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The waste economy

Chindogu is a term used by the twentieth-century management guru Charles Handy.¹ It comes from a Japanese word meaning clutter and excess. Examples of *chindogu* include washing machines with 30 programmes when you might only ever use three or four and (Handy's favourite) spectacles with windscreen wipers. But it also includes the shoes or ties or other items of clothing bought but never used and books bought on impulse from Amazon that are never read. *Chindogu* products are especially prevalent at Christmastime: for example, a Darth Vader talking piggy bank, an individual beer can chiller, or bacon-flavoured toothpaste – all products that after a few days are thrown away. George Monbiot, an environmentalist and a columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, calls them examples of pathological consumption: the unfortunate using up of rare materials, complex electronics, and much-needed sources of energy and transport. As he puts it, 'We are screwing the planet to make solar-powered bath thermometers and desktop crazy golfers.'²

Why are we creating so much waste? I discussed capitalism's growth fetish in Chapter 5. And as noted in earlier chapters, Handy writes, 'Economic growth depends, ultimately, on more and more people, wanting more and more, of more and more things'³ while E.J. Mishan warns that 'the precondition of

sustained growth is sustained discontent.⁴ •• But what happens if consumers move beyond their needs and can't be persuaded to want more than they have? How can discontent be rekindled? Handy comments that this was the problem faced in Japan in the 1990s, when the Japanese government even considered giving people vouchers to tempt them into the shops.⁵

To promote discontent requires new products and product upgrades to titillate consumer appetites and keep demand buoyant. Boosting the desire to have what we see others having, or to have what they don't have, through advertising and creating new fashions Handy recognizes to be an important stimulus to demand, as is envy. I remember Tim Jackson's words: 'It's a story about us, people, being persuaded to spend money we don't have, on things we don't need, to create impressions that don't last, on people that we don't care about.'⁶ In other words, *chindogu* is one of capitalism's ways of stoking discontent and promoting economic growth. Considering all this, Handy writes:

I was enough of an economist to recognize that *chindogu* has its uses in providing employment and more money for people to spend, but a part of me worried about the waste involved in all those unnecessary things, the waste of people's time as much as the waste of materials. It can't be much fun standing in those shopping malls all day and increasingly all night promoting *chindogu*, even if it is upmarket stuff, nor can it be satisfying to be one of those who produce it, in a factory or, nowadays, to be sitting in a call centre backing up yet another unneeded website. Not the best use of a life, I reflected, even if it does provide the bread to sustain that life.⁷

As well as *chindogu*, there are other ways in which our modern economy promotes waste in the pursuit of economic growth, and I shall look at some of them later in this chapter. But before that, I shall discuss the attitude to waste found in accounts from the life of the Buddha and his followers, using three examples.

First, in the Vinaya, the compendium of regulations governing the life of the Buddha's monks and nuns, there's a story about a king who is wondering whether to make a gift of cloth for robes to the Buddha's monastic followers, wondering whether the gift will be appropriately used. He investigates and discovers that once their robes become worn, monks use the cloth as mattress coverings or foot wipers and that the shreds left over after these uses are mixed with mud and used to build huts. This convinces the king that the monks and nuns do indeed make proper use of a gift of cloth. Nothing is wasted in the Buddha's Sangha.⁸

Second, in relation to his lay followers, the Buddha identified four worthy ways in which wealth might be spent: properly maintaining oneself, family, workers, friends, and colleagues in happiness; making provision against potential losses; making offerings to relatives, guests, ancestors, the king, and the gods; and giving alms to ascetics and other praiseworthy spiritual figures. The Buddha concluded: 'For anyone whose wealth is expended on other things apart from these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to waste, to have been squandered and used frivolously. But for anyone whose wealth is expended on these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to good use, to have been fruitfully employed and used for a worthy cause.'⁹

