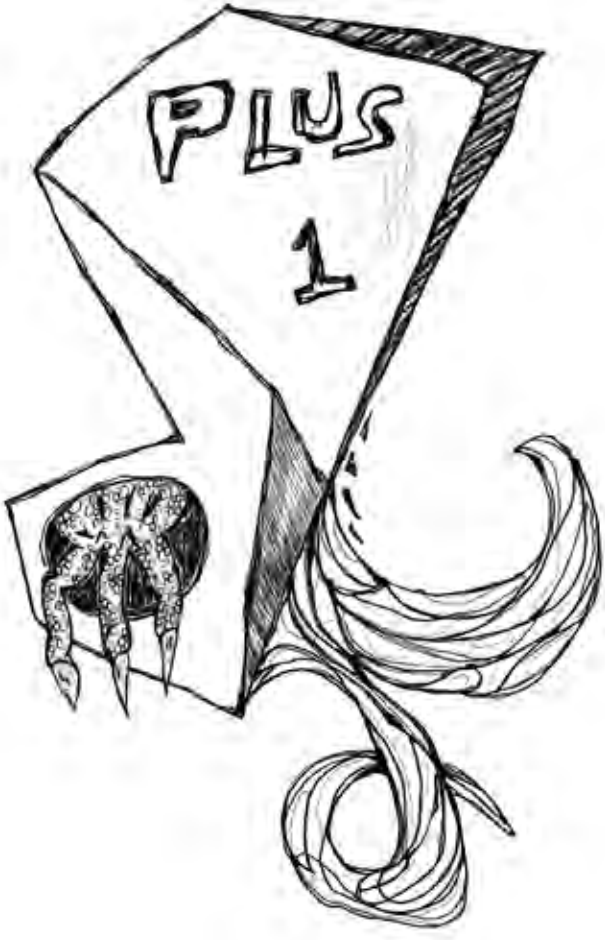
tion from suffering; so it can have a very important role in reminding us that what causes our unhappiness is not uniquely ours, but interpersonal.

> *If we take fashion in the largest sense, as the imitation of any desirable behavior, that may also be meditation or mindfulness (and we may also want to imitate desirable suffering). Can imitation (I do the same as you do), help us in our spiritual endeavor, or are we doomed to be stuck on the surface of things and doings?*

There are a number of different teachers and methods even in a single tradition; for example, in the Thai forest school the differences between the Ajahn Lee and the Ajahn Chah practices are very distinct. Practitioners are drawn to one or the other based on what resonates, but I suppose one could consider the various practices as 'fashions' but that would, to me, be an odd employment of 'fashion.' I suppose it's possible that people who like what I teach could imitate how I dress or speak, etc, but such imitations wouldn't fall under the domain of "spiritual practice."

> *We sometimes use imitation and fashion to amplify our socially competitive behaviors. In this way, fashion is a sort of symbolic and dressed arms-race. What is a wise way of setting goals for our performances? How can we have a wise relationship to competition?*

If we have to compete in life, which is behavior the Buddha specifically warned against in many Suttas, it's best to do it like a game, one that we don't become attached to results, don't feel winning or losing makes any statement about our identity or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core values, just a pastime where we enjoy the competition for the fun of it; akin to playing a game of Scrabble or Table Tennis. The key is dispassion and non-attachment.

> *But it can sometimes be upsetting to play a game with someone who doesn't take it seriously or put their effort in the game. They should not be too serious of course, that may be scary, but if they do not pay attention we also lose interest. Perhaps similarly we may feel unease when someone is not "dressed to the occasion". How can we play a balanced life-game, and how can we put efforts into the fashion-game in a balanced way?*

Absolutely, if one takes the game concept too far, and becomes lazy, it can disrespectful of those who also engage in the enterprise. As in everything, it requires balance. But in most cases people take the game far too seriously, introducing stress and suffering into their lives as a result.

For an example of not taking the game seriously enough, the artist Julian Schnabel, notorious for showing up to hosted events in his pajamas, comes to mind. There can be an implied message of "I'm better than this and you, so I don't have to bother getting dressed." On the other hand, Bob Dylan's wonderful meta-answers during his famous press inquisitions during his 1965 tour is a terrific way to play the game respectfully (giving interviews for promotion) while also calling attention to its shallowness and absurdity.

