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Speak Up

THE PARADOX OF PLENTY

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Imagine, for a moment, a world in which your wardrobe is overflowing, your phone is perfectly functional, your bookshelf is crowded, and your online shopping cart is perpetually one click away from becoming reality. You have everything you need, several things you forgot you owned, and at least three items purchased because they were on sale. Yet, somehow, you still have nothing to wear, your phone is already outdated, and life would apparently be incomplete without the latest trending water bottle.

Welcome to the twenty-first century: a marvellous age of technological advancement, instant gratification, and the extraordinary human ability to manufacture new needs faster than we can satisfy old ones. We have become remarkably good at acquiring things, yet increasingly incapable of recognising when we have enough. Perhaps the problem is not merely what we possess, but what possesses us.

The Consumerism Conundrum: Buy Now, Question Never

Somewhere along the way, shopping stopped being about buying what we needed and became a hobby of discovering things we apparently cannot live without. A perfectly good phone suddenly feels ancient, an untouched wardrobe seems to have nothing suitable, and a skincare routine becomes a full-time project in pursuit of a face that meets society's ever-changing standards. We are no longer just buying things; we are buying the promise of becoming better versions of ourselves. Social media, naturally, is there to make sure we see everyone else's upgrades while questioning our own.

The irony is almost impressive: we work to earn money, spend it acquiring things, and then work harder to pay for, maintain, organise, and replace those very things. Somewhere along the way, possessions that were supposed to make life easier begin demanding our time, attention, and emotional energy. We have managed to turn consumption into both a reward for working and a reason to keep working.

Ecological economist Jason Hickel explores this contradiction in his book *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*. He challenges the assumption that endless economic expansion and ever-increasing consumption are necessary measures of progress, highlighting their



environmental and social costs. His work raises a simple but uncomfortable question: does consuming more necessarily mean living better? Perhaps progress should be measured not only by how much we produce and purchase, but also by how wisely we use what we already have.

Minimalism: The Twenty-First Century's Plot Twist

After years of being told to buy more, we seem to have arrived at a rather unexpected idea: what if we simply bought less? Minimalism turns the usual consumerist script on its head. An empty corner does not necessarily need a decorative plant, a new shelf, and three carefully selected objects to make it look intentional. Sometimes, an empty corner can just be an empty corner. At its simplest, minimalism means being more deliberate about what we own and what we bring into our lives. It could mean buying fewer clothes, repairing a familiar pair of shoes, resisting an impulse purchase, or finally accepting that the kitchen appliance bought for a recipe tried once in 2022 has fulfilled its purpose in life.

One example is Project 333, a minimalist fashion challenge created by Courtney Carver. It encourages participants to dress with 33 items of clothing and accessories for three months, subject to certain exclusions. For someone whose wardrobe could outfit a small theatre production, this may sound less like a lifestyle experiment and more like a personal tragedy. Yet it raises a fair question: how many of our possessions do we actually use, and how many do we merely store, organise, and occasionally rediscover?

Of course, minimalism has its own absurdities. One can spend an entire weekend buying matching storage boxes, colour-coordinated hangers, and minimalist furniture to organise all the things accumulated while trying to own less. Consumerism, it seems, is perfectly capable of selling us an escape from itself. Worse, minimalism can become another status symbol, where an apparently effortless, empty living room costs more than someone else's fully furnished home.

The point, then, is not to make having less look fashionable, but to question why we feel compelled to have so much in the first place. And that question leads somewhere rather unexpected: to a principle found in Jain philosophy long before minimalism became a twenty-first-century lifestyle trend.

An Ancient Vow Walks into a Modern Shopping Mall

Long before minimalism had hashtags, capsule wardrobes, and carefully curated Instagram feeds, Jain philosophy had already raised an inconvenient question for a culture obsessed with acquiring more: how much is enough? The principle of *Parigraha-Parimāṇa Vrata* offers one answer. *Parigraha* refers to possessions and attachment, *parimāṇa* means limitation, and *vrata* is a vow or disciplined commitment. One of the five *aṇuvratas*, or minor vows traditionally undertaken by Jain householders, it involves consciously setting limits on one's possessions rather than allowing accumulation to continue unchecked.

But this is not simply an ancient decluttering method. The vow carries an ethical and spiritual purpose, encouraging restraint and reflection on our attachment to material things. Minimalism might empty your wardrobe, but can it empty your desires? Not necessarily. One can own ten shirts and still obsess over someone else's eleventh.

Minimalism asks us to reconsider what we own; *Parigraha-Parimāṇa Vrata* takes us a step further, asking us to examine our relationship with possession itself. The challenge is not merely to stop filling the wardrobe, but to understand the desire that keeps urging us to fill it again.

A Revelation: You Were Never Short of Things

Here is the plot twist consumerism would rather you never discover: sometimes, what possesses us most is not what we own, but what we desire. Every purchase promises happiness or a better version of ourselves. The excitement fades, something newer appears, and the cycle begins again. We acquire what we want, only to find ourselves wanting something else. Perhaps the problem is not just that we possess too much, but that our desires have learnt to possess us.

After all, no advertisement will ever say, “*Congratulations! You have enough. Please stop shopping.*” That would be terrible marketing.

This is where *Parigraha-Parimāṇa Vrata* offers a deeper perspective. We may not own the latest phone, yet the desire for it can already occupy our thoughts. In this sense, desire itself can become a form of psychological possession, controlling our attention long before the object enters our lives. The Jain vow invites us to set limits on our possessions and reflect on the attachments behind them.

Perhaps true non-possession is not simply about having less, but about being less possessed by what we wish to have. The paradox of plenty is not that we lack things, but that we keep feeling deprived even when we have enough.
