

Right Livelihood

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I thought today to continue with my occasional series on the *Noble Eightfold Path*. This year, on some Friday a month, we've been studying the Eight Faithful Path the Buddha taught, and then periodically, somewhat correspondence to that, I have been teaching about each of the steps of the *Eightfold Path*, and we've now gotten up to right livelihood. So the talk today will be on right livelihood. And there is an important part of Buddhist spirituality that has to do with a sense of, aside from intentionality, motivation, the intentions by which we base our life. Some people would say that a big part of a spiritual life is a life that involves intention, intentions, intentionality, and motivation. And it's one thing to have intentions, wishes, motivations.

It's another thing to inhabit them, to embody them, to express them, to manifest them in our lives. And so a Buddhist spiritual life is one that both has intentionality as part of it, a sense of purpose, but also has a manifesting that, embodying that, living that intentionality. There's a phenomenon called a book stand Buddhist. And these are people who just read books about Buddhism, the Buddhist books on their bed stand, and are bed stand Buddhists. And it's nice, but you don't—a Buddhist life is not found through reading books. It's found by somehow manifesting it in our lives.

So one of them—there's a variety of ways of understanding a Buddhist life, intentional aspect of Buddhist life. And each person who engages in Buddhist practice will find their own way, their own intentionality or motivation, site, purpose. But one very nice kind of overview or kind of generalized intentionality that the Buddha taught was the intention to both be a benefit to oneself and to be a benefit to others. And that's somehow one of the possibilities of motivating one's life. Another way of talking about that is to talk about liberation or free-

dom, that we're motivated by the idea that's considered the ultimate benefit, liberation or freedom, so that is to be motivated by a life where we become free.

When we relieve ourselves, we free ourselves from suffering, the causes of suffering. And then we can manifest a life of awakening or freedom, an inner life, as we go about our life. So in order to live through that kind of a life of intentionality, the Buddha offered what he called an eight noble path, an *Eightfold Noble Path*, and eightfold steps. Sometimes you talk about steps, you know, one step at a time. But sometimes it's more like the strands of a rope, and there's eight strands to the single rope. There's eight—I know, lanes is the right talk, a path, but eight lanes. They go together. There's eight facets that all work together, they're not necessarily sequential. And the fifth of those is right livelihood.

And I love it because it talks about a way of life, how we're going to live our life, and usually understood to be on how we make a living, how we work our work. But I think right livelihood is really a subset of a much bigger thing. Is that what are the choices? What choice you make about how you want to live your life, what is most important for you in your life, and to really spend some time reflecting deeply: What is it you want your life to be about? What do you want to really infuse your life with? It's so easy, I think, in the kind of life that many people live, to lose and lose touch with our deepest intention, or perhaps be raised in such a way that we never even take time to reflect on our deepest intention.

I've known people who have followed the course they were set for them by their parents, for example, or society, a high school, college, careers, family, and then at some point maybe in their forties or fifties, they can't say, "Wait a minute, I never really thought about this. What is it I really want to do? What's really important for me? And this really maybe has no meaning any more." It's not so uncommon for people to get to be relatively established in their life, forty or fifty, and realize, "Wait a minute, this doesn't, you know, this doesn't have the promise in it that I originally thought it might have."

There is a vague promise of lasting happiness and satisfaction, and I'm not finding it here. This is kind of empty. So to spend some time thinking about our deepest intentions for our life, and then appreciating that. For some people, a big part of their life is spent at work, and so if we have a fundamental aspiration for our life, it makes sense to incorporate it into our work life, how we may have a livelihood. So we're not compartmentalized. We're not bifurcating our life between one place we have a certain direction we're trying to go and develop, and another place maybe that's taking us in a different direction.

So to spend some time reflecting on what our life should be about, what we want life to be

about, and then reflecting, “How is it that my work life also supports that and develops that as well?” In putting right livelihood as part of the path, I think the Buddha is appreciating that we want to integrate all our life on a path. If what we want to do is have our life be about a path, it’s possible to have a life not about a path, but if you want to make your whole life a path, then the work part has to be a part of that as well.