> *Sometimes we may say someone has an excellent sense of style, and this may trigger imitation. Even Buddhist robes or artifacts*


Blood
money

*express an excellence in craft and artisan production, or may even be adorned. How can we approach skillful excellence in craft and its symbolic appearance (and avoid being drawn to grasp fleeting beauty)?*

In Theravadan Buddhism robes are not adorned, and they're all made from dyed rags. Buddhist monks do spend a great deal of time tending to their limited possessions—robes, bowl, bowl harness, spoon, spiritual books, a few others—as an acknowledgment of the fragility of all things, appreciation for what's impermanent, as well as a caring attention. It's the same with the human body: we acknowledge that it's fragile and prone to fall apart, so we appreciate it while it works and take care of it.

*Even rags are chosen according to some criteria (for example that they can be dyed), and possibly some rags feel better, or worse, on the skin than others. Also a bowl may express the excellence of a wood turner's skill, even if very modest. Can we find acknowledgements of craftsmen among spiritual practitioners in Buddhism?*

The practice itself is a craft that we all perform with varying degrees of care and artistry; as for material accouterments the rags and bowls (which are brass) there are very strict traditions which go back hundreds of years and there is very little room for the distinction of craft to play. Monks would certainly avoid receiving a bowl that was in some way superior or inferior to their fellows, as such a contrast would lead to attachment and stress.

*How about beauty? We can sometimes speak of fashion as a form of beauty in a very wide sense; fashion is what is considered beautiful in a certain time. Is there a Buddhist approach to beauty?*

Throughout the teachings I've studied, beauty is inevitably used in reference to impermanence, an example of what we chase in the world in the hopes of lasting pleasure, only to find it fades. Even in the few examples of its mention as a reward for wholesome acts, it's clear that the state will pass, and is not an inevitable attribute of inner peace.

*Are there any references on a possible "beauty" of inner peace? I am thinking of the discrete smile one can sometimes see in images of the Buddha; does inner peace express beauty in some way?*

There are some adjectives in Pali that describe the bliss of inner peace might be translated as beauty, for example, from Ajahn Geoff's translation of "Sattadhatu Sutta:"

> Monks, there are these seven properties. Which seven? The property of light, the property of beauty*, the property of the dimension of the infinitude of space, the property of the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, the property of the dimension of nothingness, the property of the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception, the property of the cessation of feeling & perception. These are the seven properties.
>
> (*The property of beauty refers to a blissful meditative state.)

# WALL OF MASKS

## Non-self

*The concept of "non-self" or the lack of self is a key to Buddhism, and paradoxically fashion is all about change and the negation of a sustainable (dressed) self. Could we draw any parallels between these two forms of "non-self"?*

Yes, if more people viewed the external presentations of identity (manifested behaviors, views, skill sets, etc) as a form of 'fashion,' rather than an inherent core truth, one that is constantly in flux and largely interpolated rather than authentic, then sure, that would be healthy understanding of how we present to the world.

*Could it be possible to somehow say that people who are "shallow", or perhaps even "fashion victims", somewhat unconsciously have gotten some kind of understanding of "non-self"?*

I'd be doubtful, as "non-self" is an inherently discerning insight; it requires observing one's sensations, feelings, perceptions and thoughts as they arise and pass, noting the constant flux and change, eventually experiencing that there is no core, consistent, determinant identity beneath it all. The body creates sensations, the mind creates thoughts, perceptions, but they are merely events being caused by dynamic conditions


THONGS R US

(for example the constantly changing contact with the world around us).

Unconsciously people may have repressed desires and memories that clash with the conscious, narrative, social "ego," but that doesn't indicate an advanced awareness the mutable nature of identity.

I should add that I do enjoy the efforts of those who break the paradigms of dress codes, etc, especially when the efforts lead to a liberating expression of gender, sexuality, etc. But I don't align that enjoyment with my Buddhist perspectives, as I feel it would require intellectual gymnastics.

> *The Dalai Lama has made the remark that all religions are basically about the same thing; not being self-centric, not being greedy and not causing harm, and the key to these actions resides in all the small things in everyday life. And if you do your religion well, any religion, it adds up to the same human goal, just with different methods. Do you think if we could practice fashion in such non-self-centric way?*

I'm not familiar with his quote, but that summary fails to include the core practice of actively developing tranquility within, using the various tools of mindfulness and concentration, which not all religions or spiritual practices contain. This doesn't mean that other spiritual paths are wrong; I happen to believe that the goals of various spiritual paths are not all the same; the Buddhist belief that unconditional peace of mind is available, that it doesn't depend on any god or external deity, is surely different from Judeo-Christian views.

