

WORKING LIFE

An exploration of Right Livelihood.

Jnanavaca.

"Buddhism, properly and deeply understood, and thoroughly and extensively applied, is revolutionary. It is revolutionary, that is to say, within the context of the established order. It is in this realisation that our breakthrough consists: in the realisation of the fact that Buddhism has to transform every aspect of our lives and be not just something that we theoretically understand, not just a little hobby with which we occupy ourselves once or twice a week, but the transforming agent, the transforming influence - the catalyst, if you like - of our lives."

These words from Bhante make very clear, perhaps uncomfortably clear, that if we are sincere in our practice of the Dharma, then there can be no 'no go' areas for the Dharma in our lives. We need to be trying to integrate every aspect of our lives, every aspect of ourselves, around our Ideals. For many of us our working lives can be the most challenging aspect to integrate. But if that's the case, then it is likely that it is also one of the most important aspects in the integration process. As Bhante puts it: "Unless one solves the problem of Right Livelihood (or rather, the problem of wrong livelihood), to some extent at least, spiritual development can be quite difficult." And of course it's not only Bhante, but also the Buddha who emphasised livelihood as a spiritual issue - to such an extent that it comprises a whole 'limb' of the Noble Eightfold Path.

The essence of the Buddha's teaching is the truth of conditionality. All things arise in dependence upon conditions. Conditions matter. In fact conditions are all that there is. Everything is a network of conditions. We are conditioned by the world around us, and in turn we condition that world. It can all seem fairly straight-forward - at least in theory. It's the application that becomes more difficult. The conditions that make up our 'working lives' matter. They influence the world around us, and they influence our consciousness.

Somebody was recently saying to me how difficult she found going back to work after returning from the Winter Retreat. The environment she returned to, the values, the behaviours were all so different, and at odds with, what she had experienced on retreat. She was asking about what she could do. And I'm sure this is a fairly common, painful experience for many people - it certainly used to be for me. So what can we do?

Simplistically speaking we can either try to develop spiritually within the conditions that we have, or we can change (or exchange) those conditions into more supportive ones. In practice, knowing which approach is best for us in our current circumstances is often more tricky. Probably all of us need to be working in both these ways.

I want to begin this talk by looking at what we mean by 'Right Livelihood'. I am going to use some material from a talk that Subhuti gave a few years ago. In this talk he outlined five different categories or models of Right Livelihood that constituted a sort of spectrum of options.

It's useful to look at these options because otherwise it can be easy to mistakenly think that Right Livelihood has to mean work in one of the FWBO's Team Based Right Livelihood businesses. The term 'Right Livelihood' can become narrowed down to 'Team Based Right Livelihood', and this is unhelpful.

Subhuti's five categories for Right Livelihood

The first of Subhuti's categories for Right Livelihood was simply 'ethical work' - or work that is at least not unethical. It need not have any more explicit relation to the spiritual life in order for it to be Right Livelihood. There is of course a whole spectrum of work covered just by this category - ranging from the ethically neutral to the sort of work that is directly helping others or making for a better world. And of course questions of ethics are rarely cut and dry. Speaking personally, I used to work in the IT department of a large retailer. Initially when I started trying to practice the Dharma, I thought of my work as more or less ethically neutral - and in some ways it was. But when I became a vegetarian, I also became uncomfortably aware that the company I worked for sold meat (amongst other things), and that the systems I was helping to develop were ultimately connected to this trade. And being a multi-national retailer, they were a large player in the market - and the suffering connected with it. However in the end it wasn't this ethical consideration that led me to leave. It was a more direct experience of my values changing. What mattered to me, what I was interested in, what I enjoyed doing - all these things started to change as I explored meditation and Buddhism. Increasingly I felt I just didn't belong in the environment in which I had worked for ten years. In particular I missed the level of communication that I could experience with my friends in the Sangha.

