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# Going Further with Buddhism

## *Week 5 – Perfect Livelihood*



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Last week we looked at Perfect Action as the ethical ‘core’ of the Noble Eightfold Path, and considered the negative and positive statements of the Five Precepts. This week we remain in the ethical dimension of the Path as we introduce the fifth ‘limb’ - Perfect Livelihood.

In some ways, this term doesn’t immediately do justice to the size of the ‘agenda’ that deeper thought reveals. The starting point for this discussion is to realise that Buddhism isn’t just as it is sometimes represented - a worthy but unworldly set of beliefs that have little to do with the sordid reality of everyday life. On the contrary, the Buddha made very practical and realistic suggestions about improving society, and there have been many historic examples of Buddhists who have been prepared to try to do so. The essence of these teachings is seen by many Buddhists as being entirely valid now, in the West of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the term ‘engaged Buddhism’ (originally coined by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh) is fairly well known.

Perfect Livelihood, in the broader sense described in ‘The Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path’, really involves the social and political aspects of our lives, as well as the economic ones – in other words, the transformation of the whole collective life that we have come to refer to as ‘society’. If we consider our personal role in this broader arena, there may well be more opportunities to bring about positive change than in the Buddha’s time. All the same, our contribution, through work, to the economy is still probably the way in which we have the greatest influence. After all, for most of us our work is a very considerable part of our lives, and to try to separate it from the rest of our experience is unlikely to be skilful, or even healthy.

For Buddhists, the blunt reality is that we need to operate in a medium that is often antagonistic to our spiritual ideals. Our principles of ethical action, speech and thought, it has to be said, are actually a long way from the norms of the society in which we live. This was true in the Buddha’s time in India, and is at least as true in the Europe of the present day. What can we do about this painful truth? It’s certainly possible to ‘opt out’ of society altogether, and to do so temporarily, as we do on retreat, may certainly be a positive thing. However, if we are genuinely concerned to extend metta to other living beings, this doesn’t really ring true as a permanent option. What we really need to do is to examine our economic and social role in the light of our Buddhist values. How we work, and equally how we spend our money, are conventionally thought to be nothing more than expressions of our ‘individualism’. If we take our spiritual life seriously, however, there has to be more to the story. The teaching of interconnectedness emphasises our place in a highly complex web, and we can’t pretend that our economic activities are conveniently exempt from this truth.

In 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path' we have examples of 'wrong' livelihood - occupations that a Buddhist might find difficult from an ethical standpoint, and would therefore do well to avoid. Some of these, like arms manufacture and human trafficking, are as difficult to justify now as they were in the Buddha's day. However, it's easy to add modern examples of our own, quite possibly from our personal experience. Most of us have had experiences of feeling discomfort about some aspect of our employer's methods, and a few of us have even felt the need to challenge them directly, or just move on to another job. However, this sort of approach might eventually just demonstrate that there are bigger questions that we need to ask about our personal relationship with many aspects of the economic system.

Having looked specifically at those occupations that might pose an ethical problem, Sangharakshita goes on to make some much broader points about our whole approach to work, and indeed to economics. To begin with, we might ask whether the work we do actually contributes anything of value to society in a real sense, and also whether it does us any personal good. The lectures that later became 'The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path' were originally given in 1968, when the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order was only a year old. Since then things have changed hugely, and most of us work in ways that would hardly have been recognisable then. The economy in which most of us work is largely concerned with the pursuit of luxury, using natural resources at a truly alarming rate and helping to foster an acquisitive, highly individualistic lifestyle. At the same time, many jobs seem to involve unwritten expectations of long hours and high performance – even when employers speak of 'work life balance'. If we are trying to pursue spiritual ideals these are very real issues that can only affect our mental states detrimentally.

Another consideration discussed in the chapter is vocation – in other words, work that is directly related to our core values. There are probably relatively few people truly employed in this way, but increasing numbers of people (particularly in the Triratna Buddhist Community) seem to be considering a move in the direction of more vocational work. This may involve lengthy re-training and a drop in income, but some people conclude that these are sacrifices worth making to make the time they spend at work more supportive of their spiritual development.

Under the heading of duration Sangharakshita suggests devoting as little time as one can manage to earning a living, and acknowledges just how radical a suggestion this is! Our society is extremely attached to the work ethic – we might even go so far as to describe it as an addiction.

In conclusion, the topic of Perfect Livelihood clearly addresses much more than our choice of occupation, as the term immediately suggests. The Triratna Buddhist Community has always had an idea that the Sangha is capable of forming a prototype 'new society', which would provide radical but practical alternatives to the 'old society'. Since the 1960s some important developments have taken place, just as suggested back then by Sangharakshita. There are now many individuals associated with the movement who have 'one foot in the world and one foot in the spiritual dimension'.