

Right Livelihood

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This evening is to continue the Eightfold Path series that I've been doing. Today's topic is Right Livelihood. Right livelihood is the issue of livelihood, independent of being right, and is usually a big topic for some people. It's a big challenge in their lives in finding livelihood, finding what the right livelihood is for them. People spend years sometimes trying different things, trying to figure out, not being able to find something, and then having it available. Many years ago, I was at a conference, kind of participated in a small conference with some Buddhist teachers on the issue of ethics, and Ācāriyananda, who was a wonderful Burmese monk who lived in the Bay Area for many years, was at this conference.

At some point, there was a panel discussion where the teachers who were there were asked the question, "What is the biggest ethical challenge you've ever had as a teacher?" Susīlananda immediately said that his biggest ethical challenge is that he, not only a monk but also kind of like the parish priest for a large Burmese community in the Bay Area, would have people come to him for consultation and advice. Back then, especially in 1990, he said the Burmese immigrants who came to this country sometimes had a hard time finding work, and they had a family to take care of and support. Some of them found work down in the San Jose area in industries that have to do with making weapons. I believe back then there was a company down there that makes tanks—United Defense. Some of the Burmese get jobs at places like that, and they come to him and ask, "Is this right livelihood?"

His biggest ethical challenge is what to tell them. As a Buddhist who's steeped in the Buddhist traditional teachings, he is very clear: that's wrong livelihood, to be involved in the manufacture of weapons. But he knows how hard it is to find work, and they have families to support. He doesn't quite want to tell them that is wrong livelihood, because that causes him suffering as well. That was interesting, that the issue of livelihood was, for him, one of

the difficult areas of being a teacher. Then there was another friend of mine who worked for a machinist shop down in San Jose area, and the machine shop made specialty machine work.

There was a foreign government who needed a special part for fighter jets, and they were going to make it in the specialty machine shop. The order came by him, and so he went to his boss and said, "I can't do this," and his boss said, "OK, you don't have to." That was nice. The machine shop still made it, but he wasn't involved in doing it. These are examples of people who are dealing with the ethical aspects of Right Livelihood. Generally in Buddhism, when they talk about Right Livelihood, that's what the emphasis is on: the ethical aspect of it.

There are some very clear teachings. If you think that Buddhism or Buddhist teachers like me sometimes are of the view that it's all relative, and to look at it from different sides, and like this and that, and it's all okay or something—it's unequivocal about what the Buddha said about right livelihood, what's wrong livelihood. He said wrong livelihood: don't do these things. Don't be involved in the manufacture of weapons. Don't be involved in the trade of living beings, which means prostitution and animals for slaughter. Don't be involved in the trade of intoxicants. Don't be involved in the trade of poisons. I think he meant to give poisons for human beings. Number five: weapons or anything involved in killing, killing any beings at all. It's kind of clear—you don't do these things.

Buddhist teachers in the West, when they try to apply this, are very quick to say it gets complicated, because the companies we work for do all kinds of things, and places we invest in, and it's kind of mixed what they do. So how do you know, and where do you draw the line of when it seems unethical and when it's not? One of the ways I like to look at it is: do we do work that is good for our conscience? We have a conscience, hopefully, to care for. If we rely on the conscience, if we are sensitive to our ethical sensitivity, and really take in what we're doing in that field of ethical sensitivity, do we feel good about it? If we don't feel good about it, then perhaps it's time to consider something.

I remember that famous story I've told many times now, the little story of a man who came to—I was sitting in on interviews as a teacher in training, learning how to be a teacher by watching a teacher in action. This man came in and said, "In my field of business, I'm expected to lie." Ilene asked the teacher, expecting to be told how to do this now, "How can I do my job and lie at the same time?" The teacher said, "You can't." He said, "How can I be a good Buddhist and lie at the same time?" That Buddhist teacher was quite unequivocal, said, "You can't." This teacher was Christopher Titmuss, who is one of the absolutely most liberal

Buddhist teachers in the area that I know, most permissive. But he was very clear: no, you can't be a Buddhist or a good Buddhist if you're involved in a profession that involves lying.

