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The Canonical Logic of Prosperity: A Triadic Moral Psychology of Economic Ethics in Early Buddhism

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Abstract

This article reconstructs an early canonical account of Buddhist prosperity by examining the moral psychology in the early Buddhist texts and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels. Contemporary discussions of "Buddhist economics" often invoke compassion, moderation, non-harming, and mindfulness without sustained attention to the canonical analysis of desire. Drawing on a comparative philological study, this article argues that early Buddhism articulates a distinct ethical logic of economic life through a triadic transformation of motivation: from craving (*taṇhā*) to wholesome aspiration (*chanda)*; sustained by rapturous diligence (*pīti* and *appamāda*); and culminating in contentment (*santuṭṭhi*). This progression reorganizes the familiar economic sequence of desire, effort, and satisfaction into a moral continuum that culminates not in accumulation but in equilibrium. The resulting "canonical logic of prosperity" reframes well-being as arising from certain ethical condi-

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tions rather than the maximization of consumption or preference satisfaction. By clarifying the doctrinal contours of aspiration, affect, and contentment, the article offers a constructive contribution to debates in economic ethics, well-being theory, and the moral psychology of desire. It argues that early Buddhism provides not merely an alternative set of values but a coherent conceptual architecture for understanding economic agency and the cultivation of sustainable prosperity.

Introduction

Contemporary economies face a paradox: material abundance continues to expand, yet collective well-being does not rise proportionately (Fanning and O'Neill 818). Anxiety, inequality, and ecological strain coexist with unprecedented production (Howarth and Kennedy 231). Recent "well-being" and "happiness" initiatives diagnose this malaise, but they rarely question the deeper assumption that economic life is driven by insatiable desire. As a result, well-being metrics are often added to an unchanged growth logic (Agrawal et al. 5521).

Early Buddhist thought approaches the issue differently. It identifies craving (*taṇhā*) as the root of suffering and treats happiness and ease (*sukha*), in ethically and contemplatively significant senses, as arising through the transformation rather than the intensification of desire (SN 56.11; T02 no. 109 503b05–503c22; Gold 607-609). *Sukha*, in this connection, denotes an important affective dimension of Buddhist well-being rather than a straightforward equivalent of the modern category of well-being. Economic behavior is thus a moral arena shaped by intention where the ethical quality of motivation matters as much as material outcome (AN 6.63; T01 no. 26 599b8–600b27). Early Buddhist texts present prosperity

not as reducible to accumulation but as dependent on the ethical refinement of desire: from craving to aspiration (*chanda, yuan* 願), from reactivity to mindfulness (*sati*, *nian* 念), from grasping (*upādāna*, *qu* 取) to contentment (*santuṭṭhi*, *zhi zu* 知足) (Schumacher 37–38; Payutto chapters 3, 5; AN 5.41; T01 no. 26 615c20). This moral psychology is relevant to both renunciant and householder life, though its practical expression differs across these social roles.

Although "Buddhist economics" has grown in prominence since Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), much of the discussion invokes ideals such as compassion, moderation, non-harming, and mindfulness without closely examining the canonical psychology of desire. This study addresses that gap by reconstructing an early canonical logic of prosperity.

The present study advances three related claims: (1) that desire is ethically plastic, because early Buddhist texts distinguish unwholesome craving from wholesome aspiration, thereby allowing for productive engagement that is intentional, mindful, and non-possessive; (2) that economic value is relational and moral, because intention and affect shape experience and therefore cannot be assessed solely in quantitative terms; and (3) that prosperity is ultimately measured by contentment rather than by material increase alone, because the canon repeatedly presents contentment (*santuṭṭhi*) as the highest wealth, grounded in insight rather than in acquisition as an end in itself. The following sections situate these claims in relation to existing scholarship and then develop them through close analysis of early Buddhist sources.

Literature Review

Since E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* introduced the phrase "Buddhist economics," scholars have explored how Buddhist values might inform

economic life. Works by Ng, Payutto, Brown, and Zsolnai emphasize compassion, moderation, non-harming, and mindfulness as normative correctives to contemporary economic excess.

This literature demonstrates that Buddhist traditions offer moral resources for critiquing modern economics. Yet much of it remains normatively aspirational. Ethical ideals—compassion, moderation, non-harming, and mindfulness—are affirmed, but the canonical psychology underlying these ideals is seldom reconstructed. Although some influential works, notably Payutto, explicitly recognize both the distinctions between craving and wholesome aspiration, and between rapture and contentment, along with their economic relevance, the present study develops these insights further by reconstructing these concepts as components of an integrated moral psychology.

Three strands are especially relevant. (1) The "capabilities approach" (Sen 18-19, 24; Nussbaum 5) critiques the reduction of well-being to utility, emphasizing flourishing and ethical evaluation. (2) Happiness studies (Diener et al. 288-289; Kahneman and Deaton 16489; Layard 3-4) demonstrate diminishing returns to income and highlight affective limits of consumption. (3) Degrowth and ecological economics (Daly 47, 69; Kallis 879; Jackson 13, 47) interrogate the ecological and psychological consequences of continuous growth.

These frameworks foreground agency, meaning, and relationality—concerns resonant with Buddhist ethics. Yet they seldom address how desires themselves are ethically cultivated. Preferences are treated as given or socially shaped, not as morally transformable.

Early Buddhist sources offer resources for addressing this gap. Craving perpetuates suffering not because all desire is suspect, but because desire has moral quality and can be refined. The canonical distinction between craving and aspiration—attested across the *Nikāyas* and

Āgamas (e.g., SN 51; T02, no. 125)—provides a conceptual vocabulary largely absent from contemporary well-being theories.

