



DISCUSSING
“DECLUTTERING” FROM A
BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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Our lifestyle aesthetics program has launched the “Decluttering (*Danshari*)” project, which is very meaningful. This concept of decluttering has gained popularity over the years. Many have heard of it, and some have practiced it to some extent. To advance this program, I communicated with the project team and researched relevant information online, discovering that the principles of decluttering actually align well with Chan-inspired spaces and the slow-paced lifestyle we advocate.

The characteristics of a Chan-inspired space are not just about adopting a certain style but also embodying a corresponding life-style and even an attitude towards life. The concept of “emptiness” serves here as both a guiding principle and characteristic in the design of these spaces. In our retreat center, from the selection of materials to the arrangement of objects and the choice of color schemes, every element follows the principles of simplicity. Being in such an environment naturally calms the mind. At the same time, Chan spaces demand a lot from their users. Without proper cultivation, good use and maintenance, even the finest space can deteriorate and eventually become as cluttered as a storeroom. This requires maintaining a simplistic and orderly lifestyle to complement and nourish the Chan space. Simplicity here means having fewer things; otherwise, it will not achieve a sense of ethereality; orderliness involves maintaining a disciplined routine, keeping things tidy, and putting everything back in its place after use. These principles are at the heart of decluttering and are the foundation for cultivating a Chan lifestyle. The latter’s strength lies in providing us with

operational guidelines and practical experience.

Furthermore, we must recognize the profound level of practice embodied in decluttering. The essence of decluttering is “letting go,” which is also an ongoing process of relinquishing attachments in spiritual practice. As the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* suggests, “Total abandonment leads to freedom from suffering, and my mind attains nirvana.” Attachments are essentially categorized into self-attachments and world-attachments, also known as ego-attachment and attachment to phenomena (dharma). Only when we have no attachment to ourselves or the world can we achieve liberation and move towards enlightenment. Practicing decluttering with this insight is a method that corresponds with the pursuit of liberation.

Thus, decluttering not only enhances our quality of life but also enriches our spiritual growth, purifying both mind and body. It is an effective combination of worldly practices and Buddhist teachings.

I

WHAT IS DECLUTTERING

1. The Origin of Decluttering

The concept of decluttering was introduced by the Japanese clutter management consultant Hideko Yamashita in 2000. She held lectures in various places with growing influence, and in 2009, she published a book titled *Danshari*. After its introduction to China in 2013, the book generated a significant buzz, with millions of copies sold.

Why has decluttering resonated so deeply with many? It addresses common issues faced by modern people and

offers a range of solutions. We live in a time of material abundance, owning clothes and items, possibly hundreds or thousands of times more than our ancestors. Many find their homes cluttered with belongings, yet struggling to find what they need, significantly impacting their quality of life. This has led to the emergence of professional organizers who assist in decluttering and organizing spaces. However, without a fundamental change in lifestyle, such an organization proves unsustainable in the long run in the face of continuous excessive purchasing.

During her university years, Hideko Yamashita studied yoga and was influenced by Indian yoga philosophy. Inspired by the principles of “cutting off, letting go and detachment,” she developed the concept of “Dan-Sha-Ri.” While decluttering is often perceived as managing physical possessions, it also extends to our lifestyle, our outlook on life, values, and worldview. Only by adjusting our lives according to the principles of “cutting off, letting go and detachment” and making appropriate choices, we ensure that our possessions serve us, rather than ending up surrounded

by a vast amount of items without even realizing it.

2. The Implications of Decluttering (Danshari)

Decluttering is grounded in a threefold philosophy. The first principle “Dan,” involves cutting out unnecessary items from our lives. This involves not purchasing or acquiring things we don’t need. Therefore, we need a clear understanding of what is truly essential. Looking around us, our lives are probably surrounded by superfluous things. The second principle “Sha,” focuses on letting go of excessive and useless belongings. The third, “Ri,” encourages us to detach ourselves from attachment of material possessions and even desires.

These principles are progressive: “Dan” aims to prevent new problems from arising, “Sha” addresses and resolves existing problems, and “Ri” seeks to eliminate the fundamental causes of the problems.

Decluttering originates from Indian cultural traditions.

India has many religions, and despite their diverse beliefs, they commonly center on samsara and liberation. They believe that samsara is suffering and that humans fall into it due to the shackles of desire. Only by severing desires can one escape samsara and achieve liberation. Based on this, these religions emphasize asceticism and austerity, hoping that enduring physical hardships can help overcome desires and attain liberation. It is noted that even today, over five million people are practicing such extreme forms of asceticism, including holding an arm in the air for decades or adopting vows to live like certain animals, such as cows, dogs or pigs. Asceticism isn't unique to India; there are other religions worldwide, to varying degrees, advocate it as a means to control desires. So, how does Buddhism view this issue?

Buddha initially subjected himself to severe austerities but concluded that such practices were not the ultimate path to enlightenment. Instead, he proposed the Middle Way, which on one hand, involves being content with minimal belongings and discarding the relentless pursuit

to fulfill desires. On the other hand, it means avoiding meaningless asceticism that serves no purpose other than to inflict suffering. Buddha recognized the value of certain austerities that contribute to liberation. For example, the Four Reliances and Dhutanga practice might appear to be austere, but they are intended to cut through greed and facilitate one's spiritual practice.

Following this, Buddha established various precepts tailored to the capacities of different beings, such as the Individual Liberation Precepts and the Bodhisattva Precepts. These precepts aim to foster a pure mental environment conducive to spiritual practice by regulating one's behavior and lifestyle, thus setting the foundation for deeper concentration and wisdom.

These precepts illustrate what “should be done” and what “should not be done.” Similarly, decluttering embodies this precept-like nature, guiding us on what “should be discarded” and what “should be kept.” We declutter to reflect on our internal choices, using this process as a chance

to untangle our lives. This reflection directly influences how we live, how we perceive the world, and how we shape our future. Thus, decluttering can be both straightforward and profound, serving not only as a method for organizing but also as a philosophy for living and a form of life wisdom. Furthermore, under the guidance of the Right View of Buddhism, it can also align with the path towards liberation.

