

## Right Livelihood Dharma Study Guide

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### Introduction

Today’s session focuses on practice with the path factor of right livelihood.

Unless otherwise stated, the translations from the Pali Canon used for this session are from Thannisaro Bhikku. Translations and the full sutta are available at [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org).

The basic teaching on livelihood is simple: don’t do livelihood that harms you or is harmful to those who purchase or use the product or service.

But we live and work within a complex interconnected society where we may have little control over our jobs or the privilege to mitigate harm from the systems where we work.

Today is an opportunity to practice with the support of dharma friends to consider our intentions and actions and see how we care for ourselves and for others, whatever we do to sustain this life.

### Right Livelihood

Right Livelihood is the fifth of the eight path factors in the Noble Eightfold Path, and belongs to the virtue or ethics (*sila*) division of the path along with Right Speech and Right Action.

“And what is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps his life going with right livelihood: This is called right livelihood.” (SN 45.8)

## Right Livelihood in relation to the other factors of the Eightfold Path

"And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong livelihood as wrong livelihood, and right livelihood as right livelihood. And what is wrong livelihood? Scheming, persuading, hinting, belittling, and pursuing gain with gain. This is wrong livelihood...

"One tries to abandon wrong livelihood and to enter into right livelihood: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong livelihood and to enter and remain in right livelihood: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities — right view, right effort, & right mindfulness — run & circle around right livelihood." (MN 117)

## Avoid Wrong Livelihood

### Lay followers

"A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five? Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in intoxicants, and business in poison." (AN 5.177)

In her article *Unburdened with Duties and Frugal in Our Ways*, Tony Bernhard writes:

The Buddha's simple formulation above, for example, is such that in our contemporary environment it would make the manager of a supermarket run for cover—or at least for the nearest employment office: poisons, intoxicants, meat, chemicals that can be fashioned into explosives and—if you consider the occasional oyster or live lobster at the fish counter—even living beings are all among the stuff on the store's shelves.

The complexity of today's large organizations also leaves it problematic whether or not a file clerk in a small, domestic office of a multi-national conglomerate that does some defense contracting might somehow be 'tainted' by the unwholesome activities of the corporation itself, or even whether someone who knowingly does business with or patronizes a subsidiary of such a conglomerate might be equally compromised. (Insight Journal, 2012)

### Contemplatives

"... reading marks on the limbs [e.g., palmistry]; reading omens and signs; interpreting celestial events [falling stars, comets]; interpreting dreams; reading marks on the body [e.g., phrenology]; reading marks on cloth gnawed by mice; offering fire oblations, oblations from a ladle, oblations of husks, rice powder, rice grains, ghee, and oil; offering oblations from the mouth; offering blood-sacrifices; making predictions based on the fingertips; geomancy; laying demons in a cemetery; placing spells on spirits; reciting house-protection charms; snake charming, poison-lore, scorpion-lore, rat-lore, bird-lore, crow-lore; fortune-telling based on visions; giving protective charms; interpreting the calls of birds and animals ... [The list goes on and on] (DN 2)

## Soldiers

Yodhajiva, the headman, asked three times about ancient teaching that when a warrior dies in battle he is “reborn in the company of devas slain in battle” before the Buddha answered:

"Apparently, headman, I haven't been able to get past you by saying, 'Enough, headman, put that aside. Don't ask me that.' So I will simply answer you. When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, & misdirected by the thought: 'May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist.' If others then strike him down & slay him while he is thus striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle. But if he holds such a view as this: 'When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, if others then strike him down & slay him while he is striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of devas slain in battle,' that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb." (SN 42.3)

Tony Bernhard (Insight Journal, 2012) writes:

Because we are so inextricably embedded in the interconnected complexity of our contemporary world, even our personal security is dependent on what might, on the face of it, appear to be the unskillful livelihood of others. George Orwell wrote:

“We sleep soundly in our beds because harsh men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would harm us.”

We outsource that security, paying for it with tax money that supports our police and other first responders, including the SWAT teams and military/paramilitary organizations like our national guard. We cannot extract ourselves from the economic world we all share.

We aren't practicing dharma in the midst of a jungle full of wild animals as did the Buddha or even as do some of the forest monks still practicing in remote corners of Asia that are largely not visited by westerners, and we aren't normally risking confrontation with road bandits when we travel between towns as did the monastics in the Buddha's day. Despite the many shortcomings of our law enforcement agencies, we in the developed world live our lives in an ambiance of relative peace that is absent in much of the rest of the world.

Is it inconceivable that someone might decide that his or her gift to the people among whom he or she lives is to serve as a peace officer or in the military? Could such service—at least during some phases of one's practice—flow from a genuine intention 'to protect and serve'; and might it not be seen—in some light at least—as right livelihood? In the *Bhagavad Gita* (an important text in the Indian tradition outside of Buddhism), Krishna's advice to Arjuna didn't include retreating to a monastery; instead, he encouraged the young archer to adjust his view of the activity upon which he was about to embark.

