

Lay living Dharma

Besides giving us the Dharma which awakens and liberates us through self-effort, the Buddha has also introduced the monastic system as an alternate moneyless sex-free spiritual community whose sole avowed task is to live a renounced life of moral virtue, mental cultivation, and insight wisdom, and teaching the Dharma through his own personal example.

What about the non-monastics, the lay people, who want to dedicate their lives full-time to Dharma work? How can we work as full-time lay Dharma workers? Before answering these questions, we need to understand the purposes of monastic training and the lay life.

Monastic training, with its emphasis on a moneyless sex-free life of renunciation is dedicated to meditation to overcome any attachment or inclination to sensual pleasures. This can only be done when we are able to attain and enjoy some deep level of meditation, especially the dhyanas. Then, we are tasting a joy that is more sublime than sensual pleasures or any worldly pleasure. The purpose of being a monastic, then, is to attain arhathood (like the Buddha) in this life itself, if not, at least to attain non-return.

Lay practice, on the other hand, is for the majority of us, who are unwilling or unable to renounce the world for a reclusive life of meditation and mission. For lay practitioners, the Buddha has given numerous teachings, addressing us as he addresses the monastics, so that even without deep meditation, but with commitment to such practices as keeping the 5 precepts and the perception of impermanence, we will be able to attain at least streamwinning, even once-return, in this life itself.

Monastics, as a rule, are fully supported by the laity, because they are, properly, not economically engaged with the world. Lay practitioners, however, need to work to support themselves. In other words, we (the lay Dharma-workers) – with our relationships, families, and enjoyment of sensual pleasures – have to marry right livelihood (essential support) and Dharmafaring (living the Dharma). Such a lifestyle is, of course, guided and restrained by the 5 precepts,¹ including the right livelihood precept.²

As lay Dharma workers, we also have the advantage of directing our energies and talents mainly to studying, practising, teaching and ministering to others on a broader spectrum of wisdom and compassion than monastics can. Lay spiritual teachers are nothing new. Even in the Buddha's time, we have great lay teachers such as Citta the houselord, who is an adept in dhyana meditation and a non-returner.³

One of the great advantages of the lay ministry is that it actually allows any lay person to be involved and inspired with the Dharma – personal practice and mission work – as much as we desire. We can see lay Dharma work as a cooperative effort, where we give what we can and take what we need. We are still part of the global Dharma work and network, even though we are not physically present together. Through the Dharma that we taste, we are always feasting at the same table.⁴

That same table where we commune, at least in spirit, is the Minding Centre (TMC) run by the Dharmafarers, led by Piya Tan and Ratna Lim. TMC is a registered company that is focused on right livelihood and mission with a two-pronged goal. The first is to provide Dharmaseekers of any religion or none with early Buddhist meditation and the primary sources of the Dharma, that is, the suttas.

¹ On the nature of the 5 precepts and 5 values, see [SD 1.5 \(2\)](#).

² On the right livelihood precept (*ājīv'atthamaka sīla*), see [SD 37.8 \(1.6.2.2\)](#).

³ On Citta the houselord, see [SD 8.6 \(8.3\)](#) & [SD 16.16 \(1\)](#).

⁴ On commensality, see [SD 37.8 \(6.1.2.2\)](#).

Hence, Piya has dedicated himself to the Sutta Discovery (SD) translation project since 2002, and which has now become the most detailed annotated sutta translations available. To date, we have 50 SD volumes, covering about 1000 suttas and essays, filling some 10,000 A4 pages. Such teachings (sutta translations, Dharma talks, Dharma consultation) are freely available online and through more conventional means, especially publications.

The second TMC goal is to provide non-religious meditation, therapy and consultation services to anyone from any religion or none. Clients have to pay for such services at first, but if they to commit themselves more to TMC Dharma programmes, then they may join our activities on a dāna (donation) basis. This way, we allow others to have a taste of the Dharma whether they are Buddhist or not.

