Right Livelihood

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:16

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble, and fully self-awakened one.

We're celebrating the full moon of November, which is ahead of us in the middle of next week. But it's convenient for us to come together on a Sunday. The topic for this month was livelihood, right livelihood.

I'll just go through the usual warnings that the Buddha gives. The first is that we shouldn't engage in five types of business. They're pretty straightforward, actually. The business of weapons – selling them, making them. Of course, it does question the role of the soldier. Remember, in the Buddha's time, it was really about conquest. The kings were trying to expand their kingdoms at the expense of tribal democracies. And the Buddha was definitely for the democracies, I think. He didn't like the way the kings were warring, often against each other. These days, of course, there's a call for defence. So it's a slightly different era. Maybe we can't make these rules absolute, because it depends upon your take upon violence and whether there is such a thing as a justifiable armed intervention. But that's for somebody to write a book on.

Then he says nobody should be involved in the business of people. So, of course, that's prostitution and modern-day slavery, which is absolutely awful. Indentured workers, workers that have fallen into debt and are working for a pittance. We know that goes on anyway.

Then there's the whole business of meat. Now, monks are not supposed to eat any meat if they've seen, heard or suspected the animal has actually been killed for them specifically. So I've always thought the Buddha was a crypto vegan. But being a practical person, it wasn't as though he was going to make this hard and fast rule, which, of course, the Jains did. You can't enter a Jain temple if you're wearing, say, a leather belt or leather shoes. They just won't let you in. They're absolutely severe. But the Buddha never really did that, especially for lay people. They would always remember rules of training. It was never "thou shalt." "I undertake the rule of training not to kill," et cetera.

Then there's the business of intoxicants. So the West has this very refined intoxicating industry of wine and beer. I don't think there's another culture that has quite the range of tastes. So it's a bit difficult for us to keep that one. But these days, more and more, you see these non-alcoholic things. I often wonder how a person feels who's taken this very seriously, working, shall we say, in Tesco's or a supermarket which sells alcohol. I think you have to be careful that you don't take on other people's responsibilities.

And then there's the business of poison. Well, we all know about Putin and his clever use of sarin to get rid of enemies. But it was quite widespread, of course, in Renaissance Italy. The Borgias were especially good at it. At the time, it said, nobody ever believed that popes, cardinals or royalty died natural deaths. It was that prevalent.

So those are your five businesses that people shouldn't be engaged in. There is actually something for the monastics, too. It says that they shouldn't procure their requisites, whatever they need, through flattery, hinting, bribery, coercion or hypocrisy. So there's a whole load of mistakes that even in the monastic life you can make.

That just gives us a grounding, really, of how the Buddha makes these limitations. But there's another particular discourse, the Upaddha Sutta – it's the discourse on the Holy Life. And Ānanda, who's a very endearing character, said to the Buddha that he would be his personal attendant. And he did so for the last 20 years of his life, so long as he heard everything the Buddha said. And if he wasn't there to hear it, the Buddha had to relate what he had said. And of course, Ānanda then became this enormous audio memory. It's difficult for us to grasp that these days because we've become so visual and we've sold our memory to microchips. But he had this seemingly phenomenal memory. And that's where the discourses come from, the Pali discourses.

He had the habit of thinking that he really had understood something. So there's a lovely moment where he says to the Buddha, "I think I've really got this *paṭiccasamuppāda* business." And the Buddha says, "Oh, no, *paṭiccasamuppāda* is deep, profound." And he does the same with good companionship. So he says he thinks that good companionship is half of the holy life – having admirable good people as friends, companions and colleagues. And the Buddha says, "Oh, don't say that, Ānanda. Don't say that. Having good admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues is actually the whole of the spiritual life. And when a monk or a monastic has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues, they can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

So this definition of right livelihood as the spiritual life, our spiritual lives within the life of our ordinary lives at work, seems to me then to give us a little bit of latitude as to this right livelihood. I'm tending to think of it more as right lifestyle.

