Presentation of "Living Being" in Early Indian Buddhism and Its Ethical Implications

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Abstract

This article focuses on the presentation of the notion of "living being" and its link to ethics in the Pāli Buddhist canon and its commentaries. This objective is achieved by examining the key Pāli terms that refer to "living being" (i.e., *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*) in different contexts with the aim of identifying their sematic ranges. The article then discusses how the notion of "living being" in the Pāli sources can be situated within the main doctrinal models developed in early Buddhism such as the six sense bases (*āyatana*), dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*), and the Abhidhammic presentation of cognition, which are linked to a larger ethical framework that axiomatically repudiates the existence of a human "self" as the centre of all analysis. Instead, complex systems that link all living beings serve as the foundation for Buddhist praxis, and lead to a new understanding of the lived experience, which is founded on an ethics of behaviour, centred around non-violence or the non-harming of all beings. The article concludes by exploring the important contribution of Buddhist ethics to the current environmental challenges by underscoring the essential role played by the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) as the very source and foundation of an ethical stance from which ethical actions can proceed.

Keywords: "living being" in ancient India, Theravāda Buddhism, Pāli terms *satta*, *pāṇa,* and *bhūta*, plants in Theravāda Buddhism, early Buddhist ethics

Pojmovanje "živega bitja" v zgodnjem budizmu in etične implikacije

Izvleček

Prispevek raziskuje pojem "živega bitja" (i. e. *satta*, *pāṇa*, in *bhūta*) in njegovo umestitev v etične okvire staroindijskega diskurza v theravādskem budističnem kanonu. Najprej preučuje osnovne pālijske termine za pojem "živega bitja" v različnih kontekstih s ciljem, da bi določil njihova specifična semantična polja. Nato razpravlja, kako lahko pojem "živega bitja" predstavimo v okviru glavnih modelov zgodnje budistične doktrine, kot so model šestih čutov (*āyatana*), soodvisnega nastajanja (*paticcasamuppada*) in predstavitve kognicije v *Abhidhammi*. Vsi ti modeli, ki so osnovani in globoko vpeti v budistični etični okvir, ne postavljajo človeka v središče, temveč ga predstavljajo kot del

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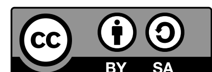

kompleksnih struktur in procesov, ki povezujejo vsa živa bitja. Iz takšnih izhodišč izhaja tudi budistična praksa, ki je osnovana na razvoju moralno-etičnih vrlin, kot so prijateljstvo, sočutje in predvsem nenasilje do vseh živih bitij. Na koncu prispevek raziskuje, kako lahko budistična etika doprinese k sodobnim izzivom, kot so okoljstvena kriza, in pri tem razmišlja s stališča osnovne budistične postavke o nesebstvu (*anattā*), ki predstavlja izvor, osnovo in nujen pogoj za etično držo, le-ta pa se odraža v etičnem delovanju, ki izključuje kakršnokoli obliko nasilja nad živimi bitji.

Ključne besede: pojem "živega bitja" v stari Indiji, theravādski budizem, pālijski termini *satta*, *pāṇa* in *bhūta*, rastline v theravādskem budizmu, zgodnja budistična etika

Abbreviations[1]

A	*Aṅguttaranikāya*
As	*Atthasālinī*
D	*Dīghanikāya*
DP	*A Dictionary of Pāli*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
Dhs	*Dhammasaṅgaṇi*
M	*Majjhimanikāya*
Pp	*Puggalapaññatti*
Ps	*Papañcasūdanī*, *Majjhimanikāyāṭṭhakathā*
Paṭis	*Paṭisambhidāmagga*
PED	*Pāli-English Dictionary*
S	*Saṃyuttanikāya*
Sn	*Suttanipāta*
Sp	*Samantapāsādikā*
Spk	*Sāratthappakāsinī*
Sv	*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī, Dīghanikāyāṭṭhakathā*
Vibh	*Vibhaṅga*
Vibh-a	*Sammohavinodanī*
Vin	*Vinaya*
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*

1 The abbreviations of Pāli sources and the quotation system follow the *Critical Pāli Dictionary* (Epilegomena to vol. 1, 1948 5*–36*, and vol. 3, 1992, II–VI). The numbers used for the quotations of Pāli sources refer to the volume and page of the PTS edition (e.g., M I 21 refers to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, vol 1, 21).

Introduction

The inspiration for this paper came from reflections about the current situation in the world. One of the greatest challenges presently faced by humanity is the severe degradation and destruction of the natural environment and the resultant climate change, which will, in the long (or even short) term, imperil the very existence of humans along with numerous ecosystems. Different approaches to the current environmental problems, which are inextricably linked to ethical issues, have been investigated, mainly using standard tools of analysis and problem solving. In trying to explore new paradigms and perspectives, this paper investigates how the early Buddhist concept of "living being" and its links to ethics are presented in the ancient Indian discourse, with a particular focus on the Theravāda[2] Buddhist sources.

All major ancient Indian religions and philosophies investigated and theorized the meaning of consciousness, sentience, and the precise nature of living beings.[3] In response to these issues, Indian systems of thought developed a number of theoretical models as well as a range of contemplative practices. When referring to sentience or living beings, several terms were used in the ancient classical language of scholarship (Sanskrit), each depending on the specific context and religious movements of the time. Overall, like many traditional cultures, ancient Indian religions more or less reflected widespread beliefs in an animated and sacred natural environment, inhabited by myriads of living beings, including animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and various invisible realms where non-material beings also abided. For example, the earliest textual records, the Vedas,[4] attest to the veneration of the natural environment, with the Vedic pantheon abounded in deities related to nature and natural phenomena such as the goddess of Earth (*Pṛthivī*), the god of Fire (*Agni*), the god of Wind (*Vāyu*), the River goddess (*Sarasvatī*), and many more.[5] In the Vedic tradition,

2 In this paper, I use the term Theravāda Buddhism in reference to the Buddhist tradition based on the Pāli canon, its commentaries, and related literature. The term Theravāda has been widely used for designating the Buddhist traditions of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, and thus sometimes it is also called Southern Buddhism.

3 Among the many sources which elaborate on this issue, see also numerous papers that have been previously published about the topic in this journal, such as, for instance, Dessein (2016), Zalta (2016), Markič and Kordeš (2016), Hashi (2015), etc.

4 The earliest Vedic text, the *Ṛgveda*, probably dates from the middle of the second millennium BCE, although the dating of early Indian textual history is very uncertain.

5 As the Vedic tradition has received considerable scholarly attention, there have been many studies of the Vedic pantheon, with the earliest comprehensive surveys by Macdonell ([1897] 1971), Bloomfield ([1908] 1969), Oldenberg (1923), and Gonda (1975), followed by many treatises on specific deities (e.g., the study on Agni by Jurewicz (2010)) or other features of the tradition.

many animals were revered as sacred, especially the horse, bull, cow, goat, snake, cow, tortoise, and birds, each with links to particular deities. For example, the god Agni was associated with both the goat and the horse, while Vedic goddesses were linked to the life-giving cow. Plants were also venerated,[6] particularly trees that were regarded sacred and frequently addressed as deities, while occasionally an entire forest would be invoked as the goddess Araṇyāni.[7] Likewise, in later and post-Vedic periods, trees were considered to be living beings with their own sentience (*jīva*),[8] and they were commonly revered as the abode of numerous deities and other living beings.

In the context in which early Indian Buddhism arose and developed, the issue of sentience was explored by all major traditions of ancient India, but was particularly comprehensively addressed in Jainism, an important ascetic tradition that was founded in northern India in the same general period as Buddhism (around the mid- to late first millennium BCE) and has continuously existed in India up until the present day. A brief review of Jain teachings may be helpful here as a way to understand early Buddhist approaches to the notion of a living being, since the non-harming of living beings is perhaps the most prominent Jain teaching from the earliest days. Jainism propounds that a sentient principle (*jīva*) exists not only in humans and animals, but also in plants, sub-microorganisms (*nigoda*), and natural elements such as air, water, earth, and fire.[9] The Jain typology of sentient beings is based on the number of senses possessed by a living being. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, one of the earliest and most important texts of Jainism, composed between the second and fifth century CE, classifies sentient beings as follows: at the lowest level are beings with only one sense (i.e., touch), which include sub-microorganisms (*nigodha*), the smallest units of matter known as the earth bodies, water bodies, fire bodies, and air bodies, and significantly, plants. Animals have between two and five senses: for example, worms have two senses (i.e., touch and taste); termites and fleas have three (i.e., touch, taste, and smell); winged insects four (i.e., touch, taste, smell, and sight); and deities, humans, hell beings, and larger animals (e.g., fish, birds, quadrupeds) have five (i.e., touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing). Some beings with five senses (i.e., humans, animals born from the womb, deities, and hell beings) also possess the sixth sense of

6 For example, an entire hymn in the *Ṛgveda* (10.97) is devoted to plants (*oṣadhi*), addressing them as goddesses with healing powers.