But such non-religious courses and activities cannot and do not fully support the Dharmafarer work as a whole. The Dharmafarer mission is an amazing act of faith. Our Dharma work and life are possible through the regular donations of a vital handful of dedicated supporters who contribute to our work on a regular (often monthly) basis by way of financial pledges. Others contribute by way of their expertise or time, such as setting up our website and business email accounts for us, proof-reading the translations. All this is known as Dharma stewardship.

Although these few years, the support that we are getting do not permit us to print any free books, we somehow manage to discharge all our obligations (like repaying the bank loan for the Pali Centre premises where we live and work) and pay all our bills, including educating our two children, and settling all our health costs.

Here, we are fortunate to have the CHAS (Community Health Assist Scheme) card which gives us substantial discounts when consulting participating general practitioners or dentists. As low-income citizens, we are also subsidised when, say, we both had to undergo eye operations and physiotherapy.

Two to three times a month, we do our marketing, usually amounting to less than \$100 each time for a family of four. We regularly go to Fairprice which offers a 2-percent discount on Tuesdays for senior citizens, along with periodic discounts on other food items. Further, to save costs, we buy in-house products rather than the popular brands. Ratna holds a Plus card from the OCBC, which gives us shopping points, adding to our discounts.

Eating out can be expensive in Singapore, so we also home-cook as often as we can. For breakfast, we feast on our stock of pre-made in-house chapati or paratha, which cost well less than half if we have ordered them from the mamak stall. They are easy to prepare, and appetising enough to go with left-overs, or even simply spread over with butter. Occasionally, we buy local fares from the Jurong East market, which probably has the lowest prices in the country.

We discovered another super-saver meal for two: order a plate of rice with 3 dishes, plus one plate of plain rice, which costs only around \$4.00. The mixed-rice stall below the Jurong East MRT even gives as much free soup as we like. This is both practising moderation in food, as well as keeping watch on our weight.

We travel by public transport, using low-waged concession cards, unless some kind friend volunteers to ferry us around for our classes and engagements. We have never been to the cinemas or theatres since we arrived in Singapore, and don't miss them. However, when it comes to books, computers or peripherals, we are willing to spend what is necessary, even if we are unable to find sponsors, so that the quality and efficiency of our Dharma work are not affected.

Whatever publications we still stock, such as the Sutta Discovery book volumes 1 & 2, and “Simple Joys,” are given away freely. Only a few occasional titles, such as the Buddhist Meditation series, are sold, only because we have to pay for the photocopying and binding. Even then, as a rule, all our books, materials and services are offered free of charge to unwaged monastics. We also do not charge the unemployed or the needy when they ask for counseling or related services.

We have been living on a small budget from regular support by a few people with big hearts. The lay worker system is cheap to maintain, and works well. We sometimes quip that we are cheaper to support than the temple monks and nuns. We have been working and living in this middle way for the last 14 years in Singapore. Our determination and inspiration is that full-time lay Dharma work is not only possible, but effective and necessary, despite overwhelming odds in our desire to **study, practise, realize and share the Dharma**.

The Dharmafarer motto is “**As we learn, we will teach; as we teach, we will learn.**” In other words, the Dharmafarer work and TMC are not just a mission cooperative, but we are ourselves practising the Dharma, a desire that first moved me to join the Theravada order, living 20 rains as a monk. And then working as a full-time Dharma-worker, with the unstinting support from my wife, Ratna (also a full-time Dharma worker), living our Dharma dreams to this very day.

We are documenting all this, along with our weekly reflections, and the sutta translations and teaching, for the benefit of future generations of full-time lay Dharma workers and local Dharma fellowship. Our message is that full-time lay commitment to the Dharma is possible, even necessary, when we have the courage to renounce the world just a little bit, and dedicate our time, energy, resources, and above all, our lives, to what we hold as the highest in our lives: the Dharma.

One last thing – last because we feel this is the most important part of a lay Dharma worker’s spirituality: We both have aspired to be streamwinners in this life itself, and we hope you and other lay Buddhists would do the same. We do not want to be reborn in any sub-human plane, but aspire to continue our Dharma work effectively in the lives to come, too, even if they are not more than seven left.

R374 Simple Joys 266
Piya Tan ©2014