

# CHAPTER III

## RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

### (*SAMMA-AJIVA*)



For several reasons, work is a key area in which to examine how *phu patibat tham* integrate *patibat tham* into their daily lives. Firstly, as Right Livelihood is one step of the Eightfold Path, it is a fundamental part of *patibat tham*. It is also the one aspect of the Path that provides a clear basis for distinguishing between lay and ordained practice. One of the essential requirements for ordination is the renunciation of worldly possessions and complete reliance on donations from laypeople for material requisites. For a monk, Right Livelihood is simply no livelihood. By contrast, for laypeople, it is still necessary to maintain at least a minimal livelihood to provide for their basic needs and those of their dependents. Thus the questions of what livelihood to pursue and how to balance it with other elements of the Path are uniquely lay issues to grapple with.

These issues are highly significant because work takes up such a large proportion of laypeople's time, and accordingly shapes their daily life and style of *patibat tham* substantially. Whereas monks can conceivably devote themselves full-time to meditation and dhamma study, the amount of time laypeople can dedicate to these activities is restricted by all the time they spend at work. Pursuing a livelihood can thus pose considerable challenges for lay practice and *phu patibat tham* must figure out ways to do work that allows for or even directly supports their *patibat tham*.

Doing so is particularly important given how work is so closely tied with self-actualization, with many people seeking jobs that 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. Educated middle to upper class people in particular are able to take a proactive role in choosing and designing their work, as they are qualified for more jobs and are not financially pressured to simply take any job to

make ends meet. However, it is still not always possible for *phu patibat tham* to land or switch to a job that is closely aligned with their spiritual aspirations. The potential for conflicts between the financial exigency of making a living and their needs in *patibat tham* invites investigation.

### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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, trading in living beings, trading in meat, trading in intoxicants, trading in poison. (A. III.208 as quoted in Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 126).

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 1971: 53; Whitmyer 1994: [various essays]).

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

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<sup>1</sup> An explanation of wrong livelihood with relevant quotations from the Tripitaka can be found in Harvey 2000: 188. As Harvey recapitulates: “...any mode of livelihood that is based on trickery and greed (M. III.75), that is, which entails breaking the second precept: stealing, directly or by deception. ... [To increase one’s wealth] ‘with tricks, fraud, and lies: worldly, purse-proud’ is to be ‘one-eyed’ (A. I.129-30).”

more complex socio-economic system. Yet another important reason why the *phu patibat tham* 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 *sila* becomes more refined, the gray 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 *patibat tham*, 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 possibly “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 centers 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 programs she listens to. He has espoused innovative explications of the precepts in an effort to make age-old dhamma 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 maximize 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? In their view, does Wrong Livelihood include ones 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 centers, she seems surprised by the notion. “I don’t look at it that deeply. For me, I see my shopping

centers 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 jewelry 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 *phu patibat tham* who owned a jewelry business on this matter, giving her serious pause for thought. While Ko hardly thinks it was specifically due to her questioning, that *phu patibat tham* has since given up her jewelry 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 maximization 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 skeptical. 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 economy leads to drastically uneven distribution of income, exploits workers, and ravages 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 *phu patibat tham* 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 *patibat tham*, or conversely some that are especially supportive of it?

One way to conceive the progression of considerations is in terms of the *sila-samadhi-panna* steps of the Path. Maintaining *sila* 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 *samadhi* and *panna* 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 *panna* to working. As Fai put it well, “It’s hard to just say which jobs are OK 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 agonizing 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 rationalization 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 realize 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” (Payutto 1998: 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. (See, for example, A. II.204 cf. the *Culakammavibhanga Sutta* in M. III.) 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” (Ibid: 62).

“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” (Ibid: 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 *patibat tham*. “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 *patibat tham*. “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 “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 well-being – the ability to remain equanimous amidst change, to not be shaken by whatever happens. Prioritizing 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 *patibat tham*, 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,<sup>2</sup> few of my informants talk of the value of generating wealth. Instead, they seem wary of it and emphasize 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 recognize 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 well-being 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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” (Payutto 1998: 60).

### Spiritual Development and Service to Others

If they de-emphasize 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 well-being, 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 *patibat tham*, choosing jobs in line with these goals becomes one important means of integrating *patibat tham* 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: 31).

