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# The Ethics of Enjoyment: *Sukha*, Merit (*Puñña*), And Lay–Monastic Interfaces in the Pañcanikāya

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how the Pañcanikāya faces the ethical challenges of assessing 'enjoyment,' specifically what kind of sukha is wholesome and what kind entrenches craving. While most scholarship assumes that Buddhism rejects enjoyment outright, the Nikāyas suggest otherwise. For one, the Nikāyas outline a graded ethics that differentiates the lower sense-based kāma-sukha, the meditative pīti-sukha and the 'bliss of blamelessness' that is virtue-anchored. A close textual study of the Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta, Aṅguttara, and Khuddaka Nikāyas, alongside a thematic doctrinal synthesis on vedanā, intention, and karma results, has enabled the construction of the Nikāya synthesis. The work has three main features in the preview. First, a taxonomy of sukha, demarcating levels along the dimensions of source, stability, and ethical consequences. Second, the act, or moral technology of enjoyment, or puñña, circling dāna and sīla, reconceptualizes enjoyment from consumptive gratification and redistributes it as conditions for liberation. Finally, a restatement of lay–monastic correlates, where lay wealth and generosity sustain a cycle of supportive contemplative cultivation and shared goods from which the oppositional structure is built. A comprehensive framework of enjoyment has been constructed, preserving the interrelated affect, ethics, and soteriological dimensions.

## Introduction

Accounts of Buddhism frequently portray it as consistently negative pleasure portray Buddhism as consistently negative toward pleasure, with a focus on world-denial, intense asceticism, and the view that all enjoyment merely solidifies craving. Yet the Nikāyas present a more complex problem. They account for both the dangers of infatuation with the senses and the reality of wholesome joy in generosity, the "bliss of blamelessness" born of virtue, and the refined pīti–sukha of a collected mind. The texts do not model a blanket prohibition. They encourage discernment: pleasures vary in their source, stability, and the ethical and soteriological consequences. This article attempts to engage with this complexity by inquiring what the Pañcanikāya commends, tolerates, problematizes, or transforms with respect to the notion of sukha.

My inquiry is guided by three questions: (1) Considering vedanā, intention, and attachment, how is sukha classified and morally assessed across the Nikāyas: Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta, Aṅguttara, and Khuddaka? (2) How does puñña (merit) authorize, limit, or redirect enjoyment, and in what ways does it do so through dāna and sīla, the "field of merit," and the discussions of karmic rewards? (3) How do the sukha of the lay and the monastic paths interface, not as rival systems, but as complementary economies of joy in which household prosperity sustains renunciant cultivation, and in which shared goods circulate between communities?

The argument in this chapter is that the Pañcanikāya expresses a tiered enjoyment ethics, in which puñña-earning practices transform sukha from a state of enjoyment into one conducive to liberation. In this construction, sense-based kāma-sukha is neither strictly condemned nor fully embraced. Instead, it is tempered by intention, restraint, and charity. Above it, in sukha and the joy of absorption, there are ethically superior forms of happiness which include ease of heart, and which are far more stable, harmless, and directed toward release. This pleasure is in consonance with more sensual forms of joy. Lay and monastic roles exist separately, yet form an interdependent whole. Thus, lay puñña provides the resources of time, teaching and social space for monastic cultivation, while monastic exemplars shift communal aspirations from sensual to non-sensual forms of well-being.

## Methodology and Scope

This article takes a dual approach to the study of the Pañcanikāya. On the philological side, I analyse select portions of Pali, particularly scrutinising the choice of lexemes, morphology, collocations, and parallel constructions across the collections. This is in an effort to determine the scope of meaning and the overlap of the key terms sukha, pīti, somanassa, vedanā, puñña, kusala, and the descriptors along the value axis of lokiya/lokuttara. Thereafter, in the thematic approach, I analyse the terms in relation to the ethical dimensions of functions pleasant feelings, evaluative moods, intentions, and the soteriology of effect. This helps observe the decline in enjoyment from gross sensuality through to meditative softness, culminating in the unpeace of possession. I employ cross-references to check intra-canonical consistency and to uncover the deliberate tensions that underlie the Nikāya's pedagogy.

