

## *Right Livelihood*

*May 2003*

For the mind to settle down, you need to give it space. This principle works on many layers. You need to give it a good space in the body. You need to give it a good space in your life.

Because meditation isn't simply a practice that you can fit into the cracks of your life regardless of what shape those cracks are. The way you live has to support the meditation.

We were talking earlier today about how the precepts provide protection. Once you make up your mind you're not going to do or say certain things, that cuts a lot of issues right at the root. The mere possibility that you would do that sort of thing is out of the question.

And you find, as you put this principle into practice, how much it really simplifies your life. You don't have to weigh a lot of issues one way or the other. They've already been weighed; they've already been decided. You can put them aside and go ahead with the practice.

So, when you sit down and meditate and sometimes find that there's trouble settling down, you might want to ask, "Okay, what are the issues in your life that are making it difficult to settle down?"

Sometimes mere meditation isn't enough to deal with them. You actually have to make changes in the way you live. Reflect on your precepts; reflect on your livelihood.

We tend to think of right livelihood in terms of the work we do. But that's not the only aspect of right livelihood.

We have that chant every evening: the reflection on the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, medicine. We reflect on the way we stay alive as an aspect of purifying our livelihood. In other words, we look at our intention when we eat, when we put on clothing, when we use any aspect of shelter, when we take any medicine: Why are we doing it?

If we allow unskillful intentions to come in with those things, they start infiltrating our whole lives.

So you take food only to keep the body going strong enough so that you can practice; clothing only enough to protect yourself from the elements; shelter enough to protect yourself from the weather; enough medicine to keep the body at a reasonable level of health.

You don't want to get involved in more than that because then all sorts of

defilements come sneaking in with your food, sneaking in with clothing, shelter and your medicine. They infiltrate your whole body, infiltrate your mind.

When you reflect on these things, you also reflect on the fact that they come to you through a fair amount of suffering. Sometimes a lot of suffering—on the part of the people who provide the food, sometimes for the animals whose meat is used. Even if you're vegetarian, there's just a lot of suffering for the farmers, a lot of suffering for the people who have to haul the produce. People have miserable jobs in supermarkets. All the way down the line.

You also think about the amount of work you have to do in order to buy the food, if you're buying it.

So you don't want to have to take on any more than you have to. The reason for this contemplation is to give an added boost to your practice, realizing that as long as you're alive, you have to depend on these things. There's a network of suffering involved in just being alive. This gives added impetus to think about what you can do in terms of your meditation to get out of this network and not create new ones.

So there's an aspect of governing the way you live, looking at the way you live, and making adjustments so that it's a life that supports the meditation, both in the way you act and in the way you learn to think as you reflect on things. When you reflect in the right way, it makes a lot easier for the mind to settle down when the time comes to settle down. There's a space that you can settle into.

Basically, what you're learning to do is to be honest with yourself about all your activities. When there's honesty, you can see more clearly what's going on in the mind and can deal with it more effectively. If there are a lot of hidden agendas and little corners for hiding away in the mind, then the thoughts that are lodged in those corners and hide behind those agendas are hard to deal with.

Especially if there are aspects in your life where you have to go into denial in order to justify the way you act: That denial is going to put up a barrier inside the mind. You want to be as open and aboveboard about your actions and their implications as you can.

That way, as honesty becomes second nature, it's easier for the mind to settle down because you see everything that's going on: All the curtains and the barriers of the mind are taken down.

So it's not so much a matter of fitting meditation into our lives but of readjusting our lives so that they fit around the meditation. After all, when you think about it, what are you going to have to look back on in your life that's really of any substance, really of any value, aside from the good qualities you've built into your mind through the way you act, through the way you speak, and

particularly in the work you do in your meditation? That's the work you do directly on the mind. That's why meditation should have top priority, because it's not just the activity of sitting here meditating but the whole pursuit of developing the mind.

If you were to look at it in terms of investment, it's the best investment of your time. It has long-term benefits. After all, this space you have right here, this space here in the present moment, is going to be with you all the time. So you want to make it a good space, you want to make it a good place to live, a good mind to live in.

In Thailand they talk a lot about developing perfections. I remember when I first went over, I was surprised that the Thais talked about that so much. I thought that the perfections were specifically a Mahayana teaching. It turns out they're not.

What the perfections are about is looking at your whole life as an opportunity to develop good qualities in the mind. And the good qualities are what you take as the results from your activities.

Oftentimes, we think of success in the world in terms of getting ahead in our work, doing good work that we like, leaving good results behind in the world. But so many times those results are dependent on factors that are totally outside of our control. So the emphasis should be on areas that are more under our control: the mind. You do good things for the sake of the good that it does for your mind.

If for some reason the world changes so that the good you do gets wiped out, still the goodness of the mind doesn't get wiped out. That's what stays with you.

So spend your time on the aspect of life that does stay with you. Arrange the rest of your life around that. That way, as you sit down to meditate, the outside world doesn't impinge so much.

Because you remember: The outside world is not a set factor. A lot of your experience of the outside world depends on how you interact with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. That's the world you experience.

And so much of it comes from your intentions in the present moment. So if you can work on the mind to get its intentions right and skillful, as much as possible, then you find that you have a better world to live in, a better space to meditate in.

So remember this: You're not a passive victim of outside circumstances. You're part of the shaper of those outside circumstances. When you realize your responsibility for the world you experience, then you can do something about it.

When you see what's under your control, what's not under your control, and are very clear about that distinction, it clears up a lot of issues in life—and a lot of

issues in your meditation.

You may not have full control over the outside results of your actions, but you do have control over your intentions—if you simply take responsibility for them.

That's what we're doing as we're meditating. We're taking responsibility for our mind, taking responsibility for the way we experience the world. We devote time and energy so that we can do it as skillfully as possible.