Reviewing Right Livelihood

The cultivation of a lifestyle that supports the process of Awakening is an essential project within Buddhist doctrine. In Pali, the words for Right Livelihood are *samma ajiva* (sah-mah ah-jee-vah). *Samma* means “*right, correct*”, and *ajiva* means “*the means to livelihood*”. During the life of the Buddha and for many centuries after, one’s lifestyle and livelihood were simple and fairly unified, compared to our current lifestyle. The understanding is that the more ethically balanced one’s day-to-day routines are, the more prepared the mind is for Awakening. Here are the classic characteristics of Right Livelihood from the Buddhist Pali Canon, first describing the practice from the view of a renunciate:

And what is right livelihood? Right livelihood, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions; there is right livelihood that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path.

And what is the right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones abandons wrong livelihood and maintains his life with right livelihood. This is the right livelihood with effluents, siding with merit, resulting in acquisitions.

And what is the right livelihood that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The abstaining, desisting, abstinence, avoidance of wrong livelihood in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path. (*Mahacattarisaka Sutta)*

This perspective reflects the lifestyle choices appropriate for a lay practitioner:

"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. " Anguttara Nikaya 5.177

Here is commentary from a more contemporary view, found on the Secular Buddhist website:

Right livelihood is concerned with ensuring that one earns one's living in a righteous way. For a lay disciple the Buddha teaches that wealth should be gained in accordance with certain standards. One should acquire it only by legal means, not illegally; one should acquire it peacefully, without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others. The Buddha mentions five specific kinds of livelihood which bring harm to others and are therefore to be avoided: dealing in weapons, in living beings (including raising animals for slaughter as well as slave trade and prostitution), in meat production and butchery, in poisons, and in intoxicants (AN 5:177). He further names several dishonest means of gaining wealth which fall under wrong livelihood: practicing deceit, treachery, soothsaying, trickery, and usury (MN 117). Obviously, any occupation that requires violation of right speech and right action is a wrong form of livelihood, but other occupations, such as selling weapons or intoxicants, may not violate those factors and yet be wrong because of their consequences for others.

The Thai treatise discusses the positive aspects of right livelihood under the three convenient headings of rightness regarding actions, rightness regarding persons, and rightness regarding objects. "Rightness regarding actions" means that workers should fulfill their duties diligently and conscientiously, not idling away time, claiming to have worked longer hours than they did, or pocketing the company's goods. "Rightness regarding persons" means that due respect and consideration should be shown to employers, employees, colleagues, and customers. An employer, for example, should assign his workers chores according to their ability, pay them adequately, promote them when they deserve a promotion and give them occasional vacations and bonuses. Colleagues should try to cooperate rather than compete, while merchants should be equitable in their dealings with customers. "Rightness regarding objects" means that in business transactions and sales the articles to be sold should be presented truthfully. There should be no deceptive advertising, misrepresentations of quality or quantity, or dishonest manoeuvers.

Because contemporary American culture has a much more complex view of livelihood than was the case before modern times, I prefer to use the term *Right Lifestyle*, and conceive of this as the ongoing manifestation of virtue from waking to sleeping, every day, whether involving work or otherwise. How do we conduct our daily life routines? Do the routines reflect the values that incline the mind toward liberation from confusion, delusion and impulsive reactivity?

**Lifestyle** is the composite of narrative and behavior, informed by wisdom. Lifestyle includes personal physical, emotional and relational hygiene. It also includes employment, recreation, and consumption of financial and ecological resources. Therefore, I suggest several categories that are contained within a benevolent lifestyle:

* Wholesome relationships
* Wholesome balance between employment and personal time
* Economic balance
* Adequate exercise
* Healthy diet
* Adequate quiet time
* Spiritual practices
* Recreational activities
* Environmental harmony, social and ecological

These categories reflect values that manifest 3 characteristics:

1. Does the activity do harm?
2. Does the category provide support for spiritual development?
3. Does the category conflict with another category?

**WHOLESOME RELATIONSHIPS**

Here is what the Buddha told Ananda about Sangha (relationships):

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Sakyans. Now there is a Sakyan town named Sakkara. There Ven. Ananda went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, "This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie."

