

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD DHARMA TALK

Complete Notes with References & Resources

Opening Sutta: Vanijja Sutta (AN 5.177)

Pronunciation: va-NEE-jah

Full Text:

"Monks, 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. These are the five types of business that a lay follower should not engage in."

Reference Notes:

- AN 5.177 = Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fives, Sutta 177
- The Anguttara Nikaya is one of the five nikayas (collections) in the Sutta Pitaka
- "Vanijja" literally means "trade" or "business" in Pali
- This is one of the Buddha's most explicit statements on livelihood ethics

Translation Source: Access to Insight -

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.177.than.html>

Key Quote

Jack Kornfield: "Pretty hard to meditate if you've been killing and stealing all day."

Source: Heart Wisdom Podcast - Episode 103: Right Livelihood and Redemption

<https://jackkornfield.com/>

PART I: CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Five Traditional Prohibitions

1. **Weapons** - Instruments of harm and killing
2. **Human Beings** - Slavery, trafficking, exploitation
3. **Meat/Animals** - Raising for slaughter

4. **Intoxicants** - Substances that cloud consciousness and lead to heedlessness
5. **Poisons** - Substances meant to harm or kill

The Concept of Blamelessness (Anavajja)

Pronunciation: ah-NAH-vah-jah

Teaching: The Pali word *anavajja* literally means "without blame." Thanissaro Bhikkhu teaches that blamelessness is about finding "a happiness that's blameless both in itself and in the way it's pursued." This means we can sleep at night without regret, with a lighter karmic footprint on the world. When we live with integrity, the mind settles naturally - which is why Right Livelihood is essential groundwork for meditation.

Source: Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Wisdom Over Justice"

<https://www.lionsroar.com/wisdom-over-justice/>

Additional Reference - Ratha Sutta (SN 35:198):

"Just as a person anoints a wound simply for its healing, or greases an axle simply for the sake of carrying a load, in the same way a monk, considering it appropriately, takes his food not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification, but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, thinking, 'I will destroy old feelings [of hunger] & not create new feelings [from overeating]. Thus I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.'"

Source: Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Right Livelihood" (On the Path)

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/OnThePath/Section0011.html>

Historical Context: Economy in Buddha's Time (c. 563-483 BCE)

Buddha's Era:

- Trade routes and merchant caravans emerging
- Walled cities and large states developing
- Population increasing, urbanization beginning
- Introduction of kahapana coins (monetary economy starting)
- Prohibited categories were distinct industries
- Local/regional economy
- Clear, direct production chains
- Small-scale operations
- Personal relationships in trade
- Economy was simpler and more transparent
- Most work (farming, crafts, trade in non-prohibited goods) was acceptable
- You could directly see the effects of your work

Today's Economy:

- Global interconnection and complex supply chains
- Supply chains opaque and hard to trace
- Even "good" companies may have problematic investments or suppliers
- Technology has created entirely new categories of potential harm (surveillance, addictive design, AI weapons, etc.)
- Scale of impact is enormous
- Much harder to practice Right Livelihood with full awareness

Key Insight: The Buddha gave these teachings in a world that was actually SIMPLER than ours. This doesn't mean the teachings don't apply—it means we need even MORE discernment, MORE compassion for ourselves, and MORE commitment to making conscious choices where we can.

PART II: THE MACRO - WHERE WE WORK

Modern Translations of the Five Prohibited Trades

1. **Weapons** → Defense contractors, surveillance technology, military AI, drones
2. **Human Beings** → Human trafficking (still a huge problem), exploitative labor practices, gig economy exploitation, private prisons
3. **Meat/Animals** → Factory farming, animal testing, environmental destruction
4. **Intoxicants** → Addictive technology design (algorithms), predatory pharmaceutical marketing, alcohol/tobacco industries
5. **Poisons** → Plastics, fossil fuels, agribusiness chemicals, toxic industrial manufacturing

Key Point: "Just being alive in the U.S., we touch most of these categories daily."

The Gray Zones

Examples:

- Marketing company with defense contractor client
- Home nurse aide concerned about carbon footprint from driving (from "Stepping Out of Self-Deception")
- Programmer whose code might be misused
- Healthcare workers in profit-driven medical systems
- Heavy sales tactics even in wellness companies

Approach: Apply discernment with compassion for self and others. Not about purity, but about intention.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Do what you can, where you are, with what you have."

Source: <https://www.dhammatalks.org/books/NobleEightfoldPath/Section0009.html>

Four Discernment Questions

Consider these core Buddhist principles: *Ahimsa* (non-harm), *Sila* (ethics), *Cetana* (intention)

1. What is the **PRIMARY PURPOSE** of this organization?
2. Am I **DIRECTLY participating** in harm?
3. Can I be a **FORCE FOR GOOD** within this structure?
4. What are the **REAL-WORLD EFFECTS** of this company's existence?

