

Right Livelihood: The Ethics of Earning a Living

Part of the Eightfold Path By Barbara O'Brien, About.com

Most of us sustain ourselves by working at a job and earning a paycheck. Your job may be something you love doing, or not. You may see yourself as serving humanity, or not. People may admire you for your profession. Or, you may see your profession as being more ethical than Mafia Hit Man, but not much. Does this matter to Buddhist practice?

In his first sermon after his enlightenment, the Buddha explained that the way to peace, wisdom, and nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path.

Right View

Right Intention

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

The fifth "fold" of the path is Right Livelihood. What does this mean, exactly, and how do you know if your livelihood is a "right" one?

What Is Right Livelihood?

Along with Right Speech and Right Action, Right Livelihood is part of the "moral conduct" section of the Path. These three folds of the Path are connected to the Five Precepts.

The Five Precepts are as follows:

1. Not killing or causing harm to other living beings. This is the fundamental ethical principle for Buddhism, and all the other precepts are elaborations of this. The precept implies acting non-violently wherever possible, and many Buddhists are vegetarian for this reason. The positive counterpart of this precept is love.
2. Not taking the not-given. Stealing is an obvious way in which one can harm others. One can also take advantage of people, exploit them, or manipulate them — all these can be seen as ways of taking the not given. The positive counterpart of this precept is generosity.
3. Avoiding sexual misconduct. This precept has been interpreted in many ways over time, but essentially it means not causing harm to oneself or others in the area of sexual activity. The positive counterpart of this precept is contentment.
4. Avoiding false speech. Speech is the crucial element in our relations with others, and yet language is a slippery medium, and we often deceive ourselves or others without even realising that this is what we are doing. Truthfulness, the positive counterpart of this precept, is therefore essential in an ethical life. But truthfulness is not enough, and in another list of precepts (the ten precepts or the ten kusala dharmas) no fewer than four speech precepts are mentioned, the others enjoining that our speech should be kindly, helpful, and harmonious.
5. Abstaining from drink and drugs that cloud the mind. The positive counterpart of this precept is mindfulness,

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or awareness. Mindfulness is a fundamental quality to be developed the Buddha's path, and experience shows that taking intoxicating drink or drugs tends to run directly counter to this.

Right Livelihood is, first, a way to earn a living without compromising the Precepts. It is a way of making a living that does no harm to others. In the Vanijja Sutta (this is from the Sutra-pitaka of the Tripitaka), the Buddha said, "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."

Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote,

"To practice Right Livelihood (samyag ajiva), you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others. " ... Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. We should be awake to the consequences, far and near, of the way we earn our living." (The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching [Parallax Press, 1998], p. 104)

Consequences, Far and Near

Our global economy complicates the precaution to do no harm to others. For example, you may work in a department store that sells merchandise made with exploited labor. Or, perhaps there is merchandise that was made in a way that harms the environment. Even if your particular job doesn't require harmful or unethical action, perhaps you are doing business with someone who does. Some things you cannot know, of course, but are you still responsible somehow?

In The Seventh World of Chan Buddhism, Ming Zhen Shakya suggests finding a "pure" livelihood is impossible. "Obviously a Buddhist cannot be a bartender or a cocktail waitress, ... or even work for a distillery or a brewery. But may he be the man who builds the cocktail lounge or cleans it? May he be the farmer who sells his grain to the brewer?"

Ming Zhen Shakya argues that any work that is honest and legal can be "Right Livelihood." I'm not sure I agree with that. However, if we remember that all beings are interconnected, we realize that trying to separate ourselves from anything "impure" is impossible, and not really the point.

And if you keep working in the department store, maybe someday you'll be a manager who can make ethical decisions about what merchandise is sold there.

Honesty the Best Policy

A person in any sort of job might be asked to be dishonest. Years ago I worked for a company that produced educational books for children. Sounds like Right Livelihood, right? Unfortunately, the owner of the company expected me to boost profits by cheating the vendors -- typesetters, freelance artists -- and sometimes even the clients. I left.

Obviously, if you're being asked to cheat, or to fudge the truth about a product in order to sell it, there's a problem. There is also honesty involved in being a conscientious employee who is diligent about his work and doesn't steal pencils out of the supply cabinet, even if everyone else does.

Right Attitude

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Most jobs present endless practice opportunities. We can be mindful of the tasks we do. We can be helpful and supportive of co-workers, practicing compassion and Right Speech in our communication.

Sometimes jobs can be a real crucible of practice. Egos clash, buttons are pushed. You may find yourself working for someone who is just plain nasty. When do you stay and try to make the best of a bad situation? When do you go? Sometimes it is hard to know. Yes, dealing with a difficult situation can make you stronger, but at the same time an emotionally toxic workplace can poison your life. If your job is draining you more than nourishing you, consider a change.

A Role in Society

We humans have created an elaborate civilization in which we depend on each other to perform many labors. Whatever work we do provides goods or services to others, and for this we are paid to support ourselves and our families. Perhaps you work at a vocation dear to your heart. But you may see your job only as something you do that provides you with a paycheck. You're not exactly "following your bliss," in other words.

If your inner voice is screaming at you to follow another career path, by all means listen to that. Otherwise, appreciate the value in the job you have now.

Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka said, "If the intention is to play a useful role in society in order to support oneself and to help others, then the work one does is right livelihood." (The Buddha and His Teachings, edited by Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn [Shambhala, 1993], p. 101) And we don't all have to be heart surgeons, you know.

Outer achievements should be expressions of inner abundance, not compensation for inner poverty. It is wrong to distinguish between what a man is and what he does. There are no mute inglorious Miltons. If he is mute he is not Milton. That one does not do something is part of one's character.

~ Sangharakshita