Constructors of Trophies

In terms of could people design and produce stylish apparel without being greedy and causing harm, I would say yes. Could people design and produce stylish apparel while, at other times of the day, cultivating mindfulness and concentration? I would say yes to that too.

*You are yourself designing jewelry. Can you tell something about how you relate to this practice? Can jewelry somehow facilitate mindfulness or helping us to develop tranquility within?*

There are a few parallels between my spiritual practice and my creative endeavors in jewelry and music. In general I'm looking for relief from my self-conscious inner narrative, which can be stressful, through endeavors that promote staying focused on what's present, awareness of internal impulses that lie outside the realm of thoughts, physicality, acts that have skillful results. For the same reason I enjoy riding my bike on long rides and yoga. Any endeavor which gives us a respite from self-speculation, worry, fear, craving, life narratives, etc is certainly worth exploring.

*What relation would you want your consumer or fan to have to your designs? Could your designs somehow speak of this?*

I practice not carrying expectations of how others will relate to my intermittent imaginative endeavors; all that speculation results in stress and is external to what's truly inspiring to me. The work is basically a private action that I invite other people to peruse the eventual outgrowth, simply to share the results of my efforts, but there's no message I'm trying to


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convey and no interest in how it's interpreted by others. My wife's jewelry line, Mettametalworks, which I occasionally contribute to, has a greater underlying spiritual messages than my own endeavors.

---

**Temptation**

*Mara is the demon that tempted Buddha, and as I understood it, Buddhas response was not to ignore or neglect Mara, but acknowledge that desire is always present, recognise it and overcome it. Could we say that fashion is one of today's tempting demons, and what would be a wise way to challenge this temptation, especially today when fashion is so ubiquitous and seems to seep into all aspects of life?*

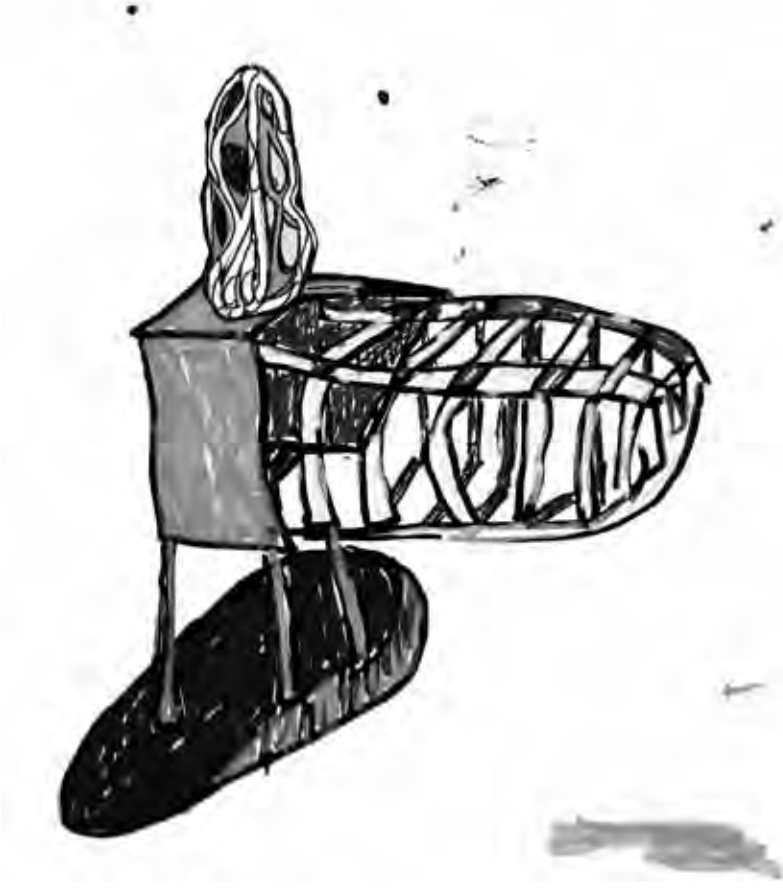
While Mara is referred to as a demon in the Suttas, it is understood by Buddhists to be an externalization of the Buddha's unskillful, materialist desires to find happiness and sensual pleasure in the consumable world, as opposed to spiritual practice. These materialist, easy-way-out cravings cropped up even after enlightenment. The Buddha would generally respond to these thoughts by saying the equivalent of "I see you Mara" acknowledging but not acting on, rather than beating away or running from, his inner cravings.

