
Applying Buddhist Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) for Businessmen in Vietnam

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Abstract

This qualitative study had three objectives: (1) to examine unethical business conditions and their impacts in Vietnam; (2) to investigate Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) in Buddhist scriptures; and (3) to propose an application of Buddhist Right Livelihood to business practice in Vietnam. Data were collected through documentary research and in-depth interviews with six key informants representing different perspectives on ethical business and the practical application of Right Livelihood.

The findings indicate that unethical business practices remain a significant concern in Vietnam despite rapid economic development. Major contributing factors include weak ethical awareness, incomplete or inconsistently enforced legal frameworks, and the pursuit of short-term profit, with consequences for society and the environment. Buddhist Right Livelihood emphasizes earning a living without harming oneself or others and therefore provides an ethical basis for business conduct. Based on the documentary and interview findings, the study proposes the “Three Rightness” model, comprising Rightness Regarding Persons, Rightness Regarding Actions, and Rightness Regarding Products. The model highlights ethical leadership, responsible conduct, stakeholder respect, social responsibility, and the provision of quality and sustainable products and services. It offers a context-sensitive framework for integrating Buddhist ethics into contemporary business practice in Vietnam.

Keywords: Right Livelihood; Business Ethics; Business Culture; Buddhist Ethics; Sustainable Development

Introduction

Over recent decades, Vietnam has transformed from a centrally planned economy into a socialist-oriented market economy. The Đổi Mới reforms

initiated in 1986 marked a major turning point in the country's economic development (Chinh & Hoang, 2009). Businesspeople have subsequently become important contributors to industrialization, modernization, employment, and socioeconomic growth. Rapid development, however, has also intensified concerns about corruption, regulatory violations, environmental harm, commercial fraud, and the erosion of public trust. Recent Vietnamese cases involving bribery, fraudulent appropriation of property, counterfeit goods, and environmental violations illustrate the continuing relevance of business ethics to national development (Dinh, 2024; Manh, 2024; Nhat, n.d.; Thien, 2024).

Buddhist Right Livelihood (*Sammā Ājīva*) offers an ethical framework for addressing these concerns. As a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Livelihood requires that one earn a living honestly and without causing suffering to oneself or other living beings (Bodhi Bhikkhu, 1984; Harvey, 2000). Buddhist teachings further emphasize that wealth should be acquired through energetic effort, lawful and peaceful means, truthfulness, and conduct that does not exploit or harm others (Bodhi Bhikkhu, 2012). The Buddha also identified five forms of trade to be avoided: trade in weapons, human beings, meat, intoxicants, and poisons (Bodhi Bhikkhu, 2012).

Right Livelihood is closely connected with other dimensions of Buddhist ethics, particularly compassion, non-harming, and the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*). A livelihood based on deception, exploitation, or greed conflicts with the ethical discipline expected of Buddhist laypeople (Harvey, 2000). Consequently, business conduct cannot be evaluated solely by profitability; it must also be considered in relation to its effects on employees, customers, communities, other living beings, and the natural environment.

Right Livelihood is intended to support genuine well-being for both individuals and society by promoting responsible relationships and reducing harm (Piyadassi, 2003). Observance of the Five Precepts similarly contributes to individual and social peace because ethical restraint protects both the practitioner and others from avoidable suffering (Mahatthanadull & Mahatthanadull, 2018). For laypeople, moral livelihood therefore forms part of a wider ethical discipline that includes Right Action (*Sammā Kammanta*), honesty, restraint, and responsibility.

Buddhist morality is best understood as a way of life rather than as a set of rules followed mechanically. Its value lies in practice and in cultivating conduct that supports peace and well-being in this life. This practical orientation is consistent with the Buddhist emphasis that ethical and spiritual teachings must be

embodied in conduct rather than remaining matters of belief alone (Narada, 2006). From this perspective, the central question for contemporary business is how economic activity can generate prosperity without producing avoidable harm to individuals, society, or the environment.

Against this background, the present study examines the application of Buddhist Right Livelihood to business practice in Vietnam. It seeks to clarify the ethical problems evident in the contemporary business environment, analyze the Buddhist foundations of Right Livelihood, and develop a practical model through which Vietnamese businesspeople may align business decisions with compassion, honesty, responsibility, and sustainable development.

Research Objectives

1. To examine unethical business conditions and their impacts in Vietnam.
2. To analyze Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) in Buddhist scriptures.
3. To propose an application of Buddhist Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) to business practice in Vietnam.