7 For example, *Ṛgveda* 10.146.

8 For example, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (VI.11.2) states that trees are alive, being permeated by the sentient principle (*jīva*), and, as explained in the commentary by Śaṅkarācarya, they are non-moving beings that possess consciousness (*cetanāvantaḥ sthāvarā*) (*Īśādidaśopaniṣadaḥ* 531).

9 See Jaini (1979, 109–110); Dundas (2002, 95).

the mind (*manas*) that facilitates thinking (Umāsvāti 2011, 45–46). According to Jainism, the surrounding world is thus to a large extent alive. Humans, in particular, have the ability to cultivate ethical behaviour toward all other sentient beings. Jainism closely interrelates cosmology, the natural world, and ethics; like many other Indian traditions, it teaches that the sentient principal (*jīva*) moves from one life to another according to the law of *karma*, with rebirth taking place in four realms or destinies (*gati*), i.e., as deities (*deva*), humans (*manuṣya*), hell beings (*nāraki*), or animals and plants (*tiryañca*).[10] The goal of Jain practices is the ultimate freedom from all *karma*, which is achieved through various ascetic practices. The pivotal practice is non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), that is, avoiding any harm to living beings, which is the very foundation of Jain ethics. For Jains, non-violence should be practiced not only toward humans but also toward animals, plants, and elemental bodies as much as possible. The non-anthropocentric ethics of Jainism was embraced, to varying extents, by other Indian traditions of the time, including Buddhism, although their definitions of a living being varied.

Terms for "Living Being" in the Pāli Canon and Its Commentaries

Judging from the textual evidence, early Buddhism had many common features with Jainism: both traditions emerged in the same period (i.e., in the mid- to late first millennium BCE) and shared a number of fundamental premises and articulations common to the ascetic (*śramaṇa*) movements of India at the time. Early Buddhist representations of sentience are likewise grounded in the ethics of non-violence, though to a lesser degree than in Jainism. In each tradition, the key terms referring to the notion of "living being" are often similar with parallel usages, although they also crystallize the doctrinal differences between the two traditions. In the Pāli canon and its commentaries, several terms are used to refer to life and living beings, mainly *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*,[11] which have overlapping English renderings, with all three being commonly translated as "life, living being, or sentient being".[12] Semantic distinctions can be identified by examining their usage in the canonical and post-canonical textual sources, which will be treated in detail below in attempt to pinpoint their semantic ranges.

10 *Sarvārthasiddhi* §265, quoted in Jaini (1979, 108 (fn. 30)).

11 I mainly draw from the Theravāda Buddhist sources in this paper, and thus the key terms are given in parentheses in Pāli.

12 For example, *satta* is usually translated as "living being, creature, sentient being", *pāṇa* as "living being, life, creature", *jīva* as "life, soul", and *bhūta*, which has a broader semantic spectrum, as "being, creature, living being" (DP, PED, s.v.).

Satta

One of the most common and broadly used terms for "living being" is *satta*, which has numerous attestations in the Pāli canonical and post-canonical texts in varied contexts. The word is usually (and unexceptionally) translated as "being, living being, living creature" (PED, *s.v.*). It appears in many instances in the Pāli canon (*Tipiṭaka*) and its commentaries in reference to living beings in the most general way, designating all beings that abide in any of the Buddhist realms.[13] For example, in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D I 82), the word *satta* encompasses all beings subject to *kamma,* both human and non-human, both material and non-material, and living in all worlds. Likewise, in the *Mahānidānasutta* (D II 69), the different kinds of beings that reside in the various realms and have different types of bodies and perceptions are all designated as *satta*.[14] Sometimes *satta* designates beings from a specific realm: for example, in the *Brahamajālasutta* (D I 17) it refers to beings from the realm of radiant deities (*ābhassara*), or in the *Sammohavinodanī* (Vibh-a 144) it denotes beings in the limitless realm (*aparimāṇā sattā*). In the Abhidhammic texts, when various material and mental states and processes are discussed, the word *satta* designates living beings in the most general sense (e.g., Dhs 144, 154, 212; Vibh 339–342).[15] It is similarly employed in post-canonical texts. For example, in the *Visuddhimagga*, *satta* mainly refers to any living being, particularly in the context of expounding the notion of non-self as, for example, in the passage on mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*), which states that apart from material and mental phenomena, there is no "being" (*satta*).[16]

In some instances, the meaning of the term *satta* is explained. For example, in the *Rādhasaṃyutta*, it is said that a being (*satta*) is one who is "attached (*satto*)[17] to and stuck in desire, greed, delight, and craving for materiality, … feeling, … perception, … mental factors, … and consciousness …"[18] (S III.190).[19] The *sutta*

13 For example, according to one of the best-known models of Buddhist cosmology, there are five realms in which living beings can be reborn according to their *kamma*: the worlds of the gods, humans, animals, ghosts, and hell.

14 *Satta* is attested in this sense in many other instances: e.g., D III 263; Paṭis I 121; Vism 205, 457, 552.

15 See also As 42, 68, 191, 406; Vibh-a 94, 176, 458, 467.

16 Vism 593: *na satto, na puggalo atthi.* It is similarly used in Vism 238, 627.

17 The Pāli term *satta* can also mean "attached"; in this case, it is a past participle from the verb *saj-* "to cling to, to be attached" (PED, *s.v.*).

18 All translations from Pāli into English in this paper are my own.

19 S III.190: *Rūpe kho Rādha yo chando yo rāgo yā nandi yā taṇhā tatra satto tatra visatto tasmā satto ti vuccati. Vedanāya … Saññāya … Saṅkhāresu … Viññāṇe yo chando yo rāgo yā nandi yā taṇhā tatra satto tatra visatto tasmā satto ti vuccati.*

thus links the notion of *satta* with craving for and clinging to the five aggregates (*khandha*), i.e., the five components that constitute a living being.[20] The passage then concludes with the statement that "the destruction of craving is *nibbāna*",[21] thus broadly relating the term *satta* to beings who are subject to craving (*taṇhā*) and the consequent bondage of *saṃsāra*. The *Visuddhimagga* further comments on this passage, saying that "in ordinary speech this term [*satta*] of common usage is also applied to those who are without craving", thus taking *satta* as a general designation for all living beings, those with craving and those without, just like "in customary language the term 'palm fan' (*tālavanta*) refers to all kinds of fans, even those made of split bamboo" (Vism 310).[22]

To recapitulate, the notion of *satta* seems to predominantly refer to living beings in the broadest and most generic sense. In this article, I thus propose a working translation of *satta* as "being". This is also indicated in many other Theravāda texts. For example, in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, the passage describing the practice of loving kindness (*mettā*) begins with wishing well to all beings (*satta*) before listing specific groups of beings encompassed by the term, including deities, human beings, men, women, as well as beings referred to by the terms *pāṇa* and *bhūta* (Paṭis II 131), implying that the latter two are subcategories of *satta*. Although the three terms are usually rendered into English as "living being", viewing them as mere equivalences or synonyms does not seem to be warranted.

Bhūta

The term *bhūta,* which also signifies living being, has a wide semantic range and is rendered into English as "produced, become, being, living being, nature, world, truth, correct, ghost" (DP, PEDF, *s.v.*). In the *Papañcasūdanī* commentary, *bhūta* is explained to include "the five aggregates, ghosts, elements, those existing, those who are free from taints, all beings, plants, and so on".[23] The fact that the word is a past participle from the root *bhū-* "to become, to be" is reflected in the explanation of *bhūta* in the *Visuddhimagga*: "Beings (*bhūta*) are so called because they are fully become (*sambhūtattā*), because of their being produced

20 Among the many ways of understanding what a "being" is in Buddhism, the analytical model of the five aggregates (*khandha*) proposes that the illusionary "person" is comprised of the following five groups: materiality (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental factors (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). On the five aggregates, see the *Khandhavagga*, S III.

21 S III.190: *Taṇhakkhayo hi Rādha nibbānan ti*.

22 Vism 310: *Rūḷhīsaddena pana vītarāgesu pi ayaṃ vohāro vattati yeva, vilīvamaye pi vījanivisese tālavaṇṭavohāro viya*.

