Interpreting 'Right Livelihood': Understanding and Practice in Contemporary Thailand*

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Abstract

The practice of Right Livelihood is a crucial aspect of the Buddhist spiritual path in that it connects inner transformation with external transformation at both the individual and social levels. Using case studies of eight seriously committed Buddhist practitioners in Bangkok, this paper examines different ways of interpreting Right Livelihood, both in understanding and in actual practice. The research shows that contemporary lay practitioners are re-interpreting 'Right Livelihood' in innovative ways to suit modern realities and are taking pro-active steps to fashion a work lifestyle that supports their spiritual self-development and promotes service to others. However, broader interpretations of 'Right Livelihood' that reflect a deeper understanding of how livelihood relates to the larger socio-economic system can still be further developed.

Introduction

Right Livelihood is one of the eight components of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path of self-development (See Figure 1), which leads to the cessation of suffering or, conversely, the attainment of ultimate happiness. In considering Gross National Happiness, then, an investigation of the interpretations of Right Livelihood, both in theory and practice, is important for several reasons. Firstly, Right Livelihood, along with Right Action and Right Speech, comprises the part of the Eightfold Path that relates to the external world; i.e., the practice of *sila* (morality). It is thus a

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* This paper is drawn from a larger research project exploring a holistic view of the integration of Buddhist practice into the daily lives of Bangkok laypeople, of which Right Livelihood is viewed as one part that is interconnected with the whole spiritual practice of each person. See Nissara Horayangura (2007). *Living the Dhamma: Integration of Buddhist Practice into the Lives of Bangkok Laypeople*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

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bridge between inner transformation, as attained through the practice of mental discipline or *samadhi* (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration), and outer transformation. The wisdom or *panna* (Right View and Right Intention), attained in part from mental training or meditation, can lead to a dramatic change in a practitioner's values, commitment to upholding morality, and understanding of their very purpose in life. However, these internal changes also need to be reflected in a practitioner's external life. Spiritual practice cannot remain confined to the meditation cushion and needs to be integrated into a practitioner's daily life for to be considered truly following the Path, which is profoundly holistic. Only then will a balanced spiritual practice be realised and real happiness achieved.

Livelihood or work is a particularly crucial area in which to examine how people can integrate their spiritual practice into their daily lives because work takes up such a large proportion of most people's time in contemporary society, especially in urban areas. Moreover, work is closely tied with self-actualisation, with many people seeking jobs that further their self-development and reflect their values, priorities, and aspirations in life. This is especially true of the modern world, where there are a wider variety of jobs and work is viewed not simply as a means to make a living, unlike in a simple economy. The educated middle to upper class are particularly able to take a proactive role in choosing and designing their form of work, as they are qualified for more jobs and are not under severe financial pressure. For many middle to upper class people, the issue may no longer be taking any job that can earn an adequate income but instead becomes choosing a job that can earn the most income. Yet for the spiritually inclined, the most salient consideration is not monetary remuneration, but whether a job allows for, or even directly supports, their spiritual practice.

How then do people who are committed to spiritual practice interpret what it means to practice Right Livelihood and actually go about selecting a job and fashioning their work lifestyle? Based on extensive in-depth interviews, this paper investigates eight case studies of Bangkok laypeople who self-identify as being committed Buddhist practitioners (or 'dharma practitioners'; in Thai called *phu patibat tham*). It provides a comparative thematic

analysis of their different interpretations of Right Livelihood, both in understanding and in actual practice. An underlying concern is to examine what difficulties practitioners face in attempting to practice Right Livelihood and ways they negotiate them.

To widen the perspective beyond the level of the individual, this paper also explores how individual practitioners' interpretations of Right Livelihood relate to the larger socio-economic system. How can Right Livelihood be interpreted in ways that link internal transformation not only with external transformation at the individual level, but also external social transformation? To what extent contemporary lay practitioners are making this connection bears evaluation.