In a way, this brings me onto Subhuti's next point - or category - for Right Livelihood. Assuming that our work is at least ethically neutral, he suggests making contact with other Buddhists in the same line of work. So even though we might not have any work colleagues who are practising Buddhism, we can try to form connections with other people in the Sangha who might support our spiritual practice in the workplace. This can perhaps begin to break down the walls between the different aspects of our lives and help in the process of integration.

Subhuti's third category is a continuation of this. He suggests that people in the Sangha in the same line of work might be able to arrange to work together in the same organisation. For example teachers in the Sangha might try to arrange to work in the same school, or health professionals in the same hospital. Again speaking from my own experience, although I didn't have any FWBO Sangha members in the company I worked for, there were several people I came across who were interested in meditation and the spiritual life more generally. And being able to talk to some of them and to form friendships with two of them in particular, meant a great deal to me. It felt a huge relief to be able to communicate with someone about what was happening in my life.

Fourthly Subhuti talks about the model of several Buddhists setting up a business together, but paying themselves a normal 'worldly' wage rather than a minimal support package. This would allow those that need or want a 'normal' standard of living to experience working with the Sangha. We have had a few examples of this in the FWBO, mainly amongst those in the building trade, but it's a model that I hope is explored much further.

Lastly there's the more familiar model of 'Team Based Right Livelihood' as we see it in the businesses around the LBC. Subhuti talked of there being a definite renunciative aspect to this type of livelihood - requiring us to simplify our lives, reduce our 'wants', in order to try and raise money for Dharma projects. He talked of it in terms of a 'semi-monastic' lifestyle.

There's much to explore in each of these five categories that Subhuti outlined, but I'm not going to be able to do that. I hope however that as a Sangha we will actively explore all these categories (and others that might arise) so that we have more of a developed understanding of the relationship between work and the spiritual life. One thing that I think we could start to think about more is seeing these categories as more fluid and maybe seeing the possibility of moving between them more freely. For example I think that for some people it might be appropriate to think about working in Team Based Right Livelihood as a sort of short-term career break - rather like doing VSO. Or even within a Team Based Right Livelihood business there might be a mixture of models at play - some people earning a wage, others on support package, and others working on a voluntary basis. We are starting to see more of this sort of mixture happening in our businesses - which is great. At the same time this 'mixing' means that we need to be clearer than ever about which model each person is working to - and why. So for example, in Team Based Right Livelihood, if we decide to give ourselves a support package that is comparative to a worldly wage, then we are probably blurring boundaries in an unhelpful way.

In the remainder of this talk I will primarily focus on the last of Subhuti's five models of Right Livelihood - the Team Based Right Livelihood model. I hope however that what I say will have some relevance to all of the categorisations - indeed to any work situation. I am going to look at 'Team Based Right Livelihood' under three headings: 'What We Do', 'Who We Work With' and 'Why We Work'.

'Team Based Right Livelihood' under three headings

1. What We Do

Buddhism is primarily about action - it's something we do, even if what we 'do' is an invisible working on our minds. Sometimes people want to see Buddhism more in terms of 'being' as opposed to 'doing', but in a way it's a false distinction. Bhante puts this very clearly: "It is wrong to distinguish between what a man is and what he does. There are no mute inglorious Miltons. If he is mute he is not Milton. That one does not do something is part of one's character."

We could consider the question macroscopically - i.e. what do we do for work? - or microscopically - how do we work? I want to talk about the latter, about what we do in work from an ethical perspective. And I'm going to explore this using the three aspects of ethics - ethics of 'body', of 'speech' and of 'mind'.