Literature Review

Bodhi Bhikkhu (1984), in *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering*, explains Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) as the requirement to earn one's living in a righteous manner. His account situates livelihood within the Noble Eightfold Path and emphasizes the ethical relationship between one's occupation, intention, and consequences for other beings.

Piyadassi (2003), in *The Buddha's Ancient Path*, explains that Right Livelihood is intended to contribute to the well-being of both individuals and society. Wrong or exploitative livelihoods disturb social harmony because they are driven by greed and disregard the suffering imposed on others. This perspective highlights the social consequences of livelihood choices rather than treating them as merely private economic decisions.

Boatright (2009), in *Ethics and the Conduct of Business*, examines ethical problems arising in relationships with shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, and the wider public. Business decisions often involve tensions between commercial objectives and moral responsibilities. This perspective is useful for understanding the practical challenges involved in applying ethical principles within competitive markets.

Hanh (1999), in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, presents Right Livelihood as earning a living without violating the ideals of love and compassion. Livelihood can express one's deepest ethical commitments or become a source of suffering for oneself and others. This interpretation provides a practical bridge between Buddhist ethics and everyday occupational choices.

Harvey (2000), in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues*, explains that livelihood should neither be dishonest nor cause suffering to other living beings. His analysis connects Right Livelihood with broader Buddhist principles such as non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and ethical responsibility toward social and environmental concerns.

Payutto (1994), in *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Marketplace*, argues that economic activity should be evaluated in relation to human well-being rather than profit alone. From this perspective, the absence of ethical principles in business can damage consumers, investors, communities, and the environment, while Buddhist economic principles provide an alternative framework for responsible production and consumption.

Mahatthanadull and Mahatthanadull (2020) discuss holistic well-being from the perspective of Buddhist psychology and emphasize the importance of ethical conduct in establishing a balanced way of life. Their analysis supports the view that the Five Precepts provide a basic moral foundation for harmonious human relationships and responsible conduct.

Studies of Vietnamese business culture similarly emphasize credibility, social responsibility, community cooperation, and transparent competition as important conditions for sustainable development (Ho, 2020; Quang, 2004). As Vietnam continues economic integration and modernization, businesspeople play an increasingly important role in generating wealth, employment, and national development; this role also increases the importance of ethical responsibility.

Contemporary Buddhist approaches to business likewise emphasize that wealth creation need not be separated from compassion and morality. Buddhist business ethics seeks harmony among people, products, society, and the natural environment, encouraging business activity that avoids harm while contributing to collective well-being (Harvey, 2000; Hanh, 1999).

Mahatthanadull and Mahatthanadull (2018) examine the Five Precepts as criteria for promoting individual and social peace. Their study demonstrates that Buddhist moral principles can guide individuals toward conduct that protects others from harm and strengthens social harmony. This ethical foundation is directly relevant to business relationships and decision-making.

The reviewed literature provides strong foundations in Buddhist ethics, business ethics, and Vietnamese business culture. However, limited research has integrated these strands into a practical framework specifically applying Right Livelihood to contemporary business practice in Vietnam. The present study addresses this gap by synthesizing Buddhist ethical principles with the conditions of the Vietnamese business environment and developing the “Three Rightness” model.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework follows an input–process–output structure. The inputs comprise documented ethical problems in the Vietnamese business environment and Buddhist teachings on Right Livelihood. The process combines documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, analysis, and synthesis. The output is a practical model for applying Right Livelihood to business practice in Vietnam.