Two simple ethical guidelines that I think I'd like to fall back on: it's not particular rules, but rather the issue of conscience—how is it for your conscience, what you do? The second is: does it harm people? Does it cause harm? Over and over again, that's the Buddhist ethical foundation: does it cause harm? Then there's a little higher order that the person can consider, and that is: does it cause benefit, is it beneficial? I would like to believe that the right livelihood is one that brings benefit to ourselves and the world around us. How does it bring benefit? In terms of the world around us, it improves people's lives in some way or other, and so I feel like making a difference in the world. There's a tremendous range of what that can be, and it might not have anything to do with what we do, but how we do it.

I think that one of the neuroses—or, I don't know if that's the right word—but a source of suffering for people I've seen in this area is people who feel there has to be the career, and they have to find the career, that this is their career, like the thing that they do. Some people do find it, the thing that they like to do, and it fits who they are. But from what I can tell, I think that for some people, that's not in the cards. There isn't that "the career," the thing. It's a form of suffering to assume that there should be. People struggle to try to fit into this idea that there should be. For some people, what's important is not what they do, but how they do it. It's how they do their work where the definition of right livelihood comes in.

They might do something which, in some kind of way, doesn't seem dramatically beneficial for the world, but they do it in such a way that it makes a difference for the people they encounter. They make a difference for their co-workers, and make a difference for the people they encounter, and part makes their life better. They express their kindness, or their care, or their friendliness, or their compassion, or something. Some people find that hope is the place—it becomes the really important foundation of their work and they do it. Maybe I've known people who've worked in places that have very little status in our general culture here and low-paying work, but have been extremely happy, and the way they do their work is full of dignity and generosity and compassion for the people around them. I've been inspired by these people, how they do, and they seem very content and happy with how they do their work rather than what they're doing.

So, is the work we're doing beneficial for the world, and is it beneficial for ourselves? Right livelihood is an issue that's part of the Eightfold Path. It's of interest not as an ethical norm that "thou shalt," but rather it's of interest about people who want to become liberated, become free. If what you want is to be free, then you will not have the heart constricted tight.

If you want to have the heart not afraid, if you want to have the heart not struggle, weighed down by anything, and you want to be liberated, then these eight steps are ways to help you do that. Now, in this topic of right livelihood, then, is the question or the quest: how is it that the livelihood I have supports that movement of liberation and freedom?

In that sense, it becomes: how is it good for my practice? Is it good for my heart? Is it good for the liberation, freedom that I have? Here also, I think there's two questions: what is done, the job, and how it's done. Is it a job that nourishes you, or is it a job that finds no nourishment at all from it, but it just gives you a paycheck that you get by? I know some people who would never put up with a job that was only for a paycheck. I think I know people for whom they'd rather be poor and homeless than put up with a job that just makes them miserable. Other people may, because they have family to care for, maybe feel like they have no choice but to take a job that has very little meaning and doesn't nourish them, but they're trying to take care of their family.

If there's a possibility, consider finding work that's nourishing, that's meaningful, that's inspiring, that brings joy and delight. I think it's very important. It's interesting that the Buddha talked about four kinds of happiness that a lay person can have, a lay person who works. The first is the happiness of economic security. The second is the happiness of gaining wealth that is legally or lawfully acquired. Here the idea is gaining wealth—it isn't just like make enough money to get by, but it's considered in the ancient world, in the Buddha's time, quite fine and a happy thing to become wealthy provided it was lawfully acquired. Now, remember this was before Marx, so the Buddha had a different analysis. Maybe we have a different one now. Then, the happiness of being free from debt is considered one of the four kinds of happiness, and the happiness of doing work that's blameless, so there's no one can blame you. You don't feel any kind of remorse or criticism for the kind of work you do.

