

Balancing Lay and Spiritual Life

Carl Fooks · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

As I write this, I have just completed another long week of work. I am a “key worker” and the last 10 weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown have been long and hard. The work that I do is literally to help keep the country running; to help people get through this crisis. I write 40 hours on my timesheet, but I know it's more. I'm tired and a little frazzled. I have this to write, send to Bhante, Noirin, and a few close friends for feedback, and update accordingly, and so on. I'm planning for a Zoom call tomorrow which Noirin and I are holding for our upcoming retreat. Next weekend (today as you read this!) is the inaugural Satipanya Urban Southeast Saṅgha (Zoom) meet-up which I'm thinking about, and I'm also thinking about recording my talks for the retreat so that I can just play them, and not have to worry about if I'm called to work instead. On top of that, the grass and weeds keep growing. The bills still need paying. The dog needs walking. The family need tending to. Life goes on. Oh, and the very last thing that happened at work last week was that I had my first meeting with my new boss who started off by telling me that at his last place he fired all the people in my position. Did I mention that I was tired and a little frazzled? The point of me saying all this is that lay life is hard! So we come to Buddhism to get some peace and ease, some joyful release from the rigours and hardships of life, and what do we find? Phrases like “diligent, ardent, and resolute” (MN p. 497). We go on retreat where we have to get up at 3:30 in the morning, meditate until at least 9:30 at night, and stay mindful—no, not just mindful, but “diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful” (Anālayo 2003, p. 4)—from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep. Oh, and we have to find a noting word to label each and every experience as we go. To top it off, after a week of slog comes *adhīṭṭhānaday* ... a day of “resolute resolution” where we “strive” for a full day of moment-to-moment mindfulness. And let's not mention the dreaded “C” word. OK, let's! “Concentration”. I'm old enough for a teacher to have whacked me across the knuckles with a ruler for “not concentrating hard enough!” When Bhante reads us the *Mettā Sutta* every night, the Buddha says how we should behave like this and should do that. More things we should do! [Edit: Bhante's softened it now.] I mean, to cap it all, the Buddha's last words were literally “strive diligently for your liberation.” (DN p. 270). “Strive diligently ...”. You would be forgiven for thinking this isn't the kind of peace and ease or rest and relaxation I had in mind when I signed up! Where's the Spa?! So, the question is, how do we balance the demands of our lay life with the demands of the spiritual life? How do we reconcile our needs with the exhortation of the Buddha to “strive diligently for [our] liberation”? The Buddha, of course, had the answer to this: Skilfully! But, what amounts to ‘skilful’, and how do we apply it to our lives and practice? Professor Peter Harvey (Harvey 2000, p. 46) whittled the Buddha's criteria down to: 1) Is the motivation based in greed, hatred, or delusion? 2) Is the action to my harm or that of others? And 3) does it incline away from liberation? So, if an action affirms any of these, the action is unskilful, and we should abandon it. Ultimately, all unskilful

action can be said to be to our harm because it does not incline towards liberation. Now, to be controversial. This can include practice! If we're up to our eyeballs in stress and worry and feeling particularly aversive to practice, and go and do it anyway, it can be that all we do is build up further resentment and aversion to the practice, never to practice again. Of course, it can also be that we find a wonderful place of peace and calm in the thick of it, but you get the point. We need to connect with our needs right now. Sometimes, sitting at the window, watching the rain fall gently on leaves is a more skilful thing to do than formal practice. Sometimes, getting up at 3:30am to practice diligently, ardently, and resolutely is exactly the right thing to do. Basically, it boils down to this: we should be gentle and kind to ourselves; we should be sensitive to our needs at the time and skilful in our response to them; we need to have a skilful orientation to the path that does not result in harm to ourselves or others, is not based in greed (which implies not indulging laziness!), hatred, or delusion, and does not incline away from liberation. We need to gently nurture our practice, doing those things that are most nourishing for us at the time. Notice all the "should"s and "need"s in that last paragraph? If you feel the gentleness of these, this is how we "should" hear the Mettā Sutta that Bhante reads each night. I implore you to read it again with exactly this in mind. Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer's day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time. (John Lubbock, *The Use of Life*.)

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