II

THE SUBJECTS OF DECLUTTERING

Decluttering challenges us to consider: what exactly does it mean to discard? Typically, we think of throwing away or giving away excess belongings. Yet, this is just the starting point. The philosophy embedded in these three syllables of Danshari invites us to examine all aspects of life, particularly focusing on six key areas:

1. Household Goods

Under the influence of Western lifestyles, the entire world is engaged in uncontrolled resource exploitation and increasing production capacity. Some manufacturers

demand to double their output year over year—if they generate 10 billion this year, they target 20 billion the next year. To meet these targets, billions of garments must be sold annually, leading to a relentless push to drive consumer spending. In the past, manufacturers produced clothing because people needed them. Nowadays, to sell more, the manufacturers produce them to make you feel that you still need more clothing. How is this demand created? Through a mix of influencer marketing, promotional hype, fashion trends, and precise targeting based on big data... There’s always a method to keep you purchasing endlessly. Our homes thus overflow with countless garments and footwear. As a result, some items are discarded with the price tags still on them.

How much clothing do we actually require, considering the actual functionality of it? How many outfits and pairs of shoes does one need throughout the four seasons? There’s a common misconception that spending one’s own money on purchases is entirely justifiable. Yet, this overlooks the fact that excessive consumption depletes the

Earth's resources and diminishes our collective blessings. Our resources are limited, and so are our blessings. In fact, this type of consumption has led to severe ecological crises, which are not only natural disasters but also man-made catastrophes.

Therefore, we must change our perception of consumption. Before making a purchase, consider whether it's something we truly need. Too often, we buy impulsively and later realize the item wasn't as desired or appealing as initially thought. Sometimes, we even cannot remember why it was purchased. This step is vital—purchasing only what is necessary and using things to their fullest potential is an effective use of resources. This also prevents unnecessary burdens in our lives.

Regarding the problems already created, we must learn to select, organize, and discard, retaining only what is genuinely useful. The forthcoming sessions will introduce practical methods, including item categorization, choosing what you need, and the correct attitude toward

belongings. Ultimately, our possessions should enhance our lives, offering ease rather than inconvenience.

2. Nourishing Diet

Diet is essential for survival but can also cause diseases; the old wisdom says, “Illness enters through the mouth.” Current studies validate that a poor diet can trigger many health problems. Data reveals that the number of people in China with various chronic diseases is increasing, with healthcare expenses predicted to hit an astounding eight trillion Yuan in the next five years. That is a staggering figure! Among the factors that affect health, including disordered lifestyles, excessive stress, and negative mind-sets, the impact of reckless eating also cannot be ignored.

It is necessary to apply the principles of decluttering to our eating habits, which means identifying healthy foods and unhealthy foods to be avoided. For instance, meat consumption involves not only the ethical implications of killing but also reveals the numerous issues in the

livestock-raising process. Traditionally, livestock were raised naturally, but their growth periods have been dramatically reduced to maximize profits quickly. Hormones are used to speed up growth, and antibiotics are administered to prevent diseases. Within just a few months, these animals, nourished on synthetic feed and medications, make their way to our dining tables. It is hard to imagine the amount of toxins and hidden risks accumulated in such meat. By contrast, although vegetables also involve chemicals like fertilizers and pesticides, they can be washed, and there are options like organic or eco-friendly vegetables, which are generally safer.

There are three key aspects to consider when applying decluttering to our diets:

First, choose healthy foods. Remember, what we eat fills our stomachs and becomes part of our body's metabolism. It is not like putting something in the drawer. Once consumed, it's not easy to discard. Given that some businesses might illegally add harmful substances for profit,

we must make choices carefully. Also, understanding related knowledge is essential: first, select foods that suit your body type; second, learn healthy cooking techniques to minimize using too much oil, salt, and sugar; and third, learn to read and understand food labels to reduce or eliminate consumption of heavily processed foods with too many additives. Moderation is also crucial; even the healthiest foods can backfire once over-consumed.

Second, eat at the appropriate times. The ancient saying “Do not eat out of season” refers to both the timing of meals and the seasonality of foods. From a health perspective, breakfast should be hearty, lunch should be filling, and dinner should be light or even skipped. Buddhism advocates not eating after noon. Even if dinner is necessary, eating should be like taking medicine, only to alleviate hunger without indulging in taste. However, modern people often go against this wisdom with hurried or skipped breakfasts, quick lunches at work, and overly indulgent dinners, sometimes even followed by late-night snacks. Such habits can disrupt digestion, sleep, and

immunity over time, leading to various health issues or a sub-health state. Moreover, choosing naturally ripened, seasonal produce over off-season items is best.

Third, keep a mindful distance from food. Monastic regulations suggest that areas for eating and storing food should be clearly defined and separated from other spaces. Eating should be confined to these designated areas but not other places. This is an effective measure to avoid the unconscious consumption of snacks, especially today when most snacks are filled with numerous additives that foster cravings and compromise health.

By following these guidelines, one can establish healthy dietary habits. Ensuring that food is consumed appropriately and at suitable times is vital because eating is one of the two primary desires in human nature, and a lack of vigilance can easily lead to unhealthy habits.

3. Interpersonal Relationships

Upon entering society, one is inevitably involved in various interpersonal relationships, keeping us occupied with social engagements and various activities. But do these interactions genuinely benefit our lives, work, and personal growth? Or are they merely a result of boredom or an inability to say no, leading us to engage in socializing for its own sake? How can we critically assess these relationships?

The ancient adage “one takes on the habits of one’s company” highlights the significant impact of our social circles on personal development. Buddhist scriptures also advise us to seek out good teachers and virtuous friends, as they are beneficial for our growth. For instance, the *Yogacarabbumi-Sastra* prioritizes “associating with good teachers” as the foremost of the Four Dharma Practices, and the *Dirgha Agama* places “befriending virtuous companions” at the beginning of the Three Means of Accomplishment, underscoring their importance in enhancing

spiritual cultivation. On the contrary, keeping the company of frivolous friends often leads to indulgence in mere pleasure-seeking, excessive laxity, and even vices like gambling and drug abuse, which can lead one down the path of crime.

It is necessary to make choices, especially at young ages when one is particularly susceptible to environmental influences. We should aspire to emulate the qualities of our virtuous friends with an open mind, while maintaining a distance from mischievous people, using them as cautionary examples. For neutral parties, we should interact moderately without seeking or avoiding them. Moreover, some emotional entanglements not only cause personal suffering but also bring trouble to others. These should be analyzed rationally, and decisive actions should be taken to break free rather than languishing in them.

