CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Right Livelihood

To practice Right Livelihood (*samyag ajīva*), you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideals of love and compassion. The way you support yourself can be an expression of your deepest self, or it can be a source of suffering for you and others.

The suttas usually define Right Livelihood as earning a living without needing to transgress any of the Five Mindfulness Trainings: not dealing in arms, in the slave trade, the meat trade, the sale of alcohol, drugs, or poisons; or making prophecies or telling fortunes. Monks and nuns must be careful not to make unreasonable demands on the laity for the four requisites of medicine, food, clothes, and lodging, and not to live with material requisites in excess of immediate needs. Bringing awareness to every moment, we try to have a vocation that is beneficial to humans, animals, plants, and the earth, or at least minimally harmful. We live in a society in which jobs are sometimes hard to find, but if it happens that our work involves harming life, we should try to find another job. Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or erode them. We should be aware of the consequences, far and near, of the way we earn our living. So many modern industries are harmful to humans and nature, even food production. Chemical pesticides and fertilizers can cause a lot of harm to the environment. Practicing Right Livelihood is difficult for farmers. If they do not use chemicals, it
may be difficult for them to compete commercially. This is just one example. When you practice your profession or trade, observe the Five Mindfulness Trainings. A job that involves killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, or selling drugs or alcohol is not Right Livelihood. If your company pollutes the rivers or the air, working there is not Right Livelihood. Making weapons or profiting from others’ superstitions is also not Right Livelihood. People have superstitions, such as believing that their fate is sealed in the stars or in the palms of their hands. No one can be sure what will occur in the future. By practicing mindfulness, we can change the destiny astrologers have predicted for us. Moreover, prophecies can be self-fulfilling.

Composing or performing works of art can also be livelihood. A composer, writer, painter, or performer has an effect on the collective consciousness. Any work of art, to a large extent, a product of the collective consciousness. Therefore, the individual artist needs to practice mindfulness so that his or her work of art helps those who touch it practice right attention. A young man wanted to learn how to draw lotus flowers, so he went to a master to apprentice with him. The master took him to a lotus pond and invited him to sit there. The young man saw flowers bloom when the sun was high, and he watched them return into buds when night fell. The next morning, he did the same. When one lotus flower wilted and its petals fell into the water, he just looked at the stalk, the stamen, and the rest of the flower, and then moved on to another lotus. He did that for ten days. On the eleventh day, the master asked him, “Are you ready?” and he replied, “I will try.” The master gave him a brush, and although the young man’s style was childlike, the lotus he drew was beautiful. He had become the lotus, and the painting came forth from him. You could see his naiveté concerning technique, but deep beauty was there.

Right Livelihood is not just a personal matter. It is our collective karma. Suppose I am a schoolteacher and I believe that nurturing love and understanding in children is a beautiful occupation. I would object if someone were to ask me to stop teaching and become, for example, a butcher. But when I meditate on the interrelatedness of things, I see that the butcher is not the only person responsible for killing animals. We may think the butcher’s livelihood is wrong and ours is right, but if we didn’t eat meat, he would not have to kill. Right Livelihood is a collective matter. The livelihood of each person affects everyone else. The butcher’s children might benefit from my teaching, while my children, because they eat meat, share some responsibility for the butcher’s livelihood. Suppose a farmer who sells his cattle as meat wants to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings. He wants to know if he can, in light of the first training to protect life. He feels that he gives his cattle the best conditions for their well-being. He even operates his own slaughterhouse, so that there is no unnecessary cruelty inflicted on the animals when he puts an end to their lives. He inherited his farm from his father, and he has a family to support. This is a dilemma. What should he do? His intentions are good, but he has inherited his farm and his habit energies from his ancestors. Every time a cow is slaughtered, it leaves an impression on his consciousness, which will come back to him in dreams, during meditation, or at the moment of death. It is Right Livelihood to look after his cows so well while they are alive. He has the wish to be kind to his cows, and he also wants the security of regular income for himself and his family.

He should continue to look deeply and practice mindfulness with his local Sangha. As his insight deepens, the way out of the situation where he finds himself killing to make a living will present itself.