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 well-being oneself before one can help others. As such, they concentrated first on explaining how their work relates to personal well-being. Moreover, by “well-being” they mean not only material well-being, but also higher forms of well-being. 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 emphasized 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” (M. II.72-73 as quoted in 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 well-being and self-development.”

In the early days of her *patibat tham*, however, she had a more compartmentalized approach to work and *patibat tham*. “I separated them. Work was one world, *patibat tham* was another world.” In fact, it seems many new *phu patibat tham* go through a similar phase of thinking. Waew in some ways still does separate the two, talking in terms of “worldly work” (*ngan thang lok*) and “dhamma work.” (*ngan thang tham*) 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 “dhamma work.”

When conceived separately, “dhamma work” or *patibat tham* 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 *phu patibat tham* blend the two into one – work and *patibat tham*? They could either try to incorporate dhamma 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 *patibat tham*. 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 honor 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 2548: 45).

Noi cites Buddhadasa’s teaching that “working is practising dhamma” (“*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 *patibat tham*.” This idea helped her make her peace with – or one might argue, rationalize – not being able to retire and pursue her aspiration of full-time Buddhist study and practice (in, ironically enough, the *Dhammamata* women’s training program at Suan Mokkh originally spearheaded by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu himself). And in staying on

at her job, applying dhamma principles has helped her become at ease in what she once thought was an unpleasant work environment.

But are there still, nonetheless, 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 *patibat tham*. Some jobs allow one to be “close to dhamma” (*yu klai thama*) – jobs whose very content is directly related to dhamma. After she started to *patibat tham*, she decided not to go back to running a business and instead devote herself to writing dhamma books and being a dhamma teacher (*khru kamathan*). She says, “In writing dhamma books, clearly I get to *patibat tham* more this way. The two are incomparable! Can you *patibat tham* and do business? Sure. But there’s no way you can get as much *patibat* done.” Writing dhamma books supports her practice because in the research process she reads a lot of other dhamma books and even the Tripitaka, which deepens her knowledge about dhamma. She also appreciates how it gives her the opportunity to spend time with other people who *patibat tham* and talk about dhamma.

Daeng takes a more moderate approach. She has not forsaken business entirely, but has reoriented it towards dhamma. 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 dhamma books to the line-up. For her, the benefit of doing work that is close to dhamma is that “it helps my mind stay focused on dhamma, which helps to build up *panna*.”

Waew, who currently is the MD of her own retailing business, is a useful point of comparison, as she particularly emphasizes integrating dhamma principles into *how* she does her business work, such as keeping calm when facing problems and managing her employees with more patience and *sati*.<sup>3</sup> But she has also started writing dhamma 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” dhamma work is the more “real” form of *patibat*, and more deeply fulfilling than her regular business work. Her face lights up when she talks about one of her “special dhamma projects” wherein she took a few employees down to her monk-teacher’s

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<sup>3</sup> More specifically, she also mentions applying the Buddhist values of *Promviharn 4* and *Iddhipada 4*.

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 dhamma 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 “dhamma work”, her incorporation of the dhamma book projects into her job detail is her way to bridge the gap between her “dhamma 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, *phu patibat tham* 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 dhamma-related job, one could still do it with a non-dhammic attitude, ironically enough. If so, one might actually be making little progress in one’s dhamma practice, or at best one may progress only in intellectual knowledge of dhamma. That in itself is not without value, as intellectual knowledge can serve as a foundation for more real application of dhamma in one’s behavior. Yet the cautionary point is that just working in a dhamma-related job is no guarantee that it will equate with actual practice of dhamma. One might be “close to dhamma” 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 program 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, dhamma and service-oriented work.

Thus, a dhammic job should not be over-romanticized into some saintly endeavor. 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 dhamma teacher. When she first began to *patibat dhamma*, she had been very enthusiastic about taking up a dhammic vocation and serving as a dhamma teacher. “Now, I don’t feel I need to be a dhamma teacher anymore. I no longer am attached (*yued*) to that. I no longer feel I have to be this particular kind of person – Dhamma 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 dhamma-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.

Mi points out another potential pitfall in teaching about dhamma. “Some teachers only teach about Buddhism philosophically, but don’t actually seem to convey it in their actions or the way they treat students. But I believe the best way to teach dhamma is through the example of our own practice of Buddhism itself.” True, the question of *how* to teach dhamma is important to her, but the fact remains that *what* she wants to do is teach dhamma.