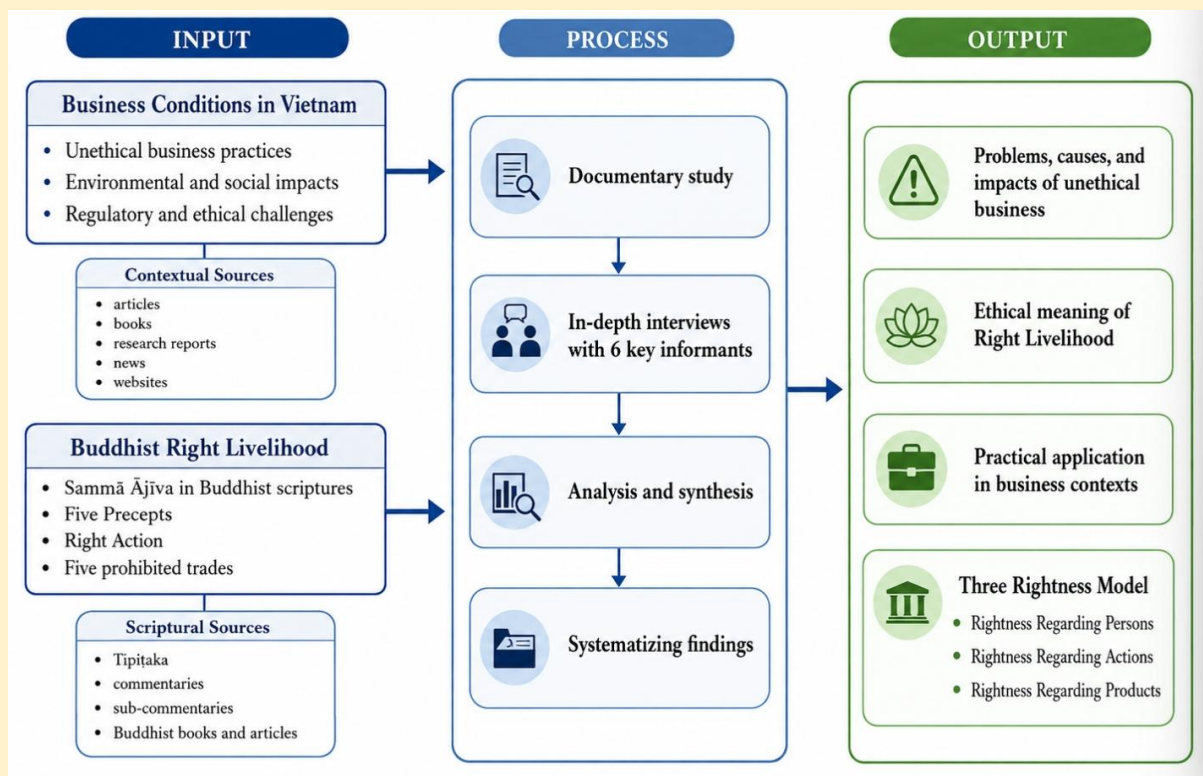


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative documentary and interview-based research. The methodology comprised the following stages:

Data Collection

Primary documentary sources included the Pāli Tipiṭaka (Nikāyas), commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā), and relevant sub-commentarial materials, using established English translations published by the Buddhist Publication Society, Wisdom Publications, and the Pali Text Society. Secondary sources included academic books, theses, journal articles, research reports, and documents related to Buddhist ethics, Right Livelihood, business ethics, and the Vietnamese business context. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with six key informants to obtain practical perspectives on the application of Right Livelihood to business practice in Vietnam.

Analysis and Synthesis

The documentary and interview data were analyzed and synthesized thematically in relation to the three research objectives. Buddhist sources were examined to clarify the meaning, ethical foundations, and practical implications of Right Livelihood, while contemporary sources and interview data were used to identify business problems, contextual challenges, and possibilities for application in Vietnam.

Outline Construction

The findings were organized according to the three research objectives: unethical business conditions and their impacts, Buddhist teachings on Right Livelihood, and the practical application of Right Livelihood in the Vietnamese business context.

Problem Discussion

Key problems and tensions identified in the documentary and interview data were compared and interpreted, particularly the conflict between short-term profitability and ethical responsibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The final stage synthesized the principal findings, formulated the “Three Rightness” model, identified limitations, and developed recommendations for future research.

Research Results

Objective 1: The findings indicate that Vietnam's business environment continues to face significant ethical challenges. Unethical conduct is associated with pressures for rapid economic growth, gaps in regulation and enforcement, weak ethical awareness, and the pursuit of short-term profit. Such practices have consequences beyond individual firms, including environmental degradation, weakened public trust, corruption, and broader social harm. The findings therefore suggest that economic development requires an ethical framework capable of evaluating not only profitability but also the effects of business decisions on society and the environment.

Objective 2: Buddhist Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva), the fifth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, requires earning a living through lawful, peaceful, honest, and non-harming means. The findings identify the Five Precepts, Right Action, and the five prohibited trades as particularly relevant ethical foundations. These teachings establish clear limits on occupations and commercial activities that involve deception, exploitation, violence, intoxicants, or other forms of harm. Right Livelihood therefore provides both a personal moral discipline and a broader framework for responsible economic conduct.

Objective 3: The study developed the "Three Rightness" model as a practical framework for applying Buddhist Right Livelihood to business practice in Vietnam. The model comprises Rightness Regarding Persons, Rightness Regarding Actions, and Rightness Regarding Products. Together, these dimensions address ethical relationships with stakeholders, integrity and accountability in business decisions, and the social and environmental quality of goods and services.