As practitioners of Buddhism, once we attain a certain level of stability in our practice, we should reconsider our relationships from an altruistic perspective. It is

important to consider how it helps us and how we can benefit others. We should aspire to extend our compassion to all beings, treating them equally regardless of whether they are good or evil. However, in practice, we should focus on those with whom we share a karmic connection, meaning those we can truly benefit. Attempting to help everyone indiscriminately can be ineffective and even lead to unintended consequences and a waste of energy. Thus, compassion must be accompanied by wisdom. We must find a balance between universal benevolence and strategic discernment to give full play to our altruistic actions. It's like assessing the soil before sowing seeds. We need to determine which fields are ready to take the seeds, which need further cultivation, and which must be temporarily set aside. Without discernment, our efforts may yield no fruits, no matter how well-intentioned.

In summary, interpersonal relationships should be evaluated from both self-beneficial and altruistic perspectives, with different criteria based on different contexts.

4. Conducts and Behaviors

It's essential to look closer at our daily lives and question ourselves: How do we allocate our time from morning to night? What activities do we engage in? Which of these activities holds value? Which are truly necessary? Our time could slip away unnoticed without proper scrutiny. For example, a casual conversation can take up to half an hour, daydreaming can consume an hour, and before we know it, scrolling through social media, browsing online shops, and watching short videos can devour several more hours. In fact, this has become the norm for many. Especially with the widespread use of smartphones, many people lose themselves in these digital distractions. Have we ever considered that what we consume is not just time but life itself?

Days turn into years swiftly. In the blink of an eye, the elderly monks from my early days in the monastery passed away, and now I am among the elders. Especially in recent years, we have noticed the impermanence of life

in a deeper sense. Before the pandemic, relative stability often gave us the illusion of permanence despite the rapid changes in society. People believed that working hard could help them achieve their goals. But now, the fierce nature of impermanence is undeniable. From the ongoing fluctuations of the pandemic to escalating international conflicts and to natural disasters, we see that uncertainty is everywhere. Whether we are in our old age, middle age, or youth, no one can guarantee how much time we have left in this life. It could be decades, one year, or even one day. And even if we have decades left, how much of that time can truly be devoted to spiritual practice?

In our daily practices, we reflect on human life’s preciousness, significance, and rarity. But have we truly integrated this understanding into our actions and thoughts? Do we remind ourselves to cherish time and use it wisely? To what extent are our body, speech, and thoughts done with mindfulness, and to what extent are filled with delusion? How much of what we do is valuable and how much is just wasting time?

Today, we live in an environment that often caters to greed, aversion, and ignorance. We must apply the principles of decluttering to our actions, speech, and thoughts, discard worthless indulgences, and establish a meaningful, disciplined, and mindful way of living. From the moment we wake up, we should have a clear morning, afternoon, and evening schedule down to the hour or even minute. With clear benchmarks, we know what we should be doing at any given time and what we should avoid.

From a Buddhist perspective, time is merely a conventional concept based on the movement of objects and is inherently illusory. Yet, it also serves as a metric for life, reflecting our utilization of the precious human existence. By effectively planning our time—living, working, and practicing with mindfulness—we can steer clear of misguided fantasies, break free from indulgent habits, and realize the greatest potential of our lives.

5. Inner Attachments

Letting go of our inner attachments is arguably more challenging than letting go of physical possessions. The difficulty lies in our reliance on the self and the external world. Clearing out all our belongings without overcoming inner attachments only offers a temporary solution. It won't be long before we revert to our old ways and end up where we started. Freedom from these attachments requires cultivating a pure and self-sufficient mind, focusing on the functional use of objects rather than the sensation of possession.

There was once a popular term, “X-fanatic,” where ‘X’ stands for whatever you are attached to. Whatever controls you, dictates your life, stripping away your freedom. When these crutches are gone, we often feel lost and deeply distressed. But why do we become obsessed with something? Why do we experience distress when the object of the obsession is gone? It's not due to dire need or survival threats but rather the disappointment of unfulfilled

desires. After all, these cravings and fanatics are self-imposed. Without these cravings, life is inherently free and self-sufficient.

Thus, the essence of decluttering is not just about letting go of material goods but, more importantly, about releasing the grip of our attachments to both our ego and the material world. Meditation and mindfulness practices can help illuminate these dependencies and cravings, enabling us to recognize them as mere illusions in our mind, just like clouds in the sky, and thus they will not be able to control us anymore.

6. Mental Garbage

According to Yogacara Buddhism, spiritual practice is essentially about transforming reliance. This reliance represents our current state of existence. It's worth pondering: are we mindful, compassionate, wise, and gentle, or are we consumed by greed, aversion, jealousy, arrogance, restlessness, depression, and boredom? Most people today

belong to the latter category. But why is this so? Why are our minds always filled with garbage?

Each thought or impulse does not simply disappear after it arises; it leaves an imprint, planting seeds in our minds. The traces left will invariably be negative mental patterns if we navigate life non-selectively, driven by mere habit. This is because the life of an ordinary person is a perpetuation of greed, aversion, and ignorance. We are habitually greedy, irritable and oblivious. It is imperative to cultivate mindfulness through meditation to see what is in our minds and our mental activities at the moment. Only by clearly understanding these can we consciously choose to cultivate positive mental states and discard the negative ones.

Initially, our capacity for such awareness may be limited. And even when we do notice, changing ourselves can be challenging. This difficulty arises from deeply entrenched habits accumulated over innumerable lifetimes, which are hard to reverse. That is why many people say, “I know

what I should do, but can't do it." However challenging, it's crucial to persist; otherwise, the accumulation of mental garbage will continue to enslave us.

Transformation of reliance involves changing the very essence of our lives, unlocking the innate potentials for awakening, liberation, and great compassion. This process requires letting go of the ordinary mind and cultivating the bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment. Thus, decluttering is not just about renunciation but also actively unveils life's inherent treasures that are obscured by ignorance. By clearing away the mental garbage, we unlock our capacity to tap into the splendid qualities of life.

Fundamentally, decluttering is about relinquishing the three poisons of our lives: greed, aversion, and ignorance.

