

# An Analytical Examination of Human Nature in Theravāda Buddhism\*

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## Abstract

The objectives of this research paper are 1) to study the concepts and theories of human nature, 2) to study human nature according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy, and 3) to analyze human nature according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy. This research is a qualitative research, which focuses on documentary research by studying the Tipitaka and related documents. The results showed that Human beings are high-minded. Know what is useful and what is not, have a rational thought. know the decision and know how to choose things that are beneficial to humans as beings that arise from two components: the part that is matter or form (body) and the part that is matter or name (Mind or spirit). The human body is made up of the basic four elements, namely earth, water, fire, and wind, through perception of the outside world through the senses. Each sense has its own unique emotion or object. Does the human mind or spirit really exist? By relying on the body as a natural habitat that has no shape. The mind is abstract in relation to the body. and is more important than the body. Human beings have a special nature of spirit or spirit. and has a high potential for self-improvement. It is an animal that has intelligence or reason to live. The nature of the human body has changed. It cannot remain in its original state forever (anicca) and is constantly subjected to internal changes (dukkha). Human beings are innately related to society. Because humans are animals with both high and low instincts. Waiting to be the driving force to be involved with society. Humans should show good behavior towards others and society.

**Keywords:** Analysis, Human Nature, Theravada Buddhist Philosophy

## Introduction

Nature has created the best and most suitable for the current environment through natural selection of living things. Any living thing that is able to adapt itself to the changing environment will be able to survive and pass on those outstanding characteristics to its offspring to continue the species and be able to maintain its species. Humans are creatures that are able to adapt very well. Therefore, humans have

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been able to maintain their species until today (Chamnong Thongprasert, 1990: 32). Thomas Hobbes said, "Human nature is barbaric, selfish, boastful, low, rude, self-centered, and competitive without limits. Their lifespan is short, but if they encounter hardship, they will reduce their selfishness and society will help them to be better." Williamson said similarly, "Everyone who is born is like an evil spirit." (Kritsana Saksri, 1987). However, John Locke had the opposite opinion, saying, "Humans are naturally good and not selfish. Their badness comes from their environment." In addition, sociologists believe that: The nature of human beings in general is to learn, to be curious, to see, to like to know about others. Some people know others better than themselves because they have never explored themselves. Because in general, people like to learn about others more than themselves and feel that they know others well. But if asked back, how much do they know themselves? That person often gets angry. Not because they look down on themselves. But under that consciousness is the lack of self-awareness, which makes them feel inferior. Humans are basically rational and can make decisions for themselves. Humans have dignity, value, goodness, trustworthiness and reliability. Humans are also intelligent in adapting and need freedom to develop themselves to progress (Jakkasin Pisesat, 1978). As for the tendency to develop themselves completely, Rogers believes that the nature of human beings has an innate tendency to develop all of their abilities and potentials in a way that will help the organs to remain or to be better by adapting, refining, developing, relying on themselves and being themselves.

According to Theravada Buddhist philosophy, people often think that we have a self and a person, something that is real and certain. In fact, the life that we see is impermanent, suffering, and not-self, which means it is not permanent. We are born as a person and then decay and disappear. It is suffering and cannot remain in the same state and is not a real self. The real self is permanent and exists in the same way. But what we are is like a bamboo basket that a weaver made of nothing and is not anything until it becomes a basket shape for use. But when the bamboo pegs are pulled out piece by piece, in the end there is no basket left, only a pile of bamboo pegs. Therefore, what we think we are this person or that person or have a self is our own assumption by our own viewpoint, which is believing, clinging, and taking that assumption seriously until we think it is something certain, so we have upadana, which is clinging with infatuation. If someone does something to us, we will feel hurt because we think that it affects us. If it is something that we like or is consistent with our image, we will be happy, joyful, and joyful. But on the contrary, we will feel sorry and sad. We have gained knowledge and understanding about humans in this aspect from the humanities. It makes us think that what we can see and touch is actually not genuine, but the genuine thing we cannot see, cannot touch, but we know, which appears in the form of thoughts, dreams, and imagination (Phra Thammakosacharn (Prayoon Thammajitto), 1995). Therefore, it can be said that the philosophy and beliefs about humans of Greek philosophers and Western religions and Buddhist philosophy are consistent in that respect.