Third, as regards food, the Buddha laid down very specific guidelines to be followed by monks and nuns.¹⁰ They were allowed to eat only what they had been given. They were not allowed to provide themselves with food. They were able to

obtain food by collecting it from house to house or they could be invited to a meal by their lay followers. To collect food, monks would stand in silence with their bowl at a householder's front door. They had to accept whatever they were given regardless of its quality. If they were not given anything, the Buddha advised them not to feel displeasure or frustration. The monks and nuns were not allowed to prompt their benefactors; and unless they were ill, they were not allowed to express any requests or to make known their favourite kinds of food. In the stories of the Buddha's life, there are many instances of discussions and debates between the Buddha and lay followers ending with a request: 'Blessed One, may you accept to come and eat in my house with your disciples tomorrow.' Generally monks were not to store or to cook food themselves, although limited exceptions of particular kinds of food were made for sick monks. When during famine lay followers brought food to the more settled abodes of monks and nuns, the Buddha allowed food to be stored and cooked by monks. And when monks were to set out across a desert or through a large forest where food would not be available for some time, they were allowed to bring along a lay attendant to carry provisions for the journey.

Monks and nuns were allowed to eat only between dawn and noon. The reasons for this rule were explained by the Buddha: 'Monks, I do not eat in the evening. Because I avoid eating in the evening, I am in good health, light, energetic and live comfortably. You too, monks, avoid eating in the evening, and you will have good health.'¹¹ The rule on eating only between dawn and noon was also intended so that monks would not waste time that could be spent concentrating on their religious practice. It was also to prevent monks standing alone outside a house at night and possibly frightening householders.

Although the Buddha was always concerned that his disciples had enough nourishing food to keep them in good physical health, he was very critical of overeating or gluttony. Gluttony, like any other kind of desire, was an obstacle to inner progress. The Buddha said: ‘. . . as soon as a monk is able to control his senses, the Tathāgata [Buddha] leads him further still: now, monk, be moderate in your eating. Concentrate and be attentive when you eat: do not eat for pleasure or enjoyment, nor in order to be handsome and attractive; eat only for the benefit of the religious life.’¹² Because overeating causes heavy sleep, it was seen as an obstacle on the spiritual path of renunciation: it prevented the practice of meditation and mindfulness. Monks and nuns, who had entered the path of renunciation, had to restrict their eating in order to practise contemplation, to meditate for long periods of time without feeling sleepy, and to stay in good physical health.

To summarize, although applied in different ways to his lay followers and to his monks and nuns, the Buddha’s advice was essentially to lead a life of stillness, simplicity, and contentment. Wealth was not to be used frivolously and food was to be consumed in moderation. Waste was to be avoided. However, modern society is deliberately structured to promote waste and to induce overeating. It faces an individual with many obstacles to a life of simplicity, stillness, and contentment.

For example, just how difficult has it become to get something repaired? The author Shannon Hayes tells the story of how her family tried to get its favourite stereo system repaired.¹³ First, they contacted the manufacturer, to be told that ‘Those systems can’t be repaired any longer.’ Then they approached Mr Kleinburger, who for many years had run a local electronics store. He didn’t hold out much hope, explaining, ‘Factories don’t authorize repair people anymore. It used to be that we’d get trained by the

manufacturers to repair and maintain their equipment. Nobody does that anymore. They wanna sell you the new thing.’ Although he was pretty sure that the repair would cost just a few dollars, he could not find a way to open up the casing without breaking it. The people he contacted at the company refused to tell him how to do that because they were under strict orders not to release the information. But finally the persistent Mr Kleinburger did find someone at the company who shared his passion for the way things are made and told him how to open the casing. The repair was easily done and the stereo again worked perfectly. Mr Kleinburger’s final words were ‘That’s your stereo. It’s a beautiful piece of machinery, that thing is. Every single part is a standard American part, made here and easily replaced.’