So in thinking about work, there are two primary ways of infusing meaning or intentionality in work, finding meaning in work. One way is by what we do, and the other way is how we do it. And some people will focus on one rather than both. Some people focus on both. What we do is very meaningful for some people, and some people will find the career, you know, their life career there, is like finding a soul mate or something, you know, that’s—they feel just a perfect fit for them, and they feel like it is great.

And then some people are neurotically—I don’t know if neurotic is the right word—but are oppressively trying to find the right career, and our society kind of passes the message on. Sometimes you’re supposed to find it, you’re supposed to have it. And so people will kind of be looking for how to be successful, and it’s right. Then there’s a third category of people who never find what to do in life at all. They never kind of even start looking for the perfect job. They know the perfect thing to do and what, but their work life is very meaningful not because of what they do, but because of how they do it.

And they infuse whatever they’re doing, whatever the work happens to be, they infuse it with a kind of involvement, intentionality, and meaning that is transformative, that’s helpful. So the what and the how are two different approaches. And some people, the what doesn’t matter. Some people, what does matter—the what do we do? The Buddha had various things to say when he defined right livelihood, primarily by defining it in the negative, by saying, “What is wrong livelihood?” And in some ways, these are kind of maybe the outer edges of what’s wrong.

He had a list of five things, which he categorizes absolutely as a kind of wrong livelihood, wrong occupations, or work to be done. One is dealing with a commerce of weapons, buying and selling guns and bombs and things like that. You know, it doesn’t work for a Buddhist to do that. That goes against the very grain of what Buddhism is about. The other is a commerce with people. It’s okay to have a helping agency. But no, it’s like slavery and prostitution and things like that, where you’re buying and selling people.

And then there is, it’s said, that also dealing with meat, you know, involves—that somehow involves the killing of animals. Buying and selling meat, being a butcher, is considered to be

a wrong livelihood. It's a little bit strange in some Buddhist countries where Buddhists will eat meat. But it's not so—the Buddhist community are not the butchers, but rather people of other religions. The butchers and the Buddhists co-buy their meat from them. It seems a little odd.

And then there is not dealing in intoxicants and alcohol that intoxicates. People said drugs and alcohol. And then there's a thing about not dealing with the poisons. It's kind of like weapons—poisons, meaning back in the old days, poisons which used to kill people as kind of weapons. And perhaps back in the ancient world, that was pretty straightforward, you know. Either you dealt with weapons or didn't deal with weapons. In the modern world, is it so straightforward where the line is between my dealing with weapons or not in my work?

Sometimes people work here locally, work in big corporations, that somehow those corporations are also supported. You know, a part in their clients might be the defense department. Maybe they make certain kinds of equipment. And so is it then, you know, is it supportive or not of you now? Are you participating in that kind of commerce and weapons by supporting this? I know that it was a great, meaningful little exchange that I once had with or heard from Isidatta, a Burmese monk who recently died a few years ago. He was a monk here for about—a teacher here for about twenty years, twenty-five years.

And he was, among other things, he was a kind of a monk for a large part of the Burmese community in the Bay Area. In the early nineties, he was asked what his—as a Buddhist teacher—what was his biggest ethical dilemma. It was a panel. Different teachers, they are going to speak about the ethical dilemmas they had as teachers. And now it's his turn to speak on the topic. And he said, "My biggest ethical dilemma is that there are Burmese families here in the Bay Area that I counsel. And I know back then it's really hard for these Burmese immigrants to find work. They have whole families to take care of. It's hard to find work in the Bay Area and take care of their family. And some of them find work in a weapons industry, which we have here in the Bay Area. And they come to me and ask me, 'Is this right livelihood?' And I know that it's not. My dilemma is that I know how hard it is for them to find work. I don't want to tell them that." And that's a struggle, you know?