Those are the four kinds of happiness for a lay person who works. The issue of debt, of course, is interesting here. In America, free of debt—they didn't have mortgages and credit cards in the Buddha's time, so now the chances of being free of debt are different. Maybe it's easy to get into debt, or so well supported by society to go into debt. There was a bhikkhu named Ajahn Amaro, who was a Theravādin monk ordained in Tibet who lived in the Bay Area for many years. When he first came to visit, he was visiting San Francisco. Someone took him on a tour of the San Francisco financial district, and he was from England, right? He'd been a monk for many years and living in Tibet, and so the man was telling him about the American economic system and how it works. At some point, the man said to the monk, "You're more wealthy than most people in America." Ajahn Amaro was kind of stunned to hear that. "What

do you mean? I'm a renunciant. I've given away all my money. I don't have any money. I'm not allowed to handle money, you know. I'm allowed to have a bowl once a day, the food that goes in, my robes, and a place, a roof over my head. That's all I have. I don't have any money." The man said, "Yes, but you're not in debt. Most people in America are in debt in some way or other." So the happiness of being free from debt is a nice happiness.

Why I mention this is that as some people—there is a tenet, I don't know if it's still true, but it used to be true, especially when all us hippies came into Buddhism—that there was a kind of a negative view towards money and earning money, a kind of "money is evil." It was kind of like the hippie, almost kind of thing. So there's a kind of negative, and also because the monastics, and monastics we know, Buddhist monastics don't handle money, it lends itself to the idea that money is so much wrong. But the monastics don't handle money, never say that. They just say, "That's just the rule I live by." In fact, the Buddha actually referred to as a form of happiness the happiness of economic security, wealth lawfully gained, being free of debt, and doing work which is blameless. That's kind of nice.

So how do we do that? How do we find that? What is the kind of work that nourishes us, supports us, helps us in our spiritual practice? How do we—or how do we do our work so it helps us in our spiritual practice? One of the things I learned from working at the Zen monasteries—you do a lot of work, it's part of the spiritual practice—is I learned to do things wholeheartedly. When you do something, you assume you kind of put yourself completely in it. It took a while for me to learn that. I was kind of like, "I didn't want to do it," or "I can't believe I'm doing this," or "I wish I had the other job," and all kinds of resistance. But now I would do my best and put myself into it. I learned a certain kind of way of being wholehearted in what I did.

What I discovered in the wholeheartedness is that there were ten lines on the job I was doing, but there was a way in which doing something wholeheartedly, being fully there for the job and not anywhere else in the mind, that my mind got really still. I would end my work feeling more still and more centered, more calm than when I started. In the monastery, sometimes I would go directly, in terms of minutes, between working—like in the kitchen, wholeheartedly, kitchen work is very physical—and then going into the meditation hall to sit. Usually I would show up just as I closed the doors, so I really literally the last minute, and I would sit down, and my mind would be completely still and very focused. There I was, because of the way I worked. I've done work where I've had doubt about what I was doing, I was anxious about what I was doing, I was kind of scattered in what I was doing, and all kinds of things. Then I went to meditate, and guess what? I carried that with me into the meditation. So that kind of putting yourself fully into what you're doing, I think it's a beautiful thing.

How does it support our practice? Sometimes in the mindfulness scene that we do here, I think we put too much emphasis on mindfulness, because sometimes it's overemphasized, and mindfulness is sometimes a little bit removed, and slow, and kind of a little bit too disconnected from what we're doing. One of the blessings or benefits for me from being a Zen practitioner is where they emphasize wholeheartedness. Their emphasis was not so much being mindful, but participating fully in what you did. In some situations, I still find to this day that that's a wonderful guide for how to practise in situations: how to participate fully, and mindfulness comes along with participation, to be really there completely.