Figure 1: The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path

Morality (Sila)	
Right Speech (samma-vaca)	Inner External Transformation
Right Action (samma-kammanta)	(on Individual and Social Levels)
Right Livelihood (samma-ajiva)	
Mental Discipline (Samadhi)	
Right Effort (samma-vayama)	
Right Mindfulness (samma-sati)	
Right Concentration (samma-samadhi)	Inner Transformation
Wisdom (Panna)	
Right View (samma-ditthi)	
Right Intention (samma-sankappa)	

Avoiding 'wrong' livelihood

When determining what profession to do, it is perhaps simplest, and most logical, to start by ruling out what not to do. In discussing their conceptions of Right Livelihood, all my informants first raised the issue of avoiding jobs that were not ethical (*sujarit).*

Most generally, they understood wrong livelihood to mean any job that causes suffering to others or breaks the basic five precepts.[1] They also mentioned the Buddha's teachings on five prohibited professions as their guide: "These five trades, O monks, should not be taken up by a lay follower: trading in weapons,

[1] An explanation of wrong livelihood with relevant quotations from the Tripitaka can be found in Harvey, 2000.

trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, trading in poison (Bhikkhu Bodhi edition, 2005, 126-127).

It is a short, seemingly straightforward set of proscriptions. Yet some scholars have argued that in the far more complex modern economy, these guidelines have to be understood in accordingly more complex ways. The five taboo professions can be interpreted more comprehensively to include jobs in the arms industry, production of pesticides, research involving animal experimentation, or even advertising insofar as it stimulates greed, hatred, and delusion or bends the truth (Saddhatissa, 1997, p.53; Whitmyer eds., 1994).

Several of my informants did reflect more complicated understandings of what constitutes a morally unacceptable profession. In part, it is indeed a response to the more complex socio-economic system. Yet another important reason why the dharma practitioner may adopt more finely drawn interpretations of wrong livelihood is also because they themselves have personally evolved a deeper understanding of the precepts as their practice progresses. When their understanding of the precepts becomes more refined, the grey areas of what they consider wrong livelihood expand.

One striking case of how fine a point it can be taken to is Ko. Soon after she started to practice dharma, she became very concerned about whether she was really maintaining the 'truth' in her journalism work or was possibly lying in some way. "I started to ask myself, if I interviewed someone for an hour, do I really know the real story? And when I'm writing, am I fictionalizing a bit when I'm reconstructing a scene? Even if I try to write in the most balanced fashion, won't I still have some bias? I really did feel very conflicted about my work at first." In this way, even a seemingly morally acceptable job like journalism becomes suspect as a possible wrong livelihood, as she contemplates more deeply the meaning of the precepts.

As to the prohibition on selling alcohol, Waew has expanded it beyond the interpretation that she cannot own a business that sell alcohols directly itself. She has also mandated that none of the shops leasing space in the shopping centres she owns and manages, including those in the food court, can sell alcohol. Her

company has set this as one of the conditions for tenancy, which she says is not the standard practice in the industry.

Meanwhile, Daeng has developed a subtler interpretation of the precept on stealing. It is not immediately obvious what would be amiss in her line of work – her family's publishing company produces textbooks for schools. It seems harmless, and even socially beneficial. Daeng reveals, however, that nowadays corruption is unavoidable when bidding for textbook contracts from government schools. "To get a teacher to use your textbooks, you have to pay them a commission. It's not clean…It's like stealing the nation's money, money that should really have been used for the nation's development. Instead of the kids having low-cost books, we have to increase the price of books to cover the cost of paying off school officials." She considers this kind of work a tainting of her precepts and has chosen not to continue it. She says, "Once you are working towards *nibbana*, you won't risk even a little [tainting of the precepts]."

This view interprets 'stealing' in a more sophisticated and abstract way, not simply a matter of taking objects or money directly from another person, but 'stealing' on a broader societal level. In developing this understanding, Daeng cites in particular the influence of contemporary monks like Luang Ta Mahabua, whose popular radio programmes she listens to. He has espoused innovative explications of the precepts in an effort to make age-old dharma teachings relevant to current societal problems like corruption.

Mi believes corruption is not only endemic to the publishing business, but the contemporary business world at large. Through her experiences working as an auditor in a large accountancy firm and the finance manager of her family's hotel, she says she has seen how it is virtually impossible to avoid under-the-table payments, circumvention of laws, or smooth-talking that involves lying in doing business. "You have to 'zig-zag' [bend the rules or bend the truth] all the time in business. If you don't, you really can't survive. Especially in this era of decaying morals and fierce competition." Even if she herself may not be taking any discrete actions that explicitly break the precepts, she believes she is indirectly breaking them just by being involved in the company and the business world of today.