Absolutely, fashion can certainly be produced and consumed in an attempt to find lasting happiness and peace of mind;

producing and consuming is not the realm of lasting peace, though, when done in moderation, has its role in day to day life. Fashion, to my mind, is invariably interwoven with branding, the practice of implanting a unique identity and image for products in consumers' thoughts. Buddhist practice is to simply relate to a product in terms of its requisite function, not its identity in relation to other products. Giving an identity to a product is delusion.

Finally, in terms of Buddhist views on producing and consuming only what is requisite, fashion or style can have problematic connotations from a Buddhist perspective, as they indicate the practice of generating and purchasing objects simply for the purpose of expression of identity. As the Buddha said about clothing: "considering the robe, I use it simply to ward off cold, to ward off heat, to ward off mosquitoes,and for the purpose of covering the parts of the body that cause arousal or shame in revealing."

> *Some very functional clothes ward off cold, heat and mosquitoes, and can become very strong signifiers. I may get a high-tech outdoor rain jacket, even though I live in the city and is rarely exposed to the weather in an extreme way. This jacket makes me look more sporty than I am. I look like an adventurer, and the jacket supports but also somehow substitutes my outdoor adventurousness. Also Buddhism has rituals similar to that of substitution - such as the Tibetan prayer wheel, which prays instead of me, or add more prayers to mine, amplifying them. Likewise, my jacket is sporty instead of me, or makes me sportier. Could we draw some parallels there, and how does these kind of rituals work in Buddhism?*



I'm not really qualified to talk directly to the symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, as I follow the Theravada, and only have an informal acquaintance with their practice.

Perhaps the difference between the prayer wheel and the jacket could be explained as follows: someone who wears a high tech outdoor jacket while living in the city is putting on an empty sign, signifying a life of hazards, risk, adventure, which isn't, of course, actually occurring; a Buddhist with a robe is almost invariably living what the clothing denotes. There's little extraneous, projected fantasy. While a western tourist might purchase a Tibetan prayer wheel as a souvenir, few Tibetans would frivolously keep a prayer wheel without actually putting it to use, diligently.

> *Sometimes when we encounter a garment we like we feel we just NEED it, that we can't live without this newly dressed "me". What would be a skilful way to respond to this?*

To become aware of the attraction to the garment as early as possible, before too much "Papanca" (obsessive thought) has developed. It's important to note that attraction first arises physically, as gut feelings, which are—interestingly enough—how the unconscious alerts us to the presence of something desirable or dangerous, then rises to the mind, which focuses on an object then begins to add stories: "I deserve that. After all, I work hard, I never get my fair share, etc." If we can mindfully watch how the body reacts to beauty, note how the sensations arise, linger, then eventually pass, without focusing on all the thought based chatter, it's actually quite possible, with practice, to resist following urges and impulses.

FRONT WINDOW

*Could we be using the idea if "feeling tones" to better understand our relationship to fashion and the desires it may trigger? Could I somehow "map" my feelings or emotions triggered by fashion in order to live more skillfully with fashion?*

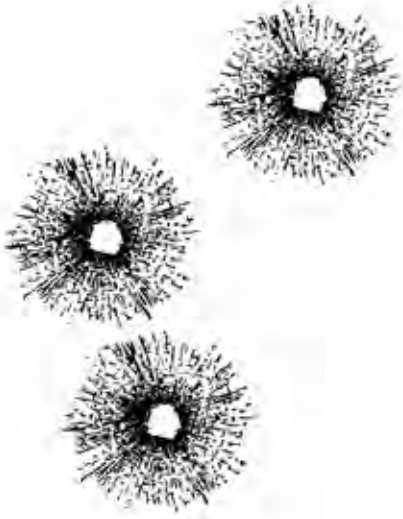
Yes, as I mentioned earlier, Vedana/gut feelings/feeling tones/ etc have a tendency to manifest themselves in consistent parts of the body. I've noticed that when products catch my attention there's a softening in the forehead muscles, a smile begins to unconsciously form, etc.