### *Service to Others*

While they place high value on self-development, my informants also spoke at length about the importance of contributing to society. A constant refrain was, “It is not enough to benefit yourself. You have to be useful to others also.” Their views contrast markedly with the common stereotype of Theravada Buddhists as isolationist practitioners concerned solely with personal cultivation to the neglect of wider society.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, the Buddhist scriptures do contain teachings regarding social welfare, including those related to work. The Buddha’s main guidelines on livelihood center on the proper way to use wealth earned – that is, to share it. It should be used to bring

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<sup>4</sup> Max Weber has influentially characterized ancient Buddhism in this manner, where “salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual” (Weber 1958: 206). See also Smith 1972: 106 and Gombrich 1988: 30.

happiness to oneself and family, friends, employees; give offerings to guests and the king (nowadays government) for taxes and public works; and give offerings of the highest merit, to virtuous renunciates and Brahmins.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the original text of the sutta does not explicitly mention donating wealth to the poor or performing charitable works. However, Payutto interprets good works such as poverty alleviation and community welfare projects as being included, citing as related evidence the praise given to the millionaire Anathapindika, who donated huge sums to feed both the monks and the poor. While it is debatable whether he is taking interpretive license, other thinkers of the modernist school of “socially engaged Buddhism” similarly put forward interpretations of Buddhist teachings that emphasize social consciousness. Moreover, rather than focus only on sharing wealth as the way to benefit others, socially engaged Buddhists advocate social action (Payutto 1998: 63, 75).<sup>6</sup>

Socially engaged Buddhism draws heavily from Mahayana traditions, which also influence my informants. Ko cites as a major source of inspiration the Vietnamese Zen monk Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, whose teaching espouses the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva and the importance of helping others. Mi also is greatly influenced by Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, and particularly appreciates his activist-like reading of the five precepts. He interprets the precepts as “mindfulness trainings,” guidelines not only for refraining from causing harm, but for actively protecting others from harm and working to promote the opposite of harm. For example, the precept against killing is interpreted not simply as avoiding killing, but also includes preventing others from being killed, and promoting peace; the precept against stealing includes preventing others from being exploited, and promoting other’s well-being; while the precept against sexual misconduct includes preventing others from being sexually abused and promoting respect of commitments.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A. II. 65-8. Full text of the sutta in Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 126-127. Also quoted and further explained in Harvey 2000: 191 and Payutto 1998: 86-87.

<sup>6</sup> For more on socially engaged Buddhism, see Sizemore and Swearer 1990, including a chapter by Payutto, “Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics.” See also Queen and King 1996 and Jones 2003.



However, they and many of my other informants stress that Theravada Buddhism also has this social dimension too. They point out that Theravada Buddhism teaches the importance of generating loving-kindness (*phae metta*). Ko also highlights the teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who emphasized the concept of interdependence (*idappaccayata*). Along with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Payutto, they are also inspired by Phra Phaisan Visalo, who not only puts forward a socially engaged understanding of Buddhism but is actively involved in social initiatives.

An interesting discovery was that many of my informants' social conscience was not borne of Buddhist teachings alone. This streak in them ran deeper, predating the start of their *patibat tham*, and indeed often reaching as far back as childhood. Noi, for example, relates how as a child she questioned the way her father only made donations to support the local temple and not schools and the like. Having attended Catholic school and being exposed to the Catholic emphasis on performing good works, she asked herself why her father didn't prioritize that as well.

Fai, who actually was raised as a Catholic, was similarly influenced. In fact, she even questioned the Catholic nuns at her school when she felt they were not living up to these ideals. She tells an amusing story of how as a child she challenged her Catholic school's custom of collecting money from the students to buy extravagant Christmas presents for the nuns. Fai says, "I asked them, 'Wouldn't it be better to donate the money to the needy?' The nuns got so mad. I was such a little rebel. Not so sweet at all!" she laughs. Even as a Buddhist, when she stresses the importance of helping the disadvantaged, she holds up not only the Buddha but also Jesus Christ as an exemplar.

For Ko, it was not religion but her graduate studies in anthropology that sparked her desire to promote greater social harmony. "Anthropology taught me that there was such a wide variety in human cultures and the way different people could view the same thing. I wanted to do work that would help build greater compassion and understanding in society. As a journalist I wanted to write articles that would help people see different viewpoints, especially those of marginalized groups."