For instance, I Googled what were the important qualities of a police officer. And it's got physical fitness, critical thinking, problem solving skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, strong moral character, devotion to the community. And then I looked up what was a successful nurse practitioner. So empathy comes at the top there. Enthusiasm, an intense and eager enjoyment accompanied by a big grin and a list of questions. Tenacity, creativity, integrity. And when I looked up "common traits of a good employee," 54 million responses came. And there's a whole list: dedication, confidence, reliability, teamwork, independence – that's interesting, teamwork and independence – leadership, interpersonal communication skills and self-awareness.

Now, whatever job you're doing, and of course, if you're retired, you'll be doing something with your life, all these activities reinforce certain parts of our characters and personalities. And it might be worth just thinking about what you're doing and how it's affecting you personally, your characters, personalities, and then doing something which does the opposite, so that you get a balance.

So I remember at work, I was teaching. I really got fed up with all the head stuff. It's always head stuff. You're always talking about stuff. And I got to a point where I really felt I needed – if I was going to progress – I really needed to do something physical. So I got the idea in my head that I'd be a great cook. So I went for a week's introduction to vegetarian cooking. By the end of the week, by the way, I knew I didn't want to be a cook, but it did give me confidence. There's too much vegetable shopping. But it did give me a physical base because I'm not – I haven't been brought up to take care of gardens or anything like that. And so I just found ways of bringing into my life something that was physical. And so I started doing things like Tai Chi and stuff.

You can imagine that if somebody runs a business, so their mind is always really caught up in running costs and profit – I mean, I know that just running this little centre, you're always worried about running costs – and it'd just be nice to balance that with doing some charitable work where those sorts of thoughts just don't come in. So it's a case of, I think, perhaps translating that right livelihood in a wider sense and just looking at our lives, trying to get that balance right.

And that would include, of course, our leisure pursuits – the films, the reading, walking, looking after the body, flying drones, things like that. So anything that we do, which is our pastime, and to get a global view of our lives.

I don't know whether they have them anymore, but in the old fairs – I'm sure they do, really – they used to have these roundabouts with different animals. You could ride a horse or a bear or a pig. And you go round and round with this silly music as a kid. And if our lives are unconnected, we tend to go from one thing to another, really just to keep busy, keep occupied and so on and so forth. But there's no connection. But if you were centred on the Dharma, on what you understand to be your personal spiritual path, then everything you do has to make sense to that particular position.

One thing that happens to a lot of people when they start practicing – definitely happened to me – is that you find interests that you had begin to disappear. So I remember once listening to jazz. I used to go to jazz in pubs. And I remember this was a special night. They had this American trumpeter. I can't remember the name, but he was phenomenal. And the backing group were finding it really difficult to keep up with him. You could see them sweating, trying to keep up with the speed of his playing. And just somehow, halfway through the performance, I just got this feeling that I was wasting time. It just didn't make any sense to me anymore. And just after that particular performance, I made my excuses and left.

So you find that your life begins to collect around those things that make sense to the heart of your dharma. I like to quote Lewis Carroll: if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

But the thing is, some wit also said, how do you know when you've arrived? So at least the Buddhist path is fairly clear for us, gives us parameters and allows us to be very creative within that too.

Often when people think of the monastic life, they think it's just one type of livelihood. Maybe they know the forest tradition and all you do is meditate all the time. But there's quite a variety of things that you can do and become involved in as a monastic. I'm thinking things like the study part – many take degrees and stuff like that. Other people involved in the community. I know in Colombo, for instance, there was a monk who was a constant visitor to the hospital, things like that. So there's a whole load of variety in life, but we have to think of it in terms of where I'm standing in the Dharma and how it makes sense to it.

You might find, again, as I did, that certain friends drop away. It's not as though you end up telling them to go away. You just stop seeing them. It's just that a different social scene begins to appear.

There we have it. I think we are closer to the idea of the spiritual life if we just extend that word, right livelihood, which is the direct translation, *sammā ājīva*, right livelihood, and just see it more as right lifestyle. Right work, the work we have – if we just extend that to include everything we do, so it becomes like a right lifestyle. I think that would be a much more profitable way of looking at it.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion and that by your devotion to right lifestyle, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.