Ethics of Body

The main thing I want to say here is very straight-forward - that working involves doing the work. In particular, from an ethical perspective we need to do what we said we'd do. And do it with integrity, in a reliable and responsible way. It's about turning up on time (which of course implies turning up at all!). It's about following the tasks through to their conclusion. It's about being transparent in our actions. This is all so easy to say and often quite difficult to practise. I remember in my IT job there were times when all I could really focus on was getting through the day. I can remember one project (that lasted about a year) where none of us had anything to do - almost literally nothing to do! And yet we kept up a slightly surreal pretence that we were doing some strategic research work. And for some bizarre reasons to do with internal politics, it wasn't possible to say 'look we're just wasting our time here!' I can remember being very frustrated and unhappy - going for long walks, long lunches and spending time in bookshops browsing books on Buddhism! I can remember looking for excuses just to wander around the huge building in which I worked (striding around as if I had a purpose), and even riding up and down in the lift!

And all the time being paid a pretty high salary to not do anything. It was probably the most difficult and depressing time of my career. So hopefully we never have similar situations in any of our Team Based Right Livelihood businesses. At least there's not much chance of the high salaries... For us in the Sangha, the broader principle is about trying to use our energy skilfully - and this is an area that we could all usefully revisit from time to time.

Ethics of Speech

In terms of the ethics of speech at work, I want to start by emphasising friendliness - friendly speech. Our Team Based Right Livelihood businesses should be characterised by it. Bhante once said that we can't always expect to be happy, but we could always be friendly. Sometimes when we're in the midst of a busy environment, when we're under pressure, friendly speech can seem like something we don't have time for - something that's not very important. But in fact it makes a huge difference. Always. It makes a huge difference to ourselves and to the people around us. It creates an atmosphere that extends beyond us. Generally I think we're reasonably good at this aspect of speech, but I think that it would be good to ask ourselves, to consider in our teams, how we could be even friendlier - with each other, with our customers and with our suppliers. After all, we really should be exemplary in this regard.

Next I want to mention truthful speech. In a sense I don't need to talk about this - it's probably something that we take for granted in the Sangha. It's the fourth precept. I mention it merely to celebrate that we do have an environment of trust and honesty in the Sangha. And that this is comparatively rare in the world - at least in my experience. In my previous work it wasn't that people were particularly unethical - it's just that the culture tolerated (and even encouraged) an element of dishonesty, of lying, of saying what was convenient rather than what was true. This seemed to become more the case the further up the corporate hierarchy you ascended. And most people didn't see anything particularly wrong with this. For me it became a source of more and more tension as I deepened my practice of the Dharma, and in the end was another reason why I decided to leave my job and work for the LBC instead.

Thirdly there's the whole issue of disgruntled speech. I don't mean where we have a genuine grievance that we're trying to address. I mean that we can habitually fall into moaning and complaining - a sort of low level and persistent 'whingeing' without any particular reason. I think that this is something that some of us have to watch out for in our Team Based Right Livelihood businesses. It can have a very undermining effect on ourselves and those around us. It can be a symptom of not taking responsibility for the situation which we're in. Even if we 'have a point' as it were, unfortunately this sort of disgruntled speech doesn't usually lead to any progress or improvements. If we find ourselves often talking in this way we probably need to re-connect with our inspiration, our ideals and our real reasons for wanting to work in the Sangha.

Finally I wanted to highlight another form of insidious speech that we need to watch out for - that of gossiping and 'back-biting'. There's probably more to explore in this area but perhaps its best to just leave it there and move on.

Ethics of Mind

The Buddha taught the Four Right Efforts (samyak prahanani) as a framework for working with our minds. The effort to: eradicate already-arisen unskilful mental states; prevent the arising of unarisen unskilful mental states; cultivate the arising of as yet unarisen skilful mental states; maintain already-arisen skilful mental states.

Working with and on our mental states is the great challenge of practising the Dharma. It needs to inform everything that we do and in particular be the basis for our working in Team Based Right Livelihood. I think this is what Bhante means by his aphorism: "Unless your work is your meditation, your meditation is not your meditation."

