The Noble Eightfold Path: Right Livelihood

October 11, 2018

Once my business card had the logo of FMC’s Defense Group International. Then I encountered Buddhism and the step on the Noble Eightfold Path that we’re exploring tonight…

Right Livelihood is the fifth of the eight steps on the Eightfold Path. In Pali, the prefix *samma* means “complete, perfected,” rather than simply “right,” with its connotations of orthodox correctness. Thus, *samma-ajiva* may mean something more like “livelihood fully understood and rightly conducted, with all its tensions.” This would involve a saner relation to our work  
  
What is right livelihood? Perhaps it’s clearer to say what it’s not. 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*.

But what are those beyond the obvious?

-business in weapons – yes, I know that from personal experience, but what about being a soldier? Or about being a comedian with the vicious edge to your act?  
Or what else has been “weaponized” in our current culture?. (and that word, *weaponized*!)  
  
-business in human beings?

-business in meat?

-business in intoxicants?

-business in poison?

But the Buddha understood the realities of human life. He understood that the prostitute could take all the precepts during Jukai except for the one about sexuality. And that the butcher would take all excepts the one about killing.  
  
The dictionary definition of *livelihood* is “…a means of securing the necessities of life.” And what are the necessities of life?   
  
  
But *livelihood* also includes the way we live. And how do we pay attention to that? Mindfulness is essential here.  
  
The Buddha tells us about that, too, in a “systemic” way:  
*"…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.".* — [AN 8.54](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.054.nara.html#livelihood)

In a general way, Right Livelihood involves mindfulness of our place in the whole, and thus becomes the foundation for our mindful involvement with our world. Another way of expressing this is that Right Livelihood isn’t just about your day job.

We cannot run away from our connection to the rest of the world. It guarantees our existence. If we have a “good job” and yet refuse to think about where our food comes from, where the plastic goes, why gas can be so cheap, and so on, our spiritual practice will be undertaken with eyes wide shut.   
  
If we are embarking on a spiritual path, we need to live our lives ethically, and this means ensuring that we do as little harm as possible to anyone or anything while we’re earning our daily bread. If we don’t, our practice will be undermined by our daily actions, not only because of the practical consequences of harmful acts but also through the internal agitation of remorse and denial.  
  
*Is a soldier’s career necessarily incompatible with a spiritual life if he aspires to keep the peace and protect sentient beings? If plays and films have the potential to bring an audience closer to the truth about the human condition and to awaken compassion, why can’t there be Buddhist actors?*

*Even professions that seem admirable and praiseworthy can be tangled up in negative consequences. A physician today is implicated in a dubious industry that often benefits corporations and shareholders more than patients. My own career as a professor at a private college is mottled with questions about the consequences of the debt these young people take on in order to study. Is it truly worth it for them, or will it hurt them in the future in ways they cannot yet imagine? And, if so, does this negate the beneficial aspects of my work?*

*Almost every profession carries a burden of nagging doubt. Life was simpler 2,600 years ago. A butcher’s job related to the farmer who sold him the cow, the cow he butchered in his yard, and the customers who bought the meat*.

Today, any means of livelihood is knotted into a vast system that impacts lives and landscapes thousands of miles away. A modern butcher’s livelihood is inextricable from the powerful farming and slaughtering industry that has the power to wipe out small farms and entire communities.   
  
It has become much harder to evaluate the consequences of our jobs: we can do the research, or we can shut our eyes. In either case, the result is that deep inside, we find ourselves unsettled.  
  
***We make a living by what we get****, but****we make****a life by what****we****give*.   
Winston Churchill

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## **The Buddha on being a soldier:**

Then Yodhajiva the headman went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, I have heard that it has been passed down by the ancient teaching lineage of warriors that '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.' What does the Blessed One have to say about that?"

"Enough, headman, put that aside. Don't ask me that."

A second time... A third time Yodhajiva the headman said: "Lord, I have heard that it has been passed down by the ancient teaching lineage of warriors that '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.' What does the Blessed One have to say about that?"

"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."

When this was said, Yodhajiva the headman sobbed & burst into tears. [The Blessed One said:] "That is what I couldn't get past you by saying, 'Enough, headman, put that aside. Don't ask me that.'"

"I'm not crying, lord, because of what the Blessed One said to me, but simply because I have been deceived, cheated, & fooled for a long time by that ancient teaching lineage of warriors who said: '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.'

— [SN 42.3](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn42/sn42.003.than.html)

## **The Buddha on being an actor:**

Then Talaputa, the head of an acting troupe, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Lord, I have heard that it has been passed down by the ancient teaching lineage of actors that '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.' What does the Blessed One have to say about that?"

"Enough, headman, put that aside. Don't ask me that."

A second time... A third time Talaputa, the head of an acting troupe, said: "Lord, I have heard that it has been passed down by the ancient teaching lineage of actors that '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.' What does the Blessed One have to say about that?"

"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. 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."

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"I'm not crying, lord, because of what the Blessed One said to me, but simply because I have been deceived, cheated, & fooled for a long time by that ancient teaching lineage of actors who said: '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.' — [SN 42.2](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn42/sn42.002.than.html)