23 Ps I 31: *pañcakkhandhāmanussa-dhātu-vijjamāna-khīṇāsava-satta-rukkhādīsu dissati*.

(*abhinibbattattā*)".[24] It often occurs in reference to beings in a general sense; for example, in the *Ratanasutta*, benevolent wishes are addressed to all beings (*bhūtā*) (Sn 39), or in the *Kukkuravattikasutta* (M I 390), the term is used to explain the rebirth of all beings, saying that "the reappearance of a being (*bhūta*) is due to a being; what actions one does, due to that one reappears".[25] Likewise, it is said in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II 157) that "all beings (*bhūtā*) in the world, all bodies must break up".[26] Similar to *satta*, *bhūta* can thus generally refer to beings that inhabit any of the realms, although *bhūta* is very rarely attested in this general sense in comparison to the frequent occurrences of *satta.*[27]

Bhūta sometimes refers to the beings of a particular realm such as the world of humans and lower deities (e.g., M I 2, 328). Along with the adjective *mahat*, it is occasionally used to designate those who have attained any of the four stages of awakening and are known as "great beings", as in the *Uposathasutta* (A IV 207).[28] More rarely, the term can also signify "truth, being true" (e.g., Pp 50, Vism 204). *Bhūta* is also attested in the sense of "has come to be", as in the expression describing present and future beings as "those who have already come to be (*bhūta*) and those who are about to become" (*sambhavesī*).[29] In this sense, there are also a few attestations of *bhūtā* in the *Abhidhamma*, mainly in reference to something that "has become, come to be".[30] In addition, in the Pāli commentaries, the term signifies "element" when materiality is discussed.[31] *Bhūta* is also a component of the compound *bhūtagāma*, which denotes "plants, trees, vegetation". This latter term always occurs in an ethical context, most commonly in the *Vinayapiṭaka* (Vin IV 34),[32] when the offence of destroying plants, viewed as living beings, is discussed. In the *Suttapiṭaka*, *bhūtagāma* appears as a component of a larger compound *bījagāmabhūtagāma* "seeds and plants", once again in the specific context of showing non-violence toward them. For example, in the *Brahmajālasutta*, it is said that "the ascetic Gotama refrains from injuring seeds and

24 Vism 310: *Bhūtattā bhūtā; sambhūtattā abhinibbattattā ti attho*.

25 M I 390: *bhūtā bhūtassa upapatti hoti, yaṃ karoti tena upapajjati*). Similarly in M I 390, A V 290.

26 D II 157: *sabbeva nikkhipissanti bhūtā loke samussayaṃ*. Similarly D II 163, M I 36.

27 The term *satta* is attested about ten times more frequently than *bhūta*. The number of occurrences of the terms discussed in this article are broad estimates based on the numbers generated by searches using the Digital Pali Reader.

28 A IV 207: *mahataṃ bhūtānaṃ āvāso.*

29 E.g., S II 11: *bhūtānaṃ vā sattānaṃ ṭhitiyā sambhavesīnaṃ vā*.

30 E.g., Dhs 187; As 172, 227; Vibh 2, Vibh-a 305.

31 E.g., As 300, Vibh-a 7, 137, 173, 265, Vism 367, 444.

32 Vin IV 34: *bhūtagāmapātabyatāya pācittiyan ti.*

plants" (D I 5).[33] Another compound with *bhūta* referring to all living beings is *pāṇabhūta*, which is again mostly attested in relation to the non-violence shown toward all living beings; it usually appears in the phrase *sabbapāṇabhūtahitānu-kampī*, "compassionate for the welfare of all living beings".[34]

Pāṇa

The word *pāṇa*, which is (once again) usually rendered into English as "living being, living creature" (DP, PED, *s.v.*), has a great number of attestations in the *Tipiṭaka* and its commentaries. The term also has other meanings, such as "breath, life" (DP, PED, *s.v.*), thus reflecting the noun's derivation from the verb "to breath" (*pa-an-*). Consequently, *pāṇa* is sometimes translated as "breathing, animate being". This link is also articulated in the explanation of term *pāṇa* in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 310): "Beings are called *pāṇa* because of their state of breathing (*pāṇanatā*); this is because their existence depends on in-breaths and out-breaths."[35]

The numerous occurrences of *pāṇa* in the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentarial literature predominantly appear in an ethical context when the harming or non-harming of living beings are discussed.[36] For example, in the *Udumbarikasīhanādasutta* (D III 48), it is said that "an ascetic does not harm a living being (*pāṇa*), does not cause a living being (*pāṇa*) to be harmed, does not approve of harming a living being (*pāṇa*)".[37] Or in the *Pāsādikasutta* (D III 133), an *arahat* is described as one who "cannot intentionally take the life of a living being (*pāṇa*)",[38] and the *Jīvakasutta* (M I 371) uses *pāṇa* in relation to "killing a living being (*pāṇa*)".[39] The predominant use of the term *pāṇa* in the context of the (non)-killing of living beings is also reflected in compounds formed with this word such as *pāṇaghāti* "one who kills a living being", *pāṇakoṭi* "the end of one's life", *pāṇahara* "taking away life", and *pāṇada* "one who rescues, gives life" (DP, *s.v.*). By far, the most frequently attested compound formed with *pāṇa* is *pāṇātipāta*, "killing living

33 D I 5: *bījagāmabhūtagāmasamārambhā samārabbhā paṭivirato samaṇo gotamo.* Similarly in D I 6, 64; M I 180; M II 226; M III 34; S V 470; A II 209; A V 205.

34 E.g., D I 173; M III 46; S IV 314, A II 208, Vibh 244.

35 Vism 310: *Pāṇanatāya pāṇā; assāsapassāsāyattavuttitāyā ti attho*.

36 To distinguish *pāṇa* from *satta* ("being"), a working translation of *pāṇa* as "living being" is used.

37 D III 48: *tapassī na pāṇam atipāpeti, na pāṇam atipātayati, na pāṇam atipātayato samanuñño hoti*.

38 D III 133: *sañcicca pāṇaṃ jīvitā voropetuṃ*. See also A II 176; M I 39, 371, Dhp 270, etc.

39 M I 371: … *pāṇaṃ ārabhati*.

being, destruction of life, taking life", and the word's derivations *pāṇātipāti* and *pāṇātipātika*, "one who kills".[40] The compound *pāṇātipāta* occurs in the very first of the five Buddhist moral precepts (*pañcasīlāni*),[41] which represent the basic code of ethics for lay people, while it is also one of the leading precepts in other sets of moral guidelines for the laity and those living a monastic life. The first rule of moral training (*sikkhāpada*) is abstaining (*veramaṇī*) from killing living beings (*pāṇātipāta*), which reflects the pivotal role played by non-violence in Buddhist ethics. Apart from referring to human beings, the word *pāṇa* often occurs in relation to animals. The phrase *tiracchānagatā pāṇā* is frequently employed to designate animals in general.[42] For example, in the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta* (M III 167–170) *pāṇa* refers to different kinds of animals that are classified according to what they eat, or in the *Appamādasutta* (A V 21) the phrase *jaṅgalānaṃ pāṇānaṃ* designates animals in the wilderness. The derivative *pāṇaka* also frequently designates animals in general (e.g., S IV 198) or specifically insects (As 279) and worms (Vism 259).

The word *pāṇa* also appears in an ethical context in the *Abhidhamma*, again most frequently in the compound *pāṇātipāta* when the killing of living beings is discussed. The later commentaries, such as the *Atthāsalinī* commentary (As 97), further elaborate what is meant by taking life:

> Taking life (*pāṇātipāto*) means destroying a living being (*pāṇa*), killing or slaughtering. "Life" signifies in common use a being (*satta*); in its ultimate sense (*paramatthata*), it means life faculty (*jīvitindriya*).[43]

The notion of "living being" (*pāṇa*) is thus explained as (and equated with) "life faculty" or "vital principle" (*jīvitindriya*), which is one of the twenty-two faculties (*indriya*), i.e., important aspects or qualities expounded in Buddhist teachings.[44]

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40 The compound *pāṇātipāta* and its derivations account for more than half of all attestations of the word *pāṇa* in the *Tipiṭaka.*

41 The five precepts (*pañcasīla*) involve abstaining from killing sentient beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming alcohol and similar substances (Harvey 2013, 264–278).

42 See also M III 25; S III 85, 152; S V 228; A II 33; As 66.

43 As 97: *Tattha pāṇassa atipāto pāṇātipāto nāma; pāṇavadho, pāṇaghātoti vuttaṃ hoti. Pāṇoti cettha vohārato satto, paramatthato jīvitindriyaṃ.* See also Sp II 439, Sv I 69, Ps I 199.

