

Two classes ago, we explored why it is that we act against our own happiness. Often, we know it's going to cause problems as we say or do it.

We were looking at the afflictions (ill will, greed, ignorance, and fear), as powerful energies that can move us like puppets. What we can see is less powerful than what we can't, so it is useful to see these in action. Not a personal failings, but as impersonal forces that affect everybody.

Seeing comes first. Finding which one is predominant is a helpful place to start. What are the ways we respond in a knee-jerk fashion? What tends to come up consistently?

Then finding the observer, that helps us hold it, noticing it's there but not responding to its outflow. Growing the observer in our practice is the tool that helps build ABC (A Bigger Container), the inner space that has enough room to see that we are not actually the affliction itself. We are what experiences it.

Being able to make an inner container that can hold it and be with it without reacting is life changing. The qualities to do this are kindness and compassion, curiosity, courage and gratitude for ourselves and others.

SILA IN GENERAL

This is the last week we will be looking at sila, or ethics, living with non-harm.

It's the last week we'll have a worksheet to fill out and think about.

I know it's been bit of a slog, why have we spent a semester looking at all this? What does this have to do with meditation practice?

A spiritual path is about finding peace, happiness, feeling the miracle of life and being alive. It's about connecting with meaning that's larger than any of us as individuals, but in which we find belonging.

Ultimately, there is nothing that is not part of this path. It's not just sitting in practice a few minutes a day. To find peace and happiness, we need to look at everything in our lives: the way we act and communicate in the world, the values with which we make decisions, how we live in the world.

Vipassana, or any valid spiritual path, is more than just sitting practice. It is living practice, thinking practice, view of life practice, loving practice, connecting practice, action practice.

This part of the Eightfold Path requires us to look at how we are living, the stuff we usually don't think too much about in the rush and demands of life. When sila is in place, it is the foundation from which we become freer and freer, less conflict and unrest in our lives.

Sila is like the dam that's most upstream in a stream in a series of dams. When this dam is open, the water can flow. When it's stuck shut, everything downstream tends to dry up.

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD - LIVING HOLISTICALLY

Working with sila involves cultivation practices, like metta practice.

A few words about cultivation practice: in itself, it does not lead to suffering's end, but is nevertheless work that must be done.

An analogy might be getting ready to take a night hike in the woods. You tie up your hiking boots carefully and get the flashlight out, testing it to make sure the batteries are strong. Neither of these things are actually the hiking, but necessary prep work. Otherwise you'll be tripping over yourself, running into trees.

So....This is a cultivation, a doing. It's not to fix or improve ourselves. That just reinforces the separated, dualistic mind. It's choosing to put all your eggs in the noticing basket.

We are looking at decisions we make and have made to see things that serve us and enlarge them, and notice the things that no longer serve us and allow them to fall away.

What serves us makes us happy. What no longer serves us creates suffering. It's simple as that.

This cultivation is spiritual inquiry to see "This is an old pattern. I don't need this anymore." With seeing, it will eventually drop away. It's an effortless kind of process when it arises from awareness. We are bringing our deepest wisdom and compassion to our thoughts and actions.

It's important to understand that cultivation practices do not lead to awakening from the separate sense of self into the deeper, larger ground of our being. Cultivation is still somebody doing something.

It works to align our life, mind and emotions with what is already happening at the deepest ground of our being. Cultivation is to bring our small mind in line with the flow of Big Mind, the open, stillness of awareness, the ground of who you are. Cultivation is the alignment of the egoic personality, so it's going the same direction, with the same energy, as the deeper truth of our nature.

In other words, cultivation practices help align us with the truth of ourselves beyond the ego. These practices diminishes the barriers, the veils, which, like clouds, keep blocking out the sunshine of the clear sky behind them.

Thinning out the barriers prepare the way for dissolving the illusion of separateness - that is the root of our suffering.