"Don't say that Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path.

"And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, develop & pursue the noble eightfold path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. He develops right resolve... right speech... right action... right livelihood... right effort... right mindfulness... right concentration dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment. This is how a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions, & colleagues, develops & pursues the noble eightfold path.

"And through this line of reasoning one may know how admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life: It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to birth have gained release from birth, that beings subject to aging have gained release from aging, that beings subject to death have gained release from death, that beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair have gained release from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life." SN 45.2 Upaddha Sutta: Half (of the Holy Life) translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu [© 1997–2013](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn45/sn45.002.than.html#F_termsOfUse)

The more my understanding of a spiritual path grows, the more I appreciate the value of relationship. We are inherently social creatures and require interpersonal experience for the development of personality. It’s not necessary for everyone to have a primary, one-to-one relationship to have a wholesome life. It is important to interact with others with confidence and trust. Growing closer enables us to explore more deeply and richly the various ways the Four Noble Truths manifest.

Mindfulness can monitor our interpersonal dynamics to discern whether the relationship experience is functionally harmful to self or others, in order to make appropriate adjustments to interpersonal boundaries. Does the relationship create disruptive or dysfunctional dynamics in relationships? Can spiritual values and practices be supported by a particular relationship or sense of community?

The first experiences we have in life are in the context of relationships. As infants, we are entirely dependent upon relationships for our physical and emotional survival. In adulthood, relationships are typically not so utterly dependent, but the need for interpersonal feedback remains an important area of human experience. Much of our sense of self-worth and value emerges through interpersonal dialogue, especially with those persons who are important to us.

**WHOLESOME BALANCE BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND PERSONAL TIME**

Our monetized culture requires money to survive, and for nearly all of us, this means working at some occupation. Many people work only for the money, not particularly enjoying the job. Others work in professions that violate the commitment to benevolent intention. Because the workplace is stressful, coworkers may be critical, competitive and are prone to conflict. It’s often the case that there are challenges to time management and setting boundaries.

There are two sorts of boundaries: internal and external. Internal boundaries involve the inability to clearly monitor our internal states for signs of stress--expecting too much of our energy, and multitasking, trying to do two or more things as the same time. External boundaries involve having a hard time saying “no” when being tasked too many things to do in the workday.

How can we address these very real issues?

* During the workday experience, how much does deceit, manipulation or gossip play out in the daily routine? How can I address these situations without creating unnecessary conflicts?
* How much does work stress intrude on life away from work? What strategies can be applied to cultivate mindful resilience on the way to work, and then leave stresses behind on the way home from work?
* How does work interfere with other wholesome activities? How can clear and flexible boundaries be established and maintained?
* How does the ethical behavior of the organization relate to benevolent intention?
* Is it possible to engage in spiritual practice at work, or should that be addressed elsewhere?

It is useful to think about evaluating the work-home dynamic in terms of the four noble truths.

1. **Stress and tension are inevitable:** We tend to believe that stress and tension are only present when something is wrong, and that if we’re stressed, we shouldn’t be, or that when we’re stressed, we’re helpless to do anything about it (except perhaps taking Aleve). Rather than blame ourselves, the workplace or our families, we can pay attention to how we experience the stress physically and in terms of the internal narratives that are stress related. *Being immediately aware of the experience of stress provides the first opportunity to assess the causes and conditions that are producing the stress.*
2. **This stress and tension is caused and reinforced by internal conflicts, related to external concerns and conditions:** Through mindful investigation of the stress symptoms (headaches, irritability, anxiety, etc.), the practice of investigating the perceptions, assumptions and internal narratives can be applied.
3. **It is possible to bring relief to the stress and tension by mindful investigation into the generation of an “ideal self”, compared/contrasted to what actually happens in the workplace setting and the home setting (including commuting periods), combined with developed emotional self-regulation capacities:** The ideal self is twofold: the self-state that believes that we should be able to do anything required, or the self-state that believes that we can’t possibly negotiate our needs is contrasted with the actual circumstances. For example, I might believe that I can’t set limits on my internal resources; this ideal self is in conflict with the distracted, depleted self-state that actually emerges. In order to do this investigation, the processes of taking in data and the processes of mindful investigation of emerging narratives and urgencies can be engaged fruitfully. The ongoing practice of mindful awareness during daily routines can help regulate interactions between work expectations and personal resources; the same mindfulness is also applicable at home, or anywhere else for that matter.
4. **The eightfold path can offer some concepts and practices that facilitate the dynamic adjustments that arise during the workplace, the commute and at home.**