## Actors

Talaputa, the head of an acting troupe, asked the Buddha if an actor is “reborn in the company of the laughing devas.” After hearing the question three times, the Buddha answered:

"Any beings who are not devoid of passion to begin with, who are bound by the bond of passion, focus with even more passion on things inspiring passion presented by an actor on stage in the midst of a festival. Any beings who are not devoid of aversion to begin with, who are bound by the bond of aversion, focus with even more aversion on things inspiring aversion presented by an actor on stage in the midst of a festival. Any beings who are not devoid of delusion to begin with, who are bound by the bond of delusion, focus with even more delusion on things inspiring delusion presented by an actor on stage in the midst of a festival. Thus the actor — himself intoxicated & heedless, having made others intoxicated & heedless — with the breakup of the body, after death, is reborn in what is called the hell of laughter. But if he holds such a view as this: 'When an actor on the stage, in the midst of a festival, makes people laugh & gives them delight with his imitation of reality, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of the laughing devas,' that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb." (SN 42.2)

Tony Bernhard (Insight Journal, 2012) writes:

...judging whether a particular occupation is itself appropriate may not be as obvious as we might think: at first blush, right livelihood would seem to translate into, at least, avoiding employment that causes harm. But extricating ourselves from the web of social connections—as with the supermarket manager—might make the actual activity we perform less important than the constellation of intentions we bring to it.

“Right” and “wrong” in this context seem not to be the relevant issue. Instead, and more to the point: how do we experience our own form of employment, and does it interfere with the opening of our hearts and minds?

Ben Connelly instructs:

We should learn about and engage in how our livelihood connects to the rest of the world. Take the time to consider how your livelihood affects your family, your neighborhood, the rest of the country, and all over the world, as well as the ground and the trees, and the sleek fish in the seas, geese flying, trees, grasses, bees, and the very earth out of which all this life is born. Out of this consideration, let the path of your life work flow. (*Mindfulness and Intimacy*, 2019. p.132-133).

## Bringing the Practice to Whatever Livelihood We Have

Even when we are in occupations that are “wrong” livelihood, we can try to bring the practice to them and cultivate mindfulness.

Gyōzan Royce Andrew Johnson writes about being a Buddhist practitioner while working as a butcher in Detroit’s only black-owned grocery store. (*From Butcher To Zen Priest: Radical Transformation through Bloodletting*, in Giles, Cheryl A.; Yetunde, Pamela Ayo; et al. *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us about Race, Resilience, Transformation, and Freedom*. Shambhala, 2020, p. 119).

So, here I was—a butcher embarking on a Buddhist path. But I didn’t let my profession deter me from learning about Buddhism and Zen. Why? This quest was more about how to survive, not what work was appropriate. ...Staying on the path has produced some insights.

In *The Hidden Lamp*, (Moon, Susan. *The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women*. Wisdom Publications, 2013. p. 61) a collection of stories and koans about Buddhist women practitioners, there is the story “Ohashi Wakes up Working in a Brothel.”

Ohashi sold herself to a brothel to support her impoverished family after her samurai father lost his position. She served diligently and became a poet and calligrapher, but she was plagued by sadness for her former life. Later she met Hakuin, who advised her that enlightenment was possible in any circumstance. He gave her the koan “Who is it that does this work?”

Ohashi was terrified by lightning. One day, during a violent thunderstorm, she sat zazen on the veranda of the brothel in order to face her fear. A bolt of lightning struck the ground in front of her. She fainted, and when she awoke, she saw the world in an entirely new way. Hakuin later certified her enlightenment.

Ohashi was eventually ransomed from the brothel by one of her patrons, Isso, and they were married. Later, with Isso’s permission, she became a nun and was renowned for her wisdom and compassion. After Ohashi’s death, instead of making the customary memorial tablet, Isso had a statue of Kannon carved in Ohashi’s likeness and donated it to Hakuin’s temple.

Commenting on this story, Zen priest Judith Randall notes that Ohashi’s reasons for entering prostitution were themselves part of the bodhisattva path—she sought to support her family, despite how degrading job must have seemed to an upper caste woman in a culture concerned with personal and family honor.

## Sources of Welfare and Happiness

How we earn a living is not separate from what we do with the income we earn. In the *Dīghajāṇusutta (Vyagghapajja) Sutta* the Buddha offered guidance to householders about how to engage in the world that have clear implications for right livelihood. This list of eight accomplishments can be cultivated through skillful persistent practice. The translation used here is from Bhikkhu Bodhi’s anthology, *In the Buddha’s Words* (Wisdom Publications, 2005).

Thus have I heard. Once the Exalted One was dwelling amongst the Koliyans, in their market town named Kakkarapatta. Then Dighajanu, a Koliyan, approached the Exalted One, respectfully saluted Him and sat on one side. Thus seated, he addressed the Exalted One as follows:

"We, Lord, are laymen who enjoy worldly pleasure. We lead a life encumbered by wife and children. We use sandalwood of Kasi. We deck ourselves with garlands, perfume and unguents. We use gold and silver. To those like us, O Lord, let the Exalted One preach the Dhamma, teach those things that lead to weal and happiness in this life and to weal and happiness in future life."

### Conditions of Worldly Progress

"Four conditions, Vyagghapajja, conduce to a householder's wealth and happiness in this very life. Which four?"