The findings also indicate that implementation may be constrained by competitive pressure and tensions between short-term profitability and ethical standards. Nevertheless, the model suggests that ethical conduct can support long-term organizational value through trust, reputation, employee commitment, responsible resource use, and stronger relationships with customers and communities. These potential benefits should be understood as qualitative findings and propositions for further empirical testing rather than as established causal effects.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that applying Buddhist Right Livelihood to business practice must be understood within Vietnam's specific economic and institutional context. Ethical problems identified in the study—including corruption, short-term profit orientation, regulatory weakness, environmental harm, and declining public trust—show that business ethics is not merely an individual matter but a systemic concern. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary Vietnamese evidence documenting bribery, commercial fraud, and environmental violations (Dinh, 2024; Manh, 2024; Thien, 2024). The present study extends this discussion by examining these problems through the Buddhist principle that economic activity should avoid causing suffering to oneself and others.

The findings for Objective 2 reinforce the ethical significance of Right Livelihood as part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Livelihood is not simply the avoidance of a few prohibited occupations; it is connected with the Five Precepts, Right Action, honesty, non-harming, compassion, and responsibility for the consequences of one's livelihood (Bodhi Bhikkhu, 1984, 2012; Harvey, 2000; Piyadassi, 2003). This broader understanding is important for contemporary business because many harmful practices do not fall neatly within the five prohibited trades but may nevertheless involve deception, exploitation, environmental damage, or avoidable suffering.

For Objective 3, the “Three Rightness” model translates these ethical principles into three interrelated domains: persons, actions, and products. Rightness Regarding Persons emphasizes fair and respectful relationships with employees, customers, partners, communities, and other stakeholders. Rightness Regarding Actions concerns honesty, transparency, accountability, social responsibility, and ethically responsible decision-making. Rightness Regarding Products focuses on quality, safety, sustainability, and avoidance of harm. In this respect, the model provides a contextualized Buddhist ethical framework for Vietnamese business practice. Its contribution lies in connecting Buddhist moral principles with stakeholder relationships, organizational conduct, and product responsibility; however, its effectiveness requires further empirical evaluation across different industries and organizational settings.

New Knowledge from the Research

This study contributes new knowledge by integrating analysis of ethical problems in Vietnam's business environment with Buddhist Right Livelihood and translating that synthesis into a practical business framework. The findings show that Right Livelihood can be interpreted not only as an individual occupational principle but also as a multidimensional guide for organizational relationships, business decisions, and the social consequences of products and services.

The study further clarifies that livelihood encompasses both the means by which people sustain themselves and the ethical effects of economic activity on other stakeholders and the wider environment. Right Livelihood therefore provides an ethical foundation centered on non-harming, compassion, honesty, responsibility, and the long-term consequences of economic conduct.

The principal contribution is the "Three Rightness" model, which organizes the application of Right Livelihood into three dimensions: Rightness Regarding Persons, Rightness Regarding Actions, and Rightness Regarding Products (Figure 2). This model offers a practical structure through which Vietnamese businesspeople can align stakeholder relationships, organizational conduct, and products or services with Buddhist ethical principles.

Rightness Regarding Persons emphasizes fairness, dignity, trust, and respectful relationships with stakeholders. Rightness Regarding Actions emphasizes integrity, transparency, accountability, responsible decision-making, and social responsibility. Rightness Regarding Products emphasizes quality, safety, sustainability, and the avoidance of harm in the production and delivery of goods and services.

Taken together, the three dimensions provide a context-sensitive framework for connecting Buddhist Right Livelihood with contemporary business ethics. The model proposes that sustainable business development requires ethical alignment among the people involved, the actions undertaken, and the products or services created.