**WHOLESOMENESS AND MONEY MANAGEMENT**

Money is a strange and marvelous invention. It was just being introduced into the culture the Buddha was immersed in. Unless a person was extraordinarily wealthy, most transactions were through barter or other means of bring value to the transaction in a balanced way. For the most part, this involved what amounted to a “goods and services” sense of economics. At first, money was simply something that was an object that was rare or otherwise deemed valuable, and it most often, for most people, involved what was needed for survival.

Somewhere along the line, the concept of money became symbolic, that is, a token the represented a particular value. Its value depended upon what was common or uncommon. Money can be transported over great distances, but its value was likely different in another region, either more or less so.

Now it has reached a level of symbolic universality and almost magical potency. A well-respected commenter on Buddhism and modern culture, David Loy, has suggested we live in a “moneytheistic” culture! In my lifetime, the valuing of money has moved from the “gold standard”, that is, the equivalent amount of a dollar is supposedly stored in gold somewhere, to a free-floating standard, which is determined by internationally determined value equity. As Milton Friedman puts it, "the pieces of green paper have value because everybody thinks they have value."

How do we as Buddhists approach this issue, which seems to exemplify the essence of the Buddhist concept of anatta?

**MONEY AND VALUE**

The issue about money, and all material goods, is that of value. What makes something valuable? We tend to think of values in two ways: ethics and price. I chose the word price because nearly all that we buy or do is associated with money. Most people evaluate their jobs through the amount of money they make, which, by inference, suggests that their efforts are valued by money.

What does the Pali Canon offer us in attempting to understand money and value?

"And what is balanced living? Here, a clansman knows his income and expenditures and leads a balanced life, neither too extravagant nor too frugal, [aware]: In this way my income will exceed my expenditures rather than the reverse/ Just as an appraiser or his apprentice, holding up a scale, knows: 'By so much it has dipped down, by so much it has gone u p / so a clansman knows his income and expenditures and leads a balanced life, neither too extravagant nor too frugal, [aware]: 'In this way my income will exceed my expenditures rather than the reverse .

"If this clansman has a small income but lives luxuriously, others would say of him: 'This clansman eats his wealth just like an eater of figs.' But if he has a large income but lives sparingly, others would say of him: 'This clansman may even starve himself. But it is called balanced living when a clansman knows his income and expenditures and leads a balanced life, neither too extravagant nor too frugal, [aware]: 'In this way my income will exceed m y expenditures rather than the reverse.'

"The wealth thus amassed has four sources of dissipation: womanizing, drunkenness, gambling, and bad friendship, bad companionship, bad comradeship. Just as if there were a large reservoir with four inlets and four outlets, and a man would close the inlets and open the outlets, and sufficient rain does not fall, one could expect the water in the reservoir to decrease rather than increase; so the wealth thus amassed has four sources of dissipation: womanizing. . . bad comradeship.

"The wealth thus amassed has four sources of accretion: one avoids womanizing, drunkenness, and [284] gambling, and cultivates good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. Just as if there were a large reservoir with four inlets and four outlets, and a man would open the inlets and close the outlets, and sufficient rain falls; one could expect the water in the reservoir to increase rather than decrease, so the wealth amassed has four sources of accretion: one avoids womanizing... and cultivates good friendship.

"These are the four things that lead to the welfare and happiness of a clansman in this very life. Anguttaranikaya (A.II. (69-70)

Then Anathapindika the householder went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there the Blessed One said to him: "There are these four kinds of bliss that can be attained in the proper season, on the proper occasions, by a householder partaking of sensuality. Which four? The bliss of having, the bliss of [making use of] wealth, the bliss of debtlessness, the bliss of blamelessness.