Studies of Buddhist moral psychology (Collins; Keown; Gethin; Harvey) illuminate the central role of intention, wholesome mental factors (*kusala dhamma*s), and the transformation effected by the path. These works acknowledge the importance of aspiration, rapture, and contentment within ethical development.

Although Payutto extends these insights into economic reasoning, the present study builds on them by situating aspiration, rapture, and contentment within a systematic canonical moral psychology that clarifies their implications for productive activity, motivation, and satisfaction in economic life—a level of exegetical integration not yet articulated in the literature.

Methodology and Corpus

This study adopts a philological and philosophical method grounded in close reading of early Buddhist sources. It delimits its inquiry to the *Nikāya–Āgama* corpus to reconstruct an early canonical account of the moral psychology relevant to prosperity, with attention to both renunciant and householder discourses and to the different normative settings in which they operate. Although contemporary writers often highlight compassion, moderation, non-harming, and mindfulness (Payutto; Zsolnai; Kovács), the significance of these virtues becomes clearer when situated within the canonical grammar of desire, intention, and moral cultivation.

The analysis therefore begins with the *Nikāya–Āgama* corpus and develops a historically delimited reconstruction that is then placed in dialogue with broader ethical and economic reflection. The method is historical, in identifying the semantic and doctrinal contours of key terms—

craving, aspiration, rapture, heedfulness (*appamāda)*, contentment—in their textual contexts; and constructive, in developing these findings into analytic categories capable of engaging contemporary debates on motivation and well-being. This dual orientation follows earlier work in Buddhist ethics and moral psychology (Collins; Keown; Gethin; Harvey) and extends it into the domain of economic reasoning. The corpus for this study comprises the four Pāli *Nikāyas* and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels, especially the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN) and *Dīrgha Āgama* (DA), the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN) and *Madhyama Āgama* (MA), the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN) and *Saṃyukta Āgama* (SA), and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN) and *Ekottara Āgama* (EA). This selection is methodological rather than normative: these collections provide a comparatively stable and well-studied corpus for philological analysis, just as their parallel structure enables cross-recensional comparison of shared doctrinal material.

Cross-canonical comparison serves two purposes. First, it allows doctrinal control: parallel passages enable identification of shared doctrinal material and recurrent formulations relevant to the study of early Buddhism. This comparative method is now standard in early Buddhist studies (Anālayo *Comparative*; Choong). Second, it supports semantic clarification: key terms—aspiration (*chanda, yuan* 願), rapture (*pīti*, *xi* 喜), heedfulness (*appamāda*, *bu fang yi* 不放逸), contentment (*santuṭṭhi, zhi zu* 知足)—often display nuanced semantic ranges, and examining their usage across parallels clarifies how early Buddhism understood aspiration, affective tone, and moral sufficiency.

Philological findings are translated into analytic categories through a three-stage interpretive process. First, the analysis identifies lexical clusters: aspiration in contexts of wholesome motivation and effort; rapture and heedfulness in contexts of rapturous diligence and heedful effort; and contentment in contexts of restraint, tranquility, and equilibrium. Second, an interpretive synthesis is undertaken. Rather than

treating these terms in isolation, the analysis examines their relational functioning within sutta discourse, revealing an integrated moral–psychological progression. Third, a philosophical translation renders canonical functions into broader categories—moral intention, affective regulation, and contentment—and places them in dialogue with contemporary ethical and economic theory (Sen; Nussbaum; Jackson). The aim is not to impose external frameworks but to articulate the normative tools already implicit in the texts.

Exegesis I—The Transformation of Desire (*Taṇhā, yu* 欲 to *Chanda, yuan* 願)

Desire forms the conceptual hinge of early Buddhist ethics (AN 6.63; MN 117; AN 3.33). Although the cultivation of right effort depends on aspiration refined by wisdom and mindfulness (MN 141), the Second Noble Truth identifies craving as the origin of suffering (*SN* 56.11). Desire therefore mediates intention, action, and liberation. Reconstructing how early texts articulate the transformation of craving into aspiration helps clarify an early canonical account of motivation and prosperity relevant to economic ethics. The analysis here follows Anālayo (*Comparative*)'s comparative method of contextual triangulation, drawing on parallel passages across the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* to clarify the semantic and doctrinal contours of desire.

Desire appears in the canon in both negative and positive forms. Craving is described as the force that propels suffering, especially in its three modalities—craving for sensual pleasure, for existence, and for nonexistence (*SN* 56.11; T02, no. 109). Yet elsewhere the Buddha encourages aspiration for the wholesome (*kusalachanda*), diligent striving (*viriya*), and "the desire [aspiration] to attain perfection" (*arahattappattiyā . . . chando*) (SN 51.15). The apparent tension dissolves once the underlying inten-

tional structure is considered: craving is reactive and appropriative, whereas aspiration is volitional, mindful, and ethically grounded (AN 3.33; MN 117; AN 6.63).

Ethical discernment (*paññā*) thus becomes the faculty that differentiates desire's moral valence. Desire is not extinguished wholesale but trained, redirected, and purified. Wisdom reframes wanting so that it supports, rather than obstructs, the path (SN 51.15; MN 44; MN 9; MN 117).

Pāli and Chinese sources reinforce this ethical polarity. The term *taṇhā* signifies compulsive craving. In Chinese translations it appears largely as 欲 (*yu*) or 愛 (*ai*), both highlighting affective attachment—for example, *Ekottara Āgama* 31.2 (T02, no. 125,667a04) where craving is rendered 欲 (*yu*). By contrast, *chanda* is rendered as 願 (*yuan*) in morally positive contexts, carrying the sense of resolve or volition. In *Madhyama Āgama* 32 (T01, no. 26,469c17) monks are urged to "arouse aspiration to Buddha path and the practice of wholesome conduct" (願佛道，行梵行).

