ETHICAL FASHION SHOPPING GUIDE

9 STEPS TO ALIGNING YOUR FASHION CHOICES WITH YOUR VALUES & AESTHETICS
By the year 2100, human activities may drive more than half of the world’s marine and land species to extinction.

In Fashion, women earn significantly less than men, face systematic discrimination, and are only able to access the lowest paid jobs with poor prospects for promotion.

One cotton t-shirt consumes nearly 3 years of clean drinking water for a single person.

45.8 million people are living in modern slavery or forced labour today, many in the supply chains of clothing brands and retailers.

83% of the world’s drinking water is contaminated with micro-fibers from synthetic clothes that are not biodegradable.

References: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Are Clothes Sustainable?

Frankly we could solve one of the world’s most polluting problems if we all went naked.

It’s that simple. But you’re not going to show up at a board meeting or dinner party naked.

...So what do you do?

Our clothing is killing the planet but aligning our priorities with our wardrobe can feel confusing.

Conscious shopping doesn’t need to be overwhelming, or require yet another Ph.D’s worth of research. With a little effort, and unadulterated facts, you can shop with ease and feel good about it.

If you are looking for a magic solution, the only option is to become a nudist. But, if you are like the rest of us, in the other camp, we can do better, far better.
1 DON'T BUY IT.

Do you really need it?

Ask yourself:
1. Am I in need of a piece of clothing to cover my body in a way that nothing else I have will do?

2. Am I in need of a piece of clothing that sends an important message to others (employers, clients, friends, lovers, etc) in a way that nothing else I own can?

If the answer is ‘no’ to these, then let yourself forget about it. Take a walk on the beach. Enjoy life. Do something that feels good.

Later, if you find yourself getting dressed and that perfect item pops up, like it would be ‘just the thing’ and nothing else in your closet will do; then, go to the next step.

2 KNOW WHAT YOU NEED.

Knowing what you need before you start shopping is the best way to walk out with what you need and not a guilt trip.

For example:
1. Function
2. Social communication
3. Personal fit & feel
KNOW YOUR DEAL-BREAKERS.

What issues are you passionate about?

Is it oceans?
Is it forests?
Is it animal cruelty?
Modern day slavery?
Women’s Rights?
All of the above?!

If there ever was a motivating factor to become a nudist, it is learning about the depressing issues we face in the fashion industry. But, the cost of not knowing is filling up our landfills and oceans.

To make this process a lot easier, I wrote the Deal-Breaker’s Handbook, which is divided into categories: animal cruelty, environment, women’s rights, health, poverty, economy and arts/cultural diversity. From the perspective of each topic, the making of a garment is examined and broken down into a condensed list of do’s and don’ts. It’s available on the Beauty & Virtue website for free.

After getting some perspective on the issues and your position on them, you’ll find that the rest of these tips almost fall into place naturally.
INVESTIGATE.

* Capture the brand name for this step.*

Ask Questions.

You need to figure out if it’s really good or if it’s hype. (If you want help cutting through the hype my blog/newsletter navigates through this tough terrain.)

Knowing what your deal-breakers are will help you identify whether this brand is walking their talk or just trying to get you to buy.

If a charity or 501(c)3 organization approached you and asked for money, you would probably want to know the validity and reliability of their claims. The same is true for conscious fashion choices.

Why look up a brand instead of relying on the garment label?

If you find a good brand that makes you feel beautiful and makes the world a better place, why would you go anywhere else for your other clothing needs?
Not sure what to ask?

Questions to Ask:

Are they greenwashing?

Do they care or just pretend to care?

Are they telling you what you want to hear or what they really feel?

Examples:

• If they have a sustainability page that says they are cruelty-free but you spot conventional silk in their collection, something’s not right between what they say and what they do.

• If they boast about organic cotton but most of their collection is non-organic, there is a disconnect.

• If they glorify their sustainability policy but you see polyester in their collection, you know there’s something not right here.

It might not be a ‘no’, but a ‘let’s ask more questions’. You can call or email the company.

A Case Study:
Someone invented a new material; an alternative to leather that they claim is “sustainable, natural, 100% biodegradable and inspired by Cradle to Cradle approach”. Sounds great. Looking around on their website they reveal in their FAQ that the product is coated in a “petroleum-based resin”. They also say that 20% of their product is “PLA” (bio-plastic). Through further research, we learned from reputable sources (including a report by the United Nations) that ‘PLA’ is not biodegradable or a marine-safe material. Notice that they also reference Cradle to Cradle® as their inspiration, but they are not actually certified.

