

CAUGHT IN THE CONSUMER TRAP

What do complaints like "I'm on a diet", "I'm too busy" or "I can't make up my mind" have in common ?

Well they're distinctly problems of wealthier societies. Obesity now rivals smoking as the largest cause of premature death, an average American consumes some 150 pounds of sugar annually. This is one side effect of being wealthy. Another is time squeeze' - the sense that we are very busy; there isn't enough time to do things and this despite the fact that total work hours have dropped over the years. We still complain and the complaining rises with rising income. This is not a paradox as Isa ﷺ explained "man does not live by bread alone". As more and more of our material wishes become satisfied our desire for more increases. It is a vicious positive feedback cycle; the more we have the more we want.

Is it not true that what we really want is not more material objects but love, compassion, respect and happy families? Sadly these traditional values are not available on the supermarket shelves. I think we can do two things to remedy this problem.

Firstly we need to nurture and develop traditional values like patience, tolerance, compassion and honesty. These will help us to share our wealth with others. Secondly we need to learn to spend our money wisely, not merely for self-gratification but avoiding impulse buying.

However, the most powerful means of avoiding the consumer trap is to develop a particular mindset and attitude towards consumerism. This attitude in Islamic terminology is called Zuhd, strict self-discipline and abstention from too many worldly possessions. It leads to spiritual growth and Divine proximity. This is not about living an ascetic life or living like a monk but maintaining a balance between worldly activities and spiritual life.

The teachings of the Quran and Sunnah are clear on this topic: The Quran often mentions the fleeting and temporary nature of the world, "And this life of the world is only amusement and play, surely the home of the hereafter is the real life if only they knew" (Surah Ankabut:64). The beloved Mustafa ﷺ warned Muslims against the excesses of worldly life once he said, "What concerns me most about you is the abundance of material wealth" (Muslim). On another occasion he said "the world is sweet and green whilst you are its custodians, be aware what you are doing, be careful with wealth and be careful with women" (Muslim). Thus warning us against the allure and the deception of material and sensual things.

This is not condemning material wealth or women, far from it, but warning us to be careful how we use them and not to abuse them.

One way of avoiding the worldly trap as the Messenger ﷺ taught was to 'look at those who are less wealthy than you and 'don't look up to the wealthy for this will keep you from belittling the favours of Allah' (Bukhari).

However, the Messenger ﷺ did curse those who fall in love with material things and who love vanity, he ﷺ declared, 'he is ruined who loves gold and silver and designer clothes made of silk' (Bukhari).

Instead of putting Allah and His deen first he puts material things first. On another occasion he ﷺ advised his followers this lifestyle: 'Live in the world like a stranger or traveller' (Bukhari).

“Live in the world like a stranger or traveller”