This lexical differentiation mirrors doctrinal usage. Aspiration appears as one of the bases of spiritual success (*iddhipāda*) (*SN* 51.15), signifying constructive motivation. Craving, by contrast, figures as a causal link in dependent origination, leading from feeling to clinging (*DN* 15; T01, no. 1,60a28). The movement from craving to aspiration thus marks a shift from conditioned reactivity to intention guided by insight.

Several discourses depict this transformation directly. In the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (*MN* 19) the Buddha recounts learning to redirect unwholesome thoughts rooted in sensuality, ill will, and cruelty toward renunciation, non-hatred, and compassion. This represents not suppression but ethical reorientation. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* identifies intention as central to karma, marking the distinctive Buddhist emphasis on volition in ethical assessment (*AN* 6.63). Desire's moral significance lies in its intentional orientation.

The shift from craving to aspiration is both cognitive and affective (AN 4.159; MN 117; SN 12.2). Craving projects fulfillment onto imagined objects and is driven by restlessness. Aspiration arises from insight into impermanence and redirects motivation toward skillful means and beneficial ends (SN 22.59; SN 22.46; SN 45.8). Mindfulness (*sati*, *nian* 念) serves as the hinge: it interrupts habitual projection and transforms reactive wanting into deliberate intention (MN 10; MN 9).

Contemporary psychology provides helpful parallels. Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 244) shows that intrinsic goals—mastery, meaning, affiliation—yield more stable well-being than extrinsic pursuits tied to status or consumption. Positive Psychology similarly finds that intention's quality predicts well-being more reliably than the quantity of material acquisition (Diener et al. 283-284). Early Buddhism anticipates this distinction while embedding it within a moral and liberative framework: aspiration is desire rendered conducive to freedom.

Understanding this transformation requires situating it within Buddhist causality. Because intention is central to the karmic quality of action, wholesome and unwholesome motivations produce structurally different outcomes. Craving yields suffering because it is rooted in delusion (*moha*, *chi* 癡) and grasping. Aspiration, refined by mindfulness and insight, conditions wholesome results.

The *Mahānidāna Sutta* (*DN* 15) illustrates how craving conditions clinging and becoming; its *Dīrgha-Āgama* parallel (T01, no. 1,60a28) mirrors this sequence. Transformation occurs when craving is recognized and replaced with aspiration. Material and social actions, viewed through dependent origination, are never ethically neutral; they participate in networks of psychological and relational causality (SN 12.2; SN 12.39; MN 135).

This explains why early Buddhism does not reject economic activity per se. It questions craving-driven acquisition but affirms aspiration-driven livelihood. The *Sigālovāda Sutta* (*DN* 31) (T01, no. 1, 60a02) instruct householders to earn wealth by righteous means through skilled and disciplined conduct and accumulate it gradually to "pick up riches as bees . . . like a termite mound piling up" (*bhoge saṁharamānassa . . . vammikovu-pacīyati*). In doctrinal terms, this aligns with its *Dīrgha-Āgama* parallel (T01, no. 1, 70a19–60a02) concerning "right livelihood" (*zheng ming* 正命). Desire here is disciplined, not denied.

Across the *Nikāya–Āgama*s discussed here, the transformation of desire may be described in terms of four interrelated stages, although these take different practical forms in renunciant cultivation and in householder life. Recognition involves insight (*vipassanā*, *guan* 觀), which reveals craving (*taṇhā*, *yu* 欲) as unstable and conditioned. Redirection follows, as mindfulness (*sati*, *nian* 念) interrupts habitual patterns and reorients intention (*cetanā*, *si* 思) toward wholesome ends. Through cultivation, aspiration (*chanda*, *yuan* 願) energizes right effort (*sammā-vāyāma*, *zheng jing jin* 正精進) and is supported by rapture (*pīti*, *xi* 喜). Finally, integration occurs when action is undertaken without clinging, culminating in contentment (*santuṭṭhi*, *zhi zu* 知足). This sequence reflects dependent origination in reverse: as ignorance subsides, craving is displaced by aspiration and activity becomes aligned with equanimity.

This transformation helps clarify an early canonical account of prosperity. Prosperity is not exhausted by the accumulation of goods but depends on the purification and alignment of intention that governs acquisition, use, and satisfaction. Aspiration anchors productive engagement while remaining bounded by mindfulness and ethical concern. Economic activity becomes a domain for cultivating non-possessive motivation, generosity, and mutual well-being.

By distinguishing craving from aspiration, early Buddhist texts offer a model in which vitality does not require insatiability. Motivation can be both energetic and ethically regulated. The transformation of desire thus provides a psychological framework for the early canonical vision of prosperity reconstructed here.

The distinction between craving and wholesome aspiration has been recognized and further elaborated across Buddhist traditions, but the status of non-attached motivation has remained doctrinally difficult to define in any single or uncontroversial way. Early Buddhist materials distinguish compulsive appropriation from skilful intention, but they do not thereby settle all questions concerning the status of action once attachment has ceased (Collins; Gethin). This issue becomes especially pointed in later Buddhist discussions of the compassion and activity of *arhats* and buddhas. Classical traditions, including debates reflected in the *Kathāvatthu* and later commentarial literature, take up these problems more explicitly (Aung and Rhys Davids; Harvey). The present study does not seek to resolve that broader doctrinal question. Its narrower aim is to reconstruct, from *Nikāya–Āgama* materials, the moral psychology by which desire is ethically transformed within early Buddhist discourse, especially as this bears on cultivation, livelihood, and prosperity in ordinary moral life.

