

The necessity of right livelihood¹

Economics and ecology. Apart from sleep, most of us spend more of our lives at work and wage-earning than in any other waking activity. Inevitably, the work that we do powerfully moulds us. An important message of **the Vāseṭṭha Sutta** (M 98 = Sn 3.9), for example, is that we are not born high or low, but *we are the kind of work we do* (Sn 612-619).

Right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) (RL), then, is essentially how we, as followers of the Buddha's teaching, whether monastic or lay, or those who claim to be Buddhist, should support ourselves. In short, it is Buddhist economics at its best. Etymologically, *economics* comes from the Greek, *oikos*, "house, household, habitation" + *nomos*, "manager," and *ecology*, from Greek, *oikos* + *logos*, "word, reason, speech, account." Hence, essentially (on a personal or family level), economics is the knowledge and application of the proper material management of our homes. More broadly (on a macro or global level), it is a theory and practice of the proper management and use of external resources.²

As such, in terms of RL, economics and ecology are intimately intertwined: while economics is the management of the "household," ecology is the management of "the inhabited sphere, or living space," that is, the world itself. RL is the driving spirit underlying all this. At least, this is the way it should be. Such theoretical approaches are useful when we are faced with damage control over the weaknesses and failures of our current economic systems and situations, and in reminding us of how to rethink the issues so that we have healthy individuals in a healthy community in a healthy world.³

More broadly, RL may be described as *living and working as if life and happiness really matter*. RL is based on the key understanding that life is the most valuable thing we have and therefore should be respected so. Our most precious possession is, of course, our human life, but we are not alone, as there are also other beings, life-forms and nature that co-exist interdependently in the same space that provides us with food, growth, creativity, procreation and rest.⁴

Ecology, natural and social. This wholesome space which we inhabit called the earth, is, in turn, a part of a bigger and infinite universe. The quality of the relationship within our own family, species and world are ultimately dependent on the kind of physical environment we inhabit and how we relate to others and to nature. This is our ecology, our natural and social space.

By "natural" here is meant how we respect and harmonize with nature, and, to an important extent, how we emulate and enjoy nature. Our social space is where we live, grow, create, breed and rest. The wholesomeness of such vital spaces depends on how *natural* it is. This

¹ This is an excerpt from **Right livelihood** = SD SD 37.8 (1.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.8-Right-livelihood.-piya.pdf>

² See **Right livelihood** = SD 37.8 (7): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.8-Right-livelihood.-piya.pdf>

³ See **Sappurisa Dāna S** (A 5.148) @ SD 22.15 (3.1): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/22.15-Sappurisa-Dana-S-a5.148-piya.pdf>

⁴ See **Right livelihood** = SD 37.8 (2.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.8-Right-livelihood.-piya.pdf>

interbeing with nature not only provides us with physical health and sustains it, but also inspires us to create and enjoy *beauty*.

On a deeper level, natural space inspires and nurtures mental health. Wholesome nature allows us to *breathe* easily and healthily, which, in turn, induces, enhances and supports a calm and clear mind. For Buddhists and many others, nature is a very helpful component of mental cultivation and meditation. In short, nature is a vital ingredient of our mental well-being so that we are healthy individuals.

A healthy individual is the true measure of a healthy family, society, nation and world. The more healthy individuals there are in a group, the healthier it is. Although it is rare that a group is ever fully filled with healthy individuals, some kind of social code and the wholesome influence of healthy individuals can at least minimize the effects of negative persons, unhealthy situations, and natural disasters. Such a society lives in harmony with nature, mutually benefiting all life. This is a sustainable lifestyle in a healthy environment -- this is a broad description of right livelihood.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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