But present-day manufacturers don’t want it to be that way. Perhaps we could learn from the sixteenth-century Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū. On one occasion, Sen no Rikyū steadfastly ignored a Song dynasty Chinese tea jar of which his host was inordinately proud, until the owner smashed it in despair at his indifference. After it had been painstakingly put together by the owner’s friends, Rikyū declared, ‘Now, the piece is magnificent.’ When ceramics were broken in old Japan, it was an opportunity to make a new one from the pieces, and often a repaired bowl or container would be valued more highly than the original. The writer Philip Ball comments, ‘The mended object is special precisely because it was worth mending. The repair, like that of an old teddy bear, is a testament to the affection in which the object is held.’¹⁴

A similar approach applied to the *boro* clothes of the Japanese peasant and artisan classes: they were stitched together from scraps of cloth. In the spirit of the Buddha, nothing went to waste. Both *boro* and the mending of ceramics had a strong aesthetic

side that drew upon the Japanese tradition of *wabi-sabi*, a view of the world that emphasizes transience and imperfection. Unfortunately, we live in a society dominated by a consumerism that is prejudiced, even organized, against repair. It wasn't always this way. In Britain, mending clothes was a routine part of life for all classes, including the aristocracy. Mending in countries such as Britain and the US used to be a skilled manual trade, of which Mr Kleinburger is a reminder. But now, just as Shannon Hayes' stereo unit was sealed, more and more electronic items are sealed against repair; and if you start to tinker with them, you lose any guarantee. And, Ball comments, 'Add that to a climate in which you pay for the service or accessories rather than for the item – inks are pricier than printers, mobile phones are free when you subscribe to a network – and repair lacks feasibility, infrastructure or economic motivation.'¹⁵

Jacques Peretti, in the first episode of his 2014 BBC television series *The Men Who Made Us Spend*,¹⁶ reveals how the idea of planned obsolescence goes back to the 1920s. A cartel of light bulb manufacturers agreed then to deliberately and artificially limit the lifespan of a light bulb to 1,000 hours when it could easily be manufactured to last for 2,500 hours. The result was a doubling of sales of light bulbs. This was the start of the cycle of endless spending and throwing away. As Peretti demonstrates in the programme, now we have printer cartridges made so that customers can't take a look inside them and see a counter there that tells them that it is finished and stops the cartridge working after a certain number of pages have been printed. In fact, Peretti says, the counter can be reset and used three times over. Or perhaps you have had the same experience as I have when your printer tells you that the ink cartridge has run out and needs to be replaced, only to discover that if you persist

and continue to use it, many more pages can be printed before it actually does finish.

Apple and other manufacturers deliberately make electronic devices such as iPods or phones with batteries that run out after a fixed time. Sometimes they design their products in a way that makes it very difficult to replace the battery, even to the extent of creating an entirely new screw that needs an entirely new screwdriver to get into a phone! The choice for the customer is either to pay an exorbitant sum of money to the manufacturer to instal a new battery or, better still (from the company's point of view), simply to buy a newer model.

Peretti also demonstrates other elements in promoting the cycle of endless spending and throwing away. In the 1950s, Alfred P. Sloan, the head of General Motors Corporation, initiated a psychological reprogramming of the consumer, creating the desire to buy a new car every year by continually modifying the style of new models. Alongside planned obsolescence being 'done to an object', planned obsolescence would now be 'done in the head'. General Motors called it 'the organized creation of dissatisfaction', a phrase echoed in the 1960s by E.J. Mishan's observation that economic growth requires 'sustained discontent'. When consumer demand abated in the 1970s, the response in the 1980s was to massively expand credit so as to make it easier to shop and aspire to a richer lifestyle. With the introduction of computer-aided design, it became much easier to make products with myriad design features and rapid turnover. For example, instead of watches being for life, they were now manufactured to be bought several times a year according to seasonal fashions. IKEA introduced the idea of household furniture as throw-away items just like other consumer products, and their advertisements mocked people for their attachment to old furniture and

furnishings. Football supporters and their children need to buy expensive new shirts every year in the summer as football clubs change their club strips.