III

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT FOR MODERN PEOPLE TO PRACTICE DECLUTTERING

Many people may agree with the principles of decluttering after learning about them but find it's not so easy. It is a classic case of "easier said than done." Why is that? I believe there are several factors at play.

1. Lack of Religious Belief

How does religious belief relate to decluttering?

First, having a religious belief can help us define our

ultimate goals. Once we understand our true purpose, material possessions naturally lose their appeal. For instance, some religions view ascension to heaven as the ultimate aim, rendering all earthly matters fleeting and illusory. Essentially, decluttering isn't just about getting rid of material stuff; it's about prioritizing what's truly important. It helps us discern what to let go of and why. While excess belongings cluttering our space are visible and often acknowledged, we tend to overlook how superfluous relationships and mental clutter can drain our life energy, leaving us physically and mentally exhausted. Thus, discernment is crucial for our life's journey. From a Buddhist standpoint, the ultimate objectives are enlightenment and liberation, and to lead all beings toward these ends. Anything that doesn't support or hinder this goal should be consciously discarded.

Second, religious belief nurtures compassion and wisdom, breaking the habitual tendencies of greed, aversion, and ignorance. Although worldly sages also value love and wisdom, only Buddhism takes these virtues to their

highest level. The type of compassion Buddhism advocates is universal and unconditional, characterized by complete selflessness and altruism. In contrast, the conventional notions of love often carry an element of self-interest. Even the universal love advocated by some religions is differentiated between believers and non-believers, thus unable to embrace all beings inclusively. The wisdom in Buddhism pertains to realizing life's true nature and liberating oneself from all forms of suffering. Armed with such wisdom, we perceive “all phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles or shadows.” Is there anything to cling to? This perspective provides a vital philosophical foundation for the practice of decluttering.

Some might say that there are a large number of Buddhists in China and Westerners with religious beliefs. Yet, their attachment to worldly desires appears similar to ordinary people's and has not decreased. Why is this the case? The answer lies in the depth of one's faith. Some people adopt religious beliefs only to serve their worldly life. For example, a person might burn incense and place offerings at a

temple with the hope of earning more money, staying safe or wishing for things to go smoothly. This is not genuine faith and naturally will not achieve the transformative effects that true belief can inspire.

2. Overlooking Spiritual Pursuits

The concept of “spiritual goals” might be familiar to many, but when it comes to articulating “what are your spiritual pursuits?” Many people struggle to articulate their thoughts clearly. In our daily lives, we’re bombarded with messages about material pursuits, from TV and smartphone screens to billboards and elevator ads, all dazzling and demanding our attention. As these messages continuously engage and occupy our six senses, the room for spiritual pursuits is repeatedly compressed and devoured.

Moreover, people can see that material possessions are impermanent; having something today doesn’t mean it will be ours tomorrow, let alone forever. This realization

intensifies feelings of insecurity. It is like someone adrift at sea, clinging to a floating object for survival; asking them to let go is difficult due to their fear of sinking. Similarly, when we place all our dependence on material things and adopt a “more is better” attitude, how can we be expected to cut off, let go or detach? The problem is that clinging doesn’t secure anything; it only makes us more anxious while we have it and more distressed when we lose it.

So, how do we address this issue? The ancients revered the “joy of Confucius and Yan Hui,” a form of happiness unaffected by material conditions. Even in modest circumstances, described as “a simple meal and drink in a humble alley, people could not endure such hardship,” they maintained their contentment. In today’s rapidly changing world, if we seek inner peace and true wealth, we too must prioritize our spiritual aspirations. This is the foundation for a stable and fulfilled life, unshaken by external changes and undiminished by the amount of material wealth. With this inner strength, we can easily make choices rather than hoarding blindly, desperately

clutching everything.

3. Glorifying Material Success

In the past, people aspired towards virtues and wisdom, looking up to those who possessed both as role models. Nowadays, the objects of envy are wealth and pleasures, with wealth rankings serving as the benchmark for success. Even those who don't make it onto these lists get caught up in comparisons—measuring success by achieving one's career, the price of one's house, or the luxury of one's car. Within such a value system, material possessions are imbued with symbolic significance, tightly intertwining material wealth with personal identity. Possessions come to represent success and worth. Given the importance placed on material goods, it's no wonder that letting go becomes challenging. This is one reason why embracing decluttering is so difficult.

In my talks with business leaders, I often delve into the notion of what it means to be successful. The prevailing

view measures success regarding career achievements, wealth, and social standing—a rather narrow perspective. After all, life is more than just these aspects. Can a person be deemed successful if they have a vast enterprise but lack moral integrity, possess great wealth but show little compassion, or hold high status but engage in corruption? It's clear that success should be assessed through a broader life perspective, not just through material gains.

The Confucian perspective on success is grounded in personal development. It assesses success through virtues, accomplishments, and influential words. Cultivating virtues is about self-improvement and inspiring others through moral character; achieving accomplishments refers to contributing to society; and influential words involve educating and enlightening the public. On the other hand, Buddhism views success through the lens of liberation, aiming for benefiting self and others as the ultimate fulfillment. By setting such goals, our attachment to material possessions diminishes.

4. Powerless to Break Free from Dependency

Many people find decluttering difficult because they see everything useful, making it hard to break free from material dependence. This struggle stems partly from a lack of spiritual pursuit and the glorification of materialism, and partly from a deficiency in the disciplined practice of precepts, concentration, and wisdom. These lead to a habitual reliance on material possessions and thus, unable to let go. The former issue is a matter of skewed perspectives, while the latter indicates a lack of mental strength.

Therefore, we not only need to recognize the true nature of material possessions and establish spiritual goals, understanding what truly holds value, but also need to cultivate mental stability and focus. Achieving mindfulness allows us to assess our possessions and the thoughts they trigger objectively. When the urge to acquire or the reluctance to discard arises, recognizing these impulses as mere thoughts—not indicative of our true needs—is crucial. By letting go of dependencies, we can make decisions based

on real-life necessities, decisively cutting off or letting go when necessary, rather than being swayed by attachments and desires, struggling between keeping and discarding.

5. Lack of Generous Spirit

Due to greed and stinginess toward material things, some people, after accumulating wealth or belongings, deem everything too precious to part with, even items they have no use for or that might deteriorate over time. Additionally, some might not be particularly materialistic but still lack a spirit of generosity, missing out on the practice of sharing with others. These are also obstacles to the practice of decluttering.