44 The faculties are listed and discussed in several Pāli texts (e.g., S V 203–207), and especially in the *Abhidhamma*. In the *Vibhaṅga*, the twenty-two faculties include the six sense faculties (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), life faculty, male and female faculties, five feeling faculties (pleasure, pain, mental ease, mental displeasure, neutrality), five spiritual faculties (trust, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom), and three faculties of realization (coming to know the unknown, knowing, having known) (Vibh 122: *Bāvīsatindriyāni: cakkhundriyaṃ sotindriyaṃ ghānindriyaṃ jivhindriyaṃ kāyindriyaṃ manindriyaṃ itthindriyaṃ purisindriyaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*

The term *jīvitindriya* is mainly attested in the commentarial texts, most frequently in the *Abhidhamma* corpus. In the Abhidhammic analysis of cognition, *jīvitindriya* is one of the mental concomitants (*cetasika*) that always arises along with other concomitants at every moment of cognition (*citta*) throughout one's life. What we call a "living being" is presented in the *Abhidhamma* as a complex web of ever-changing processes involving numerous components that keep arising under various causes and conditions. One of the mental concomitants (*cetasika*) that occurs along with each moment of cognition (*citta*) is the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*), which oversees, sustains, and vitalizes the mental states that arise with it. In other words, it is a faculty that facilitates the continuity of mental processes. The *Atthasālinī* commentary (As 123) explains that the role of the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*) is to govern, vitalize, and sustain the associated and co-nascent phenomena (*dhamma*), its characteristic is a ceaseless watching over the phenomena that arise with it in cognitive processes, and its function is the continuity of the mental process (*pavattanarasa*).[45] According to the *Vibhaṅga* (Vibh 123), the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*) is twofold: the material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) and the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*).[46] The former (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) is described as follows:

> The material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ*) is that, which in these material phenomena (*dhamma*) is life, persistence, going on, sustaining, moving on, continuing, guarding, vital principle.[47]

The non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) is then explained with the same definition but only referring to non-material phenomena (*dhamma*).[48] *Jīvitindriya* thus stabilizes and sustains both non-material phenomena (*dhamma*) in its role as one of the universal, ever-present mental concomitants (*cetasika*) of cognition (*citta*), and material phenomena, which are regarded as *kamma*-originated materiality. Taking life thus means destroying the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*).

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sukhindriyaṃ dukkhindriyaṃ somanassindriyaṃ domanassindriyaṃ upekhindriyaṃ saddhindriyaṃ viriyindriyaṃ satindriyaṃ samādhindriyaṃ paññindriyaṃ anaññātaññassāmītindriyaṃ aññindriyaṃ aññātāvindriyaṃ.)

45 As 123: *Anupālanalakkhaṇe indaṭṭhaṃ kāretīti indriyaṃ. Jīvitameva indriyaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ. Taṃ pavattasantatādhipateyyaṃ hoti. Lakkhaṇādīhi pana attanā avinibhuttānaṃ dhammānaṃ anupālanalakkhaṇaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ, tesaṃ pavattanarasaṃ.*

46 Vibh 123: *Tattha katamaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ? Duvidhena jīvitindriyaṃ: atthi rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ, atthi arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.*

47 Vibh 123: *Yo tesaṃ rūpīnaṃ dhammānaṃ āyu ṭhiti yapanā yāpanā iriyanā vattanā pālanā jīvitaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ: idaṃ vuccati rūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.* See also Dhs 11–12.

48 Vibh 123: *Yo tesaṃ arūpīnaṃ dhammānaṃ āyu ṭhiti yapanā yāpanā iriyanā vattanā pālanā jīvitaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ: idaṃ vuccati arūpaṃ jīvitindriyaṃ.*

In the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, the term *jīvita* is mostly attested in the compound *jīvitindriya*, whereas in the *Suttapiṭaka* and *Vinayapiṭaka*, *jīvita* appears on its own, predominantly in reference to human life in general,[49] human life span[50] or in the context of destroying life.[51] *Jīvita* can also signify livelihood in phrases such as *jīvitaṃ kappenti* "they make their living".[52] Another term related to *jīvita* is *jīva*, which also signifies life. It is most frequently translated into English as "soul" (e.g., Jaini 1979) and sometimes (more fittingly) as "sentient principle" (Soni 2020). In contrast to Jainism where it is a foundational concept, *jīva* only seldom occurs in the Pāli textual sources, prevalently in *sutta*s where the Buddha speaks with Jain and other ascetics and brahmins, discussing their views on the existence of the permanent sentient principle (*jīva*) and its relation to the body.[53]

To recapitulate, the words *satta*, *pāṇa*, and *bhūta*, which are commonly translated into English as "living being", have different, though to some extent overlapping semantic spectra. The most frequently attested term *satta*, rendered in this article as "being", has the broadest signification, designating all beings that abide in any of the Buddhist realms, and is largely attested in this sense in all three collections ("baskets") of texts known as the *Tipiṭaka* as well as its commentaries. Another term that can signify beings in a general sense is *bhūta*, although it is attested much less frequently than *satta*. *Bhūta* appears in the compound *bhūtagāma*, which specifically signifies plants and is always used in the context of showing non-violence toward them. Another term with many occurrences is *pāṇa*. In distinction to *satta*, it is rendered here as "living being". It mostly signifies the creatures living on the earth (e.g., S I 37: *pāṇā pathaviṃ sitā*) and appears in Pāli textual sources predominantly in reference to the non-killing of humans, animals, and occasionally plants. In the commentarial literature, the term "living being" (*pāṇa*) is, in terms of Abhidhammic analysis, linked to the notion of "life faculty" or "vital principle" (*jīvitindriya*). The term *jīva*, which is the central notion of the sentient principle or being in Jainism, is very seldom attested in the Theravāda canon, appearing mainly in the *suttas* where the Buddha engages in philosophical arguments with Jain and other ascetics.

Identifying these semantic differences can provide us with a more precise understanding of how the notion of a living being was conceptualized in the Pāli canon and its commentaries, and how it was incorporated into the ethical framework

49 E.g., S I 121; S II 283; S V 384; A III 54, 433; A IV48.

50 E.g., Vin III 260; D II 233; S I 55, A IV 137.

51 E.g., D I 56, 85–86; D III 73, 235; M I 517; M III 64-65; S III 113; S IV 329; A I 27; A III 211.

52 E.g., Vin III 74; Vin IV 239; D I 9–12, 67; M I 62; S I 92; S V 9; A I 225.

53 E.g., D I 189; D II 333; M I 157, 484; S II 61; S III 258; A II 41; A V 197; Dhs 159.

of non-violence in early Buddhism. When investigating sentience and ethics, two Buddhist approaches to understanding reality must be considered: the conventional (*sammuti*) one that is described using ordinary expressions (*vohāra*) and concepts (*paññatti*) and includes entities such as living beings, and the perspective of ultimate reality (*paramattha*), which analyses reality as consisting of *dhammas*, the ultimate units of existence.

Different Perspectives on the Notion of "Living Being" in the Theravāda Textual Sources and Their Ethical Implications

Conventional Perspective (sammuti)

From the conventional or everyday perspective, a countless number of entities or living beings (*satta*) inhabit the different Buddhist worlds. Buddhist cosmology uses several models to present the different realms. One way of describing existence is through the model of the three realms: 1) the realm of sense desire (*kammadhātu*), 2) the realm of material form (*rūpadhātu*), and 3) the formless and immaterial realm (*āruppadhātu*), with each realm also referring to different levels of meditation and kinds of rebirth. Another well-known representation is the model of the five realms (*gati*) in which living beings can be reborn, depending on their *kamma*, namely, in the worlds of the gods, humans, animals, ghosts, or hell beings.[54] From the Buddhist perspective, all these worlds are impermanent (*anicca*), and all beings abiding therein are subject to non-satisfactoriness and suffering (*dukkha*). As such, the main concern of Buddhist teaching is the problem of suffering and liberation from suffering, as the Buddha says in the *Alagaddūpamasutta* (M I 140): "What I teach is [about] suffering and the cessation of suffering."[55] Buddhism postulates that liberation from suffering can be attained through the eightfold path involving the development of virtue, meditation, and wisdom. The very foundation of the eightfold path is training in virtue, comprising the cultivation of appropriate speech (*sammā vācā*), action (*sammā kammanta*), and livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), which essentially means not harming other beings and thus reducing their suffering. Moral rules are also articulated in the five precepts (*pañcasīla*) for lay people, prescribing that one should abstain from 1) killing living beings, 2) stealing, 3) engaging in sexual misconduct, 4) lying, and 5) consuming alcohol and similar substances (Harvey 2013, 268–78). Monastics are guided by a more extensive set of guidelines, which are assembled

54 E.g., S III 234., M I 73.

55 M I 140: *dukkhañ-c'eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ*.

in one collection ("basket") of the Pāli canon known as the *Vinayapiṭaka*, where a great number of rules for monks—and even a greater number for nuns—are expounded and discussed in detail.