Everything we do contributes to our effort to practice Right Livelihood. It is more than just the way we earn our paycheck. We cannot succeed at having a Right Livelihood one
hundred percent, but we can resolve to go in the direction of compassion and reducing suffering. And we can resolve to help create a society in which there is more Right Livelihood and less wrong livelihood.

Millions of people, for example, make their living in the arms industry, helping directly or indirectly to manufacture conventional and nuclear weapons. The U.S., Russia, France, Britain, China, and Germany are the primary suppliers of these weapons. Weapons are then sold to Third World countries, where the people do not need guns; they need food. To manufacture or sell weapons is not Right Livelihood, but the responsibility for this situation lies with all of us — politicians, economists, and consumers. We have not yet organized a compelling national debate on this problem. We have to discuss this further, and we have to keep creating new jobs so that no one has to live on the profits from weapons’ manufacture. If you are able to work in a profession that helps realize your ideal of compassion, be grateful. And please try to help create proper jobs for others by living mindfully, simply, and sanely. Use all of your energy to try to improve the situation.

To practice Right Livelihood means to practice Right Mindfulness. Every time the telephone rings, hear it as a bell of mindfulness. Stop what you are doing, breathe in and out consciously, and then proceed to the telephone. The way you answer the phone will embody Right Livelihood. We need to discuss among ourselves how to practice mindfulness in the workplace, how to practice Right Livelihood. Do we breathe when we hear the telephone ringing and before we pick up the phone to make a call? Do we smile while we take care of others? Do we walk mindfully from meeting to meeting? Do we practice Right Speech? Do we practice deep and total relaxation after hours of hard work? Do we live in ways that encourage everyone to be peaceful and happy and to have a job that is in the direction of peace and happiness? These are very practical and important questions. To work in a way that encourages this kind of thinking and acting, in a way that encourages our ideal of compassion, is to practice Right Livelihood.

If someone has a profession that causes living beings to suffer and oppresses others, it will infect their own consciousness, just as when we pollute the air that we ourselves have to breathe. Many people get rich by means of wrong livelihood. Then they go to their temple or church and make donations. These donations come from feelings of fear and guilt rather than the wish to bring happiness to others and relieve others of suffering. When a temple or church receives large donations, those responsible for receiving the funds must understand this: they should do their best to help the donor transform by showing him or her a way out of that wrong livelihood. Such persons need, more than anything, the teachings of the Buddha.

As we study and practice the Noble Eightfold Path, we see that each element of the path is contained within all the other seven elements. We also see that each element of the path contains the Noble Truths of suffering, the making of suffering, and the ending of suffering.

Practicing the First Noble Truth, we recognize our suffering and call it by its name — depression, anxiety, fear, or insecurity. Then we look directly into that suffering to discover its basis, and that is practicing the Second Noble Truth. These two practices contain the first two elements of the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, Right View and Right Thinking. All of us have a tendency to run away from suffering, but now with the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path we have the courage to face our suffering directly. We use Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration to look courageously at our suffering. The looking deeply that shows us clearly the basis of our suffering is Right View. Right View will not show one reason for
THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA’S TEACHING

our suffering, but layers upon layers of causes and conditions: seeds we have inherited from our parents, grandparents, and ancestors; seeds in us that have been watered by our friends and the economic and political situations of our country; and so many other causes and conditions.

Now the time has come to do something to lessen our suffering. Once we know what is feeding our suffering, we find a way to cease ingesting that nutriment, whether it is edible food, the food of sense-impression, the food we receive from our intentions, or the food from our consciousness. We do this by practicing Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, remembering that Right Speech is also listening deeply. To practice these three aspects, we take the Mindfulness Trainings as our guide. Practicing according to the Mindfulness Trainings, we see that when we speak, act, or earn our living, we do it with Right Mindfulness. Right Mindfulness lets us know when we say something that is not Right Speech or do something that is not Right Action. Once Right Mindfulness is practiced along with Right Diligence, Right Concentration will follow easily and give rise to insight or Right View. In fact, it is not possible to practice one element of the Noble Eightfold Path without practicing all seven other elements. This is the nature of interbeing, and it is true for all of the teachings offered by the Buddha.