All of this is not to say that this material is bad, but it is not what it advertises to be. And this may or may not be an issue for you. Hundreds of brands are promoting one side and hiding others. Knowing the details makes all the difference so you can make the right choices that align with your values.
IDENTIFY THE TRUE COST.

Is the tag price too high? or Too low?

The cost of the garment when priced very high could indicate:

• It is paying living wages to the people who sewed it, wove it into fabric, and/or grew it in the fields.
• There is some special material or technique that is rare or time-consuming.
• The brand is not in alignment with your values and they put their money behind advertising rather than the product.

And if the price is very low, you might think: ‘What could be the harm in that? That’s called a deal.’

Unfortunately, when you see something priced too low (aside from the sales rack), it indicates that somewhere someone is trying to take a shortcut and while you the customer aren’t paying for it with your wallet today, the people, and planet, and you too, in an unseen way, are paying for that.

I encourage you to learn what it really takes to make a high-quality garment with values. Paying double now for something with triple the lifespan is clearly a better investment.

For example, local manufacturing is going to appear costlier. But most local artisan brands are underselling their work because they are afraid the market can’t bear the true cost.

When you find a brand that aligns with you support them, because by doing so, you change the tides for the whole industry about where the priorities should be.
KNOW THE TERMS.

What does this garment expect of you?
Does it need dry cleaning? Ironing? Hand washing?
It’s either a ‘Yes I can do that’, or ‘Nope, see ya!’

Can I give it the care it needs to live a long life or is it too high-maintenance for me and going to sit in the back of the closet?

Many dry-clean garments can also be hand washed. It does take some discerning skills to know when and where to apply this, so be wise.

IDENTIFY THE LIFESPAN.

Is it built for the long haul?

There are four reasons for an untimely separation:

• **It wasn’t built to last.** Poor quality construction or material or design. Distressed Jeans are an example of this category.

• **It wasn’t well cared for.** Most of us have experiences a shrunken sweater or two.

• **It was our favorite, but an accident happened.** This is where repairs step in. Some brands are building repair services into the business. Another option would be local alterations & repair services.

• **It is highly stylized.** Cool today, not tomorrow. Unless you have identified your personal style (an expression of your personality, not a trend) and this item matches it, then this kind of garment is sadly headed for untimely death.
8  SIGN THE AGREEMENT.

Look at the lifecycle. It may be recycled plastic today but ocean pollution tomorrow.

Each purchase is an investment from your wallet, however small or large. **But, are you aware of what it takes from you, your children or your grandchildren over the entire course of its life?**

Is that something you agree to?

**Consider this earth, the environment and all its inhabitants as your inheritance and your wealth.**

Then ask the question:

“Will this purchase decrease my or my children’s inheritance?”

and: “**Is that something I agree with?**”

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9  SAVOR IT.

If this garment looks and feels good on you, and after all those steps you are still smitten with it, then buy it and enjoy it to the maximum and don’t look back.

Enjoy it like five star dining:

The portion may look small and insignificant but if you savor every bite, the satisfaction is worth a hundred plates of mediocre.
A final word:

This guide is not meant to imply that we can buy our way into a sustainable future.

We are in deep trouble.

I wrote this guide after making 3 conclusions:

1. We are not going to stop wearing clothes that meet our physical and social needs.
2. Used clothing does not meet all of those needs.
3. Many brands claiming ‘sustainability’ are just making the problem worse.

This guide is meant to empower you to make educated and mindful decisions about new purchases that you truly do need.

If you found it helpful and want to take it deeper, read the Deal-Breaker’s Handbook, the blog and sign up to get in-depth articles exploring the challenges we face in practicing each of these 9 steps.

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Shopping is way more fun with a friend.

Bounce ideas and questions off each other, investigate together, and last but not least, get their honest opinion to the question ‘Is this me?’

Some friends know us better than we know ourselves!
8-Step Ethical Fashion Guide

1. Don’t buy it. Do you need it?
2. Know what you need. What are you looking for?
3. Know your deal-breakers. What matters to you?
4. Investigate. Do the details add up?
5. Identify the true cost. Is the price too high or low?
6. Know the terms. What care does it ask of you?
7. Identify the lifespan. Is it headed for untimely death?
8. Sign the agreement. Do you agree to the lifecycle impact?
9. Savor it.