The nature of human life is that it is an animal that must be trained and can be trained. In order for humans to have a good life, they must study, train, and develop themselves to be better in the system of life, which consists of behavior, mind, and intelligence. When trained and developed, education makes life better. But if we do not learn and train, being a human being will not be able to live well and correctly. This is

because humans living by instinct alone is not enough. (Phra Dhamma Pitaka (P.A. Payutto), 1997) The word “nature” has many meanings, depending on the perspective of each person. In Buddhist philosophy, the meaning of nature means the birth by nature (dharma = something pure and ultimate truth, jati = birth). Since the word dharma cannot be explained in a way that is acceptable, it is defined as something that already exists, no one created it, timeless, does not decay, and is immortal.

Therefore, the researcher believes that in order to understand the nature of human beings, which is the existence and the impermanence, it will help to know and understand humans in various aspects more, which will lead to learning human behavior and expression to use in building good relationships in the future. It will also help humans understand each other without causing conflicts.

## Objective

1. To study the concept and theory of human nature
2. To study the nature of human according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy
3. To analyze the nature of human according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy

## Literature review

The concept of human nature has been a subject of extensive philosophical, psychological, and religious discourse. Within Theravāda Buddhism, human nature is intricately linked to the doctrines of *anattā* (non-self), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anicca* (impermanence), forming a unique perspective distinct from Western essentialist views. This literature review surveys canonical texts, classical commentaries, and modern academic interpretations to elucidate the Theravādin understanding of human nature.

### 1. Canonical Foundations in Theravāda Buddhism

Theravāda Buddhism derives its teachings primarily from the Pāli Canon, which includes the *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Sutta Pitaka*, and *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. The *Sutta Pitaka*, especially, offers insights into human nature through discourses attributed to the Buddha. One of the most significant teachings is the doctrine of *anattā*, which denies the existence of a permanent self. In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59), the Buddha explains that the five aggregates (*khandhas*)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are impermanent and non-self, forming the empirical basis of human existence (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995).

Furthermore, the *Dhammapada* underscores the potential for human transformation through ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. Verses such as Dhammapada 165 (“By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled”) suggest an internal locus of agency that contrasts with deterministic views of human nature.

### 2. The Role of the Khandhas and Dependent Origination

The *khandha* doctrine and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) are central in understanding human behavior and existential conditions. Scholars like Gethin (1998) assert that human beings are seen as dynamic processes rather than static entities. The cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) is sustained by ignorance (*avijjā*) and craving (*taṇhā*), indicating that suffering is not inherent but conditioned.

Warder (2000) emphasizes that this framework portrays human beings as capable of liberation through understanding the causal interdependence of phenomena.

Thus, human nature is not fixed but transformable, with the potential for enlightenment (*nibbāna*) through insight and moral cultivation.

### 3. Ethical Potential and Moral Psychology

Theravāda ethics assumes a fundamental moral neutrality in human nature, rejecting notions of inherent sin or purity. As Keown (2005) notes, the *Pāli Canon* views individuals as morally responsible agents capable of cultivating the ten perfections (*pāramī*) such as generosity, morality, and wisdom. This capacity reflects a form of moral optimism that is grounded in karmic volition (*cetanā*) (Harvey, 2013). Additionally, the concept of *bhāvanā* (mental development) shows that human nature is plastic and trainable. Meditation practices like *samatha* (calm abiding) and *vipassanā* (insight) enable practitioners to purify the mind, illustrating a developmental view of human nature (Bodhi, 2000).