Another area of deliberately induced waste is the production and consumption of food, as two recent reports reveal. In 2012, the largest-ever study of the state of the world's health revealed that for the first time, the number of years of healthy living lost as a result of people eating too much surpassed the number lost by people having too little to eat. Dr Majid Ezzati, Chair in Global Environmental Health at Imperial College London and one of the lead authors of the report, said, 'We have gone from a world 20 years ago where people weren't getting enough to eat to a world now where too much food and unhealthy food – even in developing countries – is making us sick.'¹⁷

This not to say that problems of malnutrition have disappeared – far from it. Although great gains have been made in the past twenty years, not having enough to eat is still the eighth most important cause of disease.¹⁸ But according to a second report issued in 2013, while people are still starving, as much as half of all the food produced in the world ends up as waste every year. The report, produced by the UK's Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IME), blames this appalling fact on a variety of factors, including unnecessarily strict sell-by dates, buy-one-get-one free sales campaigns, consumers conditioned to demand cosmetically perfect food, and also poor engineering and agricultural practices, inadequate infrastructure, and inefficient storage facilities.¹⁹ In the UK, for example, as much as 30 per cent of vegetable crops are not harvested because they do not meet retailers' standards of physical appearance. And in Europe and the United States, up to half the food that is bought by consumers is thrown away. Tim Fox, the head of energy

and the environment at the IME, says, 'The amount of food wasted and lost around the world is staggering. This is food that could be used to feed the world's growing population – as well as those in hunger today. It is also an unnecessary waste of the land, water and energy resources that were used in the production, processing and distribution of this food.'²⁰ Such is the cost of our throw-away culture. But perhaps the problem of obesity tells us the most about the consequences of promoting discontent and fuelling demand and growth.

One April evening in 1999, a meeting was held in Minneapolis in the US. Assembled there were the men who controlled America's largest food and drinks companies, among them Nestlé, Kraft, Nabisco, General Mills, Proctor and Gamble, Coca-Cola, Mars, and Pillsbury (taken over two years later by General Mills). The *New York Times* reporter Michael Moss tells the story of the meeting.²¹ There was one item on the agenda, the growing worry about the obesity epidemic. The men gathered at the meeting were business rivals, used to fighting each other for what they called 'stomach share': the amount of digestive space that any one company's brand can grab from the competition. Some present were uneasy about childhood obesity and were aware of the parallels that could be drawn between the negative health effects of cigarettes and the damage done by certain kinds of food. Would this meeting of the most powerful men in American food manufacturing come to an agreement to help tackle obesity?

Any thoughts of that were scotched, according to Moss, when Stephen Sanger, then the head of General Mills, said, 'Don't talk to me about nutrition, talk to me about taste, and if this stuff tastes better, don't run around trying to sell stuff that doesn't taste good.' Sanger went on to say that consumers were fickle, sometimes worrying about sugar, sometimes about fat. He

argued that because General Mills offered consumers a choice of products, including those designed to satisfy dieters and others with low sugar and added whole grains, he was not prepared to change anything. It was up to the consumer to decide. This was his argument despite knowing that sugary, salty, fatty foods cause obesity, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure. What mattered for Sanger was the drive for greater market share and profits for shareholders.

Moss discovered in his investigation that the food companies are pouring huge sums of money into research and development of new product lines designed to get people hooked on foods that are cheap and convenient. The aim is to find the 'bliss point', the design for a product that creates the greatest amount of craving. According to the food scientist Steve Witherly, one of the most successful food products in terms of creating craving is Cheetos potato chips. Witherly sees Cheetos as one of the most marvellously constructed foods on the planet in terms of pure pleasure. Cheetos has many attributes that make the consumer want more, but the one he admires most is the puff's uncanny ability to melt in the mouth. 'It's called vanishing caloric density,' he says. 'If something melts down quickly, your brain thinks that there's no calories in it . . . you can just keep eating it forever.'²²

Moss tells us too how some of the largest companies are now using brain scans to study how we react neurologically to certain foods, especially sugar. Apparently companies have discovered that the brain lights up for sugar in the same way it does for cocaine. This knowledge is useful in formulating the right food ingredients, and it's also useful in promoting food products. For example, the world's largest ice cream maker, Unilever, used its brain research in a marketing campaign that promotes eating ice cream as a 'scientifically proven' way to make us happy.²³

Despite this, many authorities still publicly endorse the view that the primary cause of the obesity epidemic is a lack of individual willpower. In the same way as the manufacturers of throw-away containers and other sources of rubbish seek to push responsibility on to the individual and away from themselves, food companies seek to push responsibility for obesity on to individual consumer choices.

