



The Commodification of Dhamma

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We live in a world where even inner peace has a retail price.

What was once a path walked barefoot under forest shade has now been digitized, monetized, and rebranded for the affluent seeker. Across North America and Europe, the Dhamma has been lifted out of monasteries and placed into eco-retreats and luxury wellness brands, repackaged not as liberation, but as lifestyle.

At places like the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts or Spirit Rock in California, a ten-day retreat can cost well over \$2,000, not including the unspoken etiquette of dana, or donations, which arrive at the end like a spiritual tip. The intentions may be noble, but the effect is unmistakable: the Dhamma, once freely offered, has become a service one must afford.

Some of the most celebrated names in Western Buddhism—Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield—have become fixtures of this new terrain. Their teachings, refined and accessible, are not in question. What is, however, is the ecosystem that now surrounds them: podcasts, premium apps, brand collaborations, TED talks, and sold-out retreats.

They received the Dhamma freely from humble monks in forest monasteries and lay teachers in Asia. Yet, in the West, they've helped shape a culture where the Dhamma is no longer a gift but a service, complete with sliding scales and corporate sponsorships. Scholarships are offered where economically, and often racially, disenfranchised people have to apply for a discounted handout, almost always a humiliating reminder of systemic disparity. These teachers and others like them preside over a movement that increasingly resembles an industry.

Of course, they may not have set out to sell the Dhamma. But a system grew around them—a system of commodified compassion, where noble silence costs hundreds of dollars a night, and where “awakening” is tied, however softly, to a PayPal receipt.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Jack Kornfield’s foray into venture capital. He is a founding partner in Wisdom Ventures, a VC firm that aims to “foster transformative wellness companies” and “scale impact-driven solutions.” The language is borrowed from Silicon Valley — impact, scale, innovation — but the product is something far older: teachings on how not to cling. There is a deep paradox in funding the path of letting go through the machinery of accumulation.

At the other end of the spectrum stands someone like Delson Armstrong, a teacher of “Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation” (TWIM), who offers ten-day online retreats for \$500. No food, no lodging, just video calls. For many in the developing world, this sum represents months of wages. And while his site, like many others, offers a “limited number” of scholarships, the gesture feels like an afterthought—an attempt at inclusivity within a fundamentally exclusionary model. These teachers claim to preserve the Dhamma, yet do not trust it to sustain itself without price tags. They speak of non-attachment, but refuse to detach from financial security.

The commercialization of mindfulness finds perhaps its most polished form in figures like Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk who co-founded the Headspace app—a \$3 billion company that now monetizes meditation, one subscription at a time. His journey from monastic life to tech entrepreneur is emblematic of a broader trend: teachings once rooted in renunciation now generating revenue streams and venture capital. What began as a path toward freedom from craving is now used to create consumer habits, nudging users toward inner peace—so long as they keep renewing their plan.

Jon Kabat-Zinn never sold the Dhamma outright. He translated it—into the language of medicine, of neuroscience, of corporate policy. In doing so, he made it palatable for those who would never set foot in a monastery. His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program was elegant in its neutrality: no statues, no chanting, no mention of the Four Noble Truths. Just the breath, the body, the present moment.

And yet, from this gentle repackaging, a quiet fortune grew. His books sold in the millions and the system that sprung from his work—trainings, certifications, institutional partnerships—built a bridge between contemplative silence and commercial success. Clinics charged thousands for MBSR teacher training. Hospitals licensed his curriculum. And in the end, what had once been given freely by monks in Asia now came with a registration fee and a waiting list. And from there, the floodgates opened. Thousands of trainers, life coaches, authors, and entrepreneurs stepped through peddling their version of the dhamma.

More troubling still is the booming industry of corporate mindfulness. Teachers, many trained in Buddhist traditions, are paid handsomely to help employees manage stress, stay focused, and increase productivity. They offer certifications in compassion, seminars on improving focus, apps for 'waking up'. Be mindful, they suggest, and you will perform better. You will be more efficient, more resilient, more marketable. In this quiet repurposing, something subtle and sacred has shifted.

Mindfulness is no longer a way out of craving, but a means to better indulge it. Mindfulness has become not a path to liberation, but a lubricant for capitalism — a subtle sanctification of greed, now cloaked in guided meditation and quarterly key performance indicators.

Contrast this with the centers rooted in traditional generosity. In the lineage of S.N. Goenka, Vipassana retreats are offered entirely free of charge—ten days of lodging, food, and teaching. There is no upfront cost, no expectation of payment and none of the teachers recieve any remuneration. At the end, students are invited to give only if they have benefited and only if they can.

As Goenka once said, "There is a big objection to charging fees. Dhamma is not a commodity that can be sold. The Buddha never sold Dhamma. Our tradition is against making Dhamma a commodity for sale. Initially somebody may say, 'We would only charge for the actual expenses.' But these would start growing and soon you would charge for the residence, the electricity bills, the water bills, and then for the teacher’s needs - this teacher has this need, and that teacher has that need. It would keep multiplying. All around the world courses are given at centres and outside centres—and how do they run? Students give dāna. When people find something is beneficial they feel like giving, and this is not like paying a fee or a hotel bill. Compassion, mettā, and the volition to help others to meditate arise and inspire them to give. If you start charging, even for the minimum requirements of board and lodging, you put up a barrier against very poor people attending. Some people come to courses here who are the sole earners in their family, and whatever they earn on a daily basis helps their family to get two meals for that day. Just to come here for ten days is a huge sacrifice. If at the end of the course you also want such people to pay for the expenses, you are creating a barrier against their attending. To charge would not be Dhamma, it would not be the teaching of the Buddha. The Dhamma cannot be limited to wealthy people, it is for all who are suffering. "

Goenka adds, "Often twenty-five percent or even fifty percent of the people don't give anything and leave. So what? Who cares? Money comes and the Dhamma keeps flowing. This is the proper way to teach Dhamma. If you don't put up such barriers, Dhamma will take care of everything. I do not recommend charging for courses either now or in the future. The coming generations who teach Dhamma should be very careful not to fall into this trap of Māra. This is how the Dhamma remains pure".

Meditation teacher Beth Upton, a former Buddhist nun and student of Pa Auk Sayadaw says, "I believe the Dhamma to be priceless, of incomparable value. As such, I refuse to charge a price for it. Instead, I offer my time and teachings as a gift, and invite you all to support me in return so that I may continue to do this work."

And somehow, miraculously, these centers thrive. So do others: in Malaysia, the Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary (SBS) in Taiping, many Mahasi Sayadaw, Pa Auk centres and others across the world offer residential retreats purely on dana and without charging any fees. Even some TWIM retreats in India and elsewhere are offered freely, returning to the roots of the Dhamma not just in form, but in spirit.

Ajahn Amaro, a former trustee at Spirit Rock, recognized the quiet corrosion of commercialism early on. In one meeting, frustrated by the relentless talk of fundraising, he is reported to have said: “If you mention fundraising one more time in your next newsletter, I resign.” And he did.

The tragedy is not merely economic. It’s spiritual. When the Dhamma is priced, it ceases to be a universal path. It becomes a curated experience for the affluent. And yet, it was forged for the weary, the poor, the grieving, the renunciate—not those escaping from stress, but those seeking to end suffering altogether.

The Buddha taught freely, walked barefoot, ate from a bowl. He did not file for trademarks or speak at investment summits. If we wish to honor his path, we must ask: are we walking the same way? Or just repaving it in marble and charging admission?

The Dhamma does not need luxury. It does not need scaling strategies or branded vision decks. It only needs sincerity. And the courage to give it away, as it was given to us.

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