The primary corpus incorporates all five Nikāyas. I take discourses from the Dīgha Nikāya that frame household goods, renunciant aims, and critiques of sensual intoxication to show how the order and restraint of a community shape evaluations of pleasure. From the Majjhima Nikāya, I focus on mindfulness of feeling, the 'bliss of blamelessness,' right livelihood, and jhāna-related pīti–sukha, which together provide a model of ethically purified enjoyment. The Saṃyutta Nikāna offers targeted clusters, and especially the Vedanā-, Khandha-, and Indriya-saṃyuttas, with their precise analyses of affect and appropriation and teaching of faculties, are invaluable. The Aṅguttara Nikāya's graded lists on happiness and merit provide practical thresholds and a progressive refinement in their descriptions. From the Khuddaka Nikāya, I utilize the Dhammapada "Sukha" chapters and selected Itivuttaka passages to illuminate the aphoristic valuations of joy, over-giving, and restraint espoused by early communities.

The scope has been deliberately constrained. First, this project examines the Nikāya strata, where later Theravāda commentaries, such as the Visuddhimagga, shed light on the nuances of a lexical item or clarify a questionable practice. At times, I cite them, noting the divergence of layers, so as to avoid errant anachronistic back-projection. Second, I do not offer a complete reception history or an ethnography on the economies of merit. My intention is canonical mapping, not a sociological thick description. Third, while cognate affective terms (e.g., pīti versus somanassa) and functional neighbours (e.g., non-sensual joy versus kāma-pleasure) are discussed, the analysis prioritizes passages that articulate ethical parameters of intention, harm, stability, and effects so that the resulting account of sukha is anchored in the Nikāya itself and its evaluative grammar.

**Literature Review**

Modern discussions of Buddhist happiness and ethics have largely revolved around two clusters: normative ethics and affect. On the normative side, scholars argue over whether early Buddhism yields a virtue-ethical, consequentialist, or hybrid framework. Damien Keown's eudaimonist reading highlights moral cultivation aimed at human flourishing; Charles Goodman, by contrast, emphasizes a broadly consequentialist calculus; others (e.g., Peter Harvey, Rupert Gethin) foreground intention, mental factors, and the dynamics of wholesome states. On the affective side, studies of vedanā, pīti, and sukha typically appear within analyses of meditation, mindfulness, and the aggregates, with careful attention to the interplay of feeling, craving, and cessation. Across this work runs a shared caution: "happiness" in Buddhist sources is not a monolith but a spectrum, from sensual delight to meditative ease and peace grounded in virtue and insight.

A central debate concerns whether early Buddhism is best read as a form of "Buddhist eudaimonia" or as a primarily renunciant asceticism. Eudaimonist interpreters stress that the path includes positive goods ethical integrity, friendship, generosity, serenity and that the texts praise certain joys as "blameless." Critics warn that flourishing-language risks domesticating a soteriology ordered to dispassion and release. They underscore recurring critiques of sensuality, the perils of craving, and the contingency of conditioned pleasures. Recent contributions tend to soften the dichotomy, proposing a graded model: some pleasures are ethically suspect because they strengthen appropriation; others are propaedeutic, stabilizing, or even exemplary when rooted in restraint, generosity, and collectedness. This gradient approach reframes "anti-pleasure" claims as warnings about mechanism rather than blanket bans on positive affect.

Anthropological and historical studies of merit (puñña) add a social dimension, describing ritual exchange, gift economies, "fields of merit," and the reciprocal responsibilities linking laity and saṅgha. Classic analyses by Melford Spiro, Stanley Tambiah, and others show how dāna and festival life structure communal well-being and moral aspiration. More recent work connects merit to lay prosperity, ethical education, and institutional sustainability. Yet these accounts often treat enjoyment incidentally as a by-product of ritual or status rather than a category with its own ethical taxonomy.