Exegesis II—Rapture and Heedfulness (*Pīti, xi* 喜 and *Appamāda, bu fang yi* 不放逸)

Having traced how desire is ethically transformed into wholesome aspiration, we now examine the emotional and volitional forces that sustain this aspiration in practice. In early Buddhist psychology, rapture (*pīti*, *xi* 喜) and heedfulness (*appamāda*, *bu fang yi* 不放逸) function as affective and cognitive supports for the path, especially in renunciant and contempla-

tive settings, and also bear on lay ethical diligence. They are not mere moods but disciplined modes of engagement that convert moral insight into sustained effort (SN 36.31; SN 12.23; DN 16; DHP 21; SN 45.8). Using the same *Nikāya–Āgama* comparative method outlined earlier, this section analyses how rapture and heedfulness operate as mutually reinforcing supports of Buddhist diligence.

If aspiration provides direction, rapture and heedfulness determine the quality and sustainability of that movement. Early Buddhist texts portray moral progress not as suppression but as the awakening of rapturous vitality in wholesome conduct (AN 11.1). The *Dhamma* is repeatedly described as "apparent in the present life, immediately effective, inviting inspection" (*sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko*) (AN 6.10; MN 7), a characterization linked in these texts with inspiration, rapture, and ethical clarity. As Gethin (*Foundations* 81, 156-157) observes, rapture functions as the emotional resonance of right effort—an uplifting affect grounded in restraint rather than sensual stimulation.

The *Dhammapada* (331-333) and its *Fa ju jing* (法句經, T04, no. 210,570b09) parallel present rapture as a natural expression of friendship, generosity, and mindfulness. Such rapture is not an external reward but the experiential signature of non-craving. The virtue that stabilizes such rapture is *appamāda*, usually translated as "heedfulness" or "non-negligence." As Anālayo (*Perspectives* 24, 27, 179) and Harvey (264-286) note, heedfulness safeguards wholesome states and prevents moral slackening. Together, rapture and heedfulness function as complementary affective and volitional supports for Buddhist diligence: rapture lends vitality to practice, whereas heedfulness stabilizes and grounds it. Their balanced interplay models the Middle Way between excitement and rigidity.

In Pāli sources, rapture appears in both meditative and ethical contexts. Although strongly associated with the early stages of meditative absorption (*jhāna)* (DN 2), it also denotes rapture in wholesome action (AN

11.1), confidence in the *Dhamma* (SN 12.23), and the emotional clarity accompanying virtue (AN 8.30). Chinese equivalents—喜 (*xi*), 樂 (*lè*), and 法喜 (*fa xi*, "rapture in the *Dhamma*")—likewise reflect this dual valence of serene uplift and ethical delight. Anālayo (*Perspectives* 130-131) notes that "rapture in the *Dhamma*" (*fa xi* 法喜) in *Madhyama Āgama* (T01, no. 26, 692c21–693b02) signals rapture born from reflection and release rather than acquisition.

Heedfulness—rendered in Chinese as *bu fang yi* (不放逸)—literally means "not letting loose." In *Appamādasutta* (AN 10.15), "all skillful [wholesome] qualities are rooted in diligence [heedfulness] and meet at diligence, and diligence is said to be the best of them" (*ye keci kusalā dhammā, sabbe te appamādamūlakā appamādasamosaraṇā. Appamādo tesaṁ aggamakkhāyati*). The *Ekottara Āgama* 27.4 (T02, no. 125, 699b17) parallel warns that "letting loose [heedlessness] is the path to death . . . Losing the path results in self-destruction" (放逸為死徑 . . . 失道為自喪). In doctrinal terms, rapture prevents practice from becoming mechanical, whereas heedfulness prevents rapture from slipping into complacency. Rapture without vigilance becomes indulgence; vigilance without rapture becomes ascetic strain. Early Buddhism insists (AN 10.15; DHP 24) on their integration as a sustainable model of ethical motivation: energetic yet self-regulating.

Several discourses depict rapture and heedfulness as mutually conditioning. The *Upanisa Sutta* (*SN* 12.23) presents rapture as arising from faith (*saddhā*), leading sequentially to tranquility, happiness and ease (*sukha*), concentration (*samādhi*), and liberating knowledge (*yathābhūtañāṇadassana*). The discourse from *Saṃyukta Āgama* 978 (T02, no. 99,253a26) substitutes "delight in the Dhamma" (*fa xi* 法喜) for faith, emphasizing cognitive appreciation rather than devotional exuberance. This substitution suggests that rapture is not merely emotional uplift but insight-informed confidence.

The *Appamāda Sutta* (*AN* 10.15) describes heedfulness as guarding arisen wholesome states and preventing unwholesome states from emerging. The *Dhammapada* (21) famously declares, "Heedfulness is the state free of death" (*Appamādo amatapadaṁ*). The discourse from *Saṃyukta Āgama* 993 (T02, no. 99,259a05) repeats this formula almost verbatim. Across these parallels, rapture supplies vitality whereas heedfulness directs and stabilizes it. Together they form the affective structure of Buddhist perseverance.

