

Right Livelihood

December 21, 2007

We're often impatient at the practice. We want to go straight to insight, straight to the solution of all our problems, so we can then go back home and get on with the rest of our lives. But you first have to put the mind in good shape before you can gain any insight. You have to feed it well: That's what concentration is all about. As the Buddha once said, if you don't have the pleasure and rapture that can come from at least the first jhana, you're always going to be tempted by sensuality. Even if you understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and sensual desires, if you don't have this alternative way of finding happiness you're going to go back to your old ways. No matter how much Dhamma you may have read or how precise your understanding of the intricacies of the Buddha's teachings, when the time comes to feed, you're going to go back and feed on the same old roadkill you've been feeding on all your life.

It's like Ajaan Chah's simile: Westerners, he once said, are like vultures. When they fly, they fly very high, but when they eat, they eat low. That's one of those quotes you don't normally see in books about Ajaan Chah, but it hits home. We in the West tend to overlook our need for the groundwork provided by concentration. The Buddha himself compared the happiness, pleasure, and equanimity that come from concentration to kinds of food. His image was of a fortress at the edge of a frontier, and different qualities in the path correspond to different aspects of the fortress. There's discernment, which is like a slippery wall that the enemy can't climb up. Learning is like a range of weapons to fight off the enemy. Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper who remembers who to let in and who not to let in. And jhana, he said, is like stores of food.

The first jhana is like water and grass. When you work up to the fourth jhana, you've got honey, butter, and ghee. These are ways of nourishing the mind and providing for its right livelihood. Even if you're not gaining any higher levels of insight, at least you're finding pleasure in a blameless place. This qualifies as right livelihood in the path. The more pleasure, the more a sense of wellbeing and stability you can develop from within, then the lighter your kammic footprint on the rest of the world, the less harm you're causing as you search for your livelihood, both physical and mental.

So as you're practicing concentration, you're developing several factors of the path at once. There's right resolve, the resolve to renounce sensuality, to find a

pleasure that's not involved with sensual passion; right mindfulness, which is the theme of right concentration; and right livelihood, looking after your needs in a skillful way. Right livelihood is the poor stepsister of the eightfold path. It's the factor that the Buddha hardly defines at all. He simply says the disciple of the noble ones avoids wrong livelihood and makes his or her living through right livelihood—which doesn't tell you much.

Part of this may have been simply a question of etiquette. There's only one passage in the Canon where the Buddha clearly comes out with a general statement condemning certain trades as wrong livelihood. He lists five—trading in poison, trading in weapons, trading in intoxicants, trading in meat, and trading in human beings as slaves—saying that the disciple of the noble ones avoids them. You don't set yourself up with a shop to sell alcohol, poison, weapons, meat, or slaves. But otherwise the Buddha is very circumspect when talking about other people's occupations.

There are two cases where people of questionable professions come to him. One is an actor; the other, a professional soldier. They say pretty much the same thing. "Our teachers who taught us to be actors," the actor says, "claimed that if you spend your life entertaining people with your imitations of reality, making them laugh, you're going to attain the heaven of laughter after death. What does Master Gotama have to say about that?"

The Buddha twice refuses to answer, but the actor keeps after him, and asks him a third time. So the Buddha finally says, "Well, it looks like I can't get anywhere with you by saying I don't want to answer that. So I'll answer you." He goes on to say that if, as you're acting, you give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in your audience, and your motivation for acting is greed, anger, and delusion, then after you die you're going to go to the hell of laughter—i.e., not the place where people laugh *with* you, but where they laugh *at* you. So the actor breaks into tears. The Buddha says, "See? That's why I didn't want to answer your question." The actor says, "No, I'm not crying because of what you said. I'm just crying because I've been deceived by my teachers for so long."