This article identifies a gap at the intersection of these debates: we lack a sustained mapping of puñña as an ethical mediator of enjoyment across lay–monastic interfaces in the Nikāyas. Existing literature parses sukha phenomenologically or treats merit sociologically, but rarely integrates them to show how puñña-generating practices authorize, constrain, and redirect enjoyment. By foregrounding the canonical gradations of sukha alongside the karmic logic and communal structures of puñña, the present study reframes "Buddhist happiness" as a calibrated, relational achievement distinct from mere consumption yet not reducible to negation, thereby bridging virtue, affect, and soteriology within a single canonical grammar.

## Classifying *Sukha* in the Nikāyas

Nikāyas categorizes feeling (vedanā) into three types: pleasant (sukha/somanassa), painful (dukkha/domanassa), and neutral (adukkham-asukha). This classification does not only aim to describe, but to teach as well. During contact (phassa), feeling is conditioned and transient, but in a reflexive, untrained manner, the mind claims pleasure, pivoting to craving and fixation; pain, to aversion and rejection; and neutrality, fogginess or inattention. These impulsive reflexes suggest that contact is more ethical: feeling is seen as just a feel, impersonal and transitory. The training response is reframed from this point. Mindfulness of feeling, as in mindfully feeling a painful feeling, observes tone without a conversion into craving, aversion, or delusion. Response to the assumed pleasant state is, in effect, a training perspective. The painful state

need not be expelled with unending desperation. Unending desperation signals a painful state, but a story that subtracts feeling is applied. Such is the impingement in response to a painful state. Neutral feeling is resolved so that heedlessness does not thicken silently. The Nikāyas offer a perspective on conflict that blends voluntary control with attention. Oppression of desire is aided by attention, minus capriciousness. Unwillingness to feel a painful state is resolved in response to a narrative that thickens a story elaborating pain. The work of the Nikāyas is to reclaim attention from capriciousness so that it aids desire. Unlike mindless layers of response that thicken a story, the work of the Nikāyas is to keep attention from capriciousness so that it aids desire. The painful state is essentially unending and desperation signals the need to numb it by thickening the story.

Identify kāma-sukha, joy associated with the senses and kāma-sukha, pleasure without the senses, joy associated with contentment, virtue, and insight. Such contrast does not come with a moral judgement. Three points consistently emerge. 1. Blame/ harmlessness (anavajja): Sensual pleasures come with blame when they harm oneself and others, break precepts, exploit the weak, and intoxicate discernment, while pleasures that are moderate and harmless are praiseworthy. 2. Stability: Sensual pleasure are unsteady and depend on being procured, status and stimulation. Such volatility cultivates anxiety, and rivalry. In contrast, the pleasures of simplicity, generosity and meditation are more stable, peaceful and less subject to circumstance. 3. Downstream effects: escalations of appetite, self reference, and distraction are remarkably present with even the 'lawful' pleasures of the senses. In contrast, joy without the senses, increases clarity, prepares the mind for stillness, and de-escalates desire. Such contrast does not seek to contain sensory delight, rather, recognize that it contains a weak ethical profile. The texts seek moderation of kāma-sukha through right view, livelihood, and restraint, while promoting the cultivation of nirāmisa-sukha, specifically refined pīti-sukha, a collected mind that is harmless, more durable, and soteriologically aligned.

Between raw sensuality and meditative rapture, the Nikāyas praise a civic, everyday happiness often glossed as the "bliss of blamelessness." Here sukha arises not from consuming more, but from being rightly aligned: keeping precepts, speaking truthfully, practicing right livelihood, honoring kin and communal obligations, paying debts, and sharing one's gains. Because its source is ethical rather than consumptive, this bliss expands cooperative goods: one person's honesty and restraint increase everyone's security. It is modest—eschewing ostentation—yet deeply stabilizing. Householders who earn righteously, avoid intoxication and injury, and practice dāna enjoy a quiet ease that reduces fear of loss and regret; such ease becomes the emotional capital that funds attention, meditation time, and confidence (saddhā). The "bliss of blamelessness" thus functions as both proof and path: proof that happiness need not be tethered to appetite, and path insofar as it trains desire to take satisfaction in harmlessness itself. In this middle register, enjoyment is not an enemy to liberation but an apprenticeship to it: the taste of a life whose pleasures neither scorch others nor scorch the mind, and whose aftertaste is composure rather than restlessness.