The first precept, which is considered the most essential, relates to abstaining from killing living beings (*pāṇātipāta*),[56] thus positioning non-violence as the most crucial primary virtue and the very foundation for developing wholesome and ethical mental states, which are the pivotal condition allowing for wisdom (*paññā*) to emerge and leading to liberation from suffering.[57] In this context, it is important to understand what the notion of a living being refers to. As mentioned earlier, the term predominantly used for living beings within the ethical framework is *pāṇa*. Some scholars suggest that *pāṇa* signifies those who breathe (e.g., Harvey 2013, 271), obviously connecting the term with the verb "to breathe" (*pa-an-*), although it is uncertain which beings were considered to breath in early Buddhism.[58] Notwithstanding the status of plants, and as ample textual evidence demonstrates, it is indisputable that in early Buddhism animals were, along with humans, regarded as living beings (*pāṇa*). It was commonly believed that animals can be reborn, in line with their *kamma,* as humans and *vice versa*, although an animal rebirth is generally regarded as unhappy, since they are usually subject to a great amount of suffering. Animals, generally designated in Pāli sources by the term *pāṇā*, or more specifically by *tiracchānagatā pāṇā*, include a wide range of species. They are presented in different ways; for example, in the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta* (M III 167–170), they are grouped as those who feed on grass (e.g., elephants, horses) or on dung (e.g., dogs, jackals), those who live in darkness (e.g., moths, earthworms), in water (e.g., fish, crocodiles), and in dirt (i.e., organisms that eat dead bodies). While the animal kingdom is undoubtedly inhabited by living or sentient beings—a common belief shared by all major Buddhist schools—the question as to whether plants should also be regarded as living beings is not straightforward.

As mentioned above, in the Pāli canon plants are usually referred to by *bhūta*, and more specifically *bhūtagāma*. The term *bhūtagāma* appears most frequently in terms of injuring or destroying plants, especially in the collection of monastic rules in the *Vinayapiṭaka*, where damaging vegetation, particularly trees, is seen as an offence for monks and nuns (e.g., Vin IV 34, Vin V 15, Vin V 37–38).

56 In the Theravāda tradition, this precept is formulated as: "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from killing living beings" (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*).

57 From the Abhidhammic standpoint, killing is always rooted in hate and delusion (As 102: *Mūlato ti pāṇātipāto dosamohavasena dvimūlako hoti*), which obstruct ethical states.

58 We should beware of using contemporary understandings of breath, and indeed physiology, when evaluating teachings from the past.

These rules point to a belief in plants as living beings, and also reflect the religious milieu of the time in which it was considered objectionable for ascetics and renunciates of any religious tradition to destroy plants. As mentioned earlier, the abstaining from harming plants often includes seeds, typically in the phrase *bījagāmabhūtagāmasamārambha* "refraining from injuring seeds and plants", which appears in *suttas* describing the virtues of monastics or the Buddha (e.g., M II 226, A V 205). The term *bhūtagāma* is explained in the Vinaya (Vin IV 34–35) to include five groups of plants according to their type of propagation, i.e., those arising from roots or bulbs (*mūlabīja*) (e.g., ginger, turmeric), trunks or stems (*khandhabīja*) (e.g., fig tree, banyan tree), joints (*phaḷubīja*) (e.g., sugar cane, bamboo), cuttings (*aggabīja*) (e.g., basil, swamp mallow), and seeds (*bījabīja*) (e.g., grains, pulses).[59] Indeed, all these types of plants (*bhūtagāma*) may have been considered to be living beings given that it was an offence to destroy them. In addition, plants were believed to be the abode for a myriad of living beings, from animals to deities, spirits, and other creatures. Apart from the common belief that living beings resided in trees, other plants such as medicinal herbs and grasses were also considered to be inhabited by deities and other creatures (e.g., M I 308). There are some indications, especially in the *Vinayapiṭaka*, that earth, water, and fire may have been regarded as living beings as in Jainism. For example, the monastic rules forbade digging the earth (Vin IV 32–33), splashing water (Vin IV 112), or kindling fire (Vin IV 115). However, the elements could have merely been viewed as the abodes of living beings that should not be harmed, or perhaps the Buddhists simply tried to follow the moral code expected of ascetics at the time.[60]

Unlike Jainism, in which animals and plants are categorized as a single group of sentient beings (*jīva*) (alongside other groups such as deities, humans, and hell beings), in Theravāda Buddhism animals and plants are discussed in different contexts and designated by different Pāli terms, namely *pāṇa* and *bhūtagāma*, respectively. However, the term *pāṇa* was also occasionally used in reference to plants. For example, in the *Vāseṭṭhasutta*, the Buddha explains the generic

59 Vin IV 34–35: *bhūtagāmo nāma, pañca bījajātāni, mūlabījaṃ khandhabījaṃ phaḷubījaṃ aggabījaṃ bījabījañ c' eva pañcamaṃ. mūlabījaṃ nāma haliddi siṅgiveraṃ vacaṃ vacatthaṃ ativisaṃ kaṭukarohiṇī usīraṃ bhaddamuttakaṃ yāni vā pan' aññāni pi atthi mūle jāyanti mūle sañjāyanti, etaṃ mūlabījaṃ nāma. khandhabījaṃ nāma assattho nigrodho pilakkho udumbaro kacchako kapiṭhano yāni vā pana aññāni pi atthi khandhe jāyanti khandhe sañjāyanti, etaṃ khandhabījaṃ nāma. phaḷubījaṃ nāma ucchu veḷu naḷo yānivā pan' aññāni pi atthi pabbe jāyanti pabbe sañjāyanti, etaṃ phaḷubījaṃ nāma. aggabījaṃ nāma ajjukaṃ phaṇijjakaṃ hiriveraṃ yāni vā pan' aññāni pi atthi agge jāyanti agge sañjāyanti, etaṃ aggabījaṃ nāma. bījabījaṃ nāma pubbaṇṇaṃ aparaṇṇaṃ. yāni vā pan' aññāni pi atthi bīje jāyanti bīje sañjāyanti, etaṃ bījabījaṃ nāma.* It should be noted that the Jains have a similar (but more complex) taxonomy.

60 For discussion on the sentience of the elements, see Schmithausen (1991, 46–57).

division of living beings (*pāṇa*) that includes plants, i.e., trees and grasses (*tiṇa-rukkha*) (Sn 117),[61] or in some instances, living beings (*pāṇa*) are divided into mobile (*tasa*) and stationary (*thāvara*) beings, most likely referring to animals and plants, respectively.[62]

Another term for plants, which is largely used in Jainism, is *ekindriya jīva*, meaning "living being with one sense faculty". There are only a few references to beings with one sense (*ekindriya*) in the Pāli canon, mainly occurring in the *Vinayapiṭaka* in relation to the prohibition of cutting trees. For example, in the story about a monk Channa who cut a tree, the Buddha explains that those who cut a tree "are depriving a one-faculty being of life" (Vin III 156; *ekindriyaṃ ... jīvaṃ viheṭhentīti*). The commentary on this passage specifies that this faculty is the sense of touch (Sp III 575: *ekindriyanti kāyindriyaṃ*). Since early Buddhism presents plants as beings with one sense (i.e., touch), this implies, if viewed within the Buddhist doctrinal framework, that they could (though not necessarily) have consciousness arising when the sense of touch is in contact with a tactile object; in this case, they could be considered, like in Jainism, as beings that only consume the results of *kamma* at the lower levels of life. As mentioned earlier, plants are also occasionally denoted by the term *pāṇa*, which is, from the ultimate standpoint (*paramattha*), equated with the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*) (As 97) that is one of the essential mental concomitants (*cetasika*) arising with every moment of consciousness. As explained in the *Abhidhamma* texts, *jīvitindriya* governs, vitalizes, and sustains the associated and co-nascent phenomena (*dhamma*) (As 123) and is twofold, involving the material faculty of life (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*) and the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*). From the Abhidhammic standpoint, plants as one-sense (*ekindriya*) livings beings could be viewed as having the faculty of life (*jīvitindriya*), very likely the material one (*rūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*), which sustains the plant's *kamma*-originated materiality (*kammasamuṭṭhānarūpa*), whereas it is uncertain whether they would also possess the non-material faculty of life (*arūpaṃ jīvitindriyam*). If plants were considered to only consume past *kamma* and not accumulate any new *kamma*, then according to Findly (2002, 259–62) this could indicate that they would eventually end up in a new and better rebirth, or conversely, that they could be positioned at the very end of the cycle of rebirths.[63]

61 Sn 117: *jātivibhaṅgaṃ pāṇānaṃ, aññamaññā ti jātiyo. Tiṇarukkhe pi jānātha, na cāpi paṭijānare, liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ tesaṃ, aññamaññā hi jātiyo*.