Early Buddhist thought treats rapture as more than an emotional state: it is a form of ethical vitality aligned with clarity. Discourses often depict rapture arising from meditative calm, ethical purity, or understanding. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (*AN* 10.1) and its *Madhyama Āgama* 42 (T01, no. 26, 485b08) parallel, the Buddha teaches: "the goal and benefit of skillful ethics [virtue] is not having regrets. Joy is the goal and benefit of not having regrets. Rapture is the goal and benefit of joy. Tranquility is the goal and benefit of rapture. Bliss is the goal and benefit of tranquility. Immersion [concentration] is the goal and benefit of bliss" (*kusalāni sīlāni avippaṭisāratthāni avippaṭisārānisaṁsāni; avippaṭisāro pāmojjattho pāmojjānisaṁso; pāmojjaṁ pītatthaṁ pītānisaṁsaṁ; pīti passaddhatthā passaddhānisaṁsā; passaddhi sukhatthā sukhānisaṁsā; sukhaṁ samādhatthaṁ samādhānisaṁsaṁ*, 因持戒便得不悔，因不悔便得歡悅，因歡悅便得喜，因喜便得止，因止便得樂，因樂便得定). Here, rapture mediates between virtue (*sīla*) and concentration (*samādhi*), functioning as an affective bridge that dissolves lethargy and aligns the mind with the path.

This conception complicates the modern tendency to treat spirituality and pleasure as mutually exclusive. Buddhist rapture is non-possessive: it arises not from stimulation but from the cessation of restlessness. Whereas craving drives seeking, rapture reflects fulfillment in the present moment. In this sense, rapture completes the moral reeducation of desire: aspiration provides direction; rapture confirms and energizes it.

If rapture sustains the felt attractiveness of practice, heedfulness sustains its continuity. The Buddha's final injunction—"Persist with diligence [heedfulness]" (*appamādena sampādethā*) (DN 16)—encapsulates the principle of unwavering moral attention. *Madhyama Āgama* 141 (T01, no. 26, 647b22) states, "If there are limitless virtues to be attained, they all have heedfulness as their root" (若有無量善法可得，彼一切以不放逸為本). Such images frame ethical cultivation as ongoing vigilance: moral life is a field requiring constant tending.

Heedfulness links intention with temporality. It converts momentary insight into enduring character by sustaining reflective awareness across time. In Aristotelian terms, heedfulness resembles *phronēsis*: a practical wisdom that holds knowledge and action together (Aristotle, 120-121; SN 56.11; AN 8.54; AN 10.176). It is not anxiety or hyper-vigilance but a stable attunement to consequence—the quality that renders rapture durable rather than fleeting.

The pairing of rapture and heedfulness completes the motivational triad initiated with aspiration. Aspirational direction, rapturous vitality, and sustained vigilance form an integrated structure: aspiration provides intentional direction, rapture energizes wholesome action, and heedfulness ensures continuity and balance.

Canonical sources (AN 10.15; SN 45.8; SN 12.23) emphasize that each depends on the others. Aspiration without rapture becomes dry moralism; rapture without vigilance lapses into distraction; vigilance without aspiration becomes rigid restraint. Their dynamic balance embodies the Middle Way as lived affect: vibrant and disciplined, energized yet grounded.

Within this balance lies the affective realism of Buddhist ethics. The path is not emotional suppression but emotional refinement. Rapture reveals that ethical life can be affectively rewarding; heedfulness protects

that reward from distortion. Together they articulate a vision of well-being defined not by acquisition but by the serene vitality of an ethically trained mind.

Exegesis III—Sufficiency and Contentment (*Santuṭṭhi, zhi zu* 知足)

This section examines contentment as the culmination of the early Buddhist psychology of prosperity reconstructed here. In the sequence outlined thus far, aspiration provides direction, rapture and heedfulness supply vitality and stability, and contentment completes the arc by establishing ethical equilibrium. Contentment does not signal resignation; it denotes cultivated sufficiency—a rapturous acceptance that frees motivation from compulsive acquisition and anchors sustainable well-being.

The transformation of desire from craving to aspiration initiates ethical striving, but its fulfillment depends on a reorientation of satisfaction. The Buddha repeatedly characterizes contentment as a form of wealth not wholly determined by external conditions. *Dhammapada* (204) and its *Fa ju jing* (法句經, T04, no. 210,573a27) parallel declare: "Contentment, [is] the ultimate wealth" (*santuṭṭhiparamaṁ dhanaṁ, zhi zu zui fu* 知足最富). Here prosperity is valued not simply in terms of possession but in terms of freedom from the agitation of wanting more.

Philologically, *santuṭṭhi* (*saṃ*+√*tus*, "to be satisfied") conveys complete contentment. Its Chinese renderings—*zhi zu* 知足 ("knowing enough"), *man zu* 滿足 ("being fulfilled")—emphasize discernment over deprivation. In *Fa ju jing* (法句經, T04, no. 210,568a11, 571c14), the contented person "knows what is enough in what one receives" (*qu de zhi zu* 取得知足) and "does not seek beyond measure in the mind" (*yi bu duo qiu* 意不多求), implying reflective awareness rather than forced simplicity.

In the parallel passages of *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 4.28) and *Fa ji yao song* (法集要頌經, T04, no. 213,792c28), a person practices contentment with whatever gains are lawfully obtained, exercising moderation and restraint in line with insight. Contentment thus functions as an ethical boundary: effort remains valued, but its excess is restrained by insight. Doctrinally, contentment integrates impermanence (*anicca*) and restraint (*saṃvara*). Satisfaction arises from seeing the contingency of experience, not from the exhaustion of desire. This renders contentment a practical form of wisdom—an enacted realization of the limits of acquisition.

