

ECONOMICS ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPLES OF THERAVADA BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY : AN ANALYTIC, APPRECIATIVE AND APPLICATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an analytical, appreciative, and critical investigation of economics as conceptualized within the framework of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing documentary research, content analysis, and descriptive–interpretative methods.

The findings reveal three principal insights. First, economics grounded in Theravāda Buddhist philosophy constitutes a “middle-way” economic paradigm that integrates wisdom (paññā) into economic decision-making, thereby guiding economic systems toward holistic equilibrium and comprehensive human well-being across behavioral, ethical, psychological, and intellectual dimensions. Second, this Buddhist economic framework promotes sustainable human development by fostering both inner and outer self-reliance, while simultaneously encouraging generosity, sharing, and long-term social sustainability. Third, the critical analysis suggests that the effective application of Theravāda Buddhist economics should begin with the cultivation of mindfulness (sati) and wisdom in order to generate awareness and ethical clarity. This foundation enables the formation of cooperative networks oriented toward the collective enhancement of quality of life. Once systems of individual self-reliance and mutual interdependence are firmly established, they provide the structural basis for an economy rooted in sharing, cooperation, and sustainable continuity.

Keywords: Buddhist Philosophy, Economics, Theravāda

Introduction

The economic system grounded in materialist philosophy emphasizes material value, resources, and utility as its primary goals. It prioritizes quantitative growth over qualitative development and tends to regard material wealth as the foundation of happiness. This worldview fosters competition and leads to the perception of fellow human beings as either tools or rivals in economic survival. Under such a framework, individuals tend to engage with

others based on the perceived benefits they can obtain, regardless of how small or large those benefits may be (Sirinan, Kanyawiriya, 2020).

This perspective is consistent with Bentham's utilitarian view, which asserts that human beings are inclined to assist others only when they foresee personal benefit from doing so. As Bentham famously stated, "Never say to a man, 'Go on; it will benefit you.' For even when he helps others, he does so only when he perceives advantage for himself" (Vatsyayan, 1986, p. 83). Such reasoning reflects the prevailing assumption in modern materialist societies that human nature is fundamentally self-interested and motivated by material gain.

Furthermore, capitalist economic systems often lack an explicit moral or ethical foundation in their management of resources. This deficiency has led many Western economists to turn their attention to Buddhist Economics or economics based on Buddhist philosophy. In this framework, economic principles are closely connected to the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, particularly the element of Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), which refers to earning a living in a way that does not cause harm and is ethically wholesome (Phra Prakasit Punyabhammo, 2017). From a Buddhist perspective, economics is therefore not merely concerned with production and consumption but is fundamentally related to the cultivation of a meaningful and ethical human life.

Mainstream economics, by contrast, aims to maximize human satisfaction, yet it fails to clearly define what constitutes genuine satisfaction. It does not adequately explain whether attaining satisfaction necessarily leads to a good or meaningful life. Instead, it assumes that increased consumption will result in happiness, without critically examining the deeper implications of such an assumption.

Human desire for satisfaction is natural and legitimate; however, once satisfaction is achieved, it must lead to meaningful outcomes, namely a good quality of life. Buddhism acknowledges that human desires are limitless. These desires are referred to as *tanhā* (craving). At the same time, Buddhism also recognizes that human beings are capable of training and self-development. The desire for self-improvement and for cultivating one's potential is known as *chanda*, which reflects wholesome aspiration, particularly the aspiration to develop the mind. Therefore, a fundamental principle of human development in Buddhism is the transformation of desires—from those oriented toward sensory pleasure, indulgence, and excess (such as taste, entertainment, distraction, or luxury) toward desires that support a higher quality of life, well-being, and inner peace, leading ultimately to happiness (Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto), 2002).

The economic problems faced by societies around the world, including Thailand, constitute a costly lesson for humanity. The root cause of these problems lies primarily in the low quality of the population at multiple levels: the family, society, and the nation. When a society contains a large proportion of individuals with low quality in terms of ethics, awareness, and responsibility, economic and social problems inevitably arise. Therefore, solving economic

problems requires improving the quality of people within society. In the Thai context, contemporary economic challenges are closely connected to the principles of Buddhist economics, particularly the concept of sufficiency in managing limited resources to meet unlimited human needs. Economic crises arise largely from selfishness and the pursuit of personal gain without concern for others. When people begin to address problems from this root cause, it becomes possible to develop quality of life holistically in accordance with the principles of Buddhist economics.