To tackle these challenges, it's essential to recognize the value of giving and to foster an attitude of altruism. In the Bodhisattva Path, which encompasses the Six Perfections and the Four Means of Embracing, generosity is consistently the initial step. The Six Perfections start with generosity, leading to practices like ethical discipline,

endurance, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom. Similarly, the Four Means of Embracing begins with the act of giving, followed by kind speech, beneficial actions, and collaborative work. This highlights the importance of generosity, which not only breaks down the barriers of greed but also helps build good karma, accumulate spiritual resources, and create positive connections with others. Beyond material giving, generosity also includes sharing Dharma and offering protection or courage, which is a vital pathway to cultivating compassion.

By establishing religious beliefs, setting spiritual goals, reshaping our values, strengthening our minds through precept, concentration, and wisdom, and nurturing a heart of generosity and altruism, we can overcome the obstacles to decluttering, both theoretically and practically.

IV

HOW TO PRACTICE DECLUTTERING

As followers of Buddhism, how do we approach decluttering differently from the conventional understanding of Danshari? Let me share with you five aspects:

1. Establishing the Right Views

Decluttering is not merely about organizing and discarding objects; it must be rooted in a philosophy of life and wisdom. Therefore, having the Right View is crucial. Ordinary people constantly center around the concept of self, clinging to their bodies, thoughts, and emotions, and extending this attachment to their families, careers,

possessions, and relationships. Without the wisdom of dependent origination, we easily mistake external aspects as extensions of the “self.”

What truly represents the “self”? Can our bodies, thoughts, possessions and relationships define us? In reality, these are merely conditional and illusory associations. Why do we habitually identify these with the “self”? It’s due to ignorance and a lack of clarity about what the “self” truly is that we seek validation through various external means, believing that the more we cling to it, the stronger the “self” appears to be.

In practicing Buddhism, one must use the wisdom of dependent origination to see clearly that everything we identify with the “self” cannot represent the true nature of the “self.” Otherwise, such misidentifications become the root of our afflictions. For example, parents who view their children as possessions and overly interfere in their lives end up causing pain for both parties. This common issue arises from the confusion of boundaries, failing to

recognize that children are independent beings, not extensions of themselves. Even close familial relationships don’t represent the “self,” not to mention our material possessions.

The wisdom of dependent origination shows us that our conceived self and possessions lack inherent existence, are only temporarily linked to us, and are in constant flux. Clinging to them as integral to the self invites suffering. This explains our aversion to aging, devaluation of wealth, or career downturns. When such changes affect others, they seem natural, but when they impact us, they’re intolerable. Why? Because it’s perceived not merely as change but as a direct damage to the “self.”

Decluttering works the same way. Objectively deciding what to part with isn’t particularly challenging. The real difficulty arises once these items are connected with the “self.” These attachments are sticky and subjectively biased, making it difficult to resolve the complex situation. Thus, by establishing the Right View and learning

to perceive the world, our lives, and all aspects of our existence through the lens of dependent origination, we can embrace the middle way and make decisions with moderation.

2. Adjusting Values

While values may seem like a philosophical topic disconnected from reality, they actually underpin our everyday decisions. The choices we make about what to keep and what to discard are not random; they're guided by our value system. We pursue and act on what we consider important or beneficial. If our values are flawed, everything we do will also deviate.

Over the past few decades, Chinese traditional values have significantly shifted with the impact of Western culture. The pursuit of a profit-first, materialistic mindset, led to a series of social issues. On a global scale, the rush for earning, spending, and exploiting the environment has led to the rapid depletion of resources that took billions of years

to form and were rapidly consumed within just 200 years. I’ve often addressed environmental themes in talks like “The Return to Essence of Life” and “Buddhist Views on Environment.” Sadly, the issues mentioned have only intensified, from ocean pollution and rising temperatures at the poles to increasingly frequent extreme weather events. Disasters are inching closer, with unprecedented heat waves currently affecting many. It’s a critical moment for humanity to reflect; otherwise, the history we’re witnessing might become a narrative of irreversible destruction.

So, how can we change this trend and shift away from materialism? We must reshape our values based on Eastern wisdom. As foundational life principles, Confucianism advocates benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faithfulness, kindness, respect, frugality, and humility. It advocates for a life marked by ethical integrity, societal contributions, and lasting influence, encouraging us to be morally upright individuals who serve the public good rather than narrowly self-interested. Buddhism sets its sights on enlightenment and liberation as the ultimate

aspirations. By aligning with these values and cultivating our lives around the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, we stand a chance to reorder the world and change the deteriorating current situation.

The main differences between Eastern and Western cultures lie in two aspects. First is the relationship between humans and the world: Western culture is based on changing the world, believing that technological progress and wealth creation can bring happiness. Eastern culture, on the other hand, emphasizes self-transformation. Confucianism, for instance, begins with self-cultivation, extending to family harmony, state governance, and universal peace, transitioning from personal betterment to serving society. Buddhism teaches that “a pure mind leads to a pure land,” which echoes the idea of changing oneself to transform the world. How does one behave properly? It hinges on the theory of human nature. I have discussed with Zhu Hanmin, dean of Yuelu Academy, about “how to establish the mind and life.” We concluded that a commonality between Confucianism and Buddhism is the

focus on understanding and adjusting one’s mind to subsequently benefit the world, embodying an inside-out approach.

Second is the notion of self versus no-self. Western humanism advocates for the liberation of individuality and respects the fulfillment of personal values. This is a big step forward compared to medieval feudal beliefs. Yet, in the process of this liberation, failing to grasp the true essence of the “self” can lead to ego attachment, resulting in the exaggeration of human characteristics. Thus, while this trend has contributed to the Renaissance and development of science and technology, it has also led to serious social and environmental crises. On the other hand, Buddhism’s Right View, founded on the concept of no-self, fosters genuine equality and harmony among all beings, preventing harm to others and nature in the pursuit of desires.

3. Cultivating Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom

Decluttering involves more than just a shift in mindset; it requires the practical application of precepts (ethical conduct), concentration (meditative focus), and wisdom.

