

# 2020-11-13 Eightfold Path-Right Livelihood

(1 of 1)

Fri, 11/13 7:57AM • 15:58

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

livelihood, sustenance, live, support, life, sustains, world, translated, trading, spin, freedom, righteous, acquiring, healthy, buddha, harm, people, eightfold path, monastic, translators

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So the topic for today is the fifth step, fifth factor, of the Eightfold Path - right livelihood. And that's usually how it's translated into English. But livelihood, I think for many English speaking people, suggests a career. And it's kind of broader in meaning. The word that's translated as livelihood is ājīva. And it comes from, literally means or related to, it comes out of the word sustenance, or what provides support or sustenance for us.

And so what sustains our life. And so what sustains our life often, for people who work, is their work. Some people put more time into work than anything else. And what provides them with the support, the sustenance for, food and housing and clothes, and the things we need for survival. And so we live. But some people don't have a career per se, some people are retired, some people are children. And what sustains their life? What's the sustenance? And what sustains and sustenance is the kind of primary activity or primary source from which our life kind of depends, in which we live by. So for a monastic, a monastic doesn't have a job, per se, but the monastic's sustenance and support for their lifestyle is are the donations that people provide. And a monastic doesn't eat unless someone offers them food. And so their sustenance comes from the support for others that arises because of how they live their lives. They live their lives dedicated to the Dharma, to practice, to teaching. In a sense their career is being a monastic, but their sustenance comes from the support that people have for that life and for what they're offering the world that way. So someone who's retired has some primary source from which they get their sustenance, their support. And maybe it's Social Security, maybe it's the government, or maybe it's a pension or something, or their savings. And so they're receiving that.

And then with that sustenance, we then use it. If we're a farmer, we grow our own food. And the farmers sustenance comes from their being a farmer. If a person is a merchant, sustenance comes from their work. And then they get income and then they spend that income. And they provide support

for other people. But in that kind of receiving and then giving back, in the monetary economy, we're intimately integrated, affected and affecting the world around us. How we consume, what we consume, what supports and sustains our life, comes from some source. And that source may or may not be healthy for the planet, for others, and for other people. And so we want to be supported, have a sustenance, that we feel good about. What we buy to support ourselves, to sustain ourselves, and where our money goes out, and what we put out into the world, that also has an impact and ripples out into the world. And also our money then supports either something that's unhealthy, or something that's healthy in the world. And so to live by right livelihood, sammā-ājīva, is to be aware of what sustains us and the things that we receive. Where do they come from? And are we acquiring these things and using these things and sending out what we send out back into the world in a dharmic way? And you find in the teachings of the Buddha, this idea that we want live dharmically.

And the word Dharma has a lot of meanings. And in this meaning that I'm using it today, many translators will translate it as righteously. And maybe that's a leftover from a time when early translators were kind of very much influenced and trying to offer an alternative to Christianity, when they translated Buddhism into English. And maybe that's a more of a Christian term, righteously, maybe. Or somehow in relationship to what was going on in England in the late 1800s, that being righteous was maybe a good thing. I think in the kind of English vocabulary I speak, I don't really use the word righteous very much. And it doesn't quite feel so righteous to use the word. It feels a little bit like self righteous, is a little bit problem. But the word that I like to translate dhamma, dharma, in this context is justly, with justice. Are we acquiring our sustenance dharmically, acquiring it justly? Is justice being played out? So whatever we consume and buy and acquire and whatever supports us to live. Is there justice for people and for the planet? Is it justly acquired?

The primary way of understanding this, and this becomes I think the heart of right Right Livelihood or right kind of living, is the idea that I've repeated repeatedly for this eightfold path series. The primary one, is it causing harm? Or is it causing benefit, bring benefit to the world? And this movement and care to avoid causing harm, but instead to live for the benefit of self and others, lays really at the heart of Buddhism. And not moralistically as I keep saying, but rather it's healthy to do so. And the idea of promoting health for ourselves, health for others, help for our planet, has a very different feel than doing something because it's ethical or moral to do it or we're obligated to do it. But this act of generosity towards all things, wanting everything to become healthy and to thrive and do well. And also it comes from this motivation towards freedom. That if what we want to do is to walk the path of freedom, of spiritual liberation, we want to live our life in a way that supports that. And live our life dharmically, to live with sense of justice. Again, not because it's kind of a heavy thing to do, but because it really feels like a movement to our own freedom and the freedom of others. If we are ignorant of what the impact we're having on the world, in Buddhism that would be seen as a form of delusion. But to wake up, not only to our own present moment experience, but to really feel and understand the consequences of how we live our life. The Buddha was really, more than anything else, a consequentialist. He was concerned about consequences. That the consequences we do are