*Some would argue fashion is a way to escape "real life" and its temptations, while others would argue that it is the fullest experience of life by actually diving into temptation. Could there be a parallel in Buddhism?*

Buddhist practice is not escapist; it encourages us to examine life for what it really is: a time that's fleeting, without guarantees, where both pleasurable and uncomfortable experiences will occur. The Buddha encouraged us to look straight at the inevitability of aging, sickness, death, separation from the loved, so that we can being to prioritize our lives in a useful way. Even finding peace of mind within isn't escapist; we're merely acknowledging the severely limited experiences of true happiness the world can provide, and cultivating the rest within.

*Yes, sometimes Buddhism seems to get very practical and hands-on with the issue of non-self. The saying; "If you see the Buddha, kill the Buddha", you can sometimes encounter in Buddhist writings -*

WHEN...



PEOPLE SCREW UP.

*what does it mean? Should we also "kill the fashion designer" when we see him or her?*

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him" is a Mahayana teaching, I suspect of Zen origin, which is somewhat different in this regard to the Theravada, or old school Buddhism that I practice. My interpretation is not based on study of the parable with a Mahayana teacher, so I can only guess that it means that enlightenment (the awakening, enlightenment, attainment of the Buddha's insights) are not dependent on sensory contact, such as seeing someone on a road. In Zen, awakening wouldn't have such a distinction: the Buddha is there, I am here. One wouldn't "see" or "meet" the Buddha (the enlightened mind) as an external, sensory based event. It would arise as a mind state, or a new way of perceiving. "Kill" I would suspect means "don't believe it, it's a false perception, move on." Again, that's only an interpretation. As far as seeing a fashion designer, I'd suggest going to Williamsburg or Bushwick, where you'll meet plenty of them, and hopefully you won't kill them.

Therefore, if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha because it is false.

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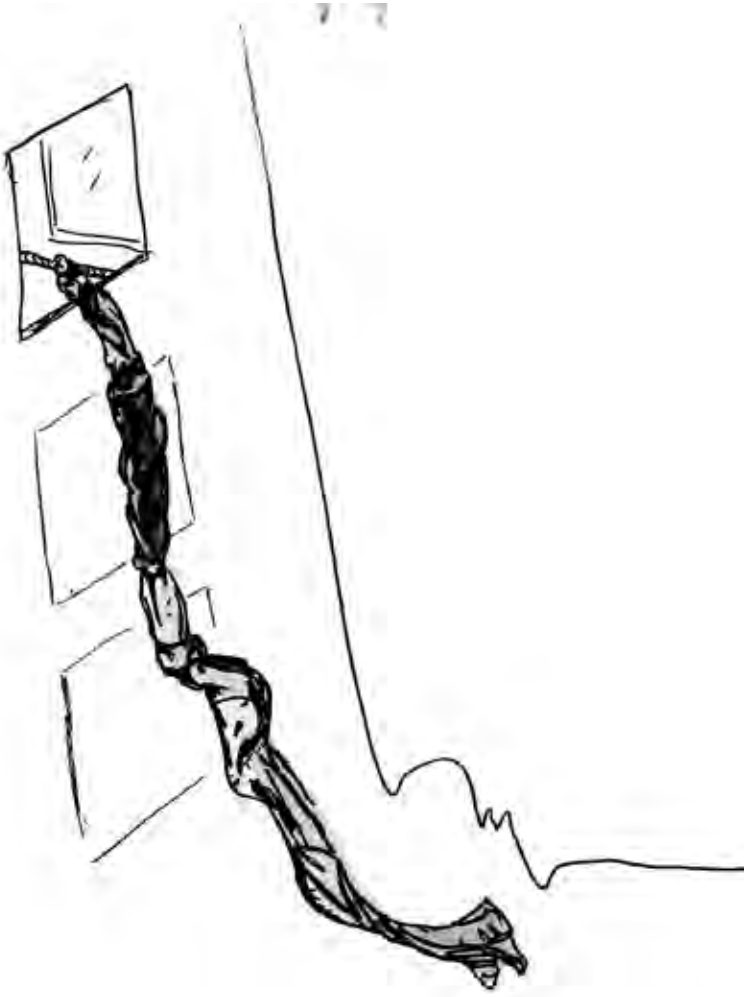
**Consumerism**

*Fashion influences our lives, from clothes to consumerism in general. Can we say it is some form of prime materialization of our*



BACK WINDOW

*greed, aversion and delusion? How could we understand this fleeting phenomenon?*

I agree completely with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose research demonstrated that fashion and culture are entirely expressions of social class; our predispositions in taste guide us towards our assigned social positions in the world. As Bourdieu notes, "When an individual encounters the culture of another class, he or she feels disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('feeling sick') of the tastes of others." The tastes of the working class are dominated by and obliged to "defend itself" to the aesthetics of the rich. I personally view fashion as inherently based on social domination and of little fruit spiritually; I wear what's inexpensive, available and comfortable in my local second hand clothing store; my wife pretty much rolls her eyes at my entire wardrobe. She's probably right from any refined perspective of taste.