The last thing I want to say about this livelihood issue is I hope that this talk is not a talk about what you shouldn't do exactly, but rather a talk that encourages you to reflect carefully and deeply about something as important as livelihood. Whatever livelihood is, we're—everything, a primary way in which you are supported and support others in terms of work. To really consider carefully—it's very important. What you do for the many hours a day is a very important thing. It's not incidental. Some people work eight hours a day or more, forty hours a week, hundreds of hours a year—that's a huge chunk of our life goes into it. It's well worth considering how to do it in such a way that the work itself is meaningful for what we want our life to be most, to be about. Now both how we do it and what we do. To do that is a reflection. Think about that, and don't go along year after year doing a job that doesn't really support us or is not meaningful just because we're afraid to change or just because we're lazy to change.

Our life is very important, and it's important to be able to have a life which supports us and nourishes us, and is meaningful, in a way, for this heart of ours. The one question that some people benefit from is to ask: the question around work, livelihood, is, "If you were not afraid, what would you do?" If you were not afraid, what would you do? Another interesting question is, "If you won the lottery, what would you do? What kind of work would you do?" It's interesting if you say, "With one lottery, I'd be free of work once and for all. I wouldn't work." But is that really nourishing? Go to the golf course, the beach, hang out, get a yacht, take a yoga class, whatever you know. What is really meaningful and nourishing? What do you really want to do with your life? It's a wonderful life that you have. Those are my thoughts about Right Livelihood.

Now we have about fifteen minutes, so if anybody would like to ask questions or give testimonials—maybe the victor here who likes oatmeal. The question as to what do you think the Buddha would have said about, on the flip side of work, and that would be consumption. You work for it. Oh yes, comes how we consume. That's a good one. I suppose

nowadays he would say that right consumption, I suppose that fits into the category of right action. Maybe, you know, right consumption usually has the side of not causing harm in how we consume things we use. So the right action is based, again, with not harming.

Yes, sir, you move the mike in front of the older person, King Cyrus. They wrote a book of him, I think, one of the people from Greece, Maria. It's called The Education of Cyrus. In that book it says that they, and he, they then were doing agriculture. Then they have to plant and they have to have land, then to keep their land so that they can generate food, they have to be able to defend their land. Then if you have land, and you have to defend the land, and let's say at that point, if you make arms to defend the land, is that called right livelihood or is it not? You ask me, he he he he he. So is it Right Livelihood to make arms to defend your land? Is there a time, a kind of variation of that, in a more dramatic variation, is there a time to engage in military combat? Is there a time to get a weapon and fight to defend yourself? It's a moral dilemma that many people have faced, and I don't—I prefer not to give an answer to that's direct. But my preferred way of answering these questions is that it's because many people are very quick to defend their right to defend themselves and to go get the arms. I'd like to see people answer that question after they've trained themselves in how to deal with conflict without fighting.

Many years ago, here in Palo Alto, a woman said to me, "I have to park at night in Palo Alto sometimes, and I'm afraid, I'm thinking of getting a gun. Now what do you think?" I didn't tell her what I thought, because I didn't think in my role that was my place to tell her what I thought. But what I said—I don't know, but Englishman, say what I really thought, right? But what I told her was that before getting a gun, I hope that you would train yourself in non-violent defence and learn the skills of defending yourself non-violently in a variety of ways so that you at least have that as a support. Then you might consider whether you need a gun or how you can use a gun. But if your first line of defense is getting a gun, then you're much more likely to get in trouble or cause trouble or cause harm. But if you learn other ways first—so are there other ways to defend a nation, defend your land? There are countries who've made that choice to do that, like Costa Rica has no military, and maybe it has no enemies so much around it, but it's quite impressive to do that, to not have a military. We've had beautiful examples in our world in the last hundred years or so, very significant examples of people who use non-violence to fight for freedom and independence. In a sense, Gandhi, who just wore, you know, just wore, you know, a white viper—seemingly, sorry, loincloth, I couldn't come to the right word, but I was trying to make a point—you know, he didn't have much, or in this little guy about the yellow, just this little guy, he is so thin and wiry, and you know, he

brought down the English empire. Quite impressive. So I don't want to answer the question directly, but please consider the other alternatives first.

