

Right Livelihood

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Of all the factors in the path, right livelihood is probably the one that receives the least attention. And so it's good to pay some attention to it. The definition in the Canon is pretty simple: you avoid wrong livelihood and you support yourself with right livelihood. It's hardly even a definition at all, because it doesn't explain the term.

In other parts of the Canon, though, the Buddha does describe right livelihood for monks: no hinting, no scheming, no trading gain for gain. In other words you don't promise to give a reward to someone who gives something to you. This is the way the monks live. It's very different from the way lay people live. For lay people, trade is the basic mode of livelihood. If you give me something, I'll give you something in return. That's the basic mode of operation throughout lay life. But when you ordain, you drop that. And you don't even hint, don't even scheme. You don't even try to plan to get anything out of anybody or think how can you attract support, or how can you attract donations from people. There are lots of rules to make sure that one monk, say, doesn't try to monopolize all the generosity of the lay people at the expense of the other monks. So that's right livelihood for monks. It's a very pure livelihood. You take what you get. You content yourself with what you get. It's purely an economy of gifts.

For lay people, there are a couple of examples in the Canon where the Buddha says to avoid certain kinds of trade. Trading in poison, trading in meat, trading in weapons, intoxicants, trading in slaves: The Buddha says to avoid these things entirely. And then there are a couple cases where people come to the Buddha and say that they have been told that their particular livelihood actually has a place for it in heaven. In one instance, it's a professional soldier who comes and he's been told by his teachers who taught him the trade of being a soldier, that if you die in the battle, you're going to the heaven of the heroes who die in battle. He wants to know: What the Buddha has to think about that? The Buddha avoids the answer. The guy asks him three times and the Buddha finally says, "Well, since I can't get past you, okay, I'll tell you. If you're in the midst of a battle and are consumed by the thought of trying to kill other people, either from greed, anger or delusion, that intention is an unskillful intention. If you die with the state of mind, you go to hell. Or if you have the wrong view that this is going to take you to heaven, you still go to hell, you go to the hell for people who die in battle. Instead of going to heaven, it's a hell.

There's another case where an actor comes, and he says, "I've been told that when you entertain people, give them enjoyment, you go to the heaven of laughter where everybody's enjoying themselves." And he wants to know what the Buddha thinks about that. Again the Buddha avoids answering until the guy asks him three times. The Buddha says, "Okay, I can't get past you, so I'll tell you. If you're trying to inspire passion, aversion, and delusion in people through your acting, then when you die, you go to the hell of laughter, i.e., they're not laughing *with* you, they're laughing *at* you.

So if your livelihood involves inspiring greed, anger, and delusion either in

yourself as you do it or in other people—think about advertising, all the greed that it inspires in some people—it's not right livelihood. That's the question of right and wrong livelihood outside.

But then there's the whole question of how you support your mind. In other words, by engaging in right livelihood there are many times you have to go without. Especially as monks, you can't try to figure out ways of attracting donations, you can't figure out ways of scheming or hinting or promising rewards for people who give donations, in terms of giving them things in return. That means that there are going to be times when you have to do without. When that happens, it's important to think of your other means of support: You support the mind. The mind does have its own belongings, all the karma it creates. Those are the belongings of the mind. That's what supports the mind. And just as your physical belongings can either weigh you down or support you, in the same way your actions weigh you down or support you. When you think about the fact that your livelihood is not placing a burden on other people that they don't want, it gives energy to the mind. The knowledge that your livelihood is pure, the knowledge that your livelihood is honest: All of these things give energy to the mind. These are belongings for the mind.

Ajaan Lee gives the example of the mind being like a tape recorder. Nowadays of course it would be an MP3 recorder. Whatever you do, it just gets recorded, gets stashed away, stashed away in the mind. So think about what you're stashing away. If you're stashing away honesty, or are stashing away any of the other the good qualities of the mind, this is a support. These things will actually contribute to the long life, the health of the mind. It's just the opposite of the principle where you gain your livelihood in ways that are unskillful. Even though you may have lots of things, things are not really supports for the mind at all. If you get them in a way that's dishonest and you start thinking about the dishonest things you did to get them, these things actually weigh the mind down. So even though you may have material belongings that seem to support the body, they are a weight on the mind, they eat away at the mind.

So remember the important place to look for the livelihood of the mind. Right livelihood, on the inner level, is what you're doing, the quality of what you're doing. Does it support you? Does it give you energy? When you can reflect on the things that you've done skillfully, that really is energizing for the mind.

So keep this in mind. If things get difficult physically—look at the state of the world right now. It seems like there are people who want to destroy civilization. They want to make life difficult for other people. And it's the nature of human civilization that no matter how good it gets, it's going to have to deteriorate. It could happen in our lifetime. So make sure you have your values straight, so that when it gets difficult to gain support for the body, at least you've got support for the mind. And that's much more important because that's the treasure you take with you when you go.

The image they give in the Canon is that the good actions you've done are like relatives waiting for you on the other side. They're happy to see you, they come up and they greet you. They support you. That's much better than being weighed down by what you have to do in order to scrape together some support for the body, which is going to die anyhow. Another image they give in the Canon is throwing a rock in the water. No matter how much you try to pray for the rock to

rise up, it's just not going to rise up. As opposed to floating oil on water: The oil will float on top of the water. No matter how much you curse it, it won't sink.

So keep this in mind if things ever get difficult physically. The supports for the body are not your true treasures. The treasures that are lasting are the ones the mind records away, records away, through its actions. So make sure you're recording good actions, things that will support the mind, energize it, provide for its health and livelihood: things like the meditation we are doing right now.

Ajaan Suwat was once asked why we didn't have a God in Buddhism. In fact the guy who said this said, "You guys would have a really good religion here if only you had a God, so you'd have a sense of support when things get difficult." Ajaan Suwat's response was really good. He said, "If there were a God who could ordain that when I eat, everybody in the world gets full, I'd bow down to that God." In other words, the nature of supporting the body is that everything just goes into the body and disappears, disappears, as opposed to the support that you make for the mind. Not only do you benefit, but the people around you benefit as well if you support the mind wisely.

So that sense of well-being, the sense of self esteem that comes from knowing you've done something right: That's an important part of the path. Not only are you energized by it, but it also energizes the people around you. That's a real treasure. So make sure that you treasure it.