It isn't too extreme to draw a comparison between this attitude and the attitude of the British in the opium wars of the nineteenth century. The import of opium was forced on the Chinese people against the wishes of their government, and the British argued that the sale of opium was not immoral because the Chinese people were only too willing to receive it. Moreover, just as one food company might argue that if it didn't provide unhealthy food for its customers, then others would, so the British argued that if they did not provide the opium, then other countries' merchants would.²⁴ To help us to deal with our own lack of willpower, a new industry, and a new source of profit, has appeared. Weight-loss food and drinks, medicines, services, surgeries, and new technologies, all designed to help us lose weight, are now big business. Apparently a Hong Kong company named Hapilabs offers an electronic fork that tracks how many bites you take per minute in order to prevent hasty eating: shovel food in too fast and it vibrates to alert you²⁵ – a modern-day reminder to eat mindfully? A May 2012 report by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. predicted that 'health and wellness' would soon become a trillion-dollar global industry. Commenting that obesity is expensive in terms of healthcare costs, the report added, encouragingly, that 'dealing with it is also a big, fat market'.²⁶

But many specialists do not believe that personal gluttony and laziness are the entire explanation for the obesity epidemic.

Richard L Atkinson, Emeritus Professor of Medicine and Nutritional Sciences at the University of Wisconsin and editor of the *International Journal of Obesity*, put it this way in 2005: 'The previous belief of many lay people and health professionals that obesity is simply the result of a lack of willpower and an inability to discipline eating habits is no longer defensible.'²⁷ We have already seen the deliberate attempt by food companies to encourage more consumption of food products. But additional research indicates that the problems caused by the food industry go deeper still.

The usual belief is that particular categories of people become fat because they simply consume more calories than others do. So one version of why poorer people become fat might go like this. Because being poor is stressful, stress makes you eat more, and the cheapest foodstuff available is the stuff with lots of 'empty' calories such as Cheeto chips, poorer people are more likely to become obese than the better-off. They simply consume more calories. However, a number of researchers have come to believe that all calories are not equal. As the science writer David Berreby points out, 'The problem with diets that are heavy in meat, fat or sugar is not solely that they pack a lot of calories into food; it is that they alter the biochemistry of fat storage and fat expenditure, tilting the body's system in favour of fat storage.'²⁸

Sugar, trans-fats, and alcohol have all been linked to changes in 'insulin signalling', which affects how the body processes carbohydrates. This might sound like a merely technical distinction but it's a fundamental shift of understanding. If the problem is not the number of calories but the biochemical influences on the body's fat-making and fat-storage processes, then the sheer quantity of food or drink is not the all-controlling determinant of weight gain. Berreby observes, 'If candy's chemistry tilts you

toward fat, then the fact that you eat it at all may be as important as the amount of it you consume.²⁹ Worse still, things that can alter the body's fat-making and fat-storage processes, that can alter the body's fat metabolism potentially include much wider categories than just food. Sleeplessness (maybe associated with shift work), stress, industrial chemicals, electric light, heating, and air conditioning are all potential factors that can alter the activities of body cells, change the body's fat metabolism, and contribute to the obesity epidemic.

Moreover, there is some evidence that such changes may persist over longer timescales, even from one generation to the next. Berreby explains it this way. A developing foetus is very sensitive to the environment into which it will be born, and a crucial source of information about that environment is the nutrition it gets via the umbilical cord. Where mothers have gone hungry during pregnancy, their child is at much greater risk of obesity. Life in the womb attunes the baby's metabolism for a life outside the womb of scarcity, preparing the child's body to store fat whenever it can in order to get them through periods with little food. If, however, the bouts of scarcity don't materialize, the child's tendency to fat storage ceases to be an advantage and can become a problem. This is why the 40,000 babies gestated during Holland's 'Hunger Winter' of 1944–5 grew up to be more obese, to be more prone to diabetes and heart trouble than their fellow citizens who developed at a different time.³⁰

Using a similar line of thought, Jonathan Wells, Professor of Child Nutrition at University College London, even proposes that the root cause of the modern epidemic of obesity in developing nations can be linked to the history of capitalism.³¹ He asks us to imagine a poor farmer growing food crops in a poor country in Africa or Asia several hundred years ago. When Europeans take

control of the economy in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, their new system pushes the farmer and his neighbours to stop growing their own food and instead to start cultivating a more marketable export commodity, such as coffee. As they are no longer growing their own food, the farmers must buy it. But the Europeans are aiming to maximize profit. Thus they pay as little as possible for the coffee crop, and so the farmers go hungry. Later, when the farmer's children go to work in factories, they also are paid as little as possible for their work and go hungry.