Over here, wondering how this pertains to sales people, because I remember one salesman telling me once—I was discussing this with him—that his job was to acquaint people with something they didn't really, they didn't know yet that they needed. That was his rationalization. I've never done sales, but I've tried. I've tried to persuade people by points of view and so forth. I think it would be pretty hard to be a sales person and not do a little bit of lying. Unless you totally believe one hundred percent in your product, and I think most sales people sell more than one product. One posits that right livelihood is also defined by, set by right action, which is set before. Lying is clearly wrong action, so it fits into wrong livelihood as well, to be lying as part of your career. That's unequivocal. Lying. But then there's a kind of a Gilman book about deceit and trickery and things like that. Generally in Buddhism, deceit and trickery as a way of business, unless you're a magician, is considered not appropriate. Gambling also is considered inappropriate in Buddhism. So is fortune telling as a career.

Well, it seems very idealistic to me to say that, because there are certain personalities who are sales people, have a certain kind of personality, and in sales, that's what they do, right? For some, it's either that or entertainment. I think that's asking a lot of somebody, if that is their love, selling, even if they don't believe in their product. I've known people who've been salespeople who, I think, were impeccable in their honesty. They believed in the product. They had a really good product that was useful for people. They believed in it, and they believed they were contributing to the world through their product. I think it can be a beautifully honourable career. To be a sales person can be done honourably, and it can be done dishonourably. I bought a phone, and I had a salesman tell me all kinds of things when I bought my phone, including a special deal I was going to get, and then when I, you know, he clearly lied, and then when I tried to follow up, there was no follow up. There's no phone call back or anything. I mean, I don't know if he lied. He could have been forgetful, but, you know, it was not—it didn't feel good to me. So it does happen.

You asked about a testimonial. I can give that one. I was on the fast track of a career, chasing the rats, and decided not to do that. I wasn't happy at that. So about four months ago I gave away, got rid of everything except for a five hundred dollar motorcycle that I bought. I am a balloon artist and dance instructor, and I packed up my saddlebags full of balloons and stuck my backpack and tent on the back of it and hit the road. For the last four months I've just been travelling around. You support yourself in making balloons, twisting balloons? Yes. One of the things that I found is that in letting go of all the more stuff I got, the less happy I

was because I had to work to support my stuff. I took my rent, and I divided it by thirty, and figured, well, I could get a pretty good hotel for that. All I was doing was I was putting all my money into the building, but I wasn't there. So it was like a very expensive storage space. Now when I'm out and about, I meet huge numbers of awesome people. Miracles seem to happen. I know it's just like the whole world comes together to support me in ways that are just absolutely phenomenal. Yes, sometimes I get a little cold, but a little bit of uncomfortableness. But I don't know anybody who doesn't, in some form or another. As far as the sales thing is concerned, what I've found—I've done some sales—and what I've found is that if you don't believe in what you're doing, what you're selling, find something that you do believe in, what you're selling. Because it is, as you mentioned, what would you do if you weren't afraid? If you're staying in a business in which you're not enjoying it and you're having to put your own ethics on the line, why be there?

By the way, that's the end of my story. I wanted to tell you that you've been my teacher for the past seven years, and that's the first time I've ever seen you, through the podcasts. It's great to have you, welcome here. Thank you for your testimonial. Was lovely to hear. A modern day mendicant, beautiful renunciant, gay. Well, so, oh, you know, of all these talks I've given now on the Eightfold Path, I think somehow this one, I feel, is the most tender because it's so personal. I mean, the others are personal too, but there's something very poignant about livelihood and work and all that goes into it. It's not an easy area to explore, but it's a beautiful thing. I hope for those people who work or have a livelihood that it becomes something that is deeply meaningful and nourishing for yourself and the world. If not because of what you do, then because of how you do it. Thank you.