Firstly, precepts guide us towards a simple, pure, orderly, and disciplined life. In our modern world, brimming with material goods and a culture of consumption, it's too easy to lose our way, complicating our lives and muddling our minds. Establishing clear behavioral guidelines becomes especially important in such a context. Living in our retreat center, for instance, provides a serene atmosphere and a structured routine, where we individually uphold the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings and collectively live in the Spirit of the Six Principles of Harmony. Thus, we support one another and foster positive influences.

Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance and reliance on the Dharma, meaning one should depend on oneself and the system. Before his passing, Buddha cautioned his disciples:

“Monks, after my demise, you should respect and cherish the Pratimoksha (monastic rules), as if someone in darkness finding light, or a poor discovering treasure. Know that these are your great teachers as if I were still alive.” This means taking the precepts as one’s guide, living according to the system rather than following a particular leader. Of course, this does not conflict with the importance of associating with virtuous teachers. While guidance from wise teachers is necessary for practice, living and coexisting within a community should be governed by law rather than by individuals. This law is the monastic code of conduct.

The basic five precepts for lay followers, which we recite daily as the Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings, are to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants. Living according to these precepts is itself the best form of decluttering. The monastic precepts are even stricter; monks observe 250 precepts and nuns 348, which include numerous rules regarding their clothing, food, shelter, and behavior. These rules not only

minimize the possessions one can have but also involve a decluttering of actions, instructing disciples on what they should and should not do.

Next is concentration, the practice of decluttering our mind from its thoughts. In today's restless age, people are often distracted and disorganized, adrift in a sea of thoughts. Concentration allows us to bring mindfulness to each moment through the practice of "samatha" and "vipassana(calming and insight meditation)." When walking, we focus solely on walking; when eating, we concentrate just on eating; when working, we are fully engaged in the task; when meditating, we are fully absorbed in the object of meditation. By choosing a single point of focus, the mind holds onto that one thing, and all other thoughts are temporarily cut off. Some people believe that multitasking is more efficient. However, this approach actually increases mental dispersion. Over time, it leads to losing focus, and the mind becomes overwhelmed. This is similar to a computer with too many windows open simultaneously, leading to insufficient CPU resources and

causing slowdowns or crashes.

The third is wisdom, the ability to see the truth. If precepts pertain to decluttering objects and actions, and concentration relates to decluttering thoughts, then wisdom truly cuts off the roots of greed, aversion, and ignorance. While precepts and concentration involve making choices, the underlying defilements of greed, aversion, and ignorance are only temporarily subdued and not entirely eradicated; they may resurface. The practice of wisdom involves awareness training to develop the mind’s clarity. This allows one to maintain a distance from thoughts, recognize them as they arise, and then resolve them through contemplation. This is the key to moving towards enlightenment.

With the integration of precepts, concentration, and wisdom, we achieve the complete practice of decluttering.

4. Sravakas and Decluttering

The term “sravaka” here mainly refers to those who have

chosen monastic life. Monasticism is a tradition that spans various Indian religions, not exclusive to Buddhism. In Brahmanism, which boasts over 3000 years of history, a follower's life is segmented into four stages: the period of studentship (Brahmacharya), the period of household life (Grihastha), the period of forest-dwelling (Vanaprastha), and the period of renunciation (Sannyasa). After fulfilling their worldly duties, individuals would leave their families to engage in meditation and ascetic practices in solitude. In early China, instead of monastics, some hermits similarly renounced worldly desires to lead secluded lives of transcendence. On his travels to advise the rulers, Confucius would occasionally be mocked by the hermits he encountered. In their view, his efforts were overly worldly and unwise.

Choosing the monastic life is in itself a profound act of decluttering, essentially a realization of the emptiness of worldly pursuits. However, it's important that this choice arises from understanding the inherent suffering in samsara—the cycle of existence, rather than as an escape

from life's hardships. The Buddhist notion of renunciation is a proactive choice made upon seeing life's true nature. The Buddha's renunciation was such a monumental sacrifice; he left behind not only his family and wealth but also a kingdom sought after by many. His example inspired numerous royals and nobles, like Bodhisattva Shantideva and Atisha, both of royal lineage, to embrace a mendicant's life devoid of material possessions.

In the early monastic community, monks lived on alms, a practice still preserved in some Theravada monasteries today. This lifestyle aims for utmost simplicity, where even daily sustenance is not a concern, let alone managing wealth, allowing for total dedication to internal cultivation and external propagation of the teachings. According to monastic rules, monks are allowed to own only the most basic necessities, such as the six requisites or the hundred-and-one items, ensuring a minimalist lifestyle. Any excess requires formal renunciation procedures to ensure adherence to simplicity. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships within the monastic community are

straightforward. Monks live according to the Dharma, with all affairs governed by specific monastic procedures, ensuring smooth operations regardless of the community's size—a stark contrast to the complex management systems in modern society that often lead to complications.

After Buddhism was introduced to China, the practice of alms-seeking wasn't adopted due to different cultural perceptions. Instead, under the guidance of ancestral masters, the tradition of “a day without work is a day without food” was established. However, the principle of simplicity remained in daily life, with simple robes and vegetarian meals, and no accumulation of material possessions.

In summary, becoming a monk or nun represents the ultimate form of Decluttering. Regardless of the time or place, or how life's details change, this spiritual essence remains consistent; otherwise, it contradicts the initial purpose of renunciation. Compared to the past, modern monastics face numerous tasks and social engagements that can disrupt their practice if without strong concentration

and an ideal management system. Hence, following the Buddha’s teachings, taking precepts as our guide, and embracing a simple life can help reduce attachments and foster both internal cultivation and external propagation of the Dharma.

5. Chan Practitioners and Decluttering

The lifestyle of Chan practitioners is well documented in texts like *The Record of Pointing at the Moon* and *The Transmission of the Lamp*. They lived in unimaginable poverty, ate pine pollen, wore lotus leaves, and lived in thatched huts, yet they found joy in such existence. Why? Because Chan practitioners recognize that true awareness, or the awakened nature, is the ultimate treasure, far surpassing the value of the material world. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, who unlock this treasure, can benefit beings infinitely. By following their path, one can also realize what the Buddha realized. With this insight, who would still care about worldly fame and pleasures?

