In Defense of Dispositional Desires: Why a Buddhist Should Treat Desires as Dispositions

0. Introduction

This paper is about a paradox. To achieve liberation on a Buddhist view, it helps to know what one desires. However, Siderits (2007) argues that there are no “in the closet” desires—desires we are unaware of. His aim in this passage is to argue that the self—an unchanging and eternal entity that makes you the person you are—is not equivalent with any of the elements that compose a person (skandhas), including her desires. If a desire could endure for a long time, say, a person’s entire life, then the self might be equivalent to one’s lifelong desire. Siderits argues that we should not posit desires that exist when we are unaware of them. Therefore no desire can serve as the basis for the self. I will not challenge Siderits’ argument against any candidate for the enduring self here, but his objection to dispositional desires. I will argue that there is not a simple dichotomy between a desire’s being observed and its being unobserved. Instead we have different degrees of awareness of our desires, and this counts in favor of treating them not as occurrent states only but as dispositional states with various occurrent manifestations.

In the first section of this paper, I will argue that a Buddhist has a soteriological reason—a reason connected with the aim of attaining nirvana—to believe that desires can exist when we’re not aware of them. In the second section, I will examine Siderits’ argument in detail. I will argue that it rests on two assumptions: any mental state I am

1 Siderits uses the terms ‘desire’ and ‘volition’ interchangeably in this passage. I take these terms to refer to the skandha (or component of a person) of mental formations (samskāra). Samskāra is sometimes translated ‘formations’ and refers to mental states broadly, excluding sensations, and other times is translated ‘volitional formations,’ referring to mental states that lead up to actions (Bodhi 2001, 44-5). I suspect Siderits’ alternating use of ‘desire’ and ‘volition’ reflects these two ways of translating samskāra.
aware of is observable, and any mental state I am not aware of is unobservable. We ought to resist the second assumption: there are mental states we are not aware of that are not thereby unobservable. We can become aware of past mental states through their present effects on us. For example, through disappointment someone might become aware of desires she did not know she had.

These observations count in favor of treating desires not as brief, occurrent states, but as dispositional states. In the final section I suggest a way for the Buddhist to accommodate this view: if we treat types of mental state (like desires) as conceptual constructions, we need not assume that any desires exist ultimately. They are, however, useful fictions insofar as knowing one’s desires can help one to stop craving their objects—an important step in becoming released from the cycle of samsara.

1. Desire and Cessation of Suffering

The Buddha teaches that life is full of suffering (dukkha) caused by desire (tanha — craving, or unwholesome desire). Dukkha is sometimes translated as ‘incapable of satisfying.’ To free oneself from suffering one is supposed to rid oneself of craving. The Buddha admonishes his disciples:

“And what is the origin of suffering? It is craving, which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the origin of suffering.
“And what is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving. This is called the cessation of suffering” (Sammaditthi Sutta, Middle Length Discourses, 135).

To rid oneself of unwholesome desires, it helps to know which unwholesome desires one is prone to having. Following the path of the Buddha seems to require a certain amount of self-knowledge. Craving leads to clinging, or attachment, which in turn leads to suffering. Suppose I crave coffee. If I am ever without my coffee for a long enough period of time, I suffer. If I know my desire for coffee is unhealthy in this way, I can work to remove it. I might attempt to wean myself off of it, or to distract myself when I’m craving it. Removing the attachments that result in suffering will help me to achieve the cessation of suffering.

My desires can result in suffering even if I do not know I have them. Suppose Zara meets a new friend on a trip but doesn’t get to say goodbye. Then after she leaves, she realizes that she very much wanted to say goodbye, but she wasn’t aware of her desire at the time. She feels deeply disappointed. When she thinks about her experience later, she can recognize that she did indeed want to say goodbye to her friend: she was thinking about it, but she got distracted. She was focused on other things—the logistics of packing and making her plane. The best explanation of Zara’s disappointment in this case is that she had a desire of which she was unaware.

Consider another case: Harriet is choosing two options for dinner. She chooses ceviche thinking it will be like sashimi. She orders it and is disappointed. Her disappointment reveals that she wanted something different all along—she wanted
sashimi; but she didn’t know that’s what she wanted. She thought she wanted ceviche and was wrong. Disappointment often reveals to us desires we did not know we had. Zara did not know she wanted to say goodbye to her friend, and Harriet did not know that sashimi was what she wanted. If we are to relinquish the desires that cause us suffering, we will often need to become aware of desires we aren’t fully aware of (as in Zara’s case), or whose contents we have wrong in some respect (as in Harriet’s). In the next section I reconstruct Siderits’ argument against unobserved desires.