So sometimes it's very clear, and sometimes the lines are not so clear. And some people, it's meaningful. It's a meaningful analysis for some people to say that the government deals with weapons all the time, and my taxes support that. And so this is very meaningful for me, you, in a difficult way. It's a problem for me. And so I've known some people who've withheld their taxes from the government.

Robert Aitken Rōshi, wonderful Zen teacher, he put his taxes in escrow, and so he didn't keep it for himself. He just put it in escrow. Then he wrote a letter to government saying, "This money you can have. As soon as you can promise me that the money will not go into buying weapons and doing war," and it just sits there in this escrow place until you can tell me that, and I don't know the results of that. But now the final results and the money is still sitting there, and he's not in jail, so I don't know what's going on. So what it points to, what points out is that our life is very complex, and the causal chain that our life is connected to is often quite complex.

And so the kind of simple admonitions, you know, "Don't be involved in the commerce of weapons," you know, becomes kind of grey for many of us in our lives. What it means for me, I hear, is that over this—that a Buddhist life is a mindful life, which means that we are willing to question and look under the surface of things. And so being present doesn't just mean being present in some kind of openness, you know, an expanded way what's here and now. It also means, in addition to that, it also means an inquiring, questioning, looking. What is this life I'm living? It's a conscious life.

What is this life? What's the impact of my life? When I flush my toilet, where does it go? Do I know where? Do you know where your gasoline comes from? Do you know where your water comes from? Do you know where the water puts into your life, where they come from? Are you mindful of or aware of that? It's possible to go to the store and be mindful of here and now, and have no idea that the things you buy are impacting people half a world away.

So part of a mindful—not mindful life is to think deeply about, "What is this life I'm encountering here?" and to question, you know: What is my impact? What is my—what is my impact in this life? Am I making a difference for the better or making a difference for the worse? It's possible to very casually cause more harm in this life of ours. It's possible very casually to cause a benefit, to give a sense of how casual it can be, or how trite or simple a difference can be. I'll give you a very ridiculously simple example of the kind of difference we might make of coming down here this morning and parking.

There's a little parking space right over here on Clinton Street that I have a little super impressed, and there's a place for parking between the red zone is exactly right for this impression. If you have a car bigger, the car is bigger. That doesn't fit just exactly right, you know. But it's really hard to get in there and get the car lined up properly, you know, because, you know, I can never guess it, you know, because it just exactly fits. So usually like six or eight inches off. So it's always a little bit in the red.

And so I get up, I turn off the engine, get out of my car, and go, “Look, oh no, didn’t make it this time either.” And so usually I get back in the car, and turn the engine, and move two or three inches, and then I get out the car and check again. And, you know, sometimes it takes me a couple of times to get it right. But today, what I did was I got out and checked, and sure enough, I was off by eight inches or something. So I got in the car, and released the gear shift, and lowered the handbrake, and got out, and pushed the car, you know, it. And then I thought, “Oh, that’s nice.”

So yes, that’s great energy, you know, so I didn’t have to pollute the Bay Area, you know, and move it extra, and America became a little more energy self-sufficient. So that’s a pretty small and a very ridiculously small example, but it’s possibly, no doubt, has an impact. I would think, you know, if enough people do it. So what impact do you have in your life? And I’ll tell you another story. I love a story.

There’s a Zen saying—I won’t tell you the Zen saying first. Paul Reps was a kind of a Zen student in the early fifties. I think he’d been maybe to Japan, and during the war or something. World War II anyway. He was on to go to Japan to study Zen in the early fifties during the Korean War, and apparently it was very hard to get a visa to go to Japan during the Korean War. And so he went to the Japanese consulate to ask for a visa, and he says he wasn’t part of the military effort and wasn’t part of the reconstruction of Japan, whatever. His visa was denied.

So he’s standing on the desk as visa was denied, and since then he turned over the visa application and wrote on it, “With this cup of tea, sipping this cup of tea, I stopped the war.” And he handed it back. The application back to the guy, the guy looked at it, turned it over, and said, “Accepted.” So that’s the saying, you know, “With this cup of tea I stopped the war.” So they did. Idea being that, you know, very small things can make an impact.