On another angle, I must say that many people from the fashion industry have attended my classes over the years, seeking peace of mind in their industry: apparently working conditions vary wildly; atrocious behavior exhibited by those who have attained power or infamy is indulged; fascination with fleeting beauty is unabashedly approved. Unfortunately part of the solution is learning to detach one's emotional involvement from these endeavors and gain perspective over how little lasting happiness can be attained in such an arena. In terms of what style would be more "Buddhist" I would have no clue.

*Fashion can indeed be a form of social domination, and perhaps we can say that it also acts as a class-based cover-up, disguising age-*


NOTHIN
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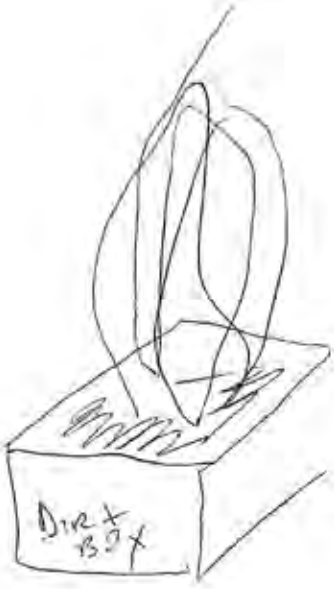
*ing and aversion, distracting us from dealing with our inner life. How should a design educator relate to this? Could there be ways future fashion designers can help consumers towards liberation?*

It's an interesting proposal, that design should address the consumerist / cultural tendencies to avoid looking at life's inevitables—aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, frustrations, disappointments, etc.

In terms of design that contains directly Buddhist influences, awhile ago I stumbled across a book on "wabi-sabi" which is a largely Zen based design approach that calls attention to the impermanence of all experience; it features design that's simple, austere, focusing on objects made from natural fibers, etc. This seemed to me to be one valid way of integrating spiritual views into design. I'm sure there are other, valid ways as well.

*Austerity and minimalism in the form of fasting and asceticism are recurring techniques in fashion, and also in many religions. Does asceticism have any place in Buddhism?*

Balanced asceticism, or more properly put, renunciation, is often misunderstood, seen as a type of self-punishment or denial. It's actually a search for true joy and happiness by putting aside, where possible, what we don't need, especially when we've become addicted or dependent. The Buddha taught we all require certain essentials: enough food, clothing, shelter and medicine to keep us healthy and alert, so that we can live productive lives and cultivate inner peace. We can even enjoy the benefits of our hard work, so long as we don't get caught up in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accumulation, addicted to commodities that aren't essential to peace of mind. People can get so easily bent out of shape when they can't get a cell phone signal or a call gets dropped, when the Internet goes out, when our routines become interrupted. When this happens we know we're imbalanced.

> *Some of this sounds like a fear of not being connected, and these days we may feel "connection" by how popular we are online. In some sense fashion is both a celebration of courage, to dare to challenge a convention, but it is also, and perhaps more often, driven by fear. How should we relate to fear?*

There are so many teachings in the Buddhist tradition that concern how to relate to fear. Perhaps the most useful strategy in Buddhist practice is mindfulness: learning how to greet fear, breaking it down into its core components: how it affects the breath (generally the breath becomes shallow), the body (contracted abdomen, tight shoulders and jaw, tense facial muscles), awareness itself (is the mind jumping from one subject to the next, or bombarded with repetitive fantasies, etc). We develop the ability to stand outside and observe, akin to a compassionate therapist observing a particularly frightened child. We're not pushing away fear or agreeing with what it has to say. Eventually we learn to coexist with fear, rather than live in the delusion we can get rid of it.