"The accomplishment of persistent effort (utthana-sampada), the accomplishment of watchfulness (arakkha-sampada), good friendship (kalyanamittata) and balanced livelihood (sama-jivikata).

"What is the accomplishment of persistent effort?

"Herein, Vyagghapajja, by whatsoever activity a householder earns his living, whether by farming, by trading, by rearing cattle, by archery, by service under the king, or by any other kind of craft — at that he becomes skillful and is not lazy. He is endowed with the power of discernment as to the proper ways and means; he is able to carry out and allocate (duties). This is called the accomplishment of persistent effort.

"What is the accomplishment of watchfulness?

"Herein, Vyagghapajja, whatsoever wealth a householder is in possession of, obtained by dint of effort, collected by strength of arm, by the sweat of his brow, justly acquired by right means — such he husbands well by guarding and watching so that kings would not seize it, thieves would not steal it, fire would not burn it, water would not carry it away, nor ill-disposed heirs remove it. This is the accomplishment of watchfulness.

"What is good friendship?

"Herein, Vyagghapajja, in whatsoever village or market town a householder dwells, he associates, converses, engages in discussions with householders or householders' sons, whether young and highly cultured or old and highly cultured, full of faith (saddha),<sup>[4]</sup> full of virtue (sila), full of charity (caga), full of wisdom (pañña). He acts in accordance with the faith of the faithful, with the virtue of the virtuous, with the charity of the charitable, with the wisdom of the wise. This is called good friendship.

"What is balanced livelihood?

"Herein, Vyagghapajja, a householder knowing his income and expenses leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income.

"Just as the goldsmith, or an apprentice of his, knows, on holding up a balance, that by so much it has dipped down, by so much it has tilted up; even so a householder, knowing his income and expenses leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income.

"If, Vyagghapajja, a householder with little income were to lead an extravagant life, there would be those who say — 'This person enjoys his property like one who eats wood-apple. 'If, Vyagghapajja, a householder with a large income were to lead a wretched life, there would be those who say — 'This person will die like a starveling.'

"The wealth thus amassed, Vyagghapajja, has four sources of destruction:

"(i) Debauchery, (ii) drunkenness, (iii) gambling, (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with evil-doers.

"Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and outlets, if a man should close the inlets and open the outlets and there should be no adequate rainfall, decrease of water is to be expected in that tank, and not an increase; even so there are four sources for the destruction of amassed wealth — debauchery, drunkenness, gambling, and friendship, companionship and intimacy with evil-doers.

"There are four sources for the increase of amassed wealth: (i) abstinence from debauchery, (ii) abstinence from drunkenness, (iii) non-indulgence in gambling, (iv) friendship, companionship and intimacy with the good.

"Just as in the case of a great tank with four inlets and four outlets, if a person were to open the inlets and close the outlets, and there should also be adequate rainfall, an increase in water is certainly to be expected in that tank and not a decrease, even so these four conditions are the sources of increase of amassed wealth.

"These four conditions, Vyagghapajja, are conducive to a householder's wealth and happiness in this very life.

### **Conditions of Spiritual Progress**

"Four conditions, Vyagghapajja, conduce to a householder's weal and happiness in his future life. Which four?

"The accomplishment of faith (saddha-sampada), the accomplishment of virtue (sila-sampada), the accomplishment of charity (caga-sampada) and the accomplishment of wisdom (pañña-sampada).

"What is the accomplishment of faith?

"Herein a householder is possessed of faith, he believes in the Enlightenment of the Perfect One (Tathagata): Thus, indeed, is that Blessed One: he is the pure one, fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, well-gone, the knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, all-knowing and blessed. This is called the accomplishment of faith.

"What is the accomplishment of virtue?

"Herein a householder abstains from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and from intoxicants that cause infatuation and heedlessness. This is called the accomplishment of virtue.

"What is the accomplishment of charity?

"Herein a householder dwells at home with heart free from the stain of avarice, devoted to charity, open-handed, delighting in generosity, attending to the needy, delighting in the distribution of alms. This is called the accomplishment of charity.

"What is the accomplishment of wisdom?

"Herein a householder is wise: he is endowed with wisdom that understands the arising and

cessation (of the five aggregates of existence); he is possessed of the noble penetrating insight that leads to the destruction of suffering. This is called the accomplishment of wisdom.

"These four conditions, Vyagghapajja, conduce to a householder's wealth and happiness in his future life."

Energetic and heedful in his tasks,  
Wisely administering his wealth,  
He lives a balanced life,  
Protecting what he has amassed.

Endowed with faith and virtue too,  
Generous he is and free from avarice;  
He ever works to clear the path  
That leads to weal in future life.

Thus to the layman full of faith,  
By him, so truly named 'Enlightened,'  
These eight conditions have been told  
Which now and after lead to bliss. (AN 8.54)

## Some Skillful Means for Practicing with Right Livelihood

- Staying present with mindfulness of the body
- Relaxing attachments to "mine" and views.
- Seeing interdependence
- Avoiding harm to one's self and others not just unprofitable outcomes
- Focusing on fundamental causes and conditions