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<sup>7</sup> For further details, see Thich Nhat Hanh 1993. The exact wording of the precepts is also available at [http://www.plumvillage.org/practice/5\\_mindfulness\\_trainings.htm](http://www.plumvillage.org/practice/5_mindfulness_trainings.htm)

Although their social conscience may have developed before starting to *patibat tham*, many say it was further enhanced and deepened by their understanding of Buddhist ideas. For instance, the way Ko expresses her thoughts on social awareness now is recast in more Buddhist terms, such as how she talks of compassion as a vital part of Buddhist practice.

Whether their social conscience stems from non-Buddhist ideas or progressive interpretations of traditional Buddhist teachings, they all register this concern, some being very pronounced in their views. Without necessarily labeling it as such, they nonetheless reflect to some extent the ideas of socially engaged Buddhism.

Notably, they speak of social service not so much in terms of monetary donations, but more importantly through actions in their work. Only a few make more than passing mention of donating money to temples – for example, the families of Thep and Waew are major patrons of temples, as previously discussed in the last chapter. Most, however, talk more about helping others through service work. Moreover, by “others” they mean not so much the sangha, but society in general. Some, like Fai, also stress in particular serving the poor and disadvantaged.

What kind of social action do they wish to do? An unexpected – but on reflection, not so surprising – theme was that they all zeroed in on serving the non-material needs of others. As Fai puts it, “I don’t want to serve the body, but the soul.” At the most basic level, some spoke of helping others to gain knowledge and attain happiness, even at the mundane level, but ultimately all aimed at promoting others’ self-development towards happiness at the higher, spiritual level.

An example of “mundane happiness” is the sort Waew aims to deliver through her retail centers. Her vision is to provide new generation customers with “exciting new experiences.” Further, by offering customers a wide range of clothing, she says the shops allow people to find clothes that assert their individual identity and make them feel confident about themselves. Her garden center also imparts customers with knowledge and skills by organizing educational workshops. The center also has launched a number of community service projects, such as supporting youth by providing university students with space to market their wares.

Daeng states her goals in her publishing company are to produce books that are useful and help people attain happiness. At the mundane level, she publishes

cookbooks because she says they provide people with happiness. While one could overanalyze this and wonder whether cookbooks could also feed some people's obsession with food and fixation on enjoyments of sensual pleasures, again a form of mental defilement, she does not register this concern. She also demonstrates wider societal concern in wanting to publish books that have only positive impacts on society. She worries that so many books dominating the mainstream market push society towards decline. "Now, what's popular are all these romance novels, and books by teenagers detailing their sexual exploits. These become the new role models for today's youth. It's disturbing." By contrast, she has chosen to focus on publishing dictionaries and educational books, which aids people in their educational endeavors, and by extension contributing socially by producing more educated members of society. Moreover, she also publishes a line of dhamma books, aimed at spreading dhamma more widely to nurture people's happiness at the spiritual level.

Daeng was not the only who wants to spread dhamma (*phueai phae tham*). In fact, it was remarkable that every single one of my informants expressed this interest. Spreading dhamma or performing "dhamma service" is not just one way to serve their fellow humans and society at large. For them, it is the highest way. Thus, it is the form of social contribution they are particularly passionate about. This view reflects a certain sincerity in wishing only the highest good they know of for others as well. If they believe that the truest form of happiness is the happiness from within, it is only natural they would feel most compelled to help others attain this kind of joy – most profoundly by learning about dhamma (*khao thueng tham*). Apparently, the "ehipassiko" quality of dhamma – literally, "come and see", or the desire one who has experienced the benefits of dhamma to spread it to others – is powerful indeed.

As it turned out, my group of informants was a veritable writer's salon. Waew and Fai have written bestselling dhamma books and have regular dhamma columns in magazines and newspapers while Ko contributes articles on spiritual topics to newspapers. Thep and Mi have yet to set pen to paper but envision writing novels with Buddhist themes.