### 4. Comparative Interpretations and Contemporary Reflections

Comparative studies often highlight the contrast between Buddhist and Western philosophical notions of human nature. While Western traditions (e.g., Aristotelian or Cartesian) often posit a fixed essence or soul, Theravāda Buddhism denies such permanence, positing a processual identity instead (Collins, 1982). This divergence is crucial in understanding ethical and psychological orientations in different cultures. Contemporary scholars like Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2010) argue that Buddhism's approach to human nature is pragmatic rather than metaphysical. It focuses on the conditions that lead to suffering and the methods to overcome it, suggesting that human potential is defined by the capacity to transform ignorance into wisdom.

### Conclusion of Literature Review

The Theravādin understanding of human nature reflects a non-essentialist, ethical, and process-oriented paradigm. Rooted in the doctrines of *anattā*, *dukkha*, and *paṭiccasamuppāda*, human beings are seen as capable of transformation through mindful practice and moral development. This dynamic and non-dogmatic view has profound implications for Buddhist ethics, education, and psychological well-being.

### Methodology

This research is a qualitative research that focuses on documentary research. It can be organized as follows:

#### Data collection stage

1. Study and research on the nature of man in Theravada Buddhist philosophy
2. Survey documents and research that experts have written and researched on the nature of man in Theravada Buddhist philosophy

#### Data collection stage

1. Collect data from primary sources, namely, the Thai-language Pitaka, Mahamakut Buddhist edition, printed on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Rattanakosin B.E. 2525
2. Collect data from secondary sources from commentaries, commentaries, commentaries, special articles, books, journals, articles, and related theses, and arrange them in order of relevance, importance, reasons, and sources to distinguish
3. Collect data from documents and research related to the concept of the nature of man in Theravada Buddhist philosophy

### **Data Analysis Stage**

1. Study and analyze data on the meaning, types, and nature of human beings in general perspectives and in Theravada Buddhist philosophy according to the set objectives.

2. Study and analyze the content of various issues and according to the set objectives regarding the nature of human beings in Theravada Buddhist philosophy. Data Presentation Stage in the form of Descriptive Analysis.

### **Results**

1. The concept and theory of human nature found that humans are people with high minds, know what is beneficial and what is not beneficial, have feelings and thoughts, are the center of matter and mind, know how to think rationally, know how to make decisions and know how to choose what is beneficial. The human body is a component of life in terms of matter, composed of 4 elements, with 5 senses or channels of perception: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. The human body is a tool of the spirit, a cave where the spirit lives. The spirit is the nature that controls and manages behind the scenes the movement of the body. Without the spirit, the body cannot do anything. The status of humans in the world that humans will have sins because there are causes of sins and the results of sins that occur to humans. But if humans do not create evil, humans will only have good deeds that occur to themselves. The humanity will be higher, which is called "a complete human being".

Monism: Human beings have body and mind integrated into one unity or are one and the same, which has 2 sub-concepts: mind and body are the same thing but have 2 aspects (Double Aspect Theory). Human life is therefore expressed in 2 ways: the mental aspect and the physical aspect. This concept appears in the works of philosophers of the 2nd line, explaining that mind and body are one but have 2 mental processes and physical processes. There are thinkers who propose this concept.

The dualist group explained that humans are composed of a body and a mind that are separate from each other. This group has 3 separate ideas: the mind and body are 2 things that have an influence on each other (Interaction). The mind has an influence on the body, for example, when the mind sets an intention, it causes the body to act as the mind thinks. In the same way, the body also has an influence on the mind, for example, when the body lacks water, the mind will feel thirsty and want to drink water. The second group explains that the mind and body are 2 different things that have no influence on each other. The activities of the mind and body are parallel lines that each side proceeds according to its function and mechanism (Function). The body has no influence on the mind and the mind has no influence on the body. The third group explains that the mind and body are 2 different things. Although the mind has no influence on the body, the body has an influence on the mind (Epiphenomenalism). The body is like a person and the mind is like a shadow. When the person moves, the shadow moves with it. Therefore, the mind is a by-product of the physical process of human conception. In modern biology, there has been great progress in the care, advice, assistance, and problem solving for all mankind. To preserve the human race, whether it is the problem of infertility or the control of human births, in order to be effective and produce quality humans for the world.

