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FOUR LESSONS I'VE LEARNT SINCE STARTING MY ETHICAL FASHION LABEL

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The co-founder of Monsoon Blooms bares all.



Being pregnant is a complex labyrinth of decision making and maturing. What pram will I buy? What parenting techniques will I adapt? What position will I push in?

In December of 2015 I found out I was pregnant whilst lying in a hospital bed in India, thinking I was suffering an acute bout of alcohol poisoning. Propelled into a series of heartbreaking visa enquiries with my Indian husband, I soon realised we wouldn't have the luxury of oohing and ahing over baby room décor; our 9-months would be spent battling the all-consuming questions of, "Where should we live?" and "How can we live where we want to live?"

Determined to keep this tiny human connected to both his Australian and Indian heritage no matter where bureaucracy threw us, we found ourselves in the forests of Kerala watching vats of medicinal plants colouring piles of Fairtrade organic cotton – an ancient Ayurvedic technique known as Ayurveda.



About six months after our son was born, we brought [Monsoon Blooms](#) into the world – both welcomings taking longer than expected, and both knotting me into uncensored disarray. Ask me how to raise a baby and I'll throw my hands in the air: every decision still feels fraught with uncertainty. But on the ethics of the fashion game and the complexities of doing business in a foreign country, I'm beginning to speak with increasing certainty.

Here's what I've learnt so far:

1. Abiding by the law isn't sufficient

According to state law, we could pay our tailors \$1.15 for every 12 bras stitched. This means they would need to artfully plough through over 200 bras before filling a scooter with petrol. The laws are failing. They do not represent the true cost of living, and they do not protect citizens from corporate greed. We asked our tailors what they wanted to earn and we pay it. We didn't negotiate; we will never negotiate. We pay 315 per cent more than required to pay by law, and we would sooner increase this than use our growing power to bargain.

2. Doing things backwards can take you forwards

Once we decided on our business idea – clothes dyed with Ayurvedic plants – we had the surprisingly difficult task of finding a dye house. I scoured Google, sent numerous emails and dialled many phone numbers. Meanwhile, my husband cruised the streets of our village on his motorbike chatting to friends and sipping chai. All my gadgets and connectivity led us nowhere, while his socialising – just as he promised me – gave us the contact of a person who knew a person who knew an Ayurvedic dye house. The seemingly backwards, outdated ways of communicating and doing business in India have given us trustworthy contacts and built sincere relationships between us and our suppliers. The more I accept the way things operate, the smoother our business runs.



3. Fairtrade and ethical aren't the same as charity

Before starting Monsoon Blooms, my understanding of Fairtrade and ethical business offered no distinction to charity. It was the doing of the noble with no care for money; those who deserved a pat on the back. My realisation now is that these terms could be loosely interchanged with: We're not criminals. We don't support child labour, we don't support forced labour, we operate in a way that is fair and just. There is now sufficient proof that operating ethically can be economically viable. It can encourage entrepreneurialism and dignified business practices in which everyone in the supply chain is rewarded fairly for their hard work – and that's a far cry from charity.

4. Making one good decision doesn't cancel out a handful of bad ones

All of our cotton is grown under the guidance of a company called Chetna Organic who work on the social, environmental and economic sustainability of small-scale cotton farms in rural India. Their various programs and the impact they have is more than I can wrap my head around. If we took their wholesome cotton and soaked it in standard synthetic dyes – many of which are known to have carcinogenic chemicals and environmental pollutants – we would be contradicting the value of their efforts. Making one good decision doesn't seem to be enough. To sprout any claims of organic purity and environmentalism, it needs to trickle through every stem of the business. And that's no easy feat...but it's possible.

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