"And what is the bliss of having? There is the case where the son of a good family has wealth earned through his efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When he thinks, 'I have wealth earned through my efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained,' he experiences bliss, he experiences joy. This is called the bliss of having.

"And what is the bliss of [making use of] wealth? There is the case where the son of a good family, using the wealth earned through his efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of his arm, and piled up through the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, partakes of his wealth and makes merit. When he thinks, 'Using the wealth earned through my efforts & enterprise, amassed through the strength of my arm, and piled up through the sweat of my brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, I partake of wealth and make merit,' he experiences bliss, he experiences joy. This is called the bliss of [making use of] wealth.

"And what is the bliss of debtlessness? There is the case where the son of a good family owes no debt, great or small, to anyone at all. When he thinks, 'I owe no debt, great or small, to anyone at all,' he experiences bliss, he experiences joy. This is called the bliss of debtlessness.

"And what is the bliss of blamelessness? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is endowed with blameless bodily kamma, blameless verbal kamma, blameless mental kamma. When he thinks, 'I am endowed with blameless bodily kamma, blameless verbal kamma, blameless mental kamma,' he experiences bliss, he experiences joy. This is called the bliss of blamelessness.

"These are the four kinds of bliss that can be attained in the proper season, on the proper occasions, by a householder partaking of sensuality." (AN 4.62 Ananda Sutta: Debtless translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

Top of Form

"Monks, for one who partakes of sensuality, poverty is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"And a poor, destitute, penniless person gets into debt. For one who partakes of sensuality, getting into debt is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"And a poor, destitute, penniless person, having gotten into debt, owes interest payments. For one who partakes of sensuality, interest payment is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"And when a poor, destitute, penniless person owing interest payments does not pay interest on time, they serve him notice. For one who partakes of sensuality, being served notice is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"And when a poor, destitute, penniless person, being served notice, does not pay, they hound him. For one who partakes of sensuality, being hounded is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"And when a poor, destitute, penniless person, being hounded, does not pay, he is put into bondage. For one who partakes of sensuality, bondage is suffering in the world."

"Yes, lord."

"Thus, monks, poverty is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Getting into debt is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Interest payment is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Being served notice is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Being hounded is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality. Bondage is suffering in the world for one who partakes of sensuality.

"In the same way, monks, whoever has no conviction with regard to skillful mental qualities, no sense of conscience with regard to skillful mental qualities, no sense of concern with regard to skillful mental qualities, no persistence with regard to skillful mental qualities, no discernment with regard to skillful mental qualities is, in the discipline of a noble one, said to be poor, destitute, & penniless.

"He — poor, destitute, & penniless, having no conviction with regard to skillful mental qualities, no sense of conscience... no sense of concern... no persistence... no discernment with regard to skillful mental qualities — engages in misconduct by way of the body, misconduct by way of speech, misconduct by way of the mind. For him, I tell you, this is getting into debt.

"For the purpose of concealing his bodily misconduct, he formulates evil desires: He desires, 'May they not know about me.' He resolves, 'May they not know about me.' He speaks, [thinking,] 'May they not know about me.' He makes an effort with his body, [thinking,] 'May they not know about me.' For the purpose of concealing his verbal misconduct... For the purpose of concealing his mental misconduct, he formulates evil desires: He desires, 'May they not know about me.' He resolves, 'May they not know about me.' He speaks, [thinking,] 'May they not know about me.' He makes an effort with his body, [thinking,] 'May they not know about me.' For him, I tell you, this is interest payment.

"And then his well-behaved companions in the holy life say about him, 'This venerable one acts in this way, behaves in this way.' For him, I tell you, this is being served notice.

"And then, when he has gone to the wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, he is beset with evil, unskillful thoughts accompanied by remorse. For him, I tell you, this is being hounded.

"He — poor, destitute, & penniless, having engaged in misconduct by way of the body, misconduct by way of speech, & misconduct by way of the mind — on the break-up of the body, after death, is bound by the bond of hell or the bond of the animal womb. And I can imagine no one other bond so tormenting, so painful, so obstructive to the unexcelled rest from bondage, as the bond of hell or the bond of the animal womb."