2. Human nature according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy finds that human nature is a condition that arises by itself, exists by itself, and exists by itself according

to causes and conditions. Within human life is human nature. Human nature according to the viewpoint of contemporary philosophers means the natural law that humans must follow, must perform duties accordingly, and will receive results accordingly. And the state is being a person who must be trained and can be trained.

Humans born into this world have 3 special characteristics: 1) Although they are different in terms of external appearance, internal qualities, life status, economic status, fame, etc., one thing that all humans have in common and equal is “being human.” 2) Because of being human, Theravada Buddhist philosophy believes that humans have the opportunity to develop themselves even though it may take different amounts of time. 3) Being human is considered a great fortune because it will be the foundation for advancing to other good things in life. The 3 special characteristics mentioned above are the natural value of human life, but it does not end there. Humans will have a high value in life according to the true meaning of the word “human” by practicing good deeds (good karma) or having virtue. Having virtue or doing good deeds will be the criteria for measuring between humans whether their life is of high value or low value, and whose life is no different from that of an animal in general. Even if a human lives for only one day, if they live with virtue or do only good deeds, it is considered more valuable than living for a hundred years without doing any good deeds. Humans who live their lives on this earth by creating a lot of virtue and karma are considered wise. It is like a clever garland maker who uses piles of flowers to make a beautiful garland.

Theravada Buddhist philosophy believes that humans by nature have the potential: 1) The ability to train and develop oneself to be the most excellent is hidden. 2) The latent nature that occurs naturally in humans is “habits” and nature is “faith”. It is nature that is suitable for training and developing the body and morality. When the body and morality are developed, it will affect the training and development of the mind and wisdom in sequence. When training and developing until achieving the qualities of being a person with a developed body, morality, mind and wisdom, only then can one be called the most excellent among humans. 3) Theravada Buddhist philosophy places great importance on human life because it is difficult to achieve human life. Human life is an important variable for world peace. It can be said that whether the world has war or peace depends on humans. In the ethical teachings, they teach not to kill other humans (including other animals) but to have compassion for each other instead. And by nature, no human being wants others to destroy their lives. Therefore, humans should not think of destroying each other’s lives or even their own lives. 4) Being born as a human being is considered the value of human life by nature and is considered a great fortune. But the value of human life will increase. It will be more valuable, meaningful and excellent if one has virtue and tries to do good deeds or virtuous deeds. Because a person who only does good deeds, even if he lives only one day, is more excellent than a person who lives a hundred years but does nothing good. And doing only good deeds not only benefits oneself, but also benefits other people and animals.

3. Analysis of human nature according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy found that all nature in the form aggregates of humans according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy arose because they depended on each other and were each other's causes and conditions. The nature of the body as mentioned above is that the human body is called the form aggregate and appears because the four great elements come together

and are subject to the laws of impermanence, suffering and non-self. The nature of this body can be divided into two main parts:

1) The original nature or basic nature (Original nature) is the nature that is the entire physical component of the body, which arises from the combination of the four great elements, supported and provided by karma.