The plaque “Seek Not Outside,” commonly found in temples, reminds us that our true treasure lies within, accessible to everyone, which does not increase in the enlightened nor decrease in the ordinary. This isn’t just philosophical talk; it’s a reality that can be experienced through dedicated practice. Chan masters of the past, having achieved profound realization, were untroubled by life and death, unmoved by honor or disgrace, feeling no lack even in utter destitution. In contrast, even with an immense fortune that could last multiple lifetimes, modern people still do not feel rich because their inner desires remain unfulfilled, always craving more.

Greed breeds scarcity. The more we covet, the emptier our lives become, a void no amount of material wealth can fill. I often remark that people nowadays are incessantly digging holes—the more capable they are, the more holes they dig, and then spend their lives trying to fill these holes, only to dig more in the process. For instance, a businessperson might start with a small venture, filling one hole with success. Yet, in seeking expansion and

taking out loans, they only enlarge the hole, and this cycle continues until the hole is too vast to fill, leading to collapse when financial support fails—a fate not uncommon in the business world.

The more external desires we have, the larger the internal void. And this void signifies scarcity; the more we lack, the poorer we become. Chan practitioners, however, tap directly into the inner wealth. Realizing this, they remain content, serene, and joyful regardless of their material conditions. External factors like life and death, honor and disgrace, gain and loss, can’t touch them.

Following the Buddha’s enlightenment, many young royals became his disciples. After ordaining and diligently practicing, one prince was often overtaken by joy, exclaiming, “Joy, oh what joy!” When asked why, he explained, “In the palace, amidst luxury and constant attendance, surrounded by guards, I felt only weariness and boredom. Now, owning nothing, I’m free from all worries and find endless joy in my practice.”

What is true wealth? It's the sense of completeness without possessing anything. Chan practitioners live this truth. They meditate by rivers and under trees, unbound and therefore joyful. This inner abundance cannot be attained through any material possession. What else could they find it hard to give up?

V

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DECLUTTERING

What does Decluttering truly mean? In other words, what kind of life can practicing Decluttering bring us? I see this unfolding in nine aspects:

1. Natural Living

Decluttering encourages us to step back from materialistic desires and reconnect with nature. China was originally an agricultural society that was deeply connected to the land. However, as modern society has shifted its focus to commerce, expanding urban areas into rural spaces, our

bond with the natural world has weakened. It's often said that we live in the best and worst times. Despite enjoying conveniences like never before, from smartphones to high-speed trains, the price includes overexploitation of resources and significant environmental harm. Only when such damage becomes irreversible do we realize the true value of our natural surroundings—lush mountains and lucid waters—as the real treasures that sustain development and nurture our well-being. In some countries, “forest bathing” has even been prescribed by doctors as a treatment for certain health conditions.

Nature has a healing power. Children in the past, with few toys, played freely outdoors, vibrant and full of life. Today's children, however, grow up playing video games and scrolling through phones, with adults similarly hooked on electronic devices. In just over a decade, we've seen a rapid increase in visible issues like myopia and neck disorders. However, the greater danger lies in the psychological problems these habits foster. Without change, we risk becoming like plants deprived of light, gradually

losing our vitality.

Thus, we must break free from material shackles and embrace nature. “With the blossoms of spring, the moon in autumn, the cool breezes of summer, and the snow in winter—if one’s heart is free from unnecessary worries, every season is indeed wonderful to be alive.” Only when our minds are uncluttered can we truly appreciate and draw sustenance from the natural beauty around us, finding tranquility in its embrace.

2. Simple living

Decluttering guides us toward a life of simplicity. Our desires are constantly increasing in a society that promotes consumption and continuous economic growth. Over 2000 years ago, the Buddha already cautioned us, “Contentment is the greatest treasure. The content rests easy, even on the ground, while the discontented find no peace, even in heaven. The discontent lives in poverty despite their wealth, whereas the content is rich even in their

poverty.” The ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi similarly reflected, “Contemporary gentlemen risk their lives and forsake their essence for material gain—how sorrowful!” It’s evident that minimizing desires is essential for happiness. The fewer desires one has, the easier it is to be satisfied and happy. As the saying goes, “Contentment brings constant happiness.”

Why is it hard for modern individuals to find contentment? Previously, people’s worldviews were limited to their immediate surroundings, with little to compare themselves to. Nowadays, we’re exposed to global lifestyles, extravagant indulgences of the super-rich, and the pervasive message of success literature that “you can have it too,” endlessly inflating our desires. If the environment influenced people’s contentment in the old days, today, we must consciously strengthen our willpower to impose restraints actively. As the more desires we harbor, the harder they are to satisfy, raising the cost of our happiness. This brings unnecessary suffering when those desires go unmet.

What Decluttering advocates is a shift from a material-centric to a people-centric approach. What does it mean to be people-centric? Many believe that even with abundant possessions, they remain self-centered—“because I need these things, having them makes me happy.” They fail to see that they’re driven by temptation and bound by desires, which makes them unable to control their shopping. When the impulse passed, they regretted it so much that they wanted to “chop off their hands” to show their determination.

Being people-centric means grounding our considerations in our being: What kind of life do I want to build? What do I truly need, find useful, and healthy? After a thorough examination, we will find that life really does not need so many things. When not controlled by material desires, we free up more time to invest in spiritual pursuits and develop hobbies and interests.

3. Leisurely living

Decluttering empowers us to escape the hustle and establish a leisurely lifestyle. A defining trait of modern life is being perpetually busy—busy earning money, busy consuming, busy harming the environment. With more money comes the fear of devaluation, leading to even more time invested in managing finances. It's a cycle where we become servants to material possessions, burdened by them.

Driven by desires, people are caught in a relentless loop of acquisition, comparison, and competition. It begins with the desire to own more—from clothing and handphones to cars and houses, with the belief that more is always better. Then comes comparison, where having more is never enough; there's always a desire to outdo others. Society is divided into various circles, and just when you've climbed to the top of one, entering another puts you back at the bottom, prompting a fresh struggle to climb to the top. This pursuit of comparison leads to competition,

fostering a sense of self-importance, superiority, and control. We might think these feelings define “us,” but in reality, they’re signs of an unhealthy mental state. It’s when you’re under their control that you become truly enslaved, tirelessly working for them.

Often, the more we have, the more we end up pursuing, making us busier than ever. Only by freeing ourselves from these desires and reducing our needs can our lives become simpler and more composed, and our minds become free and at ease.