"That's about WHERE we work—the industries, the big decisions. But whatever job we have, wherever we find ourselves, we can practice Right Livelihood through HOW we show up..."

PART III: THE MICRO - HOW WE SHOW UP

Main Teaching

Thich Nhat Hanh: "The way you make your living is a continuation of your practice. You can practice Right Livelihood wherever you are."

Source: "Right Livelihood" article, Parallax Press

<https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/right-livelihood/>

Daily Interactions at Work

Right Speech:

- No gossip or sabotage
- Not wasting time
- No lying about yourself or others
- Honest communication

Right Action:

- Using AI wisely and ethically
- Respecting privacy
- Thoroughness and care in work

Mindful Approach:

- Skillfully working with ambition, competition, and motives
- Compassion in disagreements
- Deep listening
- Separating opinion from person
- Seeing the humanity in boss and coworkers

Blamelessness in Daily Life

When we're misaligned with our values, we feel dissonance. Even "little lies" we can feel in our bodies. The fruit of Right Livelihood is **BLAMELESSNESS** (*anavajja*).

The Concept of "Professional Human Being" Peter

Story: NYC Subway Booth Attendants

In New York City, there used to be subway booth attendants who sat in small booths all day, selling tokens in freezing, loud, chaotic conditions. Yet so many of them brought brightness and authentic good customer service to their interactions.

Their job was technically giving tokens. But their REAL job was being a professional human being—maintaining human-to-human connection in every interaction.

Today, this has been replaced by kiosks and contactless tap cards. We've lost something important.

Key Teaching: Part of Right Livelihood is not objectifying workers. This applies to every interaction: post office, bank, grocery store—all opportunities for mindful, compassionate connection.

Personal Journey Story

"I've absolutely been in not-good livelihood situations. It took time to transition. Years later, I looked back and thought: 'Wow, I did it!' It required right effort and courage. This doesn't happen overnight."

Key Points:

- Don't add dukkha by trying to change too fast
- Approach with courage and compassion
- Lean on support: sangha, teachers, friends, mentors
- It's a gradual practice

"Right Livelihood isn't just about our jobs. It extends to our LIFESTYLE—what we consume, what we support with our purchasing power..."

PART IV: RIGHT LIFESTYLE

From Livelihood to Lifestyle

Thich Nhat Hanh: "How we spend our money is how we vote with our lives."

The Web of Interconnection:

- Every purchase supports a chain of production
- Food choices → factory farming
- Fashion → labor exploitation and environmental impact
- Technology → working conditions
- All connected

Key Principle: Not about guilt—about awareness and response-ability.

Story: The Plastic Water Bottle Dilemma

At a family gathering, someone hands you a plastic water bottle. You could protest and refuse, giving a speech about plastic waste. Or you could try to sneakily put it back. Or... you could just take it.

Point: Don't stress yourself out. Don't cause yourself undue dukkha. Change happens through BOTH individual and collective action. Choose wisely where you CAN, but be compassionate with yourself.

Consumer Power: Practical Choices

Examples of Conscious Choices:

- Walmart vs. Costco (very different employee policies)
- Research CEO attitudes toward staff and community
- Farmer's markets and local businesses
- Capsule wardrobes (brands like Eileen Fisher) vs. fast fashion
- Hopeful trends: thrifting, upcycling, conscious consumption

Documentary Recommendation: "China Blue" (2005)

A powerful documentary about a young woman in China who works in a jeans factory. She trims threads and takes pebbles out of pockets—for up to 20 hours a day. She lives in a cramped dormitory and speculates with her friends about the lives of people who wear these jeans overseas. She writes a letter and places it in a pocket, hoping a shopper will find it and read it.

This documentary reveals the human cost behind our consumer choices.

Going Against the Grain

Key Teaching: The Buddha went against the grain of his culture, which was built around satisfying desires. Our economy today is similarly structured around creating and satisfying craving.

Results of Craving-Based Economy:

- Obesity, cancer, mental health issues
- Unnecessary suffering (dukkha)
- Human-created problems

Our Practice:

- We can go against the grain like the Buddha did
- Through our practice, we discover happiness without needing so much
- We can be models for others
- Small choices compound over time
- It's an ongoing practice

"This might sound overwhelming. Can integrity actually work within capitalism? Let me tell you about someone who proved it's not only possible but can be wildly successful..."

