

Concept Of Right Livelihood (Samyak Ajiva) And Its Application In Contemporary Business Ethics

Prabhat¹, Neha Pal², Prashant Singh³

¹PhD Research Scholar Department of Buddhist Studies University of Delhi

Email id : Prabhat.singh030@gmail.com

²Department of Continuing Education & Extension University of Delhi

Email id : Neha.pal0017@gmail.com

³Department of Buddhist Studies University of Delhi

Email id : Psingh.phd@buddhist.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Right Livelihood (Samyak Ajiva) is a foundational principle of Buddhist ethics and an essential element of the Noble Eightfold Path. It emphasizes earning a livelihood through honest, ethical, and non-harmful means while avoiding exploitation, deception, and activities that cause harm to others. In the contemporary business environment, concerns related to profit maximization, labour exploitation, environmental sustainability, and corporate social responsibility have increased the need for ethical approaches to economic activity. This paper explores the philosophical foundations of Samyak Ajiva in Buddhist thought and examines its relevance to contemporary business ethics. Drawing upon Buddhist textual traditions, particularly the Tripitaka, and contemporary scholarship on Buddhist economics and business ethics, the paper analyzes how principles of non-harm, honesty, fairness, transparency, and social responsibility can inform modern business practices. It contends that Right Livelihood can contribute to more humane, sustainable, and socially responsible business models by integrating moral values with economic objectives.

Keywords: Right Livelihood (Samyak Ajiva), Buddhist Ethics, Business Ethics, Ethical Entrepreneurship, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Business, Moral Economy

INTRODUCTION

Ethics has always been concerned with the question of how human beings should conduct their lives and organize their relationships with others. Economic activity is an important part of this process because livelihood determines not only individual material well-being but also influences families, communities, institutions, and the environment (Schumacher, 1973). In the contemporary global economy, however, economic activity is frequently evaluated through indicators such as profit, productivity, growth, and market competitiveness. While these objectives are important for economic development, an excessive emphasis on financial gain can create serious ethical concerns, including labour exploitation, environmental degradation, corporate fraud, corruption, consumer manipulation, and unequal distribution of resources (Crane et al., 2019).

The increasing complexity of contemporary business has consequently made Business Ethics an important field of academic and practical inquiry. Business organizations are no longer viewed merely as institutions concerned with producing goods and generating profits. They are also expected to demonstrate accountability towards employees, consumers, communities, shareholders, governments, and the natural environment (Freeman, 1984; Crane et al., 2019). Concepts such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainable development, ethical entrepreneurship, stakeholder responsibility, and responsible investment reflect this broader understanding of business (Elkington, 1997; Carroll, 1999).

Within this context, Buddhist ethical philosophy provides an important perspective on the relationship between morality and economic activity. Buddhism does not treat livelihood as an ethically neutral activity. The manner in which a person earns a living has moral consequences, particularly when economic activity creates suffering or harm (Bodhi, 2012). The principle of Right Livelihood (Samma Ajiva), which forms part of the Noble Eightfold Path, provides a framework for understanding how economic activities can be guided by ethical considerations (Bodhi, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

The significance of Samma Ajiva lies in its emphasis on the means through which wealth is acquired. It suggests that earning a livelihood should be consistent with principles of honesty, non-harm, responsibility, and moral conduct. Thus, economic success cannot be considered ethically complete if it is achieved through exploitation, deception, violence, or activities that cause serious harm to others (Bodhi, 2000; Harvey, 2000). The Dhammapada similarly associates ethical conduct with the proper use of wealth and emphasizes that actions should not cause harm to oneself or others (Fronsdal, 2005).

The relevance of this principle has become particularly significant in the contemporary business environment. Modern corporations exercise considerable influence over social and environmental conditions. Their decisions concerning production, employment, investment, marketing, supply chains, and resource utilization can affect

millions of people. Consequently, the question of how profit is generated becomes as important as the question of how much profit is generated (Freeman, 1984; Elkington, 1997).

This paper explores Right Livelihood as a Buddhist ethical principle and examines its relevance for contemporary business practices. It argues that Buddhist values such as non-harm, honesty, compassion, moderation, fairness, and responsible conduct can contribute to a more humane understanding of economic activity (Schumacher, 1973; Keown, 2005). In this sense, Buddhist ethics offers a normative framework in which economic activity is evaluated not only according to its financial outcomes but also according to its consequences for human well-being, social relationships, and the wider natural environment.

2. PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RIGHT LIVELIHOOD (SAMYAK AJIVA)

Right Livelihood, generally translated as Samyak Ajiva in Sanskrit and Samma Ajiva in Pali, is one of the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path provides a comprehensive framework for ethical and spiritual development. It includes Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (Bodhi, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

Right Livelihood belongs to the ethical dimension of the path along with Right Speech and Right Action. Its inclusion within this framework demonstrates that livelihood is not merely an economic question but also a moral one. The occupation through which a person earns income must be evaluated in relation to its consequences for oneself and others (Bodhi, 2000; Keown, 2005).

The Buddhist understanding of Right Livelihood involves avoiding forms of livelihood that are characterized by deception, exploitation, violence, or intentional harm. It also encourages individuals to pursue their economic activities in a manner consistent with ethical conduct (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). Thus, livelihood becomes part of the broader Buddhist concern with moral conduct (sila) and the reduction of suffering.

The Majjhima Nikaya explains wrong livelihood through practices such as scheming, persuading, hinting, belittling others, and pursuing gain through inappropriate means. Right Livelihood therefore requires the abandonment of such practices and the adoption of ethically appropriate means of earning a living (Majjhima Nikaya, 117; Bodhi, 1995). This formulation indicates that Buddhist concern extends beyond the nature of an occupation to include the methods and intentions through which economic gain is pursued.

3. SAMYAK AJIVA IN BUDDHIST TEXTUAL TRADITIONS

Buddhist canonical literature provides several important references for understanding ethical livelihood. Among these, the Vanijja Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya is particularly significant for its explicit discussion of trade. The text identifies certain forms of commerce that a lay follower should avoid, thereby connecting economic activity with the principle of non-harm (Anguttara Nikaya, 5.177; Bodhi, 2012).

The Vanijja Sutta (AN 5.177) identifies five forms of trade that a lay follower should avoid:

- Trade in weapons
- Trade in human beings
- Trade in meat
- Trade in intoxicants
- Trade in poison

These restrictions demonstrate that Buddhist economic ethics is concerned with the consequences of economic activity. Certain occupations are considered inappropriate because they directly contribute to harm or suffering (Bodhi, 2012; Harvey, 2000). The teaching therefore establishes an ethical boundary around economic activity by emphasizing that commercial gain cannot by itself justify activities that generate significant harm.

The principle can be understood through the broader Buddhist ethical concern with Ahimsa, or non-harm. Economic activity that generates violence, exploitation, addiction, or destruction raises ethical concerns even when it produces financial benefits (Keown, 2005; Harvey, 2000). In this sense, Right Livelihood connects individual economic choices with their wider social and moral consequences.

At the same time, the Buddhist approach does not suggest that every form of trade or wealth accumulation is inherently wrong. Buddhist teachings recognize the importance of material well-being, particularly for householders. The Digha Nikaya discusses the acquisition and appropriate use of wealth, while the Anguttara Nikaya contains teachings concerning household prosperity, generosity, responsible economic conduct, and the balanced use of material resources (Digha Nikaya, 31; Anguttara Nikaya, 4.61; Bodhi, 2012).

Ethical principles of Samyak ajiva

Non-Harm

The principle of non-harm is one of the important foundations of Buddhist ethics. Right Livelihood requires individuals to consider whether their occupation creates unnecessary suffering or harm to other beings (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

The prohibition against trading in weapons, human beings, intoxicants, meat, and poison illustrates this principle clearly. These forms of economic activity are considered problematic because their consequences can involve violence, exploitation, addiction, or harm (Anguttara Nikaya, 5.177; Bodhi, 2012). The teaching demonstrates that economic activity is subject to moral evaluation and that financial gain cannot by itself justify activities that contribute to suffering.

In contemporary business, this principle can be extended to issues such as unsafe products, exploitative labour conditions, environmental destruction, trafficking, deceptive financial practices, and harmful marketing (Crane et al., 2019; Carroll, 1999).

Thus, non-harm provides a moral criterion for evaluating economic activity, requiring businesses to consider not only financial outcomes but also the social and environmental consequences of their decisions (Harvey, 2000).

Honesty

Honesty is another essential dimension of ethical livelihood. Economic relationships depend upon trust, transparency, and responsible conduct. Businesses interact with consumers, employees, suppliers, investors, and governments, and these relationships become unstable when deception becomes a normal business practice (Crane et al., 2019).

False advertising, manipulation of financial information, concealment of risks, fraudulent accounting, and misleading claims are examples of practices that conflict with the ethical orientation of Right Livelihood. Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of Right Speech (Samma Vaca), which includes avoiding false and deceptive speech, and this principle has direct relevance to economic relationships (Digha Nikaya, 22; Bodhi, 2000).