But at a certain point, when you are living beyond the ego's needs and dictations, these factors are what naturally flow outwards, cultivation is no longer necessary. These are practices that, very useful in the beginning, must be let go of at a certain point.

Like mindfulness cultivation - useful at first, because we are so often not in the moment, not present with what's going on in front of us. It helps us find the now.

When resting in open awareness is established, this cultivation actually becomes limiting and needs to be let go. Having the small mind in charge of what we focus on misses the whole point. It's like bringing a flashlight out into the morning sun.

Right livelihood is one of the branches of the eightfold path that is often skimmed over. It seems so simple and unproblematic: don't earn money in a profession that brings harm to others.

We can limit this to what we do to support ourselves financially, but truly, it involves our entire lifestyle. One of the most socially powerful forces we each have, along with our political votes, are the 'votes' we cast with our life decisions. What kinds of things do we foster in the world with our dollar votes? With our time votes? With our chosen activities votes? What kinds of things do we consume? What resources do we use?

A few verses from the suttas give us some pointers, here are a few:

"A lay follower should not engage in five types of business. Which five?
Business in weapons, business in human beings, business in meat, business in
intoxicants, and business in poison."
— Anguttara Nikaya: 5.177

This seems pretty straightforward, and frankly, seems forgettable. It does not really apply to most of us.

"One discerns wrong livelihood as wrong livelihood, and right livelihood as right
livelihood. And what is wrong livelihood? Scheming, persuading, hinting,
belittling, & pursuing gain with gain. This is wrong livelihood..."
- Majjhima Nikaya 117

This feels closer to home. It's not only what kind of livelihood we do, but HOW we are doing it... do we operate by persuading another to do what we want? Do we belittle, put down, or use people to our ends? Do we hint at things to string someone along in some way? Clearly, this goes beyond our job to our entire way of walking through life.

Fortune telling is also considered wrong livelihood.

.. reading marks on the limbs [e.g., palmistry]; reading omens and signs; interpreting celestial events [falling stars, comets]; interpreting dreams; reading marks on the body [e.g., phrenology]; reading marks on cloth gnawed by mice; offering fire oblations, oblations from a ladle, oblations of husks, rice powder, rice grains, ghee, and oil; offering oblations from the mouth; offering blood-sacrifices; making predictions based on the fingertips; geomancy; laying demons in a cemetery; placing spells on spirits; reciting house-protection charms; snake charming, poison-lore, scorpion-lore, rat-lore, bird-lore, crow-lore; fortune-telling based on visions; giving protective charms; interpreting the calls of birds and animals ..."
- Digha Nikaya 11 (long discourses) Kevatta Sutta

The list goes on and on - basically, fortunetelling methods of the day. This seems silly and antiquated. But the same forces are active today, just in a different guise: the guise of spiritual authority.

What is fortunetelling? Is it not giving information to another that they are told they cannot access for themselves, and must "believe" the fortuneteller without being able to find their own verification for? i.e. to suspend disbelief and accept another's word before one's own? To give away one's own authority?

Here's some of the things I have personally experienced:

Bring told someone reading the akashic record, and have information about a past lifetime or my karma or whatever....that you have no way to question or confirm. Past life readings. Having some kind of reading done where someone predicts the future or tells you something about yourself that you can't discern for yourself as true.

Someone claiming to channel a being of some sort you cannot access and must trust them as your sole access and that you should accept this being's word.

Someone telling you that you need them as your teacher, they are the only person can guide you, and you need to be their acolyte in order to progress on the path and if you leave, you will not progress. This can also be a therapist who tells you to trust them, not yourself, that they know better.

In many of these cases, people seem genuinely sincere, wanting to be helpful and loving. And, they all create dependencies.

In terms of the dharma, here's the problem with all of this:

The Buddha emphasized saying 'be a light unto yourself'. Never take the word of another over what is true for yourself in your own experience.

Creating a dependency on another, or on any outside source as the access point to your own truth is always damaging. It is an abuse of spiritual authority.