Canonical narratives portray contentment as mental ease rather than lack. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 8.30), practitioners are described as being "content with any kind of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicines and supplies for the sick" (*santuṭṭho hoti itarītara-cīvara-piṇḍapāta-senāsana-gilānapaccaya-bhesajja-parikkhārena*). Its *Ekottara Āgama* parallel (T02, no. 125,754c03-754c06) describes them as those "who have few wishes . . . not many wishes . . . who are content . . . not insatiable . . . [and] live in quiet seclusion . . . not dwelling in crowds" (少欲者 . . . 非多欲者 . . . 知足者 . . . 非無厭者 . . . 閑居者 . . . 非眾中者 . . .). The language carries particular force in renunciant settings shaped by simplicity of requisites and restraint. The emphasis falls on inward composure rather than on deprivation as such. In renunciant contexts, this may take the form of radical simplicity; in householder contexts, however, the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 4.62) presents four forms of household bliss—ownership, enjoyment, debtlessness, and blamelessness—thereby affirming the importance of material security, freedom from debt, and responsible prosperity within an ethical framework. The last, rooted in ethical livelihood, gives these household goods their clearest moral orientation and shows how contentment can accompany prosperity without anxiety. The *Saṃyukta Āgama* (T02, no. 99,23a22-23c17) again parallels this teaching, associating satisfaction with honest income and moral clarity.

Within Buddhist moral psychology, contentment stabilizes the motivational system. Aspiration and rapture are productive but remain vulnerable to excess: aspiration can revert into craving; rapture can drift into indulgence. Contentment provides the limit-condition that keeps these motivational forces balanced. It marks a state in which motivation becomes self-limiting through insight rather than constraint through suppression (AN 4.28; AN 8.30; MN 2).

This dynamic parallels modern accounts of intrinsic fulfillment and "autotelic experience" of the flow-state (Csikszentmihalyi 67), where engagement is accompanied by a sense of enoughness. Unlike purely psychological models, however, Buddhist contentment is grounded in the cessation of craving (*taṇhānirodha*). In both renunciant and lay contexts, the practitioner experiences motivation without compulsion; activity continues, but without the psychological friction generated by comparison or deficit-based striving. Restraint becomes a form of freedom (SN 12.15; AN 8.30; MN 2).

Contentment also serves as a social principle. The *Cakkavatti Sutta* (DN 26) attributes social decline to rulers who hoard wealth rather than ensuring equitable distribution. Poverty then leads to theft, violence, and the erosion of moral life. The implication is clear: structural stability requires both just provisioning and internal restraint. Only when people are content with their own means and resolved collectively to "refrain from stealing [taking what is not given]" (*adinnādānā virameyyāma*) can social harmony endure.

The *Madhyama Āgama* 70 (T01, no. 26,520b16-525a09) expresses this collective ethic as "mutually reinforcing wholesome actions: . . . refrain from killing and sever its cause . . . abandon greed and jealousy and cut off their roots . . ." (共行善法 . . . 共離殺、斷殺 . . . 離貪嫉、斷貪嫉 . . .) Prosperity is conceived relationally: balance among persons and between society and nature, rather than unlimited expansion of any one element.

These teachings resonate with contemporary steady-state and degrowth scholarship (Daly; Jackson; Kallis), yet Buddhism grounds sustainable prosperity in moral cultivation rather than economic design alone.

A frequent objection (Chua et al. 26244; Oishi et al. 348-56) is that contentment suppresses ambition or innovation. Canonical sources, however, depict contentment as enabling clarity rather than passivity. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (*AN* 8.30) underscores this principle, noting that "when immersed, . . . when wise, they don't wish" (*samāhito samāno . . . paññavā samāno . . . na icchati*). By praising a fewness of desires as conducive to concentration and insight, this text supports simplicity and meditative discipline in renunciant contexts. In lay contexts, however, it is better understood as restraint upon excess rather than a rejection of livelihood or responsible provision. Its *Fǎjí yàosòng jīng* parallel (T04, no. 213,792c28-794a14) likewise commends "knowing enough and when to stop, . . . not indulging in desires" (. . . 知止足 . . . 不恣於欲意). Such freedom from distraction enhances, rather than diminishes, creative responsiveness. When unburdened by acquisitive pressure, the mind perceives more accurately and acts more skillfully (AN 4.28; AN 8.30). Contentment thus supports qualitative creativity: innovation grounded in discernment rather than in accumulation as an end in itself. It refines rather than dulls the productive capacities of aspiration and rapture.

Theoretical Synthesis—The Buddhist Logic of Prosperity

This section synthesizes the exegetical analyses of desire, affect, and contentment to articulate an early canonical logic of prosperity. The model that emerges reframes fundamental economic categories—motivation, effort, and satisfaction—through the moral psychology of the early Buddhist texts. Rather than reducing prosperity to material accumulation or preference maximization, the early canonical materials examined here

conceive it in terms of the refinement of intention and the stabilization of well-being through insight.

The preceding analyses of desire transformation, rapturous diligence, and contentment outline a moral progression that maps directly onto economic life. Beginning with the transformation of desire (from *taṇhā* to *chanda*), continuing through the cultivation of rapturous diligence, and culminating in contentment, the canonical texts articulate a full cycle of ethical motivation. This triad reframes three core economic impulses: desire, transformed from craving into wholesome aspiration; effort, sustained by rapture and heedfulness; and satisfaction, completed in contentment.

Together, aspiration, rapture, and heedfulness form an integrated structure: aspiration provides intentional direction, rapture energizes wholesome action, and heedfulness sustains continuity and balance. Prosperity arises not from accumulation alone but from qualitative shifts in motivation and experience. What contemporary economics calls "utility maximization" (Saros; Mohajan 83) is here reconceived as the maximization of well-being.

The triadic model follows the structure of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). Just as craving arises from ignorance, aspiration arises from insight; rapture emerges from wholesome action; contentment from relinquishment. The *Upanisa Sutta* (SN 12.23) and its *Madhyama Āgama* parallel (T01, no. 26, 485b08-485b15) map this affective sequence explicitly: faith gives rise to rapture, rapture to tranquility, tranquility to happiness, and happiness to concentration and liberating knowledge.

