

Wise Livelihood
by Rebecca Dixon
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Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls Wise Livelihood “the poor stepsister of the eightfold path” because there are very few suttas where the Buddha actually addressed it, beyond saying that’s how his followers should make their livings. He did condemn five ways to make a living: trading in poison, weapons, intoxicants, meat, and human beings. That’s in the Business Sutta, in the Anguttara Nikaya 5.177. Thanissaro Bhikkhu adds that the Buddha shied away from condemning people’s specific line of work out of a sense of etiquette, suggesting that’s because the people involved had already done the damage to themselves and others. We can appreciate his refusing to make a list of ‘wrong’ occupations because times change – shoeing horses and mining coal have faded as jobs in demand. More importantly, and the Buddha seemed to recognize this, it’s not the job title but the principles involved. I will elaborate on this more in a little while.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu says the Buddha taught that you would do well to, “reflect on your means of livelihood. Is it harming other beings? Does it involve lying? Does it involve unskillful mental states? If it does, maybe you should look for another occupation — which, of course, may take time. This may have been one of the reasons why the Buddha observed that etiquette, for a lot of people are stuck in their occupation. It’s going to take a while for them to disentangle themselves if they realize that their means of livelihood is unskillful.”

In the Anguttara Nikaya there’s another sutta, # 8.54, on Conditions of Welfare, for householders, aka laypeople, that says, “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.” So the Buddha advised living with generosity and spending as needed, while staying within our means. Pretty practical advice.

A broader bit of advice is available in a sutta called The Great Forty, in the Mahjima Nikkaya 117, in which the Buddha asked, “what is wrong livelihood? Scheming, persuading, hinting, belittling, & pursuing gain with gain. This is wrong livelihood..” I’m sure many of us have known co-workers or bosses, partners or competitors, vendors or buyers, who act in these ways. And we’ve probably also slipped into them ourselves. The sutta goes on to say what it takes to stick to wise livelihood: **Wise View** tells us what is or isn’t a wise way to conduct our work, it takes **Wise Effort** to “abandon wrong livelihood and to enter into right livelihood,” and it takes **Wise Mindfulness** to stay there.

Here we see Wise Livelihood expanding, incorporating principles from other parts of the Eightfold Path. We know that we can have many views of what’s important, but with Wise Understanding the *guiding* view is that it’s about *suffering* – dukkha, and *ending* dukkha. We are wise to conduct ourselves in ways that will avoid setting up the causes and conditions that lead to dukkha for ourselves and other beings.

So we are careful with our speech and avoid *actions* that can cause serious harm to individuals and society – the many forms of violence, theft and sexual misconduct. The Great Forty Sutta also looks forward on the Eightfold Path to our next two months’ practice with Wise Effort and Wise Mindfulness.

It's all here, all the principles of the teachings are here in Wise Livelihood, which I don't think is so much "the poor stepsister of the eightfold path" as the lynch pin that holds it together. All of these principles, as the Great Forty puts it, "run & circle around right livelihood."

Before I leave the suttas, I do want to note that livelihood isn't just a concern for laypeople. It seems some monastics had sidelines, and the Buddha named a long list of things they ought not to do that centered on superstition – reading palms, cards or other objects to tell fortunes, etc. In my last dharma talk on the Ingredients of Generosity I talked about safeguards to keep dana, and teaching the dharma, from becoming an economic transaction which would make teaching an *unwise* livelihood and take the spiritual benefit out of generosity.

Let's not forget the work that gets done by volunteers. Besides being an inspiration for the rest of humanity, they contribute tremendously to the economy and well-being of everyone, not just those they help directly – and often that assistance and the goodwill behind it are truly invaluable. Then there's all we do for our families, friends and organizations, chores in the home, parenting. Our creativity and its products. On and on. Economists try to attach a dollar value to all this work, but I suspect they come in very low to its real worth. Wise Livelihood includes all we do, and it's a lot.

These days, most contemporary teachers have expanded Wise Livelihood to include other aspects of economic activity, particularly consumption: not only how we earn money or other things of value, but also how we spend what we have. In his 2010 article on Right Livelihood, Thanissaro Bikkhu encouraged, "looking at your attitude toward what you consume." What do you buy or take or use? He says, "Ideally, you should reflect while you're eating: why are you eating now? When you put on your clothes, why are you putting these clothes on? When you fix up your house or your hut, why are you fixing it up in this way? When you take medicine, why are you taking this particular medicine now? What's your motivation?"