### *Puñña* as the Ethics of Enjoyment

In the Nikāyas, puñña is not an incidental by-product of good deeds, but rather an ethical by-product that redirects the enjoyment of good deeds. The engine's pistons are intention, field, and social embeddedness. Intention is the driving force that determines the karmic valence. The same outward act may yield different fruit if motivated by vanity rather than compassion. Field of merit (puññakkhetta) names the relational matrix in which gifts ripen—saṅgha, parents, the needy—so that enjoyment may rather be participation in a web of care than the private accumulation of wealth. Social

embeddedness makes it clear that merit shifts surplus desire because it places gratitude, obligation, and aspiration in the cooperative relational mesh of sufficiency. In this view, sukha is no longer the surplus of successful consumption; it is the affective dividend of rightly aimed agency within a moral ecology.

The texts describe three types of psychological states associated with the practice of giving: anticipation or excitement before giving, a sense of warmth or elevation during the act of giving, and a feeling of nostalgic satisfaction afterwards. This temporal arc has the potential to shift unsteady, fluctuating forms of wealth to a more constant psychological state of well-being. Before the giving, the intended purpose of the donation anticipates and shrinks the anxious, egocentric fixation of 'Will I be giving enough?' During the act of giving, the psychological state of relinquishment and detachment of appropriation is achieved, and the giver experiences a state of pīti–sukha. After the donation has been made, the act of concentrating on the giving, or the act of recollection (anussati), stabilizes the donation as an ongoing psychological resource, making the pleasurable sense of the gift rechargeable and transportable. Above all, the practice of giving dāna focuses on the psychological means of enjoyment. It accomplishes this by removing the symptom of overindulgence or overconsumption and sanctifying the 'use' of the goods by tying it to psychological welfare. For example, after a celebration, the psychological fuel gathered during the feast becomes a 'strength for service' and the wealth that is spent becomes a form of 'social security' for the participants of the social gathering.

Sīla tempers and protects puñña produced by giving. The anticipation of ease provided by precept-keeping is felt long before precept-keeping produces outcomes. One sleeps untroubled, speaks freely without fabricating, and passes through the community with a presumption of trust. In the present moment, the constituent parts of this security sublime and positive, lymphatic and not ecstatic, compose to unburden psychosocial security. It diminishes the costs of vigilance, softens mimetic rivalry, and alleviates the micro-violences of deceit and exploitation, the many micro-violences that communal joy. The sensual escape to which desire so readily fixates is, paradoxically enough, the escape of virtue. It is the escape from the central anxieties of life.

The happiness generated from merit is not the ultimate end; it is scaffolding. When stabilizing livelihood, reputation, and conscience, puñña purchases attention, the capacity to sit, listen, and train. Lay households that practice dāna and sīla create both temporal and psychological space for hearing Dhamma, supporting retreats, and fostering the absorptions whose pīti-sukha weakens desire from stimulation. The flow is circular: lay generosity sustains monastic practice; monastic exemplars refine lay aspirations; shared rituals refresh commitment on both sides. In this way, puñña transforms sukha from a terminal good into a conveyor belt moving enjoyment toward harmlessness, clarity, and dispassion. The ethical engine does not abolish pleasure; it redeploys it, first as communal glue, then as meditative buoyancy, and finally as a quiet ease of letting go.

### Lay–Monastic Interfaces

Happiness in the Nikāyas comes from a circular economy in which material and spiritual wealth circulate between the laity and the saṅgha. Layholders, ethically gained, become dāna— food, robes, medicines, lodging, and the social infrastructure which allows renunciants to focus on spiritual cultivation. When monastics cultivate spiritually, they create teachings, exemplars, and a "field of merit," a means through which blessings of merit

and karma are distributed and shared. This circulation of spiritual wealth as blessings is not barter. Instead, it reflects a mutual relationship. Monastics turn lay wealth into time, focus, and clarity to nourish the entire community, while householders reconfigure. In this economy, sukha is formalized. Generosity liberates the giver from the anxiety of scarcity. Renunciation offers a model to tum the appetite on. Shared ritual structures a bond of collective aspiration, and individual gratitude and confidence. In this economy, sukha is formalized. Generosity liberates the giver from the anxiety of scarcity. Renunciation offers a model to tum the appetite on. Shared ritual structures a bond of collective aspiration, and individual gratitude and confidence.