The Buddha had many other strategies for relating to fear; there are lessons in how to work with fear of death, fear of uncertainty, fear of others (i.e. social anxiety). In one Sutta famous teaching ("Bhaya-bherava Sutta: Fear & Terror") the Buddha lists, if memory serves, twelve different strategies, var-


whats gon on? I dont get this.
BEWARE
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ied as cultivating good will to others, focusing the mind away from fear projects towards reflections of peaceful times, reducing one's consuming habits, refraining from disparaging others, developing peace through inner focus, and on.

Most essential, in my mind, is to rid the mind of the false beliefs that 1) we can rid ourselves completely of fear; and 2) that there's something inherently wrong when we experience fear. The mind is set up to insure our survival at all costs, and as the result it becomes rather trigger happy with the impulses of apprehension and dread. So the key is, if there's nothing immediately dangerous or life-threatening, to get enough breathing room to observe it.

> *Consumerism is partly a ritualistic behavior - some may buy new clothes before a night out as a way to ritually prepare for the evening's adventure. Fashion also has other powerful rituals, perhaps most importantly the catwalk-show. What is the role of ritual in Buddhism?*

There are certainly fewer rituals in the lay Theravadan Buddhist practice than virtually any other Buddhist practice that I know of. And while there are a few (taking refuge, precepts, etc), he also taught that attachment to rites and rituals (Silabbatupadana) is a form of clinging that causes suffering. People generally get more caught up in the rituals of spiritual practice than focusing on the real endeavor, such as awareness, kindness and compassion.

Karma Truely is the Knight stick of Justice

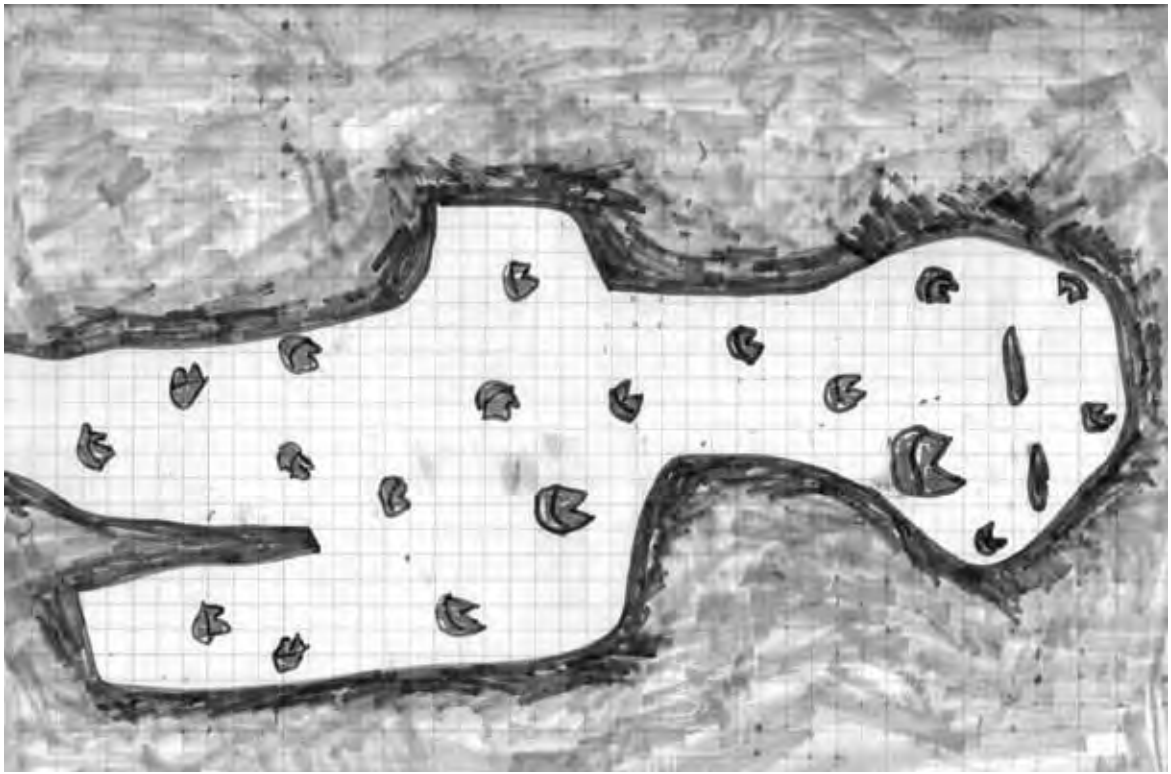
*Compassion (or to emphasise it; "com-passion") is interesting concept and word, and to have a "passion for fashion" is almost a standard expression in today's consumer culture. Is there a relation between passion and compassion in Buddhism?*

Passion may be well-thought-of in the arts and business worlds, but it's not an estimable state in spiritual practice. People have the delusion that passion is a necessary ingredient to beauty, inspiration, creativity and diligence; but they can all be achieved via serenity. Passion is a term that people who are stressed out and unkind to others use to excuse their behavior. So no, passion for compassion is a non-starter.