One particular form of unskilful mental state that I want to mention is 'resentment'. This is perhaps a state that we need to be watching out for whenever we are trying to go beyond ourselves, when we are trying to develop spiritually. We can start out with ideas about what working in Team Based Right Livelihood is going to be like, and then find it doesn't meet our expectations. Or we can have an idea about how we will develop and then find we don't change in the way, or as quickly as, we would like to. We can have ideas about other people and then find they don't live up to our expectations. It is very easy (and understandable) to fall into resentment and blame at this point. And then very easy to give up on Team Based Right Livelihood, or even the spiritual life altogether. We need to try and work with feelings of resentment as they arise rather than letting them build up. This may of course involve addressing an objective situation, as well as working on our internal responses. We need somehow to be trying to keep a sense of initiative and responsibility for ourselves and our mental states. We need to keep practising the four Right Efforts.

2. Who We Work With

Arguably the single most important conditioning factor in our lives is the people around us. The people we work with will affect our experience of work. Team Based Right Livelihood gives us an opportunity of working with others in the Sangha. This needs no further justification. It is a delight - at least in my experience - to work with others who share our ideals.

At the LBC we are extremely fortunate to have such a rich Sangha and so many opportunities to work within it. It's easy to take this situation for granted, but in fact it's rare. Even in the FWBO it's rare. There are no other centres in our Movement with so many Team Based Right Livelihood businesses. And there are no other Buddhist Movements who have explored Right Livelihood as fully in this way. We are pioneers in the Buddhist world. It's so easy to not realise this, so easy to forget it. Those working in Team Based Right Livelihood are custodians of a rare and precious jewel. These businesses have been built up through the efforts of a whole generation of people - most of whom are no longer at the LBC. We have a duty to maintain and enhance their gift of these businesses, and in turn to pass that gift on to the next generation.

But working in the Sangha can also be challenging. Co-operation is challenging. Being true to ourselves and at the same time considering others is challenging. By comparison working in the 'power mode' is easy. We are still learning in our businesses how to work in the 'love mode' and at the same time be commercially viable.

As an aside I would like to add that working on a consensus basis does not necessarily mean that everyone on a team needs to be involved in every decision. Unless there is a very high level of harmony and maturity in the team, this approach is unlikely to be fruitful. And if there really is such harmony and maturity, it's unlikely to be necessary. More often I think we need to collectively decide how to apportion responsibilities in the business - each person being willing to take responsibility and also to let others take responsibility, as appropriate.

Working co-operatively in this way can be difficult. Sometimes it's pretty easy to get on well with people, be friendly to them and so on, until, that is, you start working with them! Certainly that's

often been my experience. This challenge is also why Team Based Right Livelihood is such a spiritual opportunity. By learning to relate to each other - and not just superficially - we are learning to overcome our fixed and limited sense of self, learning to develop empathy. This is not something that is usually valued very highly in an ordinary working environment, but in Team Based Right Livelihood it is of crucial significance. Sraddhagita was recently saying in a talk she gave, that working in the Wild Cherry can be like trying to practise all five stages of the Metta Bhavana all day. Relating to others in this way is effectively aligning us to Reality. Ideally we could, and should, be doing this, whatever our working situation, but Team Based Right Livelihood gives a particularly rich and wonderful opportunity to learn to relate with awareness and kindness. Relating to each other becomes as fundamental as the work itself.

So I would like to encourage us all to value the Team Based Right Livelihood businesses we have around the LBC - whether or not we work in them. They represent unique opportunities. If we can help out in any way - either through our custom, or through encouragement, or through giving our time and energy - then I'd like to encourage us all to do so. And not just for the sake of the businesses and those that work in them, but also for our own benefit. Sometimes the LBC mandala is not easy to feel at home in. The size of the Sangha and the number of different activities can make it difficult for us to find our place in the mandala. If you feel like that, then I'd recommend helping in one of the businesses. My own experience is that it was only when I started working at the centre that I truly felt a part of it.

