

Right Livelihood

The Fifth Factor in the Noble Eightfold Path

And what is right livelihood? This is when a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood: This is called right livelihood.

–The Buddha (SN 45:8)

In moving along the Eightfold Path from Right Action to Right Livelihood, we switch from a focus on our particular actions to focusing on the general ways in which we live our lives. In general, the things we do repeatedly have much greater consequence than the things we do only once or a few times. The effects may ripple further out into our society and deeper into our hearts.

Right Livelihood is the most common English translation of the Buddhist expression *sammaajiva*. However, because *ajiva* means the way one lives, it encompasses more than one's job or occupation. It includes such lifestyle choices as what we buy, consume, use for housing, and rely on for financial support. It also includes how we parent, care for our family, or live in retirement. When walking the Eightfold Path the question regarding Right Livelihood is whether or not the way we live moves us toward more compassion, peace, and freedom. Is it nourishing? Does it support the development of ease and insight? Does it help us become a better, happier person? Does it help others?

Behind these questions is the fundamental question that guides us along each step of the Eightfold Path: Is what we are doing causing harm to others or suffering for ourselves? When this is applied to Right Livelihood, we ask whether the way we live and the way we support ourself causes harm or suffering. If the answer is yes, then we remind ourselves that this is at cross-purposes with a path meant to end suffering and harm.

When considering whether our way of life negatively impacts others, we can take into account how we contribute to the aggregate effect of many other people doing the same activity. If we were the only person driving a car on the roads, for

example, the exhaust we produce would have little or no effect on the health of others. But when we are one of the five million drivers in the San Francisco Bay Area we are contributing to the smog-related health problems both in the Bay Area, and in the central valley where the smog often blows. Similarly, when millions of people add additional electrical equipment to their homes or carelessly discard their old computers and cell phones, the aggregate effect has repercussions far beyond what we can see in our immediate, individual lives. An action that might not be very harmful if only one person does it can become detrimental when many people do it.

Such considerations are not meant to evoke anxiety and guilt. Rather they are meant to motivate us to find a way to live that increases our ease and peace and benefits our community. It is a practice that cultivates a greater awareness and responsibility for the world while being less weighed down by it.

For many people the most significant aspect of Right Livelihood is the work they do. Many people spend more time working than any other activity except perhaps sleeping. Work and other occupations such as parenting is often the vehicle through which people have their biggest impact on others. When considering whether our work constitutes Right Livelihood, we can ask whether it harms other people or ourselves. If our work or if the way in which we do our work clearly has a negative impact, then we are not walking the Eightfold Path with our livelihood.

Considering our work through the lens of Right Livelihood can be a meaningful contemplation on what is most important to us. What are the purposes for which we work? What values do we express in our work? What consequence does our work have on the quality of our inner life? What consequences does it have on the world? If we are on the path of liberation, does our work and the way we go about it further us on this path?

Because joy, ease, and peace are important parts of the Buddhist path, the question of Right Livelihood includes considering whether we enjoy our work. Is the way we live our life satisfying and meaningful? If it isn't, what can we change to have greater joy, satisfaction, and meaning?

Many things help make our livelihood a source of enjoyment and satisfaction. Being honest and ethical in work is foundational. There can be no ease if one does

not have a clean conscience. Doing work that benefits others is helpful, and so is sharing the fruits of our work with others. Living a balanced life and avoiding over-working supports ease and calm. Not being in debt is also important.

How we work is also key. Being mindful, engaged, and focused in our work is more satisfying than being distracted and uninspired. This is also true when we enjoy the work for its own sake rather than for the income it will bring. Working with attitudes of generosity and kindness can create a more supportive work environment.

When living by the Eightfold Path the practice of Right Livelihood is dedicated to living and working in a way that supports the path. It is accomplished by practicing the first four factors of the Path in our working life. In particular this means practicing goodwill, compassion, Right Speech, and ethical behavior while we work. It is also accomplished by working in ways that support the last three practices of the Eightfold Path, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

When the Eightfold Path is practiced at work, our tasks can become energizing, calming, and easeful. This in turn makes it much easier for us when we sit down to meditate. Meditation becomes less about de-stressing and relaxing and more about developing mindfulness and concentration. The result is a greater capacity to further fulfill the Eightfold Path at work.

Additional Reading

- Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Right Livelihood” in *The Noble Eightfold Path*, pp. 55-56
- Bhante Gunaratana, “Right Livelihood” in *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*

Reflections and Practices: Right Livelihood

1- What We Produce (Week 1)

The primary activities we engage in to sustain our life are what constitute livelihood. These can be grouped into two categories: what we produce and what we consume. Production refers to what we create or engage in that provides us with the financial and material support for our life. Consumption pertains to what we buy and use in order to sustain our life and our lifestyle.

For this week give attention to what you produce. What work or activities do you engage in that provide you with your financial and material support? If you are employed, what do you “produce”? If you are a homemaker, what are you “making”? If you are retired with investments, in what have you invested? If you are a student, are your studies directed toward being able to do something that will provide you with a livelihood? If so, what is this?

What is your relationship to what you produce? What attitudes do you have toward your work? Does it inspire you? If so, how? Is it meaningful? If so, how? Does it help you become a better person? Does it benefit others? Can you think of ways you benefit yourself and others through your work that you might be overlooking? What values do you express through the work you do? What values do you wish you better expressed at work?

Spend this week reviewing and reflecting on these questions. Discuss them with friends. Write down some of your answers. Please do this repeatedly so that you might begin to discover new perspectives on these questions.

2-What We Consume (Week 2)

What do you consume, use, buy, or spend your time doing in order to both meet your basic needs and sustain your lifestyle? What motivates the choices you make in what you consume? How are you affected by what you consume? What values are expressed in these choices? What values do you wish were more a part of these choices? Does what you consume make you a better person? Does it benefit others

in any direct or indirect way? Please spend the week delving as deeply as you can into these questions.

3-Work and the Eightfold Path (Week 3)

For four days this week, consider how you can practice each of the first four factors of the Eightfold Path (Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, and Right Action) in your livelihood, whether it is at a job, homemaking, studying, or in retirement. You might reread the chapters on these factors while considering how the teachings relate to your work life. Be sure to have a dialogue with someone about the relationship you see between work and each of these factors, so you might carry your reflections further than if you explored them on your own.

4-Consumption and the Eightfold Path (Week 4)

For four days this week, consider how you can practice each of the first four factors of the Eightfold Path in terms of what you consume, use, buy, or how you spend your time. For Right View, consider what happens when you look at your consumption through the lens of the Four Noble Truths. For Right Intention, explore how you might benefit from greater compassion, goodwill, and renunciation in your non-work related activities. For Right Speech, think about how you can do these activities with kinder and more honest speech. Are your patterns of consumption aligned with Right Action? Again, please find someone to discuss these reflections with.