Prosperity is thus not a static stock but a dynamic causal flow—a series of mental and ethical conditions that reinforce each other. This causal framing clarifies that happiness is emergent and relational and cannot be explained solely by material possessions. The householder dis-

courses (e.g., DN 31; AN 4.62) consistently tie prosperity to moral livelihood, responsible enjoyment, debtlessness, generosity, and blameless rapture. By contrast, renunciant texts place greater emphasis on simplicity of requisites, restraint, and non-possession, even where the underlying moral psychology of non-craving and contentment remains continuous across both domains. Wealth, in these texts, is evaluated not only by external holdings but by the causes through which it is acquired and used.

The early Buddhist account of causality developed in these texts also reconfigures the logic of value. Because all actions arise in dependence on others, genuine gain cannot be secured through exploitation. The dictum found in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN 47.19), "looking after yourself, you look after others; and looking after others, you look after yourself" (*attānaṁ, bhikkhave, rakkhanto paraṁ rakkhati, paraṁ rakkhanto attānaṁ rakkhati*), as well as its *Saṃyukta Āgama* 619 parallel (T02, no. 99, 173b13-173b14), which similarly notes that "protecting oneself is protecting others; others protecting themselves is also protecting oneself" (己自護時即是護他，他自護時亦是護己), encapsulates this principle of reciprocal causality.

Within this framework, generosity (*dāna*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) are productive forces. They expand the shared field of well-being rather than diminish one's own. Economic action, viewed through dependent origination, is fundamentally non-zero-sum: the well-being of self and other arise together. The *Madhyama Āgama* 70 (T01, no. 26,520b16-525a09)'s formulation of "mutually reinforcing wholesome actions" (*gong geng zheng xing shan* 共更增行善) reinforces this insight. Prosperity is sustainable only when well-being circulates relationally across persons and communities.

The doctrine of impermanence highlights the transience of all phenomena. Because conditions inevitably change, happiness cannot depend on securing permanent possession. Contentment internalizes this

truth by orienting satisfaction toward present sufficiency rather than toward accumulation as the primary locus of fulfillment. One enjoys without clinging because one understands that conditions inevitably change.

This temporal orientation challenges the growth imperative embedded in modern economic rationality (Siemoneit 33–34; Richters and Siemoneit 126). Growth assumes that fulfillment lies perpetually ahead: happiness is postponed for the sake of expansion. The *Dhamma*, by contrast, locates fulfillment in mindful completeness—well-being arises from the capacity to align with change rather than resist it. The early canonical model of prosperity reconstructed here would therefore privilege cyclical renewal and equilibrium over linear escalation and insatiable increase.

Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*) provides an ethical account of productivity. The four right efforts—preventing unwholesome states, abandoning those arisen, cultivating wholesome states, and maintaining them (MN 19)—function as a strategy for optimizing moral causality. Productivity here is evaluated in terms of the refinement of intention and attention rather than solely by the multiplication of output.

The rapture-heedfulness dyad sustains this ethic of effort: rapture energizes practice, whereas heedfulness ensures its continuity. The result is vitality without compulsion. Ethical productivity thus harmonizes purpose with peace. The "surplus" it generates is the deepening of wisdom, compassion, and equanimity—qualities that enhance individual flourishing and collective resilience.

Interpreted economically, the Middle Way (*majjhimā paṭipadā*) represents a dynamic balance between indulgence and deprivation. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11) and its *Madhyama Āgama* 204 parallel (T01, no. 26,777c26-777c29) frame these extremes as equally unprofitable. In economic terms, excessive consumption generates craving and

instability, whereas severe renunciation undermines capacity for engagement and contribution.

The Middle Way thus models an equilibrium condition: productive participation tempered by restraint and consumption bounded by mindfulness. Feedback operates through the triadic dynamics of aspiration, rapturous diligence, and contentment. When aspiration becomes excessive, heedfulness stabilizes effort and redirects action; when rapture wanes or leads to distraction, mindful awareness restores vitality; and contentment signals when sufficiency has been reached, preventing overextension. Ethical reflection and mindful attention thus detect extremes and guide behavior toward moderation. As a systems principle, the Middle Way offers a template for institutions oriented toward stability, contentment, and long-term flourishing.

Because early Buddhist discourse treats the self as relationally constituted, prosperity cannot be an individual achievement alone. The *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN 33) emphasizes communal concord and shared responsibility as markers of flourishing; its *Dīrgha-Āgama* 10 parallel (T01, no. 1,52c17-57b24) uses the phrase "mutual sharing/support" (*yu ren gong zhi* 與人共之). Prosperity emerges when social structures foster virtue and when personal restraint contributes to collective balance (DN 33).

Householder teachings link moderation not only with generosity, but also with the ethical acquisition, enjoyment, and distribution of wealth. They thus point toward an ethics in which resources are secured responsibly, used without blame, and circulated for mutual benefit rather than treated as accumulation for its own sake (DN 31; AN 4.62). In these texts generosity is not only a matter of inward disposition but also of material support: the basic requisites of life remain important conditions of well-being and the alleviation of poverty is ethically significant because deprivation is associated with theft, violence, and social decline (DN 26). Wealth flows through relationships; craving diminishes; trust increases.

Practices such as redistribution, charity, and other forms of material giving contribute to collective well-being and can be read as institutional expressions of *dāna*, expanding the field of mutual protection. In many lay contexts, moreover, such acts are valued not only for their present social effects but also for their karmic significance and relation to favorable rebirth (AN 3.65; AN 5.41). In this context, describing "contentment, [as] the ultimate wealth" (*santuṭṭhiparamaṁ dhanaṁ*) (DHP 204) does not exclude other forms of wealth, but qualifies the ethical orientation with which they are acquired and used.