Similarly with the soldier. The soldier says, "I was taught that if you die in battle, you're going to go to the heaven of heroes. What does Master Gotama have to say about that?" Again, the Buddha twice refuses to answer. When pushed for the third time, he finally says, "When you're in the midst of battle, giving rise to the desire for the killing of other beings—'May these other beings suffer, may they be harmed, may they be killed'—that mind state, if you die then, will take you to the hell of heroes who die in battle." Like the actor, the soldier breaks into tears and the Buddha says, "See? That's why I didn't want to answer your question." And the soldier, like the actor, says, "No, I'm not crying because

of what you said. I'm just crying because I've been deceived for so long by my teachers."

The Buddha's etiquette here is interesting. He didn't set out on a crusade against actors or professional soldiers or advertising people or whatever. Only if he was pushed would he condemn a particular occupation. Otherwise, what he would ask you to do is 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.

But there's another side to right livelihood, and that's looking at your attitude toward what you consume. This is one of the reasons why we have that chant every evening, looking back on our use of the requisites during the day. Why did you use the requisites? Actually that chant is for when you didn't reflect while you were using the requisites. 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?

The chant reminds you of the ideal motivation: Wear clothing to protect yourself from the elements, to cover up the parts of body that cause shame. Take food not to put on bulk, not for the fun or the flavor of it. After all, those who provided the food that you're eating—the farmers who worked, the animals who gave up their lives—didn't provide it in fun. You take the food simply so you can continue practicing, so you can eliminate hunger pains and yet at the same time not overstuff yourself until there's the discomfort that comes from eating too much. You're not eating just for the flavor of the food; you're eating for the nourishment of the body, so that you can practice in ease. Your use of shelter should simply be to protect yourself from the elements and to provide a place where you can be quiet, find some privacy, so you can practice. And as for medicine, you use it to eliminate pain and to maintain freedom from disease, that's all.

When you think about these things, it forces you to look at your impact when you eat, when you buy clothing, when you buy any of these things and use them: What is your impact on the world? The fact that you're alive and breathing means that you have a lot of needs, and the needs can be met only by relying on others. What way can you rely on others so that you're not harming them or causing them unnecessary pain?

This reflection ties in with one of the important principles of what are called the customs of the Noble Ones, which is contentment with your material possessions. When you think in these ways, you find that you're buying less, using less, because you're looking elsewhere for your happiness. I.e., you're looking inside. This is where the concentration comes in. This is why concentration is an important element of right livelihood. It provides you the honey, the butter, the grain, and the other foods you need for the mind, for your true happiness deep down inside. At the same time, this happiness provides you with a good foundation for the insights that are going to come as you start looking at the various ways in which you keep on taking birth. Because, again, the fact you're taking birth is placing a burden on other beings, a burden on the world.

The insights you're going to need to stop that process can be pretty harsh. As the Buddha said, when you take food, think about the story of the couple who were going across the desert with their only child. They got more than halfway across the desert and ran totally out of food. They realized that if they didn't eat anything, all three of them would die. So they decided to kill their child and make jerky out of the baby: baby jerky. That way at least two of them would survive and then they could start a family again when they got to the other side of the desert.

Now, the Buddha said, what would be their attitude toward the food while they were eating it? Would they be eating it for fun? No, they'd be thinking with sorrow of what they had to do in this horrible circumstance. That, the Buddha said, is how you should regard physical food: not something you eat out of joy or for the flavor, but simply to keep life going, realizing that your having to eat causes suffering, causes pain.

That's a harsh contemplation—one of many harsh contemplations in the Buddha's teachings. The only way the mind can stand up to that kind of contemplation is if you've got the strong sense of wellbeing that comes from nourishing the mind with right concentration. Otherwise, the insights that can come from meditation, if you don't have a good solid foundation like this, can be disorienting, destabilizing.

So as the foundation for your practice, you want to keep working on these skills. Appreciate the simple quality of getting the mind still, finding a sense of ease simply by the way you breathe; gaining a sense of wellbeing, rapture, equanimity when you need them. In this way, you nourish the mind with good food. That's right livelihood in the highest sense. It puts you in a position where, while you're still alive this time around, you weigh lightly on the world around you. And you're developing the skill so you don't have to come back and weigh

the world down again. This is why the Buddha's teachings are not selfish. They're an act of kindness both for you and for the whole world around you.