62 An overview of the different interpretations of mobile and stationary beings is given in Schmithausen (1991, 59–64).

63 Findly (2002, 261) mentions some East Asian Buddhists such as Chan-jan and Dōgen who positioned plants "as beings who have already reached enlightenment". However, there is no evidence for such an interpretation in early Buddhism.

In summary, the textual evidence indicates that the early Buddhists may have considered plants to be living beings, or at the very least, they proclaimed their respect for plants in conformity with other religious traditions of the time. This view is also shared by Schmithausen (1991) in his comprehensive study on the sentience of plants in Buddhism, mainly based on material from the *Vinayapiṭaka* and *Suttapiṭaka*. He cautiously suggests that in early Buddhism, plants may have been a kind of "borderline" case, since the texts are not sufficiently explicit in theoretically determining their status (1991, 69). As outlined by Schmithausen (1991, 83–104), in later Buddhism, from the mid-first millennium CE onwards, many texts such as the *Yogācārabhūmi*, *Tarkajvālā*, and Dharmakīrti's *Nyāyabindu* claim that plants are not living beings. Arguing against their sentience, the texts maintain that plants lack consciousness, do not produce *kamma*, and are thus without desire or aversion. However, as mentioned by Schmithausen (1991, 102), this view may also stem from a very pragmatic reason: if plants were regarded as living beings, then harvesting and eating them would amount to massive slaughter with the consequent accumulation of bad *kamma*.

From the conventional point of view, it was important for Buddhists to understand what was meant by the notion of living being (*satta, pāṇa, bhūta*), since Buddhist ethics is largely about cultivating wholesome mental states, which condition subsequent wholesome verbal and physical actions. At least in the Theravāda textual tradition, there is no justification for any form of violence, but instead showing kindness and compassion to all living beings (*satta*) is strongly emphasized. The moral guidelines on how to relate to other beings, which mostly refer to beings understood by the term *pāṇa* and include humans and animals (and to some extent, plants and other beings such as deities), were, as discussed earlier, quintessential. Abiding by the moral precepts was considered to reduce the suffering of living beings (*pāṇa*), and principally to create a solid foundation for progress on the Buddhist path to final liberation from suffering. Here the question may be raised as to how moral cultivation was viewed from the ultimate perspective, grounded in the notion of non-self (*anattā*).

Ultimate Perspective (*paramattha*)

As mentioned earlier, reality is presented in Buddhist teachings from two perspectives, namely, the conventional (*sammuti*) and the ultimate (*paramattha*). The *Suttapiṭaka* discusses the doctrine from one or the other perspective or sometimes combines both, whereas the *Abhidhamma* is largely concerned with the presentation of ultimate (*paramattha*) reality. Already in the earliest layers of the Buddhist tradition, the teachings were expressed using several models such as the model of the five aggregates

(*khandha*), six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), and the Abhidhammic *dhamma* theory. These different modes of analysis are interlinked and interrelated, each representing the world of experience in its totality but emphasizing different aspects or perspectives. They are all grounded in and permeated by the central notion of all Buddhist teachings, notably non-self (*anattā*). From the ultimate perspective, the notion of a living being as an entity is considered to be an illusion. For example, the *Visuddhimagga*, in the passage on re-becoming (*bhāva*) in dependent origination, states that ultimately there is no "living being (*satta*)" and no "sentient principle (*jīvo*)."[64] It is clinging to and erroneously identifying with any phenomena (material or non-material) experienced that gives rise to the idea of self or an "I", which is regarded as the very root of ethical problems and suffering (*dukkha*). The so-called "being" or "person" is comprised of complex processes involving multiple components and is presented in Buddhism in several ways.

One such presentation is the analytical model of the five aggregates (*khandha*), according to which clinging to the aggregates (*upādānakkhandha*) constructs an illusionary "person" or "self", which is actually a dynamic and complex structure comprised of the following five (impersonal) groups:

(1) Materiality (*rūpa*): materiality of the body and "external" material world.[65]
(2) Feeling (*vedanā*): it arises at every moment of cognition and may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.
(3) Perception (*saññā*): it recognizes, conceptualizes, and labels an experience.
(4) Mental factors (*saṅkhāra*): they determine how an object is cognized and responded to, e.g., with desire, fear, compassion, equanimity, etc.[66]
(5) Consciousness (*viññāṇa*): it arises at any of the six sense-doors and knows or cognizes the object of experience.[67]

64 Vism 553–554: *na satto, na jīvo*. It is also similarly used in Vism 238, 593, 627.

65 The term *rūpa* can refer to any kind of materiality (e.g., S II 252, IV 382), including the physical body. It is thus defined in the *Visuddhimagga*: "materiality comprises the four great elements and the materiality derived from clinging to the four great elements" (Vism 558: *Rūpan ti cattāri mahābhūtāni catunnañ ca mahābhūtānaṃ upādāya rūpaṃ*). The materiality aggregate (*rūpakkhandha*) consists of twenty-seven material categories or phenomena (*rūpadhamma*), which include the four great elements (*mahādhātu*) and twenty-three secondary or derived material categories (*upādāyarūpa*); for a comprehensive study of the Theravāda analysis of materiality, see Karunadasa (1967).

66 Feeling (*vedanā*) and perception (*saññā*) arise along with every moment of cognition and trigger mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) that are related to *kamma* (S III 87).

67 For discourses on the five aggregates, see the *Khandhavagga* S III.

Identifying with any of the five groups means that one considers the body and material objects, feelings, perceptions, memories, and so on as "mine" or "I". This constructed "self" gives rise to craving so that pleasant experiences may endure, and unpleasant ones may cease. Buddhism regards the identification with the aggregates, which is based on ignorance, as the very foundation of unethical responses—mental, verbal, or physical—and the consequent suffering. The textual sources reiterate that the nature of the five aggregates is impermanent (*anicca*), non-satisfactory (*dukkha*), and without an intrinsic self or identity (*anattā*). This understanding or insight is called wisdom (*paññā*), which is the foundation for the path to liberation (*nibbāna*).[68]

In the Buddhist analysis of cognition, every moment of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is the result of multiple causes and conditions, and in turn, it further conditions the arising of other phenomena. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not stable or lasting, it cannot be located, and it does not belong to the object that it cognizes. As soon as it arises, it ceases; therefore, there is no person or "I" that remains throughout one's life. Buddhist texts speak of six types of consciousness that correspond to the six senses through which humans (and other beings such as deities or large animals) perceive, feel, and cognize experiences. Apart from the five physical senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body), they also include the mind (*mano*), regarded as the sixth sense through which mental objects (*dhamma*) are cognized. The totality of experiences is therefore presented by this model of the six senses and their objects, which is also called six sense bases (*āyatana*).[69] The Buddha thus says in the *Sabbasutta* (S IV.15):

> And what, monks, is the all? The eye and visual forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odours, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena. This, monks, is called the all.[70]

In other words, all that exists is the sensorium, and experiences take place at the six sense bases (*āyatana*), where the sense organ, the sense object, and the corresponding consciousness come together (Table 1).

68 Impermanence (*anicca*) is listed in many *suttas* as the first of the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) of the five aggregates (*khandha*); for example, in the *Aniccavagga* of the *Khandhasaṃyutta* (S III 21–25), it is said that understanding the impermanence (*anicca*) of the five aggregates leads to weariness and dispassion toward them and (consequently) to liberation The *sutta* then continues with the same presentation for suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). See also S III 94; S III 104.