Poverty is called suffering in the world; so, too, is getting into debt. A poor person, in debt, partaking of sensuality, suffers hardship. Then they hound him and put him into bondage: the painful bond for one longing to gain sensual pleasures. Now, anyone with no conviction in the discipline of a noble one — no sense of conscience, no sense of concern — contemplating evil actions, doing wrong by way of body, wrong by way of speech, & wrong by way of the mind, wants: 'May they not know about me.' He creeps along in body, speech, or mind, piling up evil actions, here & there, again & again. He, with evil actions, his wisdom weak, knowing his own wrong-doing, is a poor person, in debt. Partaking of sensuality, he suffers hardship. Then they hound him — painful mental resolves born of remorse — at home or in the wilderness. He, with evil actions, his wisdom weak, knowing his own wrong-doing, goes to an animal womb or is bound in hell: the painful bond from which the enlightened are freed. But one with confidence, living at home, making gifts of his belongings, righteously-gained, wins both goals: advantage in the here-&-now, & happiness in the world beyond. The liberality of this householder piles up merit. Now, anyone with conviction firmly established in the discipline of a noble one — with a sense of conscience, a sense of concern, discerning & restrained by virtue — is, in the discipline of a noble one, said to be living in ease. Gaining a pleasure not of the flesh, he determines on equanimity: abandoning the five hindrances — persistence constantly aroused — entering the jhanas: unified, mindful, & wise. Knowing this as it actually is in the total ending of all fetters, through everywhere not-clinging, his mind is rightly released. In him, Such, rightly released, there is the knowledge, in the total ending of the fetters of becoming: 'My release is unshakable.' That is the highest knowledge that, the happiness unexcelled. Sorrowless, dustless, at rest, that is release from debt. AN 6.45 Ina Sutta: Debt translated from the Pali by

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

While considering the application of the eightfold path to the issues of values, I want to explore how we understand and create values, regarding money, relationships and so on, not on an abstract level, but personally, experientially. This involves discerning the difference between external and internal loci of control. Our decision-making processes are contingent and circumstantial. How do the four clear comprehensions apply in our decision-making processes? Here are some quotes from the book *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*  by U Silananda:

there are four kinds of clear comprehension mentioned in the commentaries. One is the “clear comprehension of what is of benefit”. The second is the “clear comprehension of what is suitable”. The third is the “clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain” and the fourth is the “clear comprehension of non-delusion”. Meditators have to understand and observe each of the small actions of the body with these four kinds of clear comprehension in mind.

EXERCISE, DIET AND ADEQUATE REST:

Our current culture is the most effective in human history regarding the sheer convenience and safety of the population; this is true despite the thread of violence woven in the fabric of contemporary media. One of the negative side effects of this success is that we generally don’t get enough exercise, eat too much processed food, and don’t establish enough unstimulated rest periods, including sleep. These issues can significantly interfere with spiritual development. We can use mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort to sort through our dietary options and develop the discipline that enables avoiding unwholesome food and overeating. These same skills can support getting more exercise on regular basis, through daily walking and other exercise. Contemporary research supports the value of aerobic fitness and good muscle tone for effective stress management and to increase longevity. Buddhist renunciates walked every day on their alms rounds. Social scientists have suggested that the invention of the light bulb, and, more recently, the unceasing opportunity for media stimulation have significantly decreased the amount of healthy sleep. Again, mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort can be very helpful in creating a healthy environment for the body and support regular meditation practice.

ENVIRONMENTAL BALANCE:

Environmental degradation through CO2 atmospheric contamination and the stresses on potable water sources create significant interference with the sorts of conditions conducive to spiritual development. Interdependence is a fundamental principle of Buddhism, and we must consider the effects of environmental ignorance and impulsive consumerism on our lifestyle experiences. Millions of people around the world are suffering the consequences of our ill-considered actions. I believe that we can manage our own responsibilities in this regard through the cultivation of Buddhist principles and practices.