3) Why We Work

We are conditioned not just by the people around us, but also the values and culture around us. By working in any organisation, we can, for better or worse, start to take on and even embody the values of that organisation. More broadly we live in a free-market capitalist democracy (again for better and worse). As Buddhists we need to be careful and discriminating about which of the values of this society we choose to take on. For example much of consumerism is driven by greed. Much of the greed is based on insecurity and even fear. The multi-national that I worked for - and I don't think it was particularly unusual in this respect - used greed and fear as motivators for its employees (though no-one would probably have put it like that). And of course these forces are as much within us as in any external situation.

If we're trying to live a spiritual life, then there needs to be an altruistic dimension to our lives. Ideally our work needs to give expression to that altruistic dimension. If possible this would relate directly to the type of work we do, but whatever the actual work it needs to be part of the attitude we bring to that work. If we can't relate to our work in this way, then perhaps we can have an altruistic dimension to how we spend the money we earn. Or perhaps we give time and energy outside of our main work to other more altruistic projects. However we give expression to it, this altruistic dimension is an intrinsic part of any genuine spiritual life. It is necessary if we are to overcome our habitual pre-occupation with ourselves, and our own happiness. Working in Team Based Right Livelihood is an opportunity for altruistic work, and this can help give meaning to our lives. Of course it's not the only, or perhaps even the best expression of altruism, but it is unique in that it is directly connected to the spreading of the Dharma in the world. Meaningful work helps give meaning to our lives.

I find some of the words of Albert Einstein inspiring, and I want to share something he wrote:

"Everybody has certain ideals which determine the direction of his endeavours and his judgements. In this sense I have never looked upon ease and happiness as ends in themselves"

- such an ethical basis I call more proper for a herd of swine. The ideals which have lighted me on my way and time after time given me new courage to face life cheerfully, have been Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Without the sense of fellowship with men of like mind, of preoccupation with the objective, the eternally unattainable in the field of art and scientific research, life would have seemed to me empty. The ordinary objects of human endeavour - property, outward success, luxury - have always seemed to me contemptible."

If we are working in a Team Based Right Livelihood situation then our motivations for being there are of vital importance. Most of us probably have a mixture of motivations of varying degrees of skilfulness. It's very likely that the working situation will challenge these motivations, expose them and purify them as if by fire. I remember hearing a story of someone on a retreat asking Aloka about the Chod practice. In this tantric practice you visualise your consciousness leaving your body and taking the form of a dakini, who then chops up your corpse and offers it in transmuted form to all living beings. The practice is said to be a powerful way to see into the truths of impermanence and insubstantiality, as well as a way of gaining confidence in the Dharma and freedom from fear. Aloka, who is a very long-standing member of our Order, responded to this person by saying something like "never mind the Chod practice, if you want to challenge your fixed self-view, go and work in one of the LBC's businesses!" Working in Team Based Right Livelihood, if we can grasp its opportunity for spiritual development, is a heroic endeavour.

The conventional rewards of money, status, power, approval, comfort, security, won't be met. Our egoistic motives won't be satisfied. If we are primarily concerned about our own wants and needs - about what we can get from our work - then we will be disappointed by Team Based Right Livelihood. It won't work. If however we are more concerned with what we can give, how we can help; if we are looking for greater meaning, for greater awareness, for deeper communication; if we can see our work as part of a larger spiritual vision, then such work can become a rich and fulfilling adventure.

Ultimately though, there is no good reason to work in Team Based Right Livelihood - just as there is no good reason to 'Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels'. It's an outrageous, crazy thing to do with one's life. It cannot be justified in ordinary terms. No reasoned arguments do it justice. Reasons belong to the world of conditioned existence, whereas true values point beyond it. When our work becomes an expression of these values - values such as Truth, Love, Beauty - then it becomes Right Livelihood in its fullest sense. As Bhante says, "Perfect work comes from the unification of pure wisdom and pure deeds".

I want to end with some words from the mystic poet Kahlil Gibran. They seem to capture the spirit of what I have been trying to say:

"You have been told also that life is darkness, and in your weariness you echo what was said by the weary.

And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge.

And all knowledge is vain save when there is work,

And all work is empty save when there is love;

.....
Work is love made visible"