Based on these principles and reasons, this study was undertaken under the title *“Economics according to the Principles of Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy: An Analytic, Appreciative, and Applicative Study”*. The objective is to examine pathways for improving quality of life through the analysis, evaluation, and application of Buddhist economic principles in order to generate holistic human development.

Research Objectives

To analyze, appreciate, and critically examine economics according to the principles of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on content analysis and in-depth interviews with qualified experts. The findings are presented through descriptive narration in order to summarize and explain the results of the study. The research process consists of the following steps:

1.Data collection, including the gathering of relevant documents and academic research articles.

2.Data organization, involving the classification and categorization of information obtained from documents and research articles into thematic areas to facilitate systematic analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

1.Data analysis involves examining the organized data in order to identify relationships among various dimensions and to address the research questions.

2.Synthesis and discussion consist of summarizing the analytical results and interpreting them by linking the findings with relevant documents and previous studies.

Summary of Research Findings

1.Analytical findings indicate that economics according to the principles of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy represents a middle-way economic system that employs right livelihood

as a driving force for economic activity. This leads to holistic balance and well-being in terms of behavior, conduct, mental states, and wisdom.

2. Appreciative findings reveal that economics based on Theravāda Buddhist philosophy contributes to human development by fostering both internal and external self-reliance. It encourages sharing and sustainable generosity within society.

3. Applicative findings suggest that applying Theravāda Buddhist economics should begin with the cultivation of wisdom to generate awareness. This is followed by the formation of collaborative networks with the aim of collectively enhancing quality of life. When systems of self-reliance and mutual support become stable, they give rise to an economy oriented toward sharing, which ultimately leads to lasting well-being.

Discussion

1. The analytical Finding

results show that economics according to the principles of Theravāda Buddhist philosophy constitutes a middle-path economic system driven by *sammā-ājīva* (right livelihood). This approach promotes holistic well-being across behavioral, ethical, mental, and intellectual dimensions. These findings are consistent with the perspectives of Phra Thep Suthi, Rittisila Srirad, and Parinthip Prangthipayathai (2023), who emphasize that right livelihood is the heart of Buddhist economics and functions in conjunction with right speech and right action—three elements of the Noble Eightfold Path known collectively as *sīla* (moral discipline). This also accords with the views of Warit Paenprasert and Surinthorn Thongthit (2023), who argue that the middle-path or Buddhist economic model is grounded in the principle of “*Bhojana-mattaññutā*” (moderation in consumption) and “*Mattannuta*” (knowing moderation), which together represent the practical application of Buddhist wisdom in everyday economic life.

Moreover, this interpretation is consistent with the work of Jate Supa-ud and Thiraphol Loeyen (2020), who describe Buddhist economics as a middle-way economic system that integrates quality of life with contentment. In this model, satisfaction is not derived merely from the unlimited gratification of desires but from meeting needs in a way that supports well-being. Buddhism distinguishes two types of desire: craving for sensory pleasures without limit, and the aspiration for a good life (*well-being*) within reasonable boundaries. Awareness of this distinction enables individuals to avoid self-destructive consumption patterns, such as excessive indulgence in food, luxury, or sensory stimulation, which may undermine physical health and mental balance.

Excessive consumption or overindulgence leads to obesity and increases the risk of chronic diseases, ultimately diminishing quality of life. This perspective is consistent with the view of Thanaset and Chumsuk (2017), who argue that economic development grounded in

Buddhist principles must begin with **human development**. When human beings are developed in quality—ethically, mentally, and intellectually—material development follows naturally. Since humans are both producers and consumers, when they possess wisdom and the ability to use resources beneficially, economic efficiency and social well-being are enhanced.

2. Appreciative Findings

The appreciative results indicate that economics according to Theravāda Buddhist philosophy fosters both internal and external self-reliance while promoting sustainable sharing. This is consistent with the views of Phra Thep Suthi, Rittisila Srirad, and Parinthip Prangthipayathai (2023), who state that the **Sufficiency Economy Philosophy** serves as an essential tool for building a stable and sustainable society, especially in periods of economic change and crisis. This approach also aligns with the perspectives of Watsana Kaewkla and colleagues (2021), who emphasize that Buddhist economic thought highlights **self-reliance** as a central principle. The concept of self-reliance is deeply rooted in Buddhist teachings, particularly in the idea of “*Attā hi attano nātho*” (oneself is one’s own refuge), which serves as the foundation for economic resilience and sustainable development.