It seems like maybe we don’t want to—we kind of brush it off. But anyway, so to live a life that in this complicated world we live, to reflect about what is the impact I’m having, and can I make an impact for the better, is part of a mindful life. So in terms of work, or to live in such a way, what work can I do that’s meaningful? The other kind of teaching the Buddha had about a right livelihood or wrong livelihood is to avoid a work livelihood that involves deception, trickery, a kind of forceful persuasion, and belittling people—to avoid that.

So why avoid these kinds of things? Is it because Buddhism is moralistic, and there are these kind of not really clear admonitions, “Thou shalt”? It’s not that. It’s rather that these things harm people, other people, and they also harm ourselves. And one of the functions of mind-

fulness practice is to help us to understand how we harm ourselves. But how we live, as we get more calm and relaxed and sensitive, becomes clearer and clearer how we can harm, how we harm ourselves.

And this becomes a very interesting thing around work, because there can be motivations around work that are—that we pursue, or activities, or ways of engaging in work which is not to our best interest. So for example, the pursuit of money for the one only for the purpose of money, or the, you know, to be stressed, and overworking, and pushing, and pushing, and being very aggressive. You know, you get stressed out, you start having ulcers, you get a weak heart, and all kinds of symptoms of stress can build up in people. There's pursuits, you know, here. Sometimes the kind of pursuit that sometimes a business in America wants us to pursue, the kind of values it has, are not very conducive to living a life where we're in touch with our deeper values, or deeper sense of calm or ease or relaxation, the deeper value, deeper kind of sense of spiritual touchstones in our hearts, our minds, and our being.

One of the touchstones that I think is very helpful is breathing easily. If the way you work doesn't allow you to breathe easily, then I begin to look at either what you do, or how you do what you're doing. Are you willing to sacrifice having a relaxed breath for the sake of being productive, for the sake of proving yourself, for the sake of, you know, all the different things that go on? I think in Buddhism we like the stress that you relax. Breathing is one of the great resources that's priceless.

And why would you sacrifice it for money when it's priceless? So the idea being that there is an inner life which has no value, has no price, but is infinitely valuable, easy to lose touch with. And so part of the mindful life is to sit quietly enough, for example, so you can get in touch with that which has infinite value, but which our society has no way of putting a price on. You tell your boss, "You know, you know, give me a break here and to find my relaxed breath." No, that can't go over very well. And so you are the most beautiful qualities of a heart because there's no commerce where you can buy and sell it.

So I think that, you know, it's hard to put your monetary value on it. So you now focus on not involved in things like this. Occupations of deceit or trickery or belittling people is a hint. And other things there is hinting. You're not asked a hint. That's especially true for monastics. Monasticism is also considered a livelihood. Being a monk or a nun, and now it's a different way of doing a livelihood and more things monastic. Since they're completely dependent on donations from other people, monastics are not allowed to hint—that's a wrong livelihood.

So you can't say, you know, you know, someone invites you over, offers you a meal. As a

monastic, you can receive the meal if they invite you. But then you say, “You know, Oh, thank you so much. And I am, you know, I haven’t had a papaya a long time.” You’re not asking for papaya, but you’re kind of hinting. So no hinting. And for monastics, no asking either. It’s going to take what’s given.

So then spending time reflecting on you, “No, is what I’m doing ethical, is supportive of an inner life, is supportive of a life where I try to make a positive difference to the world that I’m living here. I live in a world that I’m a part of.” And some people will spend time reflecting, going off on retreat, taking a year off in order to really get into the depths of their minds and their hearts to try to understand what is it they really want to do with their life? What’s most important? The reflection of, you know, in twenty years, if I look back, what do I want to do for the next twenty years meaningful for me? I’ve known people who have finally found meaningful work when they were in their sixties.