A few interesting trends can be observed in their approaches to book publishing, their underlying agenda being to spread dhamma to as wide an audience as possible. First, they are bent on making dhamma books more attractive, up-to-date,

and catchy to increase popular appeal, especially to hip urban readers. Out with the basic newsprint booklets given away at temples, with their drab covers and stodgy fonts. The books Waew, Fai, and Daeng produce, by contrast, have design sensibility in spades. They are beautifully illustrated, printed on high-quality paper, and generally have the look and feel of other popular books in the shops. Waew says, in business-speak, that dhamma books need “better packaging” to hook readers, especially youth. Accordingly, her own book is filled with brightly-colored, whimsical cartoons and comes in gimmicky decorative wrapping. It is a savvy, and interestingly, consumerist approach – dhamma marketing, as it were. It seems to be working. The launch for a book published by Daeng’s company, held in most mainstream of places – the upscale shopping center Siam Paragon – was attended by hundreds, and book sales were brisk.

Bells and whistles may be one strategy. Another is stealth. They prefer not to write about dhamma with a capital D, for dhamma by any other name would smell just as universal – if not more so. Being too outré Buddhist would make their message too narrow, and may turn off the irreligious or alienate those from other cultures. Thep, who wants to expose more Westerners to Buddhist teachings, envisions that in his novel he would like to develop characters using Buddhist psychology and include Buddhist themes, but without being obvious about it. He says, grinning conspiratorially, “The readers will actually be getting dhamma but they won’t know it.” Fai meanwhile wants to avoid coming across as preaching. “I want to convey dhamma, but the reader cannot feel like they are being taught. At all. I don’t think of the books as teachings, but writing that contains realities of life – well, actually, it really is dhamma. But without using the language of dhamma.” One example is her children’s book, ostensibly about an animal’s adventures, but covertly a dhamma book.

In addition to writing books, many also teach dhamma. Fai does this as her main “job,” albeit unpaid, while others do it on the side. Noi’s principal focus as a university professor is to teach classes on European culture, but she also volunteered to give some lectures in a special elective course that aims to provide students with an ethical grounding to go with their academic studies, including viewpoints from relevant aspects of dhamma. Mi, who moonlights as a special lecturer in a university

course on accountancy, adopts a subtler approach. Amidst talk of bottom lines and balance sheets, she says she consciously tries to inject “dhamma” by teaching her students to be ethical in their accountancy work.

Beyond teaching, there is a wider sense of serving the “dhamma community.” This is seen most clearly in those involved with the Foundation for the Promotion of Vipassana Meditation such as Noi and Pok. The organization is run by a committee of volunteers and retreat programs are also staffed by volunteers, called “Dhamma Servers.” A sense of community is also evoked by considering all alumni of retreat programs, referred to in the local lingo as “Old Students,” stakeholders in the organization and partial owners of the retreat centers. Noi has made it a priority to volunteer on at least one 10-day retreat course every year. Of all the communities they belong to, the one many *phu patibat tham* seem most dedicated to serving is their “dhamma community.”

Otherwise, if they do not aim to serve a specific dhamma community, they want to do community service work that has a distinctly dhammic angle to it. It is notable how many of my informants are particularly attracted to doing projects related to helping people “prepare to meet death peacefully” – probably a line of work that few non-dhammic types would be excited about. But my informants definitely are. Ko speaks passionately about how she feels she has “found her calling” in working on this issue. Today, one of her main jobs is the “Peaceful Dying Project,” which includes seminars offered to the public on the topic and a volunteer program serving terminally ill patients. She also has plans to write a book about death. Fai has already compiled a detailed guidebook for health care workers on how to treat dying patients and organized a meditation retreat focusing specifically on the matter of death. Their devotion to helping others deal with death strongly echoes their great concern in their own dhamma practice to train their minds so they will be peaceful in the moment before death, as previously discussed in this last chapter.

Their twin objectives in pursuing a Right Livelihood can thus be seen to dovetail, for they are guided by the same priorities and targeting the same needs whether they are serving others or themselves. Not only is this convergence conceptually consistent, but helpful in a practical sense as it makes it easier for them to fulfill both objectives through the same job. For instance, in order to write

dhamma books or teach dhamma, they have to gain or solidify their own knowledge. Then, through the actual process of verbalizing, they clarify and reinforce their understanding of dhamma. Answering people's questions challenges them to figure out ways to apply dhamma to actual situations. Most broadly, serving others – a form of *dana* – helps them develop generosity and lessen their ego.

Not only does this make for an ethically Right Livelihood, but a truly Right Livelihood, one that is spiritually enriching, socially beneficial, and consequently most deeply fulfilling.