2) The part that is a natural dependency (Derivative nature) which is the nature that depends on the 4 great elements to arise and operate naturally. This part of nature arises because it depends on the original nature. According to the Pali, the 24 characteristics and functions of the body are included in this natural dependency. The nature of the mind can be divided into 3 parts: the part that is universal for humans in general, the part for ordinary humans, and the part for noble humans. The nature of the mind that is universal for humans in general can be divided into 4 groups: 1) the group that is a feeling (vedana), 2) the group that is a memory (saññā), 3) the group that is a natural condition that conditions the mind (sankhara), and 4) the group that functions to know the emotions that come into contact through the various doors (viññā). The nature of the mind of ordinary humans has the following characteristics: 1) formless, with a body as a basis; 2) cannot be known or seen by the 5 senses, but can be known or seen by wisdom or thinking; 3) The behavior of the mind is an abstract matter, determined and named according to the factors that this abstraction affects; 4) quickly merges with the desired emotions. Regardless of whether the emotion is wholesome or unwholesome, good or bad, for this reason, Theravada Buddhist philosophy must teach the principle of training the mind to unite with the emotion that is wholesome or only good, for the happiness of human life itself. 5) The human mind is an abstract concept that can be trained to be good. 6) The human mind is naturally under the power of the three characteristics: impermanence, suffering, and non-self, arising, existing, ceasing, and being a current. 7) It changes quickly and is difficult to see. As for the nature of the mind of an Ariya person, in addition to being under the law of the three characteristics, normally the mind of an Ariya person will be in accordance with the strength that has been trained. That is, the mind of a Sotapanna still has lust, anger, and delusion, but can control it to some extent and can abandon three fetters: sakkayaditthi, vicikiccha, and silabbataparamasa. The mind of a Sakadagami can abandon three fetters as well, but can reduce the intensity of lust, anger, and delusion more than a Sotapanna. The mind of an Anagami can abandon 2 more fetters: Kama-raga and Atighga, making a total of 5 fetters. They can alleviate lust, anger, and delusion more than a Sakadagami, but still need to practice and polish further. The mind of an Arahant can abandon all fetters. It is a mind that is completely clean and pure, and does not need to practice and polish further.

## Discussion

The results of this analytical examination present a comprehensive comparison between general philosophical understandings of human nature and the more specific interpretations rooted in Theravāda Buddhist thought. These interpretations illustrate both convergences and distinct departures in defining what constitutes “human nature,” human potential, and the implications for moral and spiritual development.

### 1. Human Nature in General Philosophical Thought

General philosophical conceptions depict humans as rational beings with a dualistic or monistic nature, integrating body and mind in different configurations. The

monist perspective, such as the **Double Aspect Theory** (Spinoza, 1677), proposes that mind and body are two aspects of a single substance, experienced differently but essentially unified. This view underscores a holistic understanding of human existence, where physical and mental processes are inseparable components of human expression (Feinberg & Shafer-Landau, 2013).

In contrast, the dualist position, represented by thinkers like **René Descartes (1641)**, insists on a clear distinction between the mental (*res cogitans*) and the physical (*res extensa*). Dualism has evolved into three dominant strands: **interactionism**, where the mind and body influence one another; **parallelism**, where they function independently; and **epiphenomenalism**, where the body affects the mind but not vice versa (Robinson, 2020).

These concepts affirm that humans possess faculties of reason, ethical awareness, and choice, capable of discerning good from evil. Yet, they also highlight the material limitations of the human body, describing it as a vessel or "cave" for the spirit, emphasizing the dependency of bodily actions on inner consciousness or volition (MacIntyre, 1999).

## 2. Human Nature in Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy

In Theravāda Buddhism, human nature is profoundly rooted in dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and the three marks of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). Human beings are viewed as an assemblage of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—which together explain the human experience (Bodhi, 2005).

Theravāda thought underscores the potential for transformation inherent in human existence. Despite physical and social differences, all humans share the essential capacity for moral development and spiritual liberation (Rahula, 1974). This potential is realized through practices aimed at cultivating *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). Through disciplined training, individuals can progress from the ordinary human state to that of a noble person (*Ariya*), culminating in the state of an *Arahant*, a being free from all defilements.

Importantly, the Buddhist framework considers being born human as a rare opportunity (*manussatta-dullabha*) with inherent value and responsibility. Unlike the static nature in some philosophical traditions, Theravāda Buddhism stresses human impermanence and changeability—each person is a dynamic process subject to karmic influences and capable of ethical evolution (Harvey, 2013).