skillful, helpful, beneficial. And the consideration of what is healthy and beneficial probably shouldn't stop just as what's visible to us in the present moment, but also to give consideration to the ripple effect of our life out into the world. And so that we can live a life of contentment, of ease of happiness, of blamelessness. We really feel better and better about how we live our life in this complicated, interrelated, interdependent life that we live. That we can participate in it in a healthy way. And so how we use our money as well. Do we use it to support what's going on in the world around us? So I think of money as kind of like a spin. Money is just a symbolic for value. But I think of it as kind of when we spend money, we put a spin into the world. And so if we go buy alcohol or buy cigarettes, we put a certain spin into the world. If we go and buy organic produce, we put a different spin in the world. And if we buy cigarettes, we are supporting the production of more cigarettes. If we buy organic food, we're supporting the continuation and development of organic food. And so what do we do with our livelihood, how we support ourselves. Same thing. What is it? What spin do we put out into the world? If we're buying something that was created by the destruction of rainforests or mining, rare metals in some place where they use child labor, then there's a certain spin to our spending patterns. It has an effect and influence, it goes out into the world. We don't always know where that spin goes. But it's kind of like a negative spin. But to do a positive spin, it's kind of like voting with your money. What kind of world we want to live in?

And we see this emphasis on right livelihood and care and attention to where the spin is and what we do. In one of the few places where the Buddha, in my reading, is really categorical about a statement about what to do what and not to do. It isn't just the principle of avoiding harm or what's unskillful. And that is in his enumeration of five forms of livelihood, which are considered wrong livelihood. And this is trade, it all has to do with trading. So being in the business of trading in weapons, trading in living beings, so would mean trading in cattle and chickens and in business of selling animals, but also the trading of people. So slavery certainly, pimping and sex trade perhaps of human beings. That would also be a kind of trading in human beings, which would be wrong livelihood. Trading, and intoxicants, trading in poison, and trading in meat. So being a butcher or selling meat would be, the Buddha treated all of these as wrong livelihood, perhaps because of the spin they put out into the world. That they perpetuate a certain tendency to cause harm. And perhaps these kinds of trades do more harm than they do good for others and more suffering.

And so what's the alternative, right livelihoods, that really benefit the world and support the world and decrease of suffering in our world. And since people spend a lot of their time, people spend a lot of time at work. And sometimes it's through their work, that they have the biggest impact on the world. The question of right livelihood is a very profound one, very personal and very consequential. And sometimes very difficult to look at because of, your willingness to look at it, because sometimes people's realize that their profession is wrong livelihood. They're causing harm in the world. And they're horrified by this. Some of the wonderfully and ethical people who were involved in creating the whole social media and computers and in this whole technology world that's so big right now, built all these kind of big websites and big tech companies and thought they were doing good in the world.

And then not a few of them kind of horrified at some point. Wait a minute, I'm not sure that I've been involved in right livelihood.

So I'm saying this, not to single anything out. But to point out that sometimes it's a very deep personal reflection. That's not always easy to really consider this question. Am I living for the welfare of the world? Or is what I'm doing harmful in some way? So how is it we live our lives? More generally, What is our lifestyle? What is the way we live? What are the predominant ways we're supported? And that we impact the world? That that's part of the Eightfold Path. And as part of the Eightfold Path, it's not a punitive investigation. It's not a moralistic investigation. It's not meant to judge us as good or bad people. But it's a way of continuing to develop spiritually, to continue to develop the spiritual path to liberation and freedom. That how we live our lives is Just as much part of the path to freedom as meditation. And so if we only meditate as being the only way part of the path, we really shortchanging ourselves of the full potential that this path has for us.

So you might want to give some thought to this today. Until we meet again. Maybe talking to friends and thinking about this, maybe journaling, or going for walks. And really considering deeply what your relationship is to how you live and the impact that has on yourself and the world around you. And then I hope in this kind of reflection, that you understand delightfully, happily, inspiringly, how to live more for the benefit of all beings.

Thank you very much.