69 The six sense bases are discussed in the collection of *suttas* in the *Saḷāyatanasaṃyutta* (S IV 1–261).

70 S IV.15 *Kiñca bhikkhave sabbaṃ? Cakkhuṃ ceva rūpā ca. Sotañca saddā ca. Ghānañca gandhā. Jivhā rasā ca. Kāyo ca phoṭṭhabbā ca. Mano ca dhammā ca. Idam vuccati bhikkhave sabbaṃ.*

Table 1: Six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*)

Internal sense bases (*ajjhattikāni āyatanāni*)	**External sense bases (*bāhirāni āyatanāni*)**	**Corresponding consciousnesses (*viññāṇa*)**
eye (*cakkhu*)	visible form (*rūpa*)	eye-consciousness (*cakkhuviññāṇa*)
ear (*sota*)	sound (*saddā*)	ear-consciousness (*sotaviññāṇa*)
nose (*ghāna*)	smell (*gandhā*)	nose-consciousness (*ghānaviññāṇa*)
tongue (*jivhā*)	taste (*rasā*)	tongue-consciousness (*jivhāviññāṇa*)
body (*kāya*)	tangible object (*phoṭṭhabba*)	body-consciousness (*kāyaviññāṇa*)
mind (*mano*)	mental phenomena (*dhamma*)	mind-consciousness (*manoviññāṇa*)

Consciousness, which arises when a sense comes into contact with its corresponding object, can be erroneously interpreted by the mind through the construction of a subject, an "I", or a living being who is experiencing it. However, from the ultimate perspective, the cognitive processes, which are dependent on the senses, are empty of any self, as stated in the *Suññasutta* of *Saḷāyatanasaṃyutta* (S IV 54): "The world is empty because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self."[71] The *sutta* then continues that each of the six senses, their objects, and the corresponding consciousness are empty of self.[72]

Consciousness (*viññāṇa*), which depends on the senses and their corresponding objects, is an important link in the dynamic model of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which outlines the causal conditions and the interdependence of phenomena by means of the twelve links in the following way (SN II 1–133; D II 55–71):

> (1) ignorance (*avijjā*) (2) mental factors (*saṅkhāra*) (3) consciousness (*viññāṇa*) (4) mind and body (*nāmarūpa*) (5) senses (*saḷāyatana*) (6) contact (*phassa*) (7) feeling (*vedanā*) (8) craving (*taṅhā*) (9) clinging (*upādāna*) (10) becoming (*bhava*) (11) birth (*jāti*) (12) aging and death (*jarāmaraṇa*).[73]

71 S IV 54: *Yasmā ca kho Ānanda suññam attena vā attaniyena vā, tasmā suñño loko ti vuccati.attena vā attaniyena vā.*

72 S IV 54: *Cakkhuṃ kho Ānanda suññaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā. Rūpā suññā attena vā attaniyena vā. Cakkhuviññāṇaṃ suññam attena vā attaniyena vā. Cakkhusamphasso suñño attena vā attaniyena vā. …*

73 SN II 2: *Katamo ca bhikkhave paṭiccasamuppādo? Avijjāpaccayā bhikkhave saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññānaṃ, viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ,*

When consciousness (3) arises along with the contact (6) with an object, which takes place through one of the senses (5) within the mind-body (4), a feeling (7) automatically arises. If this contact, along with the associated feeling, generates a desire (8) to retain the pleasant feeling or to eliminate the unpleasant one due to past ignorance (1) and latent tendencies from the past (2), which are not observed and understood (to be impermanent and empty), this gives rise to clinging (9) to the object and the continuation of habitual states (10), involving the arising (11) and passing away (12) of the same responses, which are erroneously viewed as the self or person. As such, further ignorance (1) and habitual tendencies (2) are generated, perpetuating the entanglement in *saṃsāra* and the construction of a self or person based on ignorance, craving, and clinging, which have, inevitably, harmful ethical consequences.[74]

It is through consciousness (*viññāṇa*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), and perception (*saññā*) that thoughts (*vitakka*) arise, and mental proliferation (*papañca*) ensues, creating the erroneous idea of an "I" and from this the past, present, and future are constructed. This is described in the *Madhupiṇḍikasutta*, beginning with the example of the eye sense base:

> Eye-consciousness arises dependent on the eye and visible form. The meeting of the three is contact, and contact conditions feeling. What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates. With what one mentally proliferates as the source, through that a person is assailed by perceptions and notions in relation to past, future, and present visible forms that are cognized though the eye. (M I 111–112)[75]

From the Buddhist perspective, a "self" means clinging to the chosen objects of craving—from material objects to ideas and views—which perpetuates the illusion about the existence of a substantial entity or an "I" with the consequent creation of the "other". This (very significantly) prompts an unethical stance, and any ensuing actions result in unnecessary suffering. Buddhist practice, which includes

saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇha paccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ [soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā sambhavanti].

74 The brief explanation of dependent origination in this paragraph is summarized from Ditrich (2016, 22–23).

75 M I 111–112: *Cakkhuñc'āvuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññāṇaṃ, tiṇṇaṃ saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yaṃ vedeti taṃ sañjānāti, yaṃ sañjānāti taṃ vitakketi, yaṃ vitakketi taṃ papañceti, yaṃ papañceti tatonidānaṃ purisaṃ papañcasaññāsaṅkhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhuviññeyyesu rūpesu*.

moral training and meditation, is essentially training in how to relate to the sense objects without craving (*taṇhā*), which means not identifying with or considering the sense base (*āyatana*) and experiences arising there, as "mine" (*mama*), "I am" (*aham asmi*), or "myself" (*me attā*).[76]

The three interrelated models of Buddhist teachings (i.e., five aggregates, six sense bases, and dependent origination) are all intrinsically grounded on the notion of non-self (*anattā*) and already recorded in the earliest layers of the Buddhist tradition. The two ways of approaching reality (i.e., conventional and ultimate perspectives) are expounded in the teachings presented in the *Suttapiṭaka*, which includes, along with numerous narratives and images, passages in which the doctrinal concepts and terms are systematically expounded in a highly technical manner as, for example, in the *Saṅgītisutta* (D III 212-271). The method of technical explanation had become well established by the time of the *Abhidhamma* corpus, i.e., the collection of seven works in Pāli[77] belonging to the Theravāda Buddhist canon and usually dated to the third century BCE, although its foundations may stem from the early beginnings of Buddhism. The *Abhidhamma* systematizes the core components of Buddhist doctrine and articulates them in a very precise technical language by describing and analysing all the components involved in the lived experience, their interrelations, causes, and conditions. The whole Abhidhammic theory of reality is grounded in the theory of *dhammas* which are presented as the basic components of the entire phenomenal existence.

Dhammas are regarded as the components of the rapid flow of momentary mental and physical phenomena, which are interdependent, ever-changing, and without self or individuality. Lived experience is described at the fundamental level (*paramattha*) as an interaction between numerous interdependent *dhammas*, which are classified into four categories: 1) cognition (*citta*), 2) mental concomitants (*cetasika*), 3) materiality (*rūpa*), and 4) *nibbāna* (Bodhi 1993, 25). The first three categories are considered impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without intrinsic substance or self,[78] while *nibbāna* is the unconditioned state

76 As explained in the *Sāratthappakāsinī,* view(s) (*diṭṭhi*), craving (*taṇhā*), and conceit (*māna*) are linked to the three aspects of creating the self: "I am" (*aham asmi*) is associated with views (*diṭṭhi*), "mine" (*mama*) with craving (*taṇhā*), and "myself" (*me attā*) with conceit (*māna*) (Spk II 215: *ahaṅkāramamaṅkāramānānusayāti ahaṃkāradiṭṭhi ca mamaṃkārataṇhā ca mānānusayā ca*).

77 The works are the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*, *Puggalapaññatti*, *Kathāvatthu*, *Yamaka*, and *Paṭṭhāna* (As 21–23).

78 It is said that all phenomena (*dhamma*) are regarded to have no essence or living being (*nissattanijjīvata*) (As 38–39); the word *nissatta* means "unsubstantial, lacking an essence", while *nijjīvata* signifies "without sentient principle" (see DP; PED, *s.v.*).

that is empty, beyond time, change, and any afflictions. The notion of non-self is completely integrated into the Abhidhammic analysis of reality and intrinsically linked to Buddhist ethics.[79]

Buddhist Ethics and the Natural Environment

Ethics is deeply embedded in various presentations of Buddhist teachings but especially in the *dhamma* model expounded in the *Abhidhamma*, which is underpinned by the principle of *kusala*, usually translated as "good, wholesome, skillful" (PED, s.v.), and mostly used in reference to ethical mental states. The cultivation of moral virtues (*sīla*) is regarded as the foundation for the development of ethical mental states, which in turn are a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of wisdom (*paññā*), a pivotal mental factor (*cetasika*) on the way to liberation. Wisdom (*paññā*) is described as a direct insight into the impermanence (*anicca*), intrinsic non-satisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and emptiness (*anattā*) of all phenomena (*dhamma*) (Vism 436–438). When wisdom (*paññā*) arises, phenomena are observed without identifying with them; instead, they are experienced from the standpoint of emptiness or non-self (*anattā*) (S III 1–5; 16–25), which is regarded as the portal for a deep transformation of consciousness, ultimately leading to liberation from delusion (*moha*) and suffering (*dukkha*). The ideal Buddhist ethical stance is thus grounded in a visceral understanding of emptiness and the consequent non-identification with any phenomena experienced, which means that there is no "individual" or "self" and thus no "other" (Ditrich 2022, 358). The Buddhist path is not about extinguishing the self, since this would imply the existence of an individual self in the first place. When wisdom (*paññā*) is present, questions about the existence of the self or non-self simply do not arise. This is also highlighted in the *Kaccānagotasutta* (S II 17):

> For one who sees with right wisdom the origin of the world [of formations] as it is, there is no [notion of] non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees with right wisdom the cessation of the world [of formations] as it is, there is no [notion of] existence in regard to the world.[80]

79 For a study of the Theravāda *Abhidhamma,* see especially Karunadasa (2010) and Bodhi (1993); a brief overview is given in Ditrich (2022, 376–85).