## 3. Comparative Analysis and Integration

Both traditions agree that human beings have unique faculties—reason in the philosophical sense and mindfulness in the Buddhist sense. Yet they diverge in their metaphysical underpinnings. While Western dualists emphasize a stable self or soul (often immaterial), Theravāda Buddhism deconstructs the self into non-substantial components, negating the existence of an eternal soul (Collins, 1982).

Moreover, while Western philosophy often centers on moral agency and rational autonomy, Theravāda Buddhism integrates ethical conduct with existential insight, arguing that moral purity and wisdom are both required for true liberation.

In essence, the philosophical notion of becoming a “complete human being” through rational ethics finds a parallel in Theravāda Buddhism's path to becoming “the most excellent among humans” through the cultivation of virtue and wisdom. Both



uphold a vision of human excellence, though the Buddhist path is intrinsically soteriological—aimed at liberation from suffering, not merely moral perfection.

### Conclusion

The study affirms that both philosophical and Theravādin frameworks provide deep insights into the nature of human existence. While differing in method and metaphysics, both acknowledge human capacity for ethical reflection and transformation. Theravāda Buddhism, however, offers a comprehensive, practice-oriented path that begins with recognizing human potential and culminates in the transcendence of worldly suffering.

### New knowledge



Figure 1 New knowledge, 2024

The diagram titled "Comparative Analysis of Human Nature Perspectives" presents a four-part framework comparing different conceptions of human nature, particularly highlighting contrasts and parallels between philosophical and Theravāda Buddhist views.

#### 1. Integrated Mind-Body (Monistic Perspective)

- **Concept:** This quadrant represents the monistic view, which holds that the mind and body are not separate entities but are one unified existence.
- **Interpretation:** This aligns with some philosophical traditions (e.g., Spinoza's Double Aspect Theory), and also resonates with aspects of Theravāda Buddhism where mental and physical phenomena (nāma-rūpa) are seen as co-arising and interdependent.

- **Core Idea:** Enlightenment and human experience occur within a unified framework of existence.

## 2. Ariya Person (Enlightened Being)

- **Concept:** The Ariya person embodies the ideal in Theravāda Buddhism—a noble person who has trained their mind to overcome defilements and control emotional impulses.
- **Interpretation:** Although rooted in a dualistic body-mind reality, the Ariya person transcends this by mastering emotions through insight and discipline.
- **Core Idea:** Dualistic enlightenment through emotional regulation and ethical practice.

## 3. Ordinary Human with Potential

- **Concept:** Represents the common human condition with latent capacity for moral and spiritual development.
- **Interpretation:** This is consistent with Theravāda teachings that all humans, regardless of birth or status, have **the potential for self-training** and progress toward liberation (nibbāna).
- **Core Idea:** Humans are monistic in essence and trainable—growth and virtue are possible through effort.

## 4. Dualistic Mind–Body Conflict

- **Concept:** Illustrates the dualist philosophical view, where the mind and body are separate and often in tension or conflict.
- **Interpretation:** This includes interactionist dualism (e.g., Descartes), where mental intentions can influence the body, and vice versa. It contrasts with Buddhist views that emphasize non-self (anattā) and interdependent processes rather than opposing substances.
- **Core Idea:** The conflictual relationship between mind and body reflects inner struggle and fragmentation.

This analysis is valuable in comparative philosophy, religious studies, and human development theories, offering a deeper lens into how different traditions conceive, value, and transform human nature.

## Recommendation

1. Should research on the development of human quality of life with the principles of Tri-sikkha according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy.
2. Should research on human conduct according to the principles of Right Livelihood according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy.
3. Should research on the development of human minds with Right View in the Noble Eightfold Path according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy.
4. Should research on the development of human behavior with loving-kindness according to Theravada Buddhist philosophy.

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