

Taking Care with Work

(The following section is taken from Buddhism from Within, page 49-52. This book was written by the late Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy and provides a very simple and intuitive approach to Buddhism.)

Work is another place where it is wise to take care, since work occupies a large part of our lives. Most forms of livelihood benefit the world and are suitable for a Buddhist. They may not be glamorous or seem all that benevolent while we are doing them; yet, in the big picture, it truly does matter that someone sweeps the streets, puts the right label on cans of peas, or keeps the world's financial currencies in balance. The benefit to others is obvious for those who work in the helping professions of medicine, teaching, counseling, raising a family, etcetera; nevertheless, Buddhism suggests that any job which assists humanity or the earth is worth doing and is worthy of respect. Undertaking any of these careers is what is known as the Path aspect of 'right livelihood.'

There are a few ways of earning a living, however, which are of doubtful merit: they either involve things which seem to do harm or which appear to be utterly useless. Most of the former can be identified by looking at them in terms of right speech and right action. For example, a few forms of political work, public relations, and the like seem to require of people that they actually deceive others. It is not easy to see how someone could hold such a job without chronically lying. There are other careers which require killing as part of the job: professional hunting or fishing, working in a slaughter house, or being involved in administering capital punishment would be examples. Most Buddhists would find these types of work to violate their conscience. The principle of violating a precept in order to promote a greater good or inhibit a greater harm can be applied to the killing which may occur as part of military and police work, but does the same principle apply to the jobs that I just mentioned? Does it apply to the making or sale of armaments? And, if it does apply, where does a person draw the line: are there some weapons which are so awful that a person of conscience simply cannot be involved in making them, for instance?

If, for a particular individual, the 'greater good principle' does not justify doing an activity, then how much distance does that person need to keep from it? For example, to return to the question of making arms, is it ethical to make components, some of which are then used in the making of weapons; to make computer programs that are used to make the components; to invest money in the companies which make the programs, etcetera? To take a different example, is it ethical to work in a laboratory which produces wonderful medicines to help people but does so at the cost of creating suffering and death for thousands of laboratory animals? These kinds of decisions are brought into focus for a Buddhist by the Path aspect of right livelihood, with the understanding that there are no easy answers and that people will take personal responsibility for their actions.

Similar hard choices arise when the Buddhist considers the ethical principle of refraining from theft: things get subtle once he or she looks past the obviously unwise livelihoods of being a burglar or a swindler. To be a farmer, for instance, is clearly a right livelihood which benefits people by feeding them; but what if the farming is done in a way which depletes the soil? Is that stealing from future generations in order to feed this one? Do the benefits outweigh the costs, or not? To be a forester who both cares for the land and provides wood for housing is most excellent, but if that forester's company starts cutting more trees than they plant, is this still right livelihood?

Most Buddhists would feel that people who work as prostitutes or pornography producers

coarsen themselves and place obstacles in the way of both their own Buddhist spiritual development and that of others. But what about creating advertising which plays upon people's sexual fantasies in order to sell products? Or, is it ethical for a Buddhist to be involved in making movies which make a useful social point yet rely upon stimulating people's sexual desires in order to get them to the box office?

As for the area of drink and drugs, examples of work which most Buddhists would avoid would include those of making or selling liquor or illegal drugs. This seems to be a pretty easily defined area where right and wrong livelihoods can be clearly identified, yet gray areas are not far off here, as well. Consider the farmer again: is it ethical for him or her to sell grain to a distillery? Suppose that a doctor has a patient on chemotherapy for cancer, a patient who could benefit from using marijuana to overcome some of the side effects of the cancer medications; is it wise to recommend this drug to the patient or not? And then there are the drugs of ideology and false idealism. If a person is employed in government, is it all right to knowingly 'push' these onto people in order to get them to support a worthwhile social action? It is not always easy to tell whether a particular way of work might be doing more harm than good.

The other question which comes up when thinking about right livelihood is whether a person's work does any good at all. Even if a job does no harm, if it is utterly useless is it really a wise way to spend one's days? Answering this question is perhaps even more a matter of individual conscience than answering the previous one. How do you decide if something is useful or not? Yet this is a question which many people, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, find themselves asking about their work as they enter middle age. In those moments of quiet reflection, this seems to matter; so it may be well to ask it from time to time, before we find ourselves having spent all of our working life doing something that we regret because of its meaninglessness. A job does not have to be highly paid or glamorous in order to be meaningful; as a matter of fact, some very useful careers are of low social status. So the questions which Buddhists tend to ask themselves are whether or not someone benefits, whether or not the world is a little bit better for them having gone to work that day, or what the world would be like if no one did their job.

These are some of the difficult questions about work which the Path invites Buddhists to ask of themselves. There are often no easy or simple answers. Yet the questions are worth asking, as at the end of the day (and at the end of one's life) these things make a difference. It is not that most Buddhists spend a lot of time thinking about these things as abstract issues; however, when a particular concern of this type arises, it seems better to face it immediately, and take responsibility for answering it, then to look the other way and risk undertaking a livelihood which will be a source of deep regrets later.