The early canonical logic of prosperity reconstructed here diverges from both utilitarian (AN 6.63) and deontological ethics (MN 2; DHP 183). It differs from utilitarianism because well-being cannot be aggregated independently of the moral causes that produce it; suffering and happiness are functions of intention, not merely outcomes. It differs from deontology because virtue is experiential and transformative, not rule-bound. Ethical value lies in the purification of motivation. The model bears affinities with Aristotelian *eudaimonia* (Symons and VanderWeele 12-13) in linking flourishing to virtue, but it departs from Aristotle through its account of non-self (*anattā*) and interdependence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). Prosperity is not the perfection of a stable self but the harmonization of a relational process. The economic agent becomes a practitioner of sufficiency rather than an autonomous maximizer.

The synthesis of desire transformation, rapturous diligence, and contentment yields three propositions: first, that economic activity is wholesome when guided by aspiration, energized by rapture and heedfulness, and stabilized by contentment; second, that prosperity emerges from the right configuration of conditions, as the dependent origination of moral and material factors in mutual contentment; and third, that contentment operates as the principle linking personal well-being, social harmony, and ecological sustainability. In this view, economics becomes a

field of moral cultivation. The early canonical materials examined here do not reject personal effort or productive activity; they encourage engagement guided by mindfulness and contentment, through which individuals can experience genuine prosperity and well-being.

Conclusion—Toward a Buddhist Logic of Prosperity

This study has reconstructed the moral architecture of economic life as articulated in the early Buddhist *Nikāyas* and their Chinese *Āgama* parallels. It opened with a simple but radical question: what if the purpose of economic activity were not to satisfy desire, but to transform it? Through a close exegetical analysis of craving, aspiration, rapture, heedfulness, and contentment, the inquiry has shown that these early canonical materials do not reject material engagement. Rather, they reconfigure the motivational forces that operate within it. Economic life becomes a domain for ethical cultivation—a space in which desire is purified into aspiration, effort is sustained by rapturous vigilance, and satisfaction is grounded in contentment. For householders, this concerns livelihood, possession, use, and generosity; for renunciants, it takes the form of simplicity, discipline, and non-attachment. Prosperity, therefore, is best understood as a dynamic equilibrium of aspiration, vitality, and contentment, through which personal well-being, social harmony, and ecological stability can co-arise.

Much scholarship on "Buddhist economics" (Schumacher; Payutto) has remained at the level of critique, contrasting Buddhist virtue with capitalist excess (Schumacher 38 in PDF version; Payutto Introduction, Ch. 3; Gotsis 117; Weiss and Cattaneo 220) or invoking renunciation as a corrective to market desire (Payutto Ch. 3; Pastpipatkul and Ko 2). The present study has attempted to move beyond critique toward conceptual construction. By delineating the motivational triad of aspiration, raptur-

ous diligence, and contentment, it has articulated a coherent ethical framework capable of guiding personal engagement with economic life.

This constructive turn does not propose a new economic system but offers a moral framework for thinking about economic life. It shows how Buddhist categories can be rendered analytically legible without reducing them to secular utility terms. The aim is not to prescribe institutional blueprints but to illuminate alternative vocabularies—grounded in Buddhist moral psychology—that can enrich contemporary conversations about well-being, sustainability, and sufficiency.

The central insight emerging from the textual analyses is that contentment is the principled pivot of the account of prosperity reconstructed here, not because material well-being is irrelevant, but because lawful acquisition and material security require an ethical orientation if they are to contribute to durable flourishing. Craving multiplies dissatisfaction; aspiration generates constructive motivation; rapture transforms effort into celebration; heedfulness stabilizes practice; and contentment completes the cycle by releasing the compulsion to acquire. This dynamic yields a form of self-restraining prosperity—productive yet non-addictive, dynamic yet restrained. Whereas modern growth models often depend on manufactured scarcity (Baines and Hager 7) and perpetual dissatisfaction (Payutto Ch. 3; Passini 370), the early canonical account of prosperity reconstructed here is anchored in the wisdom of "contentment" (*Santuṭṭhi*) or "knowing enough" (*zhi zu* 知足) (DHP 204; T04, no. 210,573a27). Contentment is not a constraint on progress; it is the condition that makes sustainable flourishing possible. It links personal tranquility, social trust, and ecological resilience within a single ethical ecology of well-being.

Methodologically, the study practiced a form of hermeneutic pragmatism, combining close philological reading with conceptual analysis. This approach embodies the spirit of skillful means *(upāya-kauśalya)*:

adapting classical insights to contemporary questions without distorting their substance. Although the present model remains conceptual rather than institutional, it suggests how Buddhist moral reasoning might contribute to discussions of economic ethics, organizational design, or well-being-based policy—always as an invitation to reflection rather than a coercive prescription. If well-being is relational rather than merely personal, the boundaries between economics, ethics, and psychology begin to dissolve. Economic action becomes an extension of moral cultivation—each transaction a field in which intention and consequence interact.

The early canonical vision of prosperity reconstructed here does not reject economic life; it reorients it. It interprets exchange as a moral encounter, effort as a form of cultivation, and contentment as a mode of freedom. As the *Dhammapada* teaches, "contentment, [is] the ultimate wealth" (*santuṭṭhiparamaṁ dhanaṁ*) (DHP 204). If modern economics has refined the art of production, the early Buddhist materials examined here refine the art of letting go. Between these two capacities—creating and letting go—lies the possibility of a moral economy in which individuals and communities may learn, together, what it means to flourish.

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