COMPASSION

Buddhist ethics places considerable importance on compassion (*karuṇa*). In the context of livelihood, compassion requires sensitivity towards the effects of economic decisions on other people and sentient beings (Keown, 2005). A business guided by compassion would consider the welfare of employees, consumers, local communities, and vulnerable groups rather than treating them solely as economic instruments. This orientation corresponds with the broader stakeholder approach, which recognizes that business decisions affect multiple groups beyond shareholders (Freeman, 1984).

Compassion therefore provides a foundation for a more human-centred approach to business, in which economic decisions are evaluated in relation to human dignity, welfare, and social consequences (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

MODERATION

Buddhist philosophy also emphasizes moderation and warns against excessive attachment to material desires. The Buddhist understanding of the Middle Way rejects both extreme indulgence and extreme deprivation, emphasizing a balanced approach to human life (Bodhi, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

Buddhist Economic Thought and Ethical Wealth

The modern concept of Buddhist Economics developed partly in response to conventional economic models that place economic growth, production, and consumption at the centre of economic development. Buddhist economic thought instead emphasizes human well-being, ethical conduct, meaningful work, moderation, and the reduction of suffering (Schumacher, 1973).

E. F. Schumacher's influential discussion of Buddhist Economics emphasized the importance of meaningful work, moderation, nonviolence, and human well-being. Schumacher argued that economic systems should be evaluated according to their contribution to human life rather than solely through measures of production and consumption (Schumacher, 1973).

Economic activity can be considered valuable when it contributes to human well-being without generating unnecessary suffering. This creates an important distinction between profit as an objective and profit as the sole objective. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary stakeholder perspectives, which argue that business organizations have responsibilities towards multiple stakeholders rather than shareholders alone (Freeman, 1984). Right Livelihood therefore provides a conceptual foundation for integrating economic efficiency with ethical responsibility. It suggests that the legitimacy of economic activity should be assessed not only by the wealth it generates but also by the means through which wealth is acquired and the consequences of its production, distribution, and use (Harvey, 2000; Keown,

Applying Samyak Ajiva to Contemporary Business Practices

Contemporary Business Ethics addresses the moral responsibilities of organizations and individuals involved in economic activity. It examines questions concerning fairness, honesty, accountability, corporate governance, environmental responsibility, human rights, and stakeholder welfare (Crane et al., 2019; Freeman, 1984).

The contemporary understanding of responsible business has expanded considerably. Organizations are increasingly expected to consider their impact on society and the environment. International frameworks such as the United Nations Global Compact emphasize human rights, labour, environmental responsibility, and anti-corruption as key dimensions of responsible business conduct (United Nations Global Compact, 2023). Similarly, contemporary approaches to sustainability encourage organizations to integrate social and environmental considerations into their decision-making processes (Elkington, 1997).

There is a conceptual relationship between these contemporary principles and Right Livelihood. Buddhist ethics emphasizes avoiding harm, maintaining ethical conduct, and considering the consequences of one's actions (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). Contemporary Business Ethics similarly seeks to establish standards through which economic activity can be made socially responsible (Crane et al., 2019).

However, Right Livelihood should not be treated as an exact historical equivalent of modern Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) frameworks. It emerged within a different religious, philosophical, and social context. Its value lies instead in providing a moral and philosophical lens through which contemporary economic practices can be evaluated (Harvey, 2000).

Samyak Ajiva and Ethical Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship plays a central role in contemporary economic development. the principle of Right Livelihood can provide an ethical orientation for entrepreneurship. A Buddhist-inspired entrepreneur would be expected to consider not only whether an enterprise is financially profitable but also whether it creates social value without unnecessary harm. This approach shifts attention from profit maximization alone towards responsible value creation (Schumacher, 1973; Keown, 2005).

Such an approach does not oppose entrepreneurship. Rather, it seeks to redefine successful entrepreneurship in ethical terms. A business can be considered successful not only when it generates financial returns but also when it contributes positively to employees, consumers, communities, and the environment. This perspective corresponds with the stakeholder approach, which understands business organizations as having responsibilities towards multiple groups affected by their decisions (Freeman, 1984)

Furthermore, Buddhist principles such as compassion (*karuṇā*), non-harm, honesty, and moderation can encourage entrepreneurs to evaluate both the immediate and long-term consequences of their decisions (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

The Buddhist approach therefore does not reject wealth creation or entrepreneurial activity. Instead, it asks entrepreneurs to consider how wealth is created, whom it benefits, and what consequences its creation produces. This provides a meaningful philosophical basis for developing a more responsible and human-centred model of contemporary entrepreneurship (Schumacher, 1973; Keown, 2005).