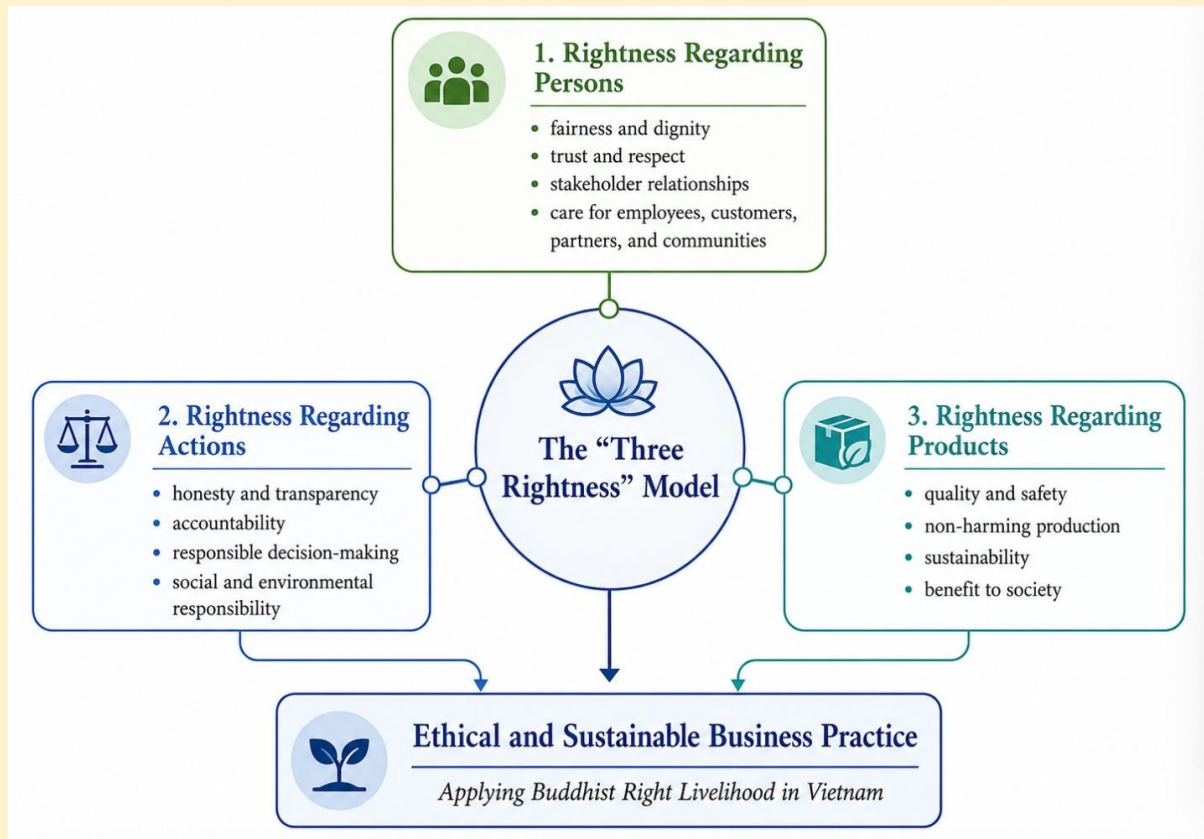


Figure 2. The “Three Rightness” Model

Conclusion

This study examined unethical business conditions in Vietnam, analyzed Buddhist Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva), and developed a practical framework for its application to contemporary business practice. The findings show that ethical challenges in the Vietnamese business environment include short-term profit orientation, weak ethical awareness, regulatory and enforcement limitations, corruption, social harm, and environmental damage. Buddhist Right Livelihood offers an alternative ethical orientation grounded in honest, lawful, peaceful, and non-harming economic activity. The study identifies the Five Precepts, Right Action, and the five prohibited trades as particularly relevant foundations for business ethics.

The study’s principal contribution is the “Three Rightness” model: Rightness Regarding Persons, Rightness Regarding Actions, and Rightness Regarding Products. The model extends Right Livelihood from individual occupational choice to organizational relationships, decision-making, and product responsibility. It therefore provides a practical framework through which Vietnamese businesspeople may integrate compassion, honesty, accountability,

stakeholder responsibility, and sustainability into economic activity. Because the research is qualitative, the model should be regarded as a conceptual and practical framework requiring further empirical testing rather than as a demonstrated causal model of business performance. Nevertheless, it offers a Buddhist ethical approach to business development that seeks to reconcile economic success with social well-being and environmental responsibility.

Recommendations

This study is limited by its qualitative design and by the absence of systematic testing across different industries, firm sizes, and organizational contexts. It also does not quantitatively assess whether adoption of the “Three Rightness” model improves business performance, stakeholder trust, or sustainability outcomes.

Future research should therefore:

1. Quantitatively examine relationships between Right Livelihood practices and business performance, stakeholder trust, and sustainability outcomes in Vietnamese firms.
2. Compare the application of the “Three Rightness” model across industries, organizational sizes, and regions in Vietnam.
3. Investigate how organizational and national business culture influences the adoption and implementation of Buddhist Right Livelihood.

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