Acquisition, use, and enjoyment are core components of pastoral counsel to householders. It reminds us of the virtue of earning wealth and the importance of spending it within rational allocation to present needs, savings, and obligations to kin and dependents, and, finally, enjoyment without excess. The passages provide positive ethics. The "balanced life" is one free from miserliness, which undermines joy and social trust, and free from reckless excess, which fuels craving and risks control. The ethics of risk are also important: one should diversify one's livelihood, stay away from debt traps, and provide buffers for the sick, for failing crops, and for unbroken dāna and the keeping of the precepts. It is also the enjoyment that is domesticated—feasts are meant for gratitude, hospitality, and communal rites, so that mere consumption is transformed into puñña and rival display into ostentation. The pastoral voice is not blaming pleasure; it creates it so that household joy is accompanied by duty, remembrance, and generosity.

Monastics serve as examples of nirāmisa-sukha: the collected mind's pīti-sukha, the ease of blamelessness, and the contentment with little. This modelling delivers two ethical effects to the laity. First, it cools the temperature of mimetic desire. In communities where prestige flows toward conspicuous consumption, the revaluation of renunciatory restraint curtails the status-goods arms race and allows quiet, steadiness, and patience to be accepted as success. Second, it induces generosity with the demonstration of happiness's absence in hoarding. The joyful ascetic proves that relinquishment is sweet. Monastic sermons and daily conduct reinforce these lessons: punctual ritual, careful speech, and uncomplaining simplicity give a felt aesthetic of sufficiency to doctrine, translating it into everyday life. Monastic joy is thus not private attainment but public pedagogy, softening lay attachment to stimulation and upgrading their preferred pleasures from thrilling to harmless.

The interface is awkward. As new dwellings, new harvests, and new ordinations occur, festive and ritual occasions gain excitement and create an exuberance that tilts between puñña and performance. When gifts turn into competitive spectacles and blessings are sought as transactional insurance, merit-seeking may puñña become commodified. The Nikāyas counter this drift by centering, once again, on intention, field, and aftermath: Generosity is to relieve suffering, not to bolster the patron's ego. Ritual is to consolidate virtue, not to excuse vice. Celebration is to renew restraint, not to license excess. The toughness of the critique on the one 'legal' sensual enjoyment is that pleasures which do not break the precepts yet still bind and lock the mind into chasing are 'legal' sensual enjoyment. This is a diagnostic, not a puritan critique. Granted, the pleasures are risky and precarious. The risks are exhaustion, escalation, and mental overshadowing. The remedy is twofold: Joyous

occasions of gratitude and service (so the aftertaste is calm, not craving), and the gradient, the one that 'justifies' stagnation.

### Comparative and Commentarial

The later commentarial tradition does not so much revise as refine the canonical movement from sensual delight to meditative ease. Particularly helpful here is the Visuddhimagga on the distinction between pīti and sukha in absorption: pīti is the energizing, buoyant thrill that is felt with interest and confidence, while sukha is the comfortable, satisfying pleasure that "tastes" the object after the excitement has settled. Teachers render the contrast succinctly: pīti gladdens; sukha settles. When considered alongside the Nikāya account of the jhānas the commentarial pairing is also illuminating in regard to the affective sequence of the path: the first jhāna contains pīti and sukha; the second refinesthe them; the third retains sukha without pīti; and the fourth transcends even the pleasant feeling of pīti. This way the commentary does not make joy an end, but positions it as a skilful and purifying stage whose ethical profile is improved by the excitation quieting to stable ease.