Right Livelihood and Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents the idea that corporations have responsibilities towards society beyond their financial interests. Carroll (1999) conceptualizes corporate responsibility as encompassing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions, thereby extending corporate responsibility beyond profit generation.

Right Livelihood offers a philosophical basis for this broader understanding of corporate responsibility. The Buddhist emphasis on compassion, non-harm, ethical conduct, and social welfare encourages individuals to consider the consequences of their actions for others (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). When applied conceptually to organizations, these principles can support a broader understanding of corporate responsibility.

CSR informed by Buddhist ethics would not be limited to charitable donations or philanthropic activities. Instead, ethical responsibility would become part of the core business model, influencing how organizations produce goods, treat workers, interact with consumers, and manage their environmental impact (Crane et al., 2019).

Right Livelihood and Corporate Governance

Corporate governance concerns the systems through which organizations are directed, managed, monitored, and held accountable. Transparency, accountability, integrity, and responsible decision-making are central to effective governance (OECD, 2023).

Right Livelihood can contribute to this discussion by emphasizing ethical intention and conduct. Buddhist ethics does not evaluate conduct solely according to its external consequences but also gives importance to intention and the moral quality of action (Harvey, 2000). Applied conceptually to corporate governance, this perspective suggests that corporate leaders should not ask only whether a particular action is legally permissible but also whether it is ethically responsible.

A Right Livelihood approach therefore encourages organizations to move beyond minimum compliance and develop a stronger culture of ethical accountability, transparency, integrity, and responsible decision-making. Corporate leaders can consequently view governance not merely as a mechanism for controlling organizational

behaviour but also as a means of ensuring that economic power is exercised responsibly (Freeman, 1984; Keown, 2005).

Right Livelihood and Consumer Ethics

Economic activity involves not only producers but also consumers. Consumer choices influence production patterns, resource use, and market demand. Contemporary approaches to responsible consumption increasingly recognize that consumer behaviour can influence environmental sustainability and broader patterns of production (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022).

Buddhist ethics emphasizes awareness, moderation, and freedom from excessive attachment to desire. Applied to consumption, this perspective encourages individuals to distinguish between genuine needs and excessive consumption (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). Buddhist Economics similarly questions consumption-oriented models that equate increasing material consumption with greater human well-being (Schumacher, 1973).

Responsible consumption can therefore complement responsible production. From this perspective, an ethical economic system requires both:

Ethical Production + Responsible Consumption

Businesses have a responsibility to produce goods and services responsibly, while consumers have a responsibility to make informed and sustainable choices. Such an approach is consistent with the broader Buddhist emphasis on moderation and with contemporary ideas of sustainable consumption and production (Schumacher, 1973; United Nations Environment Programme, 2022).

Therefore, Right Livelihood can be understood not only as a principle governing the conduct of producers and workers but also as an ethical orientation relevant to the choices made by consumers within the wider economic system.

Right Livelihood and Anti-Corruption

Corruption is one of the major challenges facing contemporary business and governance. Bribery, fraud, manipulation, and conflicts of interest undermine public trust, fair competition, and institutional integrity (OECD, 2023; United Nations Global Compact, 2023).

Right Livelihood strongly emphasizes the ethical nature of economic conduct. Wealth obtained through deception or unethical influence conflicts with the basic principles of Buddhist morality, particularly the commitment to ethical conduct and the avoidance of harmful actions (Bodhi, 2000; Harvey, 2000).

An ethically responsible organization should promote:

Transparency

Accountability

Fair competition

Responsible leadership

Disclosure of conflicts of interest; and

Zero tolerance for bribery and fraud.

These practices are also consistent with contemporary international approaches to responsible business and anti-corruption, including the principles promoted by the United Nations Global Compact and the OECD (OECD, 2023; United Nations Global Compact, 2023).

Thus, the principle of Right Livelihood can contribute to an organizational culture in which economic success is pursued through legitimate, transparent, and ethically responsible means.

Right Livelihood and Sustainable Business Models

The contemporary movement towards sustainable business reflects a growing recognition that long-term economic success cannot be separated from social and environmental well-being. Modern sustainability approaches increasingly seek to integrate economic performance with social responsibility and environmental protection (Elkington, 1997).

A sustainable business model attempts to balance economic, social, and environmental considerations. Right Livelihood provides a philosophical foundation for such balance because it challenges excessive attachment to material accumulation and emphasizes responsible conduct, moderation, and the avoidance of harm (Schumacher, 1973; Harvey, 2000).