Currently, she works in the family business only because she feels duty-bound by her parents' expectations, but she does so unhappily. "I feel morally conflicted working there. My conscience is troubled. I don't like not being able to keep the five precepts, and just doing anything in order to maximise profit," she says wearily. "If your precepts are not that refined, you can still work in business. But if they are, you can't take it anymore." She says she has begun to feel she can't do it for much longer. Still, she does not feel free to 'abandon' her parents until they are ready to accept it. In the past year, they have begun to come around and she has subsequently started to hand off her responsibilities to other employees.

Beyond breaking the precepts, are there other grounds for labeling a job as unethical? Does wrong livelihood include occupations that incite other people's desire (a form of mental defilement or *kilesa*) for material goods or, more broadly, a culture of consumerism? When I venture to ask Waew, if she is ever troubled by this consideration when it comes to her shopping centres, she seems surprised by the notion. "I don't look at it that deeply. For me, I see my shopping centres as providing the components people need to support their life (*pajjaya 4* – food, clothing, shelter, and medicine)," which she considers a straightforward and positive contribution. Fai reflects a similarly limited understanding of wrong livelihood. When I ask her if it is wrong for a businessperson to sell luxury goods, she says, "You can sell anything – diamonds, whatever. Yes, it does promote others' *kilesa*, and you do have to think of ways to lure them in. But it's not wrong, it just doesn't help other people."

However, Ko, takes a different view. She believes businesses that sell jewellery or other luxury items are problematic because they stimulate people's desire for unnecessary things and encourage them to spend money wastefully. In fact, she says she had once questioned a well-known dharma practitioner who owned a jewellery business on this matter, giving her serious pause for thought. While Ko hardly thinks it was specifically due to her questioning, that dharma practitioner has since given up her jewellery business. Ko and Fai also differ in their views on advertising. Fai disapproves of advertising because in practice it often involves making exaggerated, or outright false, claims, which

amounts to lying. Ko is also opposed to advertising, but rather than basing her argument only on precept-breaking, she takes the extra interpretive step of pointing to how it incites consumerism and greed.

The concern with inciting consumerism suggests a movement towards consideration of larger, more systemic problems of the capitalist economic system. To an extent, as previously discussed, Daeng and Mi already do evince concern with societal level repercussions of jobs in business such as corruption. Mi goes further, however, in also considering the capitalist economy to be fundamentally morally flawed as the entire system is inexorably based on profit maximisation and thus greed. In response to the suggestion that business can be reoriented to be more 'dhammic' according to the 'sufficiency economy' paradigm, a view Waew has great faith in, Mi is highly sceptical. She asserts that businesses simply could not survive following such a model. As for the argument that the Buddha had not prohibited business as a profession, she says that perhaps it was possible to do business ethically in the economic system that existed during the Buddha's time, but this is no longer the case today. In her view, working in business in the modern world is 'un-dhammic' because one would unavoidably be enmeshed in a greed-driven economic system.

However, most do not talk about how the system is structurally oppressive – how the capitalist national and world economies lead to drastically uneven distribution of income, exploit workers, and ravage the environment. Only Ko, the informant who appears to have the most pronounced social activist leanings, brings up this more complicated angle of wrong livelihood. In Ko's estimation, only a small percentage of dharma practitioners reflect this understanding.

From 'not wrong' to 'right' livelihood

While avoiding wrong livelihood may be the first step, are there other criteria they consider in choosing a job? Is there a leap that they make between pursuing a livelihood that is 'not wrong' to one that is 'right'? Are there in fact some livelihoods that they view as more 'right' than others? More specifically, are there some professions that are technically 'not wrong' but nonetheless

incompatible with their dharma practice, or conversely some that are especially supportive of it?

One way to conceive of the progression of considerations is in terms of the morality-mental discipline-wisdom steps of the Path. Maintaining morality in their profession may be the basic requirement. But there needs to be more to their job than that if they are to also progress further on the Path, and thus they seek work that enables them to develop themselves at the mental discipline and wisdom levels.

Another way to deepen the understanding of right livelihood is to go beyond interpreting 'right' in the simple moralistic sense, and to consider it in the holistic sense. In talking about livelihood, recurring themes that emerged pointed to the importance of pursuing a livelihood that brings holistic benefit – nourishing both their body and their mind, serving both themselves as well as others.