*So if we are to be anti-passionate about consumerism there seems to be some form of anti-consumer connection between punk DIY culture and Buddhism? Can punk, as an attitude of self-empowerment, be a part of a Buddhist path?*

Yep! Punk can, in this sense, definitely be a part of the Buddhist path, especially due to the emphasis on finding happiness and purpose to life outside of consumerism and careerism.

*There is also a "together" part in the anti-consumerism of DIY, punk or Buddhism, yet they are all in some way about individual empowerment. Our friends may strengthen us, but also put pressure and raise competition. What is the relation between the subcultural scene, the group or "crew", your fellow practitioners (or Sangha) and the individual's inner struggle?*



The Buddha taught, almost paradoxically, that "Admirable friendship and companionship is the whole of the spiritual life" but then one who has admirable friends goes on to develop "inner peace dependent on seclusion, dispassion, cessation, resulting in letting go of what's stressful and cultivating what's calming." (Upaddha Sutta)

In other words, the mind tends to imitate the actions of those we surround ourselves with, we're very much subject to socio-cultural influence; so if we want to pursue a spiritual path that's not in tune with the dominant, hegemonic culture, that emphasizes tranquility, that can only be developed through compassion, kindness and acceptance, over what can be purchased, it's best to surround ourselves with a subculture or "crew" that will create the underlying support we'll need.

*So, in conclusion, what would a "wise" relationship be to fashion?*

The key to achieving peace of mind in an industry such as fashion is practicing kindness, compassion and equanimity towards one's coworkers, practicing generosity and virtue (refusing to speak harmfully), staying mindful in noting and relaxing the underlying stresses that accumulate in the body and mind, and focusing one's efforts outside of work towards endeavors that develop unconditional peace (meditation and service for example).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## Bios

Josh Korda's interest in Buddhist practice began in the late 1970s, when he was introduced to the practice by his father. He has been the teacher at New York Dharmapunx since 2005, teaching classes in Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as Againstthestream.org retreats during the summer season. For the last three years Josh has been a visiting teacher at ZenCare.org, a non-profit organization that trains hospice volunteers, and gives talks at Meditate New York. Having taught at NYIMC.org, Josh has volunteered for many years as an attendant at their retreats. Josh has been published in Buddhist publications, has lead a monthlong online retreat for Tricycle Magazine, has been featured in pieces by the New York Times, CBSNews and other media outlets. His initial teacher training with Noah Levine, and has had the honor to study with countless other spiritual practitioners, including Ajahns Geoff, Sucitto, Amaro, Brahm and Vajiro to name a few. All of Josh's Dharma talks can be found at dharmapunxnyc.podbean.com, which is followed by a large online community.

Otto von Busch is an artist and fashion designer, teaching Integrated Design at Parsons the New School for Design in New York. In his work he explores how fashion can be acting as a form of civic engagement, building community capabilities through collaborative craft and social activism. He has for many years been interested in how fashion can be a tool for social, personal and spiritual liberation. Some of his projects on this subject can be found at selfpassage.org.

Jesse Bercowetz is an award-winning artist who lives in New York City. His epic and sprawling sculptures have been featured in a myriad of exhibitions worldwide. He has lectured at several prominent universities and institutions. His work can be found in numerous art collections in the U.S. and abroad. He has collaborated with over a dozen non-profit arts organizations and served on the advisory panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He has also enjoyed mentoring urban teens and immigrant artist, working with the homeless, mentally ill and chemically dependent. Bercowetz is currently preparing to travel to South East Asia on a research grant from the Jerome Foundation. See more at www.jessebercowetz.com

Josh Korda,
photo by Gianna Leo Falcon

We are aversive to pain. We are restless.
We are craving for pleasure. And we all want more.

It is easy today to look to fashion for salvation. We feel fashion can give us what we need. We can be beautiful. We can be seen. We can be popular. We can become our better self. And it is so accessible. It is everywhere.

*Can there be any liberation?*

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