These suggestions were for those practicing in a monastic setting or retreat, and these items enabled them to continue their practice with ease. The pleasure of food was secondary to the fact that eating sustained them for more practice, just as the rest of these consumables do. The key factor is our *attitude* toward our acquisition or use of material things. Are we buying a low-emission car to reduce our gasoline cost, or to protect other humans and other species from the way fossil fuels damage the environment we all share? I bought a hybrid in 2005 to encourage the development of low-emission technology, which I saw as "voting with my dollars." And look: it's working!

The things we buy have an impact that continues past the time of purchase. As we use them, our attitude toward them can determine whether they help or harm us and others. How disposable do we consider our possessions? Do we take care of them and use them well, or do they become trash quickly? Consider the impact that has on us, our community, and the whole planet. The Practice Guides devote a whole week to the impact our stuff can have. It can be horrifying to think of what becomes of all the plastic we make and buy. It's turning vast parts of the ocean into garbage dumps and poisoning sea life. I recently learned that the sunscreen I used contains a chemical that contributes to the death of coral reefs, which is as crucial to marine fisheries as bees are to plant life on land.

When I talk to people about Wise Livelihood, many begin by saying it was hard to engage with it, thinking only in terms of those five jobs we shouldn't have (trading in poison, weapons, intoxicants, meat, and human beings), none of which they had ever had. I mentioned to some that my financial advisor once suggested buying stock in a liquor business, and I nixed the idea. She said, well, it's recession-proof because then people drink more, and I just said, "That's kind of why I don't want to." Investments contribute to my livelihood, so I

would have been making a living, in part, off the misery that alcohol can cause. Once we open the notion of livelihood up, it gets a lot juicier for most people. It has to do with *any way* we engage with the economic aspect of our lives – which is huge. In fact, everything we do has an economic impact.

Retirees, trust fund kids, and all people who spend money are included in Wise Livelihood. Even if you went to go live off the land somewhere, you'd still have an economic impact on that land and any other beings your actions affect. Every dollar anyone spends affects the way this vast economic machine behaves. Wise Livelihood covers not just how you earn your dollars and what you spend on, but *how* you spend them.

In Bikkhu Bodhi's book on the Eightfold Path, he talks about treating people with "due respect and consideration." This calls for employers to be fair and decent with their workers. Employees should do their jobs, and while at work, treat all others with the same respect and consideration.

Whether or not we are gainfully employed, as we spend our dollars we should treat cashiers, clerks, secretaries, sales reps, and everyone who's doing their jobs for us the same way. And as we move through our days we need to consider the impact all our activities have on this interconnected web of what is needed by all forms of life.

Every action we take affects the welfare of all other beings. One of the lessons we've learned from the massive scale of human economic foolishness has been this, that we indeed have the capability to annihilate all species on Earth, including ourselves. So whether you're looking at Wise Livelihood in terms of some poison your company spews out into the world, or what you're having for dinner, or how you treat the bus or Uber driver, it extends to every facet of your life. *And* it pulls all the rest of the Eightfold Path into it.

I remember one of the first talks I heard as a Zen student, about the care with which an elephant places her foot as she walks. Elephants have been called the landscape architects of the jungle; they really have an impact with every step they take. And so do we. So we should be just as careful as we tread this earth, careful of those we do any sort of business with, those we meet at random, all those creatures we don't even notice encountering, and the very planet itself. We can be terribly powerful, *or* powerfully kind in our impact on the world. It's our choice, and all we've learned about the Eightfold Path, and the three parts left for us to explore, will help us Live Wisely, which is Wise Livelihood.

Thank you

I want to take a minute to mention this month's Practice Guides. We have 5 weeks until the next talk in this series. Right Livelihood is so expansive it blends into the next part of the Path, Wise Effort. So week 5's practices begin this transition by taking a look at how we accomplish change. At the beginning of this course, almost everyone wanted to know what to do about it when they saw they had views that weren't in harmony with Wise Understanding, or motivations that clashed with Wise Intention. Well, we will begin to work with this in the 5th week, as we explore how to change your thinking and your conduct, if you're engaged in any aspect of Livelihood that is not Wise.