Right intention in a right livelihood

In drawing the ever-more blurred line between what is 'wrong' and 'not wrong', and, further, in bridging the gap between 'not wrong' and 'right', the crucial consideration becomes having the right intention in doing a job, an important application of wisdom to working. As Fai put it, "It's hard to just say which jobs are okay and which jobs aren't. It depends on the way you approach it." In other words, the question is not strictly *what* job, but *how* one does the job, with what end in mind.

Do no harm

In the earlier case of Ko, after initially agonising over whether journalism could in fact be a 'wrong livelihood' because of the possible distortion of the truth it involves, she later found a way to make her peace with it. It seems she did so partly because she had to, needing the financial security of her full-time journalist job, which begs the question of whether a degree of rationalisation was involved. Even if it did, her reasoning is convincingly consistent with the dhammic principle of examining intention – looking at *how* she was approaching the job. "After a while, I just came to realise that there's no way you can really know the whole

truth anyway. As long as I report what are facts, that's as close to 'truth' as I can get. What's more important is that I look at my intention (*chetana*) towards the reader – do I have any intention to mislead them? This becomes the guideline that helps me decide more clearly what I should and shouldn't write." In this example, the 'wrong intention' would be to cause harm, which reinforces the basic understanding of 'wrong livelihood'.

Not for the money

Beyond that, another intention in doing a job that was widely disapproved of by my informants was material greed. By this, they mean not only instances of people dominated by rapacious greed, but simply the idea of doing a job with money as the main – or sole – motivation.

A useful starting point from which to frame this discussion lies in traditional Buddhist ethics regarding wealth. Payutto delineates scriptural teachings on the subject in his book *Buddhist Economics* as follows:

> The main theme in the Scriptures is that it is not wealth as such that is praised or blamed but the way it is acquired and used (p.61).
>
> For the laity…there is no instance in which poverty is encouraged. On the contrary, many passages in the Scriptures exhort lay people to seek and amass wealth in rightful ways. Among the good results of good kamma, one is to be wealthy. What is blamed in connection with wealth is to earn it in dishonest ways…[to become] enslaved by it and [create] suffering as a result of it…to accumulate riches out of stinginess, and not to spend it for the benefit and well-being of oneself, one's dependents, or other people.
>
> A true Buddhist lay person not only seeks wealth lawfully and spends it for constructive purposes, but also enjoys spiritual freedom, not being attached to it, infatuated with it or enslaved by it. This is the point where the mundane and the transcendent meet (p.67).

When compared, my informants' views did in many ways reflect these traditional views, albeit with some slight departures. Across the board, all of them expressed notably little concern about money, with their attitudes ranging from dismissive to

strongly negative. Pok, who grew up solidly middle-class and now receives a modest civil servant salary, says, "Even if I were to get rich, I probably wouldn't be truly happy. In fact, the richer you become, the more likely it is for you to go astray. So I'd rather do a job that earns little, but helps others." Waew, meanwhile, knows first-hand how it feels to be rich, having been born into a well-off family. She thus also knows first-hand its limits, saying that the kind of happiness one can get from material possessions is utterly incomparable to the joy she has received from dharma practice. "I believe if we work hard, but not for the money, we can remain happy always. I no longer see the need for a luxurious lifestyle."

Fai similarly changed her attitude after she started to practice dharma. "Before, my goals were to be successful in business and make lots of money. I don't think that way anymore." After years running her own business, she came to view wealth as a trade-off with freedom – she felt put in a position where the power was entirely with her clients, which felt oppressive. Indeed, wealth comes at a price. Mi reflects this view most strongly, going so far as to say that "wealth is a burden". She says she'd rather trade financial security for peace of mind.

In an interesting echo, Ko also talks of re-interpreting 'security' in spiritual, rather than monetary, terms. "I stress 'internal security'. By this I mean mental stability and wellbeing – the ability to remain equanimous amidst change, to not be shaken by whatever happens. Prioritising this kind of security gave me the courage to give up financial 'security' and resign from my job and go freelance. Besides, as a result of my dharma practice, I have become more easily content (*sandot*), which makes it easier for me to earn enough to support myself."