A Buddhist-inspired sustainable business model may therefore be represented as: Economic Viability + Social Well-being + Environmental Responsibility + Ethical Conduct

This framework does not require businesses to abandon profitability. Instead, it suggests that profitability should be pursued within ethical boundaries. Schumacher's concept of Buddhist Economics similarly emphasizes that economic activity should serve human well-being rather than treating consumption and production as ends in themselves (Schumacher, 1973).

Contemporary Relevance of Right Livelihood

The contemporary relevance of Right Livelihood is particularly visible in the context of globalization. Global businesses increasingly operate across geographical and cultural boundaries, making ethical decision-making

more complex. Corporate activities may affect workers, consumers, communities, and ecosystems located far beyond the organization's immediate geographical boundaries (Crane et al., 2019).

Supply chains may involve multiple layers of producers and contractors. A corporation may therefore benefit economically from practices that occur far away from its headquarters. This creates important questions concerning corporate responsibility, supply-chain accountability, labour rights, and ethical sourcing (Freeman, 1984; Crane et al., 2019).

Right Livelihood provides a useful ethical question for such situations

Does economic benefit depend upon the suffering, exploitation, or harm of others?

If the answer is yes, the activity requires ethical reconsideration. This question reflects the broader Buddhist emphasis on examining the consequences and ethical quality of actions rather than evaluating conduct solely according to material outcomes (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

Similarly, contemporary technological developments create new ethical questions concerning artificial intelligence, data privacy, digital labour, surveillance, and automation. Although these issues were obviously not addressed directly in ancient Buddhist texts, the ethical principles of non-harm, honesty, responsibility, mindfulness, and compassion can provide a broader framework for considering their consequences (Keown, 2005).

In this sense, the contemporary relevance of Right Livelihood lies in its capacity to encourage ethical reflection on emerging forms of economic activity. It invites businesses and individuals to consider not only what can be economically achieved, but also how it is achieved and what consequences it produces for human beings and the wider environment.

Limitations and Challenges

Despite its relevance, the application of Right Livelihood to contemporary business should be approached carefully.

First, ancient Buddhist teachings emerged within a very different economic and social context. Modern corporations, multinational supply chains, financial markets, and digital economies are significantly more complex.

Second, the concept of harm can be difficult to define in complex economic systems. An activity may generate both benefits and risks, making ethical evaluation complicated.

Third, Buddhist ethics emphasizes individual moral cultivation, whereas contemporary corporations require institutional systems, regulations, auditing, and accountability mechanisms. Individual morality alone cannot solve structural problems.

Fourth, Buddhist concepts should not be reduced to corporate branding or marketing strategies. Using Buddhist terminology merely to enhance corporate reputation would undermine the deeper ethical meaning of Right Livelihood.

Therefore, the contemporary application of Samyak Ajiva should be understood as an ethical dialogue between Buddhist philosophy and modern business ethics, rather than as a direct transfer of an ancient doctrine into modern corporate management.

8. Conclusion

Right Livelihood (Samyak Ajiva) represents an important contribution of Buddhist ethical philosophy to the understanding of economic life. As an element of the Noble Eightfold Path, it establishes a close relationship between livelihood and morality and emphasizes that the means through which wealth is acquired have ethical consequences.

Buddhist teachings do not necessarily reject wealth, trade, entrepreneurship, or economic activity. Rather, they emphasize that economic activities should be pursued through ethical and non-harmful means. The Vanijja Sutta, with its discussion of five forms of trade to be avoided, demonstrates that Buddhist ethics explicitly considers the social consequences of economic activity.

The principle becomes particularly relevant in the contemporary context, where businesses face challenges relating to labour exploitation, environmental degradation, corruption, consumer manipulation, and excessive profit orientation. Contemporary frameworks of responsible business, including Corporate Social Responsibility and sustainable business, similarly recognize that corporations have responsibilities beyond financial performance.

The significance of Right Livelihood, therefore, lies not in replacing contemporary Business Ethics but in deepening its moral foundation. It encourages businesses to move beyond the narrow question of how much profit can be generated and consider how that profit is generated and what consequences the process produces.

A contemporary business model inspired by Samyak Ājīva would seek to balance economic viability with human dignity, social welfare, environmental sustainability, and ethical responsibility. Such an approach can contribute to a more humane understanding of entrepreneurship and economic development.

Ultimately, Right Livelihood offers a simple but profound ethical principle: economic activity should contribute to human well-being without creating unnecessary harm. In an increasingly

interconnected global economy, this principle remains relevant for developing business practices that are not only profitable but also responsible, sustainable, and ethically grounded

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