

Consumed by Consumerism

"A fool and his money are soon parted." Few things illustrate this adage better than the innumerable sale schemes designed to profit from a consumer's avarice or naiveté. Lets decode some of the common ad lines:

FREE OFFER
Offer is free, product is payable

0% Finance
100% interest

BUY 1 GET 1 FREE
Price of one item to include that of the other

SPECIAL PRICE*
Add one zero to the price for every *after the offer

NEVER-BEFORE SALE!
Never-after sellable; product on the verge of expiry

Offer valid till stock lasts
Stocks run out the moment you enter the store

PRICES RAISED AGAIN
I only observe this week
Prices raised last week

An offer like this won't come again...
Not until next month

Marketing tricks apart, does consumerism actually bring happiness? Plasma TV, home theatre, luxury car, high-end cellphone/PDA/laptop, iPod video, designer clothes, fragrances, funky jewellery, playstation 3, travel to exotic international locales, gym and club membership, spa treatments, expensive restaurants... most consumer goods are not things of utility, but lifestyle products. The continuous visual temptation in seductive markets combined with easy access to plastic money has made carpe diem (seize the day) the mantra today.

But has the consumptive mantra increased our happiness? Physically, fast foods are slow to digest, most hedonistic enjoyments - smoking, drinking, sex - become addictive and destructive in little time. Mentally, the frenzied pace required to sustain an "earn more, spend more" consumeristic lifestyle makes us stressed and drained. Spiritually, we are left with no time to ponder on the higher values and deeper purpose of life. Instead of simple living and high thinking, we end up simply living and hardly thinking. Despite debilitating us physically, mentally and spiritually, consumerism appears charming because it gratifies our senses and inflates our egos. Moreover, no matter how much we consume and possess, the promises of goodies, gadgets and good times remain just that - promises. Satisfaction always seems to lie in the product or service we don't have. Little do hapless consumers realize that satisfaction is designed to remain a mirage because the fuel that energizes the consumer market is the perpetual dissatisfaction of the consumer.

When the Britishers asked Mahatma Gandhi whether post-independent India would follow the Western model of development, Gandhiji retorted, "It took Britain half the earth to achieve its 'progress'. If India were to follow that path, how many earths would India need?" But sadly most Indian leaders were too materially enamored to conceive that a progressive India could be anything other than a copycat of the West. Now the specter of global warming haunts us; Bom-bay "bombed" by consumerism may soon become a "bay"!

The great spiritual civilization of India - which dates back before Egypt, Maya, China, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome and the West - defined progress not in terms of material acquisition, but spiritual realization, because we are spiritual souls, not material bodies. A consumerist who is too "busy" to have time for spiritual nourishment is like a car owner too busy in prettifying his car to have time to eat food. Vedic society deemed as most successful those enterprising human beings - the renounced and realized saints - who lived only to share their spiritual joy with everyone else. The sterling example of these detached, devoted sages inspired the common people to live simply, but happily - diligently executing their occupations, while delighting in chanting the names and glories of the Lord. This spiritually harmonious society was not materially bankrupt, as some people allege; the wealthiest country of the world today USA was discovered when Europe was searching for a shorter sea route to the wealth of India!

We may not be able to adopt the economic model of ancient India, but we can certainly adopt its spiritual foundation. Lasting happiness comes from spiritual realization, not material acquisition. Let us therefore empower ourselves with divine wisdom and joy, balance our material and spiritual enrichment and thus become role models of holistic human growth - and thus help protect the brains - and bank accounts - of our misled fellow humans from being consumed by consumerism

And we need not give up our love for special offers either - because there's a special offer from the most special person. God, in His most merciful form of Lord Chaitanya, is offering: "Happiness at your tongue-tips!" By the easy process of chanting of the holy names, He is giving us quick access to everlasting bliss. When people so unhesitatingly put faith in eminently false promises of cheaters, why should we hesitate to put faith in the eternally true promise of the Supreme Absolute Truth? In fact, Srila Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, went further and offered a flat 75% off. Whereas the earlier spiritual teachers required that we chant 64 rounds of the Hare Krishna maha mantra, Srila Prabhupada, seeing our spiritual disqualifications, compassionately brought down the requirement to just 16 rounds.

So to summarize: The mother of all offers from the Father of all of us - a flat 75% off, no 'untos' and no 'uptos', 'no conditions apply', offer is 100% in your interest!



Are you game?