It seems their attitude towards wealth had a more negative edge than the traditional teachings. Whereas the Buddha taught of the benefit of laypeople possessing wealth and encouraged its rightful accumulation (Payutto, 1998, p.60)[2], few of my informants

[2] Payutto writes, "In fact, the possession of wealth by certain people is often praised and encouraged in the Pali Canon, indicating that wealth is something to be sought after. Among the Buddha's lay disciples, the better known, the most helpful, and the most often praised were in large part wealthy persons, such as Anathapindika."

talk of the value of generating wealth. Instead, they seem wary of it and emphasise its detrimental effects. The way some even prefer to stay clear of wealth altogether seemed more befitting of a renunciant, going beyond the expectation for the average layperson. If anything, they stress how they have modest needs and wish only to maintain an adequate lifestyle (although their notions of what qualifies as an 'adequate lifestyle' do vary.)

Perhaps it is because my informants are already at least middle-class, and thus do not have to be as urgently concerned about attaining a satisfactory standard of living as less well-off people, that they can pay minimal attention to this step and instead focus on other aspects of working, beyond just making a living. In addition, the fact that many have experienced considerable wealth allows them to recognise its limitations and pitfalls. They found that despite enjoying material comforts, they still faced mental suffering or simply felt something was still missing. Although none of my informants were directly affected by the 1997 financial crisis, witnessing it and the mass societal fall-out brought home the unpredictability of economic fortunes, and the dangers of pinning one's wellbeing solely on material wealth. Whatever the reasons, it is striking how they express not only disinterest in, but even distaste for, "working just for money". In taking this stance, they are clearly challenging, and indeed outright rejecting, the capitalist values of mainstream society.

Spiritual development and service to others

If they de-emphasise working for financial motivations, what then do they view as the appropriate objectives in work and, in relation, the appropriate criteria to use in choosing a job? Showing remarkable convergence, all my informants expressed two main objectives they wish to pursue in their work. Firstly, they wish to do work that nurtures their wellbeing, and supports them in their self-development, particularly their spiritual cultivation. This work goal is in line with, and indeed can be seen to flow from, their positing of spiritual development as their broader goal in life.

Secondly, they desired their work to not only benefit themselves, but serve others as well, indicating a certain degree of social consciousness – the extent of which varies among

informants – that stems partly from dhammic principles. These two goals are in fact complementary and mutually reinforcing. In addition, as both are closely related to their dharma practice, choosing jobs in line with these goals becomes one important means of integrating dharma practice into their everyday life.

In conceiving these objectives, they again echo, but expand on, traditional teachings. According to Payutto, "The Buddhist standpoint here is that a minimal amount of responsibility to oneself for betterment and perfection is required of all individuals, and at the same time they must maintain an appropriate degree of social responsibility" (Payutto, 1990, p.81).

My informants certainly concur with this statement of goals in life and work. The difference is they go even further, professing a more passionate attitude than the fairly moderate tone of Payutto's explication. They aim not at a "minimal amount" or "appropriate degree" but wish to pursue both objectives to the utmost of their ability.

Spiritual Development

Many of my informants noted that it is necessary for one to have wellbeing oneself before one can help others. As such, they concentrated first on explaining how their work relates to personal wellbeing. Moreover, by 'wellbeing' they mean not only material wellbeing, but also higher forms of wellbeing. Thus, one should work not only to secure self-preservation, but, further, to strive for self-development. While it is hardly uncommon, and in fact even natural, for people to desire some degree of self-development – to learn and grow – in their work, what is striking is how my informants emphasised the spiritual dimension of self-development.

They could well be taking their cue from this particular saying of the Buddha: "Wisdom is better than wealth, because it leads to the highest goal in this life" (Payutto, 1998, 67). In this teaching, the Buddha implies that in one's life, one should be sure to devote energy to accumulating wisdom as well. But through what avenues is one to devote this energy? It is not explained further in this particular quote. Examining it more closely, he only seems to be saying that one should work on spiritual matters in

the sense of developing oneself personally, but not necessarily literally work in jobs directly related to spiritual matters.

That is a leap many of my informants have made, however. They want to pursue their spiritual goals through their very professions. The most explicit statement of this position was made by Ko, who plainly said, "I set spiritual development as my number one priority. Everything in my life should serve that goal. So I want a job that can promote my spiritual wellbeing and self-development." In the early days of her dharma practice, however, she had a more compartmentalised approach to work and dharma practice. "I separated them. Work was one world, Dharma Practice was another world." In fact, it seems many new dharma practitioners go through a similar phase of thinking. Waew in some ways still does separate the two, talking in terms of 'worldly work' and 'dharma work'. She says she tries to do work in both areas, but says when she is too laden with 'worldly work' she is not able to do much 'dharma work'.