A second contribution is sustained attention to intensity and pervasion. Later manuals describe gradations from light thrills through waves and "uplifts" to whole-body suffusion and quiet, even pervading ease. Placed next to the classic similes—the bathman kneading moisture through powder, the spring-fed lake, the lotus pervaded by cool water—these accounts serve diagnostic ends: is one's joy episodic and splashy, or even, stable, and conducive to collectedness? The criterion remains ethical-soteriological rather than merely sensational. Joy counts as progress when it reduces hunger for stimulation, lengthens unbroken attention, and leaves a calm aftertaste compatible with insight.

Later Theravāda praxis extends the communal dimension of wholesome enjoyment through merit-sharing (patti-dāna) and rejoicing in others' merit (pattānumodanā). Public rites—kathina robe-offerings, house-blessing meals, funeral almsgivings—make joy a shared achievement. The recipient community provides a "field of merit," donors furnish intention and resources, and witnesses seal the act by rejoicing, converting private satisfaction into common uplift. Here sukha is explicitly social: it travels along relationships. The happiness of giving becomes portable and renewable through recollection, and it circulates as gratitude, solidifying, and confidence (saddhā) across lay and monastic networks.

Continuity coincides with caution. Commentarial expositions and lived ritual caution against commodification. Merit-transfer is pedagogy, not purchase. Festivals rehearse generosity and do not license excess. The throughline back to the Nikāyas is intact. Whereas early texts graded sukha by source, stability, and aftermath, the later tradition provides a precise vocabulary for meditative feelings and durable institutions for joy in community. Both posit the same test: does this enjoyment simplify the heart, strengthen virtue, and support attention, or does it agitate, inflate status, and crowd out practice? When the former obtains, commentarial distinctions and Theravāda praxis show continuity with the Nikāyas' ethics of enjoyment, wherein joy is cultivated, shared, and finally refined to the quiet ease of enjoyment that neither harms nor binds the mind. It is still a means, not an end.

**Discussion of the article**

This study reframes 'Buddhist happiness' by indicating that the Pañcanikāya do not express blanket suspicion towards pleasure but rather explicit suspicion towards certain "enjoyments". By differentiating kāma-sukha from nirāmisa-sukha and placing the "bliss of blamelessness" in between, the texts establish an evaluative ladder and criteria of intention, harm, stability, and various distal effects. Within this framework, puñña is a form of moral technology: dāna and sīla transform unstable resources of moral and relational sukha, which is portable through recollection and practice, and is thus conducive to meditation. This allows for a more comprehensive account of Buddhist flourishing—one that does not reliquarize strict austerity or moral appetite but rather trains enjoyment to be a means towards liberation.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the Pañcanikāya articulate a tiered ethics of enjoyment in which *sukha* is educated rather than extinguished. Read through *vedanā*, *kāma-sukha*, *nirāmisa-sukha*, and the "bliss of blamelessness," pleasures are evaluated by intention, harmlessness, stability, and downstream effects. *Puñña*—generated by *dāna* and *sīla*—functions as moral technology that redirects enjoyment from consumptive escalation toward relational ease and attentional clarity. Within this gradient, lay and monastic roles are distinct yet interdependent: ethically earned lay prosperity becomes generosity; monastic restraint and teaching return exemplars of non-sensual joy; shared rites and rejoicing convert private satisfaction into communal goods. Thus enjoyment is neither sacralized nor suppressed; it is trained to cooperate with liberation.

Future research can extend and test this mapping on three fronts. First, comparative work with Mahāyāna sources could clarify convergences and divergences around non-sensual joy, the scope and logic of merit-transfer, and the affective pedagogy of bodhisattva vows—especially how expansive beneficiary sets reshape the ethics of enjoyment. Second, ethnographies of contemporary merit economies—kathina festivals, memorial almsgiving, lay–monastic partnerships—could observe how intention, field, and ritual form actually convert resources into prosocial affect, and where they drift toward commodification, status display, or transactionalism; such studies could also identify institutional safeguards that preserve intention and reduce harm. Third, psychological research could examine predicted profiles of *pīti–sukha* and the "bliss of blamelessness": their stability over time, their links to prosocial behavior and reduced craving, and their compatibility with attentional training.

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