

KNOWLEDGE AND LIBERATION: PHILOSOPHICAL RUMINATIONS ON A BUDDHIST CONUNDRUM

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I have seen lay-followers, experts in the doctrine, saying “Sensual pleasures are impermanent.” . . . Truly they do not know the doctrine as it really is, even though they say “Sensual pleasures are impermanent.” They have no power to cut their desire, therefore they are attached to children, wives, and wealth.

Extract from *Theragāthā* 187–188¹

Those people are disgraceful who say, adhering to the Buddha’s path, that all is impermanent and yet remain attached to entities through their disputes.

Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā 41²

The fundamental spiritual problem that Buddhism identifies and that it intends to solve is the problem of suffering (*duḥkha*).³ Buddhism is concerned with the eradication of suffering by means of the elimination of its cause. Suffering is often said to be caused by craving (*tṛṣṇā*), a mental state that leads to attachment (*upādāna*), attachment being the natural consequence of the acquisition of the object that one craves. Craving and attachment take many forms. There is craving for one’s own continued existence and attachment to one’s own self. And there is also craving for and attachment to various other internal and external entities. One can be attached to one’s opinions, and one can crave and be attached to particular emotions or mental states, one’s car, tasty foods, one’s family and friends, and so forth. The Buddhist seeks to eliminate suffering by cutting off craving (and the resulting attachment) in all its manifold forms.

Why, though, does craving cause suffering? A common Buddhist explanation is that craving causes suffering because the objects that one craves are impermanent (*anitya*). Things have no permanent abiding essence, and in this sense are without self (*anātman*). Here the world is envisaged to be a vast complex of transient physical and mental events. This is thought to be the way things really are. Buddhism can thus be viewed as a form of process philosophy, which depicts the universe in terms of becoming and transformation rather than stasis. The truth about entities is that they do not stay the same and that they must eventually cease to exist. Things come into existence, undergo many alterations, and inevitably pass away. All phenomena are subject to the law of impermanence.⁴

Craving is essentially an attitude of possessiveness, an emotion of clinging. When one craves, one sticks, so to speak, to entities and does not accept the reality of change. Under the sway of craving, one attempts to make the coveted entity one’s own, and one is unwilling to let go of the thing once it is in one’s possession. Furthermore, one is unable to accept undesirable changes in the entity. So, craving is bound to lead to frustration, as the entity that one craves and to which one gets

attached will eventually no longer be one's possession either because it will pass away or because, given the changing circumstances of life, it will fall out of one's possession. And even before the entity passes away, and even if one does not lose possession of the entity in some other way, one has to suffer often disagreeable alterations in its state. When the objects of craving and attachment change in a disagreeable fashion, fall out of one's possession, or pass away, to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the intensity of the craving and attachment) one is disappointed, dissatisfied—one suffers.

The Buddhist might claim that if the world were static, then there would be no harm in one's craving for and attachment to entities, for they would then not be subject to alteration and dissolution, and one would not have to suffer their unpleasant changes and their loss. But this, the Buddhist says, is of course not the way things are, and thus craving and attachment must eventually bring suffering.

So, for example, my youthful, healthy, beautiful beloved, whom I crave and to whom I am attached, will eventually die. Or else my beloved may well stop being my beloved when her affections change and she no longer cares for me. And even before her death, and even if she remains my beloved until her demise, she will be ill, will grow old; she will lose her youth, her health, and her beauty. All of these events will cause me suffering, attached as I am to my beloved, and attached as I am to her as youthful, healthy, and beautiful.

If craving for and attachment to impermanent things must cause suffering, why do people still crave and get attached? Buddhism often says that people crave, get attached, and hence suffer, because they do not understand the way things really are. Sentient beings are said to be afflicted by ignorance (*avidyā*). They are blind to the reality of the impermanence of entities. One craves and becomes attached to *x* because one fails to understand that *x* is impermanent and, as such, cannot give one lasting satisfaction. One fails to understand that *x* is transient and that, consequently, one's craving for and attachment to *x* will eventually be a source of disappointment.

In other words, it is the failure to understand that entities are impermanent that motivates one to covet these entities. Here craving is seen not as an autonomous entity, a basic instinct that is quite independent of one's intellect. On the contrary, craving is thought to be rooted in one's failure to understand the true nature of the object of craving. Craving occurs for a reason: the object of craving is considered to be worth possessing. One considers the object of craving to be worth possessing because, failing to understand its impermanence, one does not understand that one will eventually have to suffer the pain of disagreeable changes in and the loss of the coveted object.

Craving may in this respect be contrasted with desires, which are instinctual and are in no way tied to the failure to understand that entities are impermanent. I have in mind here such bodily needs as the desire to eat when one's body requires nourishment, the desire to sleep when one's body needs rest, the desire to keep warm when one's body is too cold, and so forth. I suspect that the Buddhist, who is concerned with stopping craving—the selfish, appropriative desire that is rooted in ignorance about how things actually are—would have no objection to these instinctual desires; the Buddhist might accept them as an inevitable feature of having a body.⁵

Clearly, then, in seeking to eradicate craving, Buddhism does not intend to remove all desires. And, in addition to allowing instinctual desires associated with having a body, some Buddhists might permit a non-appropriative desire—an aspiration—for *nirvāṇa*. It is arguably fitting to desire, but not to crave, the irreversible ending of craving and attachment.⁶ Furthermore, Buddhist traditions generally value non-possessive, altruistic emotions such as friendliness (*maitrī*) and compassion (*karuṇa*), emotions that are rooted in the desire for the welfare of other sentient beings. Suffering is not caused by desire per se; it is caused by the selfish and appropriative desire of craving.

Also, the Buddhist rejection of craving and attachment need not be incompatible with the acceptance of a non-possessive appreciation of impermanent entities (assuming that human psychology is so constituted that it is possible to appreciate entities without craving for and getting attached to them). Insofar as the appreciator does not try to hold on to the appreciated entities, he or she will not suffer when they change disagreeably, fall out of his or her possession, or pass away.

How, then, is craving to be eradicated? If one's craving, attachment, and hence suffering are caused by one's failure to understand the way things really are, then it seems that the solution to this predicament must be to understand things as they actually are. Ignorance must be replaced by knowledge. "Knowledge" in this context has, of course, a very special, in fact unique, content. Most knowledge clearly does not lead to liberation. One is not liberated, for instance, by the knowledge of how to cook soufflés or the knowledge that Little Rock is the capital city of Arkansas. It is only the knowledge of the real nature of entities, that is, their impermanence, that has liberative effect. The ignorance about the transient nature of entities must be eradicated, and the correct understanding of the impermanence of entities must take its place.

Buddhist practitioners are thus often exhorted to reflect on the impermanence of entities, and by this means to cut off the root cause of their craving and attachment. The reasoning