When conceived separately, 'dharma work' or dharma practice becomes something akin to a hobby or extracurricular activity or, at best, sideline job. One does it outside of one's main job, 'worldly work', if one has the time for it, like going to the gym to exercise. How can a dharma practitioner blend the two into one – work and dharma practice? They could either try to incorporate dharma into *how* they work, or into *what* they do for work – or both. There is a school of thought that maintains that it does not matter what your job is. Regardless what you do (so long as it is ethical), if you do it in the right way, according to dhammic principles, it is a form of dharma practice. A major proponent of this view is Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. As he wrote in a poem about work:

> Work gives humanity its value
> Something of the highest honour without a doubt;
> If one enjoys work with a blossoming heart
> before you know it Dhamma will be truly known.
>
> Because work is the essence of Dhamma practice,
> all wholesome virtues are intermixed boldly;
> If you'll compare then try the expert marksmen
> who with one shot bags many birds.

> Naturally, work must be done mindfully
> with calm focus, patience, and industry,
> with truthfulness, self-control and intelligence,
> with confident faith and courage, truly love your work.
>
> The more one works, the more these Dhamma flourish
> promoting the transcendent shore without pause;
> seeing the universal characteristics in everything
> in a flash it plunges into vimutti freed by itself
>
> -Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 2545, p.45.

Noi cites Buddhadasa's teaching that "working is practicing dharma" (in Thai: "*karn tham ngarn kue karn patibat tham*") as a major source of inspiration to her. "It made me see that performing one's lay duties is also an important way to practice dharma." This idea helped her make her peace with – or one might argue, rationalise – not being able to retire and pursue her aspiration of full-time Buddhist study and practice (in, ironically enough, the *Dhammamata* women's training programme at Suan Mokkh originally spearheaded by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu himself). And in staying on at her job, applying dharma principles has helped her become at ease in what she once thought was an unpleasant work environment.

But are there still some jobs that are more conducive to spiritual progress than others? Fai is a good example of this other school of thought, which holds that some jobs are better than others if you want to practice dharma. Some jobs allow one to be "close to dharma" (*yu klai thama*) – jobs whose very content is directly related to dharma. After she started to practice dharma, she decided not to go back to running a business and instead devote herself to writing dharma books and being a dharma and meditation teacher (*khru kamathan).* She says, "In writing dharma books, clearly I get to practice dharma more this way. The two are incomparable! Can you practice dharma and do business? Sure. But there's no way you can get as much *patibat* done." Writing dharma books supports her practice because in the research process she reads a lot of other dharma books and even the *Tripitaka*, which deepens her knowledge about dharma. She also

appreciates how it gives her the opportunity to spend time with other people who practice dharma and talk about dharma.

Daeng takes a more moderate approach. She has not forsaken business entirely, but has reoriented it towards dharma. Two years ago she broke away from her main family business to set up her own publishing company with her brother. In addition to publishing educational books, she has also added dharma books to the line-up. For her, the benefit of doing work that is close to dharma is that "it helps my mind stay focused on dharma, which helps to build up wisdom."

Waew, who currently is the MD of her own retailing business, is a useful point of comparison, as she particularly emphasises integrating dharma principles into *how* she does her business work, such as keeping calm when facing problems and managing her employees with more patience and *sati*, and applying dhammic principles like loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (*brahmavihara 4)*. But she has also started writing dharma books on the side, and has made their publication one of her company's "special projects". And she, like Fai, feels her book writing, the "direct" dharma work is the more "real" form of dharma practice, and more deeply fulfilling than her regular business work. Her face lights up when she talks about one of her "special dharma projects" wherein she took a few employees down to her monk-teacher's temple and set up shop there for a few months to work on his biography. She sighs, "I wish I could do more of that." So Waew's approach is mixed – in some ways she does try to change *how* she does her work, but she also changes *what* her job entails by adding dharma projects into her work detail. Ultimately, she still believes the '*what*' does matter – and prefers a more directly dhammic job.