And I’ve known people who have said, “You know, I’m already in my fifties. It’s too late now.” Never too late. I knew one man who became a Buddhist monk when he was sixty, became a Buddhist teacher when he was eighty, and then had a stroke when he was ninety, and then he would have—a part of his rebirth from a stroke was he’d have two younger monks. He couldn’t walk very well, walk next to him, holding him up. And he’d do lots of walking meditation, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until he slowly got things moving again or working again. In his nineties, and I’m a great believer in not wasting time doing things which are meaningless, not wasting time doing occupations and work which don’t feed you or feed the world in some wonderful way.

To do work just because it’s some, you know, making money. Sometimes it’s valuable if you are supporting a family, and maybe there’s no other way. But today, just making—having a job for security’s sake, you know, it’s not something I could never, I could never really get behind. And maybe it’s a luxury to be able to walk away from work that gives a security. And not everyone has that luxury. But I’ve seen over and over again that there’s much better things to be done in life than making money.

Every time that I chose the *Dhamma* over the reasonable things about making a livelihood for myself, the *Dhamma* always took care of me. I felt always worked well. The story I like to tell of being—going to Japan to practice there. When I got to Japan, I didn’t have much money. I don’t know how much I had, but it certainly was not more than two hundred dollars, you know, I was to be in Japan for a year, so the reasonable thing to do is to get a job. You got little money. So I got myself set up to teach Japanese, to teach English as a second language

in Japan.

And a lot of Westerners in Japan will teach English, and it's somewhat lucrative. And so there was two weeks or ten days before my job was going to start. So since I was a Zen practitioner, I decided to go off to a Zen monastery during that time and sit a retreat. And during the end of the retreat, I thought, "What am I doing? I'm a Zen practitioner, a Zen priest. I didn't come to Japan to study—to teach English. I came to study Zen, and I don't know how I'm going to do that, but I'm going to take the risk anyway and pursue that instead of a work thing." And so I cancelled my teaching job, and then, you know, kind of tried to find myself in the Zen world of Japan, and I spent a year there, and after—when I left a year later I hadn't worked. But I left Japan with a hundred dollars more than I came with, which you do—half times as much, right?

So I made a big profit there. So somehow I was taken care of, wonderful ways I was taken care of, and people helped me and supported me. So it's a little example. If, you know, I chose the *Dhamma*, and somehow, for me, the *Dhamma* then supported me in return. Then the other whole approach around work is not what you do, but how you do it. And for some people, this is the most meaningful aspect of work, and maybe the work doesn't have some kind of great meaning in terms of helping other people or some great personal meaning for yourself. But how you do it is important.

And the opportunity is to make work a monastery, to make work a retreat center, to make work a place that really is your vehicle for developing your spiritual life. And whatever your work is, whether it's being a housewife, or a house husband, or being a monastic, or there's many different things we consider a lively way of life. But to make that way of living something that is a place of training ourselves, of developing ourselves. And I tell sometimes people, "Please make your place of work. Please make it a monastery for yourself. You're not going to go. You're not going off to a monastery, a real monastery. So make your work a monastery." And I say that with the belief that it's possible to do that.

It's possible to be very consciously and unconsciously intentional about how we approach work and what we do there, so that we bring mindfulness to work. And what work is, is a place we train ourselves in mindfulness. We are intentional, but how we speak and work becomes a place of training ourselves in right speech. Work becomes a place where we can intentionally kind of try to feel connected to others in a way that we can find vehicles to express our compassion and care. So work is a place of benefiting others. Work is a place to develop concentration, and some work is better than others. You can cultivate and develop

your concentration there.

A plot—work is a place you can cultivate and develop your kindness. There's a lot of things you can develop. And so part of how you do work is to reflect, you know, how do I want to do it? And how do I want to take it on as a place of training and developing myself? And so you're inspired when you get up. When you get up in the morning, you're inspired not just because you're going to make some money or because you are making a nice product, but because this is a place where I'm going to cultivate myself and develop myself. Let me hope that when I come home in the end of the day, I've developed my muscle of mindfulness to make it stronger.