4. Organized Living

Decluttering enables us to break free from disarray and chaos, paving the way for a more organized life. In reality, very few people live up to their ideals and feel satisfied with themselves. Many are discontent with their actions and lifestyle but feel powerless to change due to ingrained habits, laziness, and bad habits.

Tidying up our physical spaces can be a more straightforward and accessible starting point than overhauling our lifestyles. We can kick-start breaking old patterns using Decluttering to create a clean and orderly environment. This can extend to improving our diet, behavior, and daily routines. Committing to these changes for 21 days, or even one or two months, can help us gradually develop new habits, ensuring balanced eating, measured actions, and regular schedules. If doing it alone seems daunting, seeking support from our surroundings can be a game-changer. For instance, our retreat center offers a calm and disciplined setting where rules and communal efforts aid in establishing a structured life. It's not about others needing you to change; it's about you wanting to become better.

5. Quality Living

Decluttering can lead us to a meaningful and high-quality life. We should ask ourselves: Does our current lifestyle truly have quality? Does it have meaning? Among the

things we do, say, and think daily, which contribute positively to our growth and enhance our lives, and which are merely killing time or polluting our inner selves? The reality for many is that their existence is cluttered with a mishmash of negative emotions and plus a heap of mistaken thoughts, constantly generating and discarding mental trash.

Life is an endless accumulation, and its quality hinges on the essence of our being. When shopping, we opt for the best quality within our means, yet we often overlook the kind of “life product” we are. If we recognize that the quality of our life is fundamental, something that stays with us always and is key to our happiness, surely, no one doesn’t want to be a “premium product.”

How can we enhance our quality? Confucianism teaches that “learning is for the self-realization of the individual.” Humans don’t develop simply by nourishing their bodies; that’s merely a natural process, indistinguishable from animals. What distinguishes humans as the most intelligent

beings is wisdom and morality, attributes that must be honed through education. Buddhism, on the other hand, advocates for cultivating a noble life by renouncing evil and practicing virtue. This is reflected in our actions, speech, and thoughts. It starts with employing Decluttering to cut through greed, aversion, and ignorance, then diligently cultivating precepts, concentration, and wisdom to realize wisdom and compassion fully. When our deeds and intentions are imbued with quality and value, our lives inherently mirror that quality and value.

6. Pure Living

Decluttering can transform the cluttered state of our lives into one of purity. In this era of material excess, we're surrounded by an overwhelming number of things, leading to chaos in both our environments and lifestyles. This clutter further muddles our thoughts, causing mutual interference and compounding the disorder. How do we change this situation?

First, we need to change our environment through decluttering. In a clean and tidy space, we can more clearly see the state of our minds and actions. Many share a common experience: in a messy space, our behavior tends to become reckless and undisciplined. However, in a clean and orderly setting, we naturally become more restrained, our mind settles more easily and we can effectively regulate our actions, words, and thoughts. Moreover, our practice should purge ignorance, restlessness, and tendencies towards greed, aversion, and ignorance, revealing the inherently pure mind “originally free of a single thing.” This represents the ultimate form of purity, which remains luminous and untainted in any circumstance.

7. Eco-Friendly Living

Practicing Decluttering can lead us to alter our consumption habits, shifting from a materialistic focus to a lifestyle emphasizing sustainability and environmental consciousness. The ongoing deterioration of our environment is intricately linked to our high-consumption lifestyles.

The saying “No buying, no killing” not only addresses the issue of taking life but is also applicable to environmental harm. Without the extreme expansion of desires, people wouldn’t need so many things, thus reducing the resources consumed and the amount of waste generated. Poor consumption habits turn vast resources into products, quickly becoming waste that the Earth can no longer sustain.

No one can truly answer how many products exist worldwide, as new items are introduced every day. Among them are a large number of disposable and fast-moving consumer goods. Their low cost and convenience make them widely accessible and appealing to the average person. But is it only money that we’re spending on these purchases? Behind this consumption lies the depletion of ever-scarcer resources and an increasingly fragile ecosystem. Therefore, we should embrace a low-carbon, eco-friendly lifestyle, reducing desires while fostering a respect for nature and a commitment to protecting the environment.

8. Altruistic Living

Decluttering can help us lessen ego attachment, shifting our focus from self-centeredness to living for the benefit of others. While Buddhism emphasizes self-benefit and benefiting others, “self-benefit” refers to positive growth and development. Selfishness, on the contrary, not only fails to benefit oneself but also opens the door to all kinds of decline. When people accumulate countless possessions and become engrossed in ownership, it fosters attachment to self and possessions, reinforcing the three senses of self and that everything exists to serve “me.” In reality, this mindset traps us, obscuring the greater purpose and meaning of life.

Practicing decluttering and letting go of unnecessary possessions and relationships can unveil a whole new world. Freed from the shackles of material goods, we gain more time for spiritual pursuits and personal development, evolving into quality individuals. With the burden of possessions lifted, we have more energy and resources to serve

society and benefit others, becoming a loving and compassionate person. The growth and joy that come from this transformation are incomparable to any material gain.

9. Enlightened Living

Decluttering enables us to let go of our greed and embark on a life of awakening and liberation. The true essence of decluttering is about releasing our dependency and fixation on material possessions. Without this understanding, decluttering might just become an excuse for another round of shopping. It's not uncommon for some to end up purchasing even more after a decluttering session, caught in a cycle of discarding and acquiring, rationalized by making room for the new. This, however, goes against the very principle of decluttering.

At its heart, the practice is about overcoming dependencies and cravings, along with the habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and ignorance they foster. These are the roots of all suffering and the cycle of birth and death.

Liberation means freeing ourselves from these entanglements. In this sense, decluttering is a valuable ally on our path to enlightenment and freedom. Even if we don't reach such profound states right away, minimizing our reliance on material goods can offer immediate relief and a sense of freedom, something accessible to everyone.

Just as our bodies need metabolism to stay healthy, our lives need a similar renewal process. By letting go of attachments and cravings, we can release the heavy burdens on our minds. Thus, decluttering is also a practice that aligns with spiritual cultivation and Chan living principles. I encourage everyone to study, reflect, and implement these principles. For individuals, it can enhance our lives; for the world, it can help protect our environment; in the present, it can aid in adjusting our behavior and refining our minds; and ultimately, it can lead us towards liberation.