Eighty years on, some of the farmer's descendants rise out of the ranks of the poor and join the world's twenty-first-century middle class consumers. These descendants are now primed to live what Wells calls the 'obesogenic' life, a life full of factors such as stress and lifts instead of stairs in which they buy the kinds of food and beverages that are 'metabolic disturbers'. And because the human body's response to its nutrition can last a lifetime and even be passed on to the next generation, the descendants are more likely to become obese in a food-rich environment because their parents were undernourished. And if they do become obese, they pass on changes in metabolism that predispose their children to obesity too. Just as with the children of underfed people, the children of the overfed have their metabolism set in ways that tend to promote obesity.

Wells concludes that a past of *undernutrition*, combined with a present of *overnutrition*, is an obesity trap. He calls this double bind the 'metabolic ghetto', whose causes come from a history of profit-led manipulations of the global supply and quality of food. He concludes that the obesity trap is inextricably linked to the 'unifying logic of capitalism'. Capitalism requires that food companies seek immediate profits and long-term success, and its best strategy for that involves persuading people to choose

foods that are the most profitable. This the companies do, both at the behavioural level through advertising, price manipulation, and restriction of choice and at the physiological level through the enhancement of the addictive properties of foods. Obesity is the result.

What can Buddhists do in response to the waste inherent in our modern economic system? Whether we live alone, in a family, or in a residential community such as a Buddhist centre, the obvious starting step is to review and improve ways for minimizing and recycling waste of all kinds. Following a life of simplicity without waste is important.

Another step involves becoming more knowledgeable about (and to help promote awareness within the Buddhist community of) local or national initiatives designed to encourage the repair and reuse of consumer products and to safely dispose of waste. One such initiative at the national level in the US is the Electronics TakeBack Coalition. This brings together a coalition of many diverse organizations, including the Communication Workers of America, Friends of the Earth, and Physicians for Social Responsibility and it aims to promote green design and responsible recycling in the electronics industry.³² iFixit is a global community of people helping each other to repair things. Their slogan is 'Let's fix the world, one device at a time.' They point out that repairing can create local jobs, helping to shelter localities from the vicissitudes of globalization.³³

Another local project, designed to reduce food waste is Original Unverpackt in Berlin.³⁴ Original Unverpackt, born as a social business with partners coming from backgrounds in Fairtrade, vegan supermarkets, and economics, will be the first supermarket in Germany without any disposable packaging. It sources its food mostly from local suppliers and simply offers

everything in bulk, allowing customers to take as little or as much of the produce in any container they like.

A further, old-fashioned but nonetheless significant possibility is to open a second-hand clothes shop, like Lama's Pyjamas at the London Buddhist Centre.³⁵

But as I concluded at the end of the previous chapter, securing fundamental change on issues such as the environment and waste requires going beyond the steps I have just described. The initiatives above are a platform to build on by connecting with much broader political campaigns that aim to change the behaviour of food companies and other manufacturers. With their emphasis on clarity of awareness and on simplicity and contentment as fundamental values, Buddhists have much to offer such campaigns.

Notes

Chapter 6 – The waste economy

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- 25 Berreby, David. 2013.
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- 28 Berreby, David. 2013.
- 29 Berreby, David. 2013.
- 30 Berreby, David. 2013.
- 31 Berreby, David. 2012.
- 32 Electronics Take Back Coalition. Undated.
- 33 IFIXIT. Undated.
- 34 Lavars, Nick. 2014.
- 35 See Lama’s Pyjamas. Undated.