PART V: PATAGONIA - PROOF OF POSSIBILITY

Yvon Chouinard's Story

Early Years (1960s-1970s):

- Built company to support his hiking and climbing passion
- Deeply connected with nature, studied Zen Buddhism
- Started by making steel pitons (climbing gear) and selling them from the back of his car
- **Values-driven decision:** Realized pitons were damaging cracks in Yosemite. Switched to aluminum chockstones at the expense of his piton sales—values led the way.
- 1970: Scotland trip - discovered durable Rugby shirt with protective collar
- 1973: Patagonia founded as apparel company

Building a Values-Driven Company:

- Yvon Chouinard, his wife Malinda Chouinard, and other partners cultivated values alongside profit
- 1980s: Pioneered on-site childcare and healthy on-site cafeteria
- 1985: Co-founded **1% for the Planet** - pledging 1% of sales to environmental causes

- 1996: Learned about conventional cotton's environmental harm. Switched entire product line to organic cotton in just 18 months—a major accomplishment requiring courage and commitment
- Built company around durability, repair programs, transparency
- Famous anti-consumption ads: "Don't Buy This Jacket"
- Created Footprint Chronicles for supply chain transparency

"Going Purpose" (2022)

The Moment: 2022 - Yvon Chouinard woke up to find himself on the Forbes billionaire list. His reaction: EMBARRASSED.

The Decision: "Instead of 'going public,' you could say we're 'going purpose.' Instead of extracting value from nature and transforming it into wealth for investors, we'll use the wealth Patagonia creates to protect the source of all wealth."

The Structure:

- Family transferred all voting stock (2%) to the **Patagonia Purpose Trust**, giving them control over key company decisions to ensure values remain central
- Remaining 98% of company (valued at \$3 billion) went to **Holdfast Collective**, whose sole responsibility is to protect the planet
- Each year, company pays out roughly **\$100 million in annual dividends** to fight climate change
- **"Earth is now our only shareholder"**

References:

- Official announcement:
<https://www.patagoniaworks.com/press/2022/9/14/patagonias-next-chapter-earth-is-now-our-only-shareholder>
- Patagonia ownership page: <https://www.patagonia.com/ownership/>
- National Geographic profile:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/yvon-chouinard-nat-geo-33-2025>

Book: *Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman* by Yvon Chouinard

Podcast Episodes:

- NPR How I Built This: "Patagonia: Yvon Chouinard" (Dec 2016)
- MeatEater Podcast #188: "Yvon Chouinard on Belonging to Nature"
- The Sustainable Angler: "Patagonia Founder Yvon Chouinard" (Oct 2018)

What This Means for Us

Key Lessons:

- You don't have to be perfect to be ethical
- Capitalism doesn't have to be purely extractive
- Creative solutions exist when we prioritize values
- Success and integrity CAN coexist
- One person/company modeling alternatives creates ripples
- It wasn't just Yvon—it was his wife, partners, CEOs, community working together

The Invitation: We don't all need to be Yvon Chouinard. But we can ask HIS questions:

- How can I do less harm?
- How can I do more good?
- What does integrity look like in MY circumstances?

Final Thoughts

We Are at a Pivotal Moment:

- AI is rapidly transforming work and society
- Climate change demands urgent response
- Capitalism is at a crossroads
- Rapid changes are happening all around us

We Are Conscious Co-Creators:

- We have choices every day
- Our decisions matter
- We can participate mindfully in shaping the world
- We don't do this alone—lean on sangha, community, teachers

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GALA program Global Awareness Local Action (GALA)

A BCBS Climate Change Study and Practice Program

With Bhikkhu Anālayo, Rhonda Magee, Rebecca Henderson, Jon Kabat-Zinn

<https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/gala25/>

Conscious Consumer Websites

1. **Ethical Consumer** - <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/>
 - Independent not-for-profit providing product guides and ethical ratings
2. **The Good Shopping Guide** - <https://thegoodshoppingguide.com/>
 - Environmental, animal welfare, and human rights research since 2001
3. **Good On You** - Ethical fashion ratings app
 - Rates brands on people, planet, and animals
4. **DoneGood** - <https://donegood.co>
 - Browser extension suggesting ethical alternatives while shopping
5. **EarthHero** - <https://earthhero.com>
 - Curated eco-friendly products with zero-waste section

B Corp & Values-Driven Business Podcasts

6. **Get Down to Business: The B Corp Podcast**
 - By B Lab U.S. & Canada
 - <https://getdowntobusiness.podbean.com/>
7. **Beyond the B: Latest on the B Corp Movement**
 - By LIFT Economy
 - <https://go.lifteconomy.com/beyond>
8. **The B Better Podcast**
 - By Tim Jones
 - 100+ episodes on B Corp certification

Organizations

9. **B Lab** - <https://www.bcorporation.net>
 - B Impact Assessment, company directory, resources
10. **1% for the Planet** - <https://onepercentfortheplanet.org>
 - Alliance co-founded by Yvon Chouinard in 2001

Buddhist Text Resources

11. **Access to Insight** - <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/>

- Canonical sutta translations

12. **Dhammatalks.org** - <https://www.dhammatalks.org/>

- All Thanissaro Bhikkhu teachings and translations
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These notes accompany the Right Livelihood Dharma Talk given at Orlando Insight Meditation Group by April Koester.