Until she can devote herself fully to 'dharma work', her incorporation of the dharma book projects into her job detail is her way to bridge the gap between her 'dharma work' and 'worldly work'. Making them overlap helps, to some degree, to solve the problem of lack of time to do both. In the earlier analogy of going to the gym after work, if one wanted to really devote oneself to physical activities one could simply become a professional physical trainer. Similarly, dharma practitioners can try to work

as 'spiritual trainers', at least part time. It is another spin on "bagging many birds with one shot".

Nonetheless, even with a directly dharma-related job, one could still do it with a non-dhammic attitude. If so, one might actually be making little progress in one's dharma practice, or at best one may progress only in intellectual knowledge of dharma. That in itself is not without value, as intellectual knowledge can serve as a foundation for more real application of dharma in one's behaviour. Yet the cautionary point is that just working in a dharma-related job is no guarantee that it will equate with actual practice of dharma. One might be 'close to dharma' but one might not reach it.

Ko commented, a bit ruefully, that she'd noticed how some of her colleagues in projects on spiritual health often end up working too hard and getting stressed out. At one dinner I went to, following their day-long meeting, one girl sat with fried rice half-eaten, shuffling pages of work plans and fretting out loud about the elaborate AV presentation she was planning. Ironically, she was organizing The "Happy Fest" – a two-day programme packed with wellness-enhancing workshops from tai chi to therapeutic music to Zen meditation – yet was making herself unhappy working on it. Ko admits she herself feels stretched thin, overburdened by work she says she takes on because "I do feel a certain kind of greed, wanting to do all these projects and not being able to turn any down." Alas, defilements easily accompany even well-intentioned, dharma and service-oriented work.

Thus, a dhammic job should not be over-romanticised into some saintly endeavour. Fai herself makes this point. She tells of how Luang Pho Pramot once nudged her to be careful not to get attached to being a dharma teacher. When she first began to *patibat* dharma, she had been very enthusiastic about taking up a dhammic vocation and serving as a dharma teacher. "Now, I don't feel I need to be a dharma teacher anymore. I no longer am attached (*yued)* to that. I no longer feel I have to be this particular kind of person – Dharma Teacher. Wearing White. Good Person," she says in a humorously exaggerated tone, poking fun at her misguided notions. So while she still does think working in directly dharma-related jobs is beneficial, she also feels it is

important not to fall in the trap of getting attached to them or creating an egotistical sense of goodness.

Right livelihood and the socio-economic system

While all of my informants reflected a sense of social conscience, only a few linked their interpretation of Right Livelihood to a deeper understanding of the concept of 'structural suffering' or suffering generated by the problematic socio-economic system underlying contemporary society. If they were to make this connection, their understanding of wrong livelihood could be further complicated to include questioning of jobs in terms of how they are entangled in, and to what extent they help perpetuate, the present socio-economic system. Conversely, in choosing Right Livelihood, more of them could also consider to what degree the job may help ameliorate it. This includes being creative about harnessing professional skills like marketing or management to serve the social good rather than private business profits. While there is a budding movement to bring this view of professional responsibility into the public discourse, it still appears very limited and not so well-known in religious quarters other than socially-engaged Buddhist circles.

Similarly, although all my informants may be committed to serving others by 'spreading dharma', many only conceived of it in terms of helping individuals. If they were to develop a more sophisticated understanding of 'spreading dharma' to include structural concerns, they could also 'spread dharma' and engage in other forms of social action at a broader societal level. In particular, they could 'spread dharma' in a larger sense by supporting movements to inject a spiritual dimension back into the society. Already various sectors of society, such as educational institutions, NGO's, and even economic institutions riding the current wave of popularity of the sufficiency economy paradigm, are making moves in this direction. While the individual Buddhist practitioner alone obviously cannot affect such a sea of change, they can contribute to this wider movement. In my opinion, they ought to, as they can bring a special perspective to the table, given their first-hand experience in spiritual practice. Only a few of my informants' spiritual teachers seem to address this point, which could partly explain why more of my informants did not

connect their spiritual practice to these broader issues. Such understanding can only come with education and exposure to the concept. More support from popular monks, nuns, lay dharma teachers, as well as the media in highlighting these concerns would thus be of great value given their considerable public influence.

Indeed, the meaning of Right Livelihood can still be expanded further to encompass a more fully developed social dimension. Perhaps Right Livelihood in the truest sense requires it.

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