No one can 'save' you or 'enlighten' you from the outside. It has to come from within. Any teacher or teaching that is worthy does not create dependency.

A true teacher or teaching helps you learn to trust in yourself, in your own insight, and find your own wisdom eye, because that's the only way - it must be found within you.

Here's another description of the feeling tone of right livelihood:

Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, this noble restraint over the sense faculties, this noble mindfulness & alertness, there is noble contentment.

— Digha Nikaya 12

This sutta points to the fruit of samma as contentment, being happy with what we have. Of being alert and aware of things around us. Of living with non harm. Restraining our senses is about balance, not too much, not too little. The right amount of anything brings balance and care for ourselves and others.

The path to right livelihood, even in our jobs, is usually not black or white. Our society is capitalistic; meaning profits, not well being, is the bottom line value. In a world in which the economic system is built on profiteering and exploitation, it's not possible to live totally without harm.

The company you work for may disadvantage women, or people of certain political views, religions, or backgrounds.

Our food chain is dependent on poverty level migrant and undocumented agricultural laborers who may not earn a living wage.

Our clothes might be made in sweat shops, often in slavery like conditions, in other countries.

Since most of us cannot survive outside the economic culture, how can we cultivate right livelihood?

We understand and accept that everything in our lives is a mixture of forces. We can make efforts to maximize the good and minimize the harm with conscious choices.

WISE LIVLIHOOD WORKSHEET

It's so easy to think of the ways we fall short and to doubt ourselves. Instead, let's look at all the ways we are already expressing right livelihood. Much in our lives is to be celebrated. Let's look at this as cultivation of greater empowerment and enhancing happiness and well being for ourselves and others.

Please refer to the Wise Livelihood Worksheet (yes, another worksheet!) Working with the sheet is a form of inquiry. Inquiry is contacting that quiet, settled center of ourselves and seeing through our wisdom eye.

IMPORTANT: do this from the inner place where you trust yourself. From the heart, not the head.

Look at the worksheet, and fill the first column in with what is going right. Here are some of my responses as examples of things I am grateful for.

WORK/INCOME SOURCES

- liked my job
- had good rapport with co workers
- allows me to pay bills and support my family

MONEY

from the Buddha:

"A householder knowing his income and expenses leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, knowing that thus his income will stand in excess of his expenses, but not his expenses in excess of his income."

- money is in balance, present and future needs accounted for
- able to donate to the well being of others
- bills are paid

RELATIONSHIPS

- have friends
- like being with spouse and children
- enjoy seeing others around me have friendships

TIME

we all need relaxation and down time. We also need to do the things that fulfill our responsibilities to ourselves and others.

- have time for practice
- enjoy things in the community: art and music
- generally get things done in a timely way

CONSUMPTION

Do I have what I need? Do I have more than what I need?

- able to buy food locally/organically
- enjoyment from the things owned
- clearing out things no longer needed
- find pleasure in making things last and repairing them

SELF CARE

- exercise
- eat well

HOMEWORK

1) Take some time with the worksheet. Look at it regularly and add to it.

2) In the second column, where samma can be cultivated, pick ONE category and ONE thing you can do to enhance right livelihood in that area.

Write it down in the second column. Use it as an aim for a day, or several days, until you feel complete with it.

Now pick another category, and write down a second, SINGLE thing you can do in that category. Keep going.

EXAMPLES

here are some of mine:

RELATIONSHIPS:

Take time each day to reach out to one person. Text, call, or email.

SELF CARE

Get to bed on time, get enough rest.

So pick ONE action in ONE category and use it as a cultivation practice.

Again, notice the relationship to happiness and joy. This should be enjoyable.
If you miss an opportunity, just notice that you missed it.

If you find resistance arising, take a moment to appreciate that an old belief or conditioning may be arising that is no longer working for you. Perhaps there is a belief that you don't deserve something. Notice what it might be.