80 S II 17: *Lokasamudayaṃ kho Kaccāyana yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke natthitā sā na hoti. Lokanirodhaṃ kho Kaccāyana yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya passato yā loke atthitā sā na hoti*.

According to this model, in such moments no ethical guidelines are needed or are indeed even relevant, since mental states are thoroughly wholesome (*kusala*) and are automatically, without choice, followed by non-harmful speech or actions. In such states, conflict or violence is not possible, since, according to Buddhist analysis, every act of violence is grounded in and accompanied by the unwholesome roots of delusion (*moha*) and hatred (*dosa*), which are incompatible with wisdom (*paññā*); for example, in the *Atthasālinī* commentary (As 102), it is said: "Life-taking has two roots, due to hatred and delusion."[81]

As mentioned earlier, for wisdom (*paññā*) to arise the cultivation of virtue (*sīla*) is essential, especially non-violence or non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) toward all living beings (*pāṇa*) in this world as well as generosity (*dāna*), and practice of a wide range of types of meditation such as mindfulness (*sati*), friendliness (*mettā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). It is important to note, however, that the primary goal of such practices in early Buddhism, similar to Jainism and other ascetic movements of the time, was not the moral improvement of society but rather their spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), with one of the crucial conditions on the path to freedom being moral development, which would, as a by-product, benefit society and the natural environment. Ancient Buddhist ethics as described in the texts represents ideals that were probably pursued only to some extent in actual social practices, depending on the circumstances of a particular time and place. Though Buddhist teachings and ethics could be viewed to a large extent as non-anthropocentric, humans are nevertheless allotted a special place among all beings, as to be born human is regarded as the most advantageous birth, and thus desirable for achieving liberation.

After presenting an overview of the understanding of the term "living being" and its necessary link to ethics in early Buddhism, with its particular focus on transcending the world rather than engaging in it, this article will now explore the relevance of these models for addressing the ethical challenges of today's world. In the last few decades, marked by the growing awareness of the impoverishment and destruction of natural habitats along with innumerable species, it has been increasingly investigated how different religions may inspire and prompt, through their spiritual and cultural influences, new and more ecologically friendly attitudes toward the natural environment. In this process, ancient religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism[82] have also responded to these environmental challenges, and in this process

81 As 102: *Mūlato ti pāṇātipāto dosamohavasena dvimūlako hoti*.

82 Jainism, for example, with its doctrine of total non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) toward and respect for a wide range of living beings, was originally practiced with the spiritual aim of liberation from *saṃsāra*. However, in the last few decades a considerable shift has emerged with a greater focus on environmental issues and participating in environmental movements, such as the protection of animal rights (Chapple 2002).

they have inevitably been reinterpreted to respond to contemporary questions and issues. In early Buddhism, the environmental issues of today's world did not exist, nor was there any apparent dichotomy of "man versus nature"; instead, human and non-human worlds were perceived as intrinsically interconnected. The relatively recent investigation of how Buddhist doctrine and ethics may contribute to changing our attitudes toward and views on the natural environment was facilitated by the earlier development of "modern Buddhism",[83] which started to evolve as early as the late nineteenth century, and gradually shifted its focus to increasing its engagement with (largely secular) society. In parallel, the ultimate aim of early Buddhism, namely, liberation from rebirth and entanglements in *saṃsāra*, more or less moved into the background, along with the sidelining of the associated renunciate models. With the growing awareness of the environmental crisis, especially in the last two decades, modern Buddhism has responded by building on and expanding its already well-established social engagement. Nevertheless, the currently emerging articulations of Buddhist environmental approaches draw from the fundamental teachings, including the four noble truths that position greed (*taṅhā*) as the root of suffering (*dukkha*), the three characteristics of all phenomena (i.e., impermanence, non-satisfactoriness, and non-self), and Buddhist virtue ethics, especially the moral precept to abstain from killing living beings.[84] The most prominent doctrinal models on which modern Buddhist environmental ethics is grounded are the formula of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) and the later Chinese Huayan School's teachings of interconnectedness, namely, that everything that exists is dependent on everything else that exists (i.e., the metaphor of Indra's net).[85] The latter model was particularly expounded by several modern Buddhist thinkers, such as Macy (1991) and Thich Nhat Hanh (2008), one of the earliest proponents of "engaged" Buddhism. Overall, the emerging outlines of a Buddhist environmental ethics have mainly focused on the cultivation of personal virtue and responsibility for the environment and much less on social ethics which, as Kaza (2018, 439–49) argues, is equally, if not more, important and would involve a range of social actions.

When exploring new approaches to ecological issues, the notion of non-self (*anattā*) or emptiness, which underpins Buddhist doctrine and is an essential component of Buddhist ethics, is less frequently examined and often sidelined. As shown above, the understanding of and insight into non-self (*anattā*) is the very foundation

83 The historical circumstances and main parameters involved in the making of modern Buddhism are presented and analysed in McMahan (2008).

84 For an overview of Buddhist environmental ethics, see Kaza (2018).

85 For a discussion on the relationship between the early Buddhist model of dependent origination and the later Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness, as developed in the Huayan School, see Anālayo (2021).

for a radically different perspective on the world: not only seeing the world as a web of interconnected living beings, but also deeply understanding that the world is ultimately empty of beings or individual entities. The model of dependent origination, as expounded in early Buddhism, can only be understood at the ultimate level from the position of non-self (*anattā*). This means that the flow of ever-changing experiences arising through the senses are viewed without an "I" as a reference point, without any identification with phenomena, which are instead seen as simply arising and passing away on their own. As discussed in this paper, the perspective of non-self (*anattā*) has radical ethical implications, as it is an ethical stance that excludes any form of unethical behaviour such as violence in thought, speech, and action. Early Buddhism thus propounds a very different standpoint from modern action-oriented approaches. With its ideal of wisdom and detachment grounded in non-self (*anattā*) and aiming to renounce the worldly life, it puts forward a stance that could be viewed, from the modern Western perspective, as (social) non-action. Yet this stance, which could be called "action in non-action, and non-action in action",[86] is considered the very basis of ethics, wisdom, and compassion, as it excludes harming anything and thus benefits all beings. By way of cultivating virtue and practicing meditation, wisdom and the insight into non-self can evolve, which will automatically prevent any unwholesome and harmful actions toward the living environment. Social engagement can undoubtedly bring about social and environmental benefits. However, from the early Buddhist perspective, if such engagements occur with an incomplete understanding, notably without wisdom (*paññā*) and the insight into non-self (*anattā*), they may also bring about harm, especially when the methods applied to social issues are grounded in the very same paradigms and discourses that caused the problems in the first place.

Conclusion

By way of recapitulation, this paper explored the (rather underexamined) notion of a living being in Theravāda Buddhism. It showed that several Pāli terms were used to express this notion, pointing to its complex conceptualization, with each term having different, though overlapping, semantic ranges. It was proposed that *satta* refers to beings in general, whereas *pāṇa* designates "living being" mostly in reference to humans and animals in an ethical context. The more rarely attested term *bhūtagama* specifically signifies plants, to which relatively scant attention is given in the Theravāda sources, thus indicating that plants may have been called living beings, mainly in conformity with other religious traditions of the time.

86 This is a frequently quoted phrase from the *Bhagavadgītā* IV.18.

Thereafter, the two perspectives of reality in Buddhism (i.e., conventional and ultimate) were outlined, with the concept of living being thus being situated therein. From the conventional perspective, there are living beings, and moral guidelines (*sīla*) are articulated in relation to them, but at the ultimate level, living beings do not exist as such, and instead, the lived experience is presented by different doctrinal models, which are all underpinned by the notion of non-self (*anattā*). It was then explored how, by way of wisdom (*paññā*), understood as a profound and non-conceptual insight into non-self (*anattā*), an ethical stance may emerge, which, by its very nature, excludes any possibility of engaging in harmful thoughts or actions.

Finally, this paper explored the potential contributions of early Buddhism (especially its understanding of living beings, non-self, and ethics) to the environmental challenges of today. It highlighted the essential role played by the Buddhist doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) as the very source and foundation of an ethical stance from which ethical actions develop. In conclusion, the notion of non-self or non-identity in early Buddhism may provide us with the opportunity to re-examine and rethink the dominant approaches currently used for confronting ethical issues, such as the environmental crisis, that impact our planet.

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