I've had jobs where it was very clear to me that the jobs I was doing was a place where I was cultivating my concentration and cultivating my mindfulness. And it was really clear to me that both those things were developing and strengthening over the days and weeks and months and years that I did those jobs, and I loved it. I loved it. I would go to work, and there were some jobs I had where I would be more concentrated at the end of the job, end of the day, than I was going into it. And because it, you know—but part of that involved a choice, a decision to actually enter into the work in a kind of real focus.

It's easy nowadays, if I posed, be quite easy to get distracted at work. People have computers because it's—with a couple of clicks you're on to the web and a couple of clicks you check email, or you had this little, this ominous little tone that comes on, that tells you that, you know, email has come in, and so some people feel compelled to check that immediately. And maybe it's nice, just immediately, it's important. But if what you're trying to do is develop concentration, ability to be focused and present, just be with one thing at one time, then perhaps you ignore that, if you turn off a little deeper.

So you—and just kind of do one thing when you're doing it. I think it cultivates stability, cultivates a sense of relaxation, cultivates a lot of good qualities. So how we do things, to think about work as a place to cultivate oneself, and one of the really beautiful things to cultivate, is a sense of compassion to cultivate, or our sense of caring for others besides ourselves. And I think probably every livelihood, every work that someone does, has some interface with other people. Even people who are quite solitary, sooner or later, have to interface with other people because they have to, you know, some interaction with other people because no one's livelihood is independent of others, and so have work a place worth cultivating and developing compassion and care.

And I've known people for whom what was most meaningful about their work was not the

product that they made, but rather was the relationships they cultivated with the people they were connected to. The fact that they were caring relationships, that in those relationships, they made a difference in other people's lives. It's been kind of gratifying that in the last maybe the last ten years or so, last ten, fifteen years, ten years, there has been a number of books published about spirituality, but many books published in this spirituality of work. And a number of these books are also by Buddhists, talking about Buddhism and work. I'm really trying to incorporate that and integrate those—work as part of practice.

I think it's been very important, because there's been a very strong tendency. There was a very strong tendency that I saw in the Buddhist circles I travelled in to divide life about, you know, the retreats—meditating was where it was really at, and somehow that work, especially work out in society and out of the monastery, doesn't really count, not really the real stuff. And I think there's been a healing of that divide over the years, and some of these books represent that, where people actually very, very thoughtfully trying to write and consider, "How is it that we can engage in work as the spiritual practice, as a Buddhist training?" And I believe there's a way of making this a kind of idea, these ideas, and trying to get across today very simple, and that is that if you sit, meditate, or do something equivalent, and are able to relax all the surface chatter and surface tension of your being, and settle into some deeper place of well-being or peace, stability of being in touch.

Keep a place of being in touch, and find value in that place. Find value in that deep settling, that peace. How is it that you can work from that place? How is it that you can work? So work expresses that place, supports that place, nourishes that place, manifests that place of deeper settlement. And I believe that people where they do practice, like meditation on a regular basis, then they're more and more in touch with values and in a sensibility that is not consumer driven or greed driven or aversion driven, ambition driven, theory driven. And as we get in touch with this deeper kind of sensibilities, it makes sense to begin re-evaluating our work to decide whether either to change how we do it or sometimes actually change what we do so that we are honoring this deeper, beautiful place that we all have.

And for some people that's a struggle, a little victory when they come to—and those of you who are new to mindfulness might be forewarned that it's possible you're in trouble to keep doing this, because as you settle and relax and get deeper in touch with yourself, some of you, some of your values might change. And as your values change, some of your values might change and become different than some of your colleagues. And it's not a few people have talked to me about that. That's that shift that's up. And the tension that arises. So now you're warned.

And then the last thing I'll say is, that's done. To quote Lily Tomlin, "If you win the rat race, you're still a rat." So let's stop being rats. So thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you again in a couple of months, and also seeing you at the potluck. Thank you. Thank you.