Thanaset and Chumsuk (2017) further explain that Buddhist economic development must begin with **human development**. Once human beings attain a high quality of life, material and economic development naturally follows, because humans are the central agents of production and consumption. When individuals know how to seek and use resources wisely, economic benefits increase and social harmony is strengthened.

3. Applicative Findings

The applicative results show that applying Theravāda Buddhist economics should begin with the cultivation of wisdom in order to generate awareness. This should then lead to the creation of cooperative networks aimed at improving collective quality of life. When systems of self-reliance and mutual support become firmly established, they give rise to an economy based on sharing, which can be continuously sustained.

This conclusion is consistent with the teachings of Phra Thepvedī (Prajñā Pandeṭo, 1989), who stated that solving human problems requires that all economic activities function as processes that simultaneously enhance quality of life. Economic actions that are conducted correctly thus become means for developing both individual and collective well-being. This reflects the essence of Buddhist economics.

Aram Nakharin (2018) further summarized the distinction between mainstream economics and Buddhist economics as follows:

mainstream economics emphasizes maximizing production, whereas Buddhist economics emphasizes minimizing suffering; mainstream economics seeks to maximize satisfaction, whereas Buddhist economics seeks to minimize excessive desire; mainstream economics expands markets, whereas Buddhist economics reduces competitive intensity; mainstream economics promotes mechanization, whereas Buddhist economics limits over-mechanization; mainstream economics prioritizes ever-growing consumption, whereas Buddhist economics focuses on reducing unnecessary needs; mainstream economics is guided by the principle “bigger is better,” whereas Buddhist economics upholds the principle of “small is beautiful.” Mainstream economics is guided by the principle of **“the more, the better,”** whereas Buddhist economics emphasizes **“the less, the more beneficial.”** This perspective is consistent with the work of Rattanapong Phumchan and Srisamphan (2020), who explain that learners educated under the framework of Buddhist economics demonstrate progressive development in process skills across three stages—before learning, during learning, and after learning. This development results from an instructional model that systematically integrates the characteristics of Buddhist economics at every stage.

These characteristics are reflected in three key indicators of process skills:

- (1) the ability to adapt one’s life and cooperate harmoniously with others;
- (2) adherence to the Middle Way in living ethically; and
- (3) the ability to plan, act, and implement activities in accordance with moral principles.

These findings correspond with the work of Warit Paenpradit and Srisin Thongthip (2023), who reported that applying Buddhist principles to business management leads to tangible success. A clear example is the Buddhist-oriented rice production enterprise in San Phu Nan Subdistrict, Mueang District, Lampang Province. This community enterprise applies farsighted thinking, Buddhist-style cultivation, and self-reliance. It integrates Dhamma-based governance, management measures, state support, and social enterprise practices into a sustainable and stable rice development plan. Strategic planning, appropriate land-use management, and Buddhist ecological principles guide rice production through environmentally friendly processes.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Applying the Research Findings

The study entitled “**Theravāda Buddhist Economics: An Appreciative, Critical, and Analytical Study**” can be integrated into educational disciplines to develop curricula, research programs, and various development projects aimed at improving quality of life at the individual, organizational, and national levels. This integration should be based on a holistic framework of quality of life development encompassing four dimensions:

- (1) physical and environmental behavior,
- (2) social and moral conduct,
- (3) mental and emotional well-being, and
- (4) the cultivation of wisdom in economic production and consumption under the framework of Theravāda Buddhist economics.

Accordingly, this framework should be developed into formal academic curricula or short-term training programs to ensure continuous and sustainable expansion at organizational, social, and national levels.

Recommendations for Future Research

For the study “**Theravāda Buddhist Economics: An Appreciative, Critical, and Analytical Study**,” the following directions are proposed for future research:

1. The application of Buddhist principles in combination with Western or Eastern philosophical frameworks to address diverse dimensions of quality-of-life development.
2. The integration of Theravāda Buddhist economics in programs aimed at improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups, and disadvantaged populations.

Recommendation for Further Integrative Studies

Further studies should be conducted on the feasibility of applying value-based principles derived from Buddhist teachings to other fields, leading to the formulation of economic and social models grounded in Buddhist and Dhamma-based approaches that generate holistic benefits for the quality of life of the population.

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