2. The Argument against Unobserved Desires

Siderits (2007) argues that we ought not posit desires that endure when we are not aware of them. Suppose I find myself repeatedly wanting to escape dangerous situations—heavy things falling on me, car accidents, tornadoes, etc. Siderits argues that this is not one desire, but a pattern of short-lived desires:

This is shown by the fact that I am only aware of a desire to escape danger when I perceive a threatening situation. The desire thus originates in dependence on a specific sense-object contact event, and ceases to exist when that event ceases (43).

Call this the Momentary Theory of Desires. He contrasts this view with what he calls the In the Closet theory of desires. On this view, I have one enduring wish to escape danger than manifests itself in different situations: perceiving a dangerous situation brings my desire into “the part of my mind that is illuminated by consciousness, but it persists even when I am unaware of it” (43).
The In the Closet theory of desires treats desires as dispositional states. I can have a disposition to want coffee, or to escape danger, without wanting it all the time. Further, my desiring coffee (for example) might consist in my being disposed to do, think, or feel various things: to order coffee when given the opportunity, to have several every day, to feel awful when I don’t get coffee, to think about coffee and how good it smells, to relish its taste, and so on. On the Momentary theory, each of these states is unique and stands alone. What they have in common is perhaps that they are brought to consciousness through my encountering coffee or coffee-related situations.

Siderits’ primary argument for the Momentary Theory is what I will call the Argument from the Principle of Lightness. The Principle of Lightness, which Siderits derives from Vasubandhu, states that we should posit as few unobservable entities as possible (44). It is ‘lighter’ to say that I have momentary desires to escape danger each time I become aware of something dangerous, and that there is no underlying state that explains why I find myself wanting to escape danger over and over again. Siderits offers a second, compressed, argument against the In the Closet Theory in a footnote: the Sautrantikas hold that karmic seeds cease to exert influence during states of meditative cessation. I focus here exclusively on the Argument from the Principle of Lightness. Is it truly “lighter” to avoid positing dispositional desires?

We can reconstruct the Argument from the Principle of Lightness as follows:

1. If I am aware of a mental state, it is observable.

2. If I am unaware of mental state, it is unobservable.

3. Dispositional mental states, such as a general desire for coffee or to escape danger, are states we are unaware of at least some of the time.
4. Dispositional mental states are unobservable whenever we are not aware of them.

5. (Principle of Lightness): If a state is unobservable we should not hold that it exists.

6. We should not hold that dispositional desires exist.

This argument proceeds from the assumptions that mental states we are unaware of are unobservable, whereas mental states we are aware of are observable. If we ought not posit unobservable entities, then we should not posit that any mental states we are unaware of exist.

What does it mean for a mental state to be observable? Something is observable if it is capable of being observed. An observable elephant is one with qualities the senses—or technically aided senses—can detect, if in suitable contact with the elephant. Suppose that a mental state is observable if it has qualities the mind can detect. Let’s assume that being aware of a mental state counts as observing or detecting it. Therefore any mental state one is aware of is observed, and therefore observable. Premise 1, then, seems reasonable enough.

I will challenge Premise 2: it is not the case that any mental state I am not aware of is unobservable. First, one can become aware of a past desire one did not notice at the time through its later effects, including feelings of disappointment and memories of the desire. Second, even if one is aware of having a desire in some respect, one might not be aware that it is a desire, or what it is a desire for. There is no one occurrent mental state that is a desire: rather, a desire is a complex pattern of occurrent states.
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3. Unobserved Does Not Entail Unobservable

For Siderits’ argument to work, it must be true that any mental state I am unaware of (any unobserved mental state) is unobservable. This claim is less plausible than Premise 1 since a mental state might well be observable despite not being observed at the time. First, recall Zara and Harriet from Section 1 of this paper. Each becomes aware of a desire she was not previously aware of through feeling disappointed. It is right to say Zara wanted to say goodbye to her colleague before it is too late because she recognizes signs of that desire in her memories, although she did not notice them at the time. Zara’s earlier desire was unobserved by her at the time, although she became aware of it later. This is a case of a desire being observed at a later time through its effects.

Likewise it is right to say Harriet wanted sashimi at the earlier time because she was aware of wanting something that tastes like sashimi, which she wrongly thought ceviche would be. Harriet was aware at the earlier time that she wanted something like sashimi, but she was not aware that ceviche was not that. Harriet, then, was aware that she had a certain desire, but was wrong about a belief on which her desire was based: that ceviche is like sashimi. Harriet was unaware both that what she wanted was really sashimi and that her desire for ceviche was based on a false belief. This is a case of some aspect of a desire not being observed at the present but being observed later.

We can recognize desires through their effects—in Zara’s and Harriet’s cases, disappointment. But desires can have other effects aside from disappointment. I might be aware of a thought passing through my mind about coffee but not realize that it means I want coffee. I might fail to see that some mental state I have indicates that I have another one. Am I aware of my desire for coffee when I fail to realize what my passing thought indicates? It’s not clear how to answer this question. In one sense, I am aware of my
desire, since my thought is an indication of it; but in another sense, all I am aware of is a thought whose import I ignore—and find myself with a headache as a consequence.

This latter case suggests that desires are not occurrent mental states at all, but dispositional states that manifest in various kinds of occurrent states. Ryle (1949/2009) argues that many states we take to be occurrent and conscious are in fact dispositional states with multifarious occurrent manifestations. Ryle claims that a range of conative states—“liking and disliking, joy and grief, desire and aversion”—are “not ‘internal’ episodes which their owner witnesses, but his associates do not witness. They are not episodes and so are not the sorts of things which can be witnessed or unwitnessed” (94). Ryle’s evidence for this claim is largely phenomenological: if we look closely at the experiences we have when we would say of ourselves (or others would say of us) that we are wanting x or thinking about y, we will see that there isn’t a single tell-tale conscious state in each case, but instead a pattern of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

I believe desires are dispositional in Ryle’s sense. To want something is not always to have a conscious state of a particular kind. Instead I can want something without realizing it, only to be disappointed later. My later disappointment is a manifestation of my desire, as is my thought about coffee that I don’t realize I’m having because I want coffee. My wanting to talk to someone at a conference need not manifest in an occurrent thought with the content, “I want to talk to x.” Instead, I might just find myself looking around for x, looking over the shoulder of the person I am talking to, worrying about whether x might leave, and so on. It seems right to say I wanted to talk to x, even if I had no conscious thought to indicate that I did.
4. How To Make Sense of Dispositions

So far I have argued for the following claims: (1) we can have desires we are completely unaware of, only to become aware of them later, and (2) we can have desires but fail to realize they are desires, because desires are best understood as dispositional rather than occurrent states. In closing, I will suggest two ways the Buddhist can accommodate the view that desires are dispositions. Desires, if I am right, are much more than occurrent mental states; nor is there any one occurrent mental state that is desire. There are two ways we might make sense of dispositional states consistent with Buddhist philosophy. First, we can regard mental state types (‘desire,’ ‘thought,’ and so on) as conceptual fictions—useful ways of thinking about things, but not indicative of ultimate reality. Second, we might regard dispositions as karmic seeds in the alaya-vijñana, or storehouse consciousness.

A Buddhist could say that my desire exists only fictionally, as a discontinuous pattern in my conscious mental states. Since this pattern is a fiction, my desire is not ultimately real. The conceptual fictions view faces a difficulty in explaining how mental states like desires affect us. The dependent origination theory of causation holds that a cause X results in its effect Y immediately: the two moments must be simultaneous (Waldron 2003, 135). Given that mental states only exist while I am aware of them, how is it possible that my unwholesome desire at one time can result in disappointment much later?

It helps to explain how a discontinuous mental series can result in effects to adopt an element from the Yogacara theory of mind. On the Yogacara view, there are two distinct mental streams, one of occurrent mental states of which we are aware (vijñana), and another of non-occurrent, non-conscious states (karmic seeds, or bīja) (Waldron, 129).
The stream of non-occurrence, non-conscious states is the *alaya-vijñāna*. The seeds in the *alaya-vijñāna* influence one’s current mental stream and are in turn influenced by it. My wholesome or unwholesome volitions in the present plant seeds in my *alaya-vijñāna*, which in turn influence my future experience. A disposition might be a pattern spanning the *vijñāna* and the *alaya-vijñana*: my current thoughts and feelings cause certain effects in my mind that, though I am unaware of them, influence my future experience, in the way that desire leads to disappointment. Perhaps what we commonly regard as desires are trans-stream phenomena: they are patterns between the streams of conscious and unconscious mental states. On this view, desires remain fictions insofar as what is ultimately real are only individual moments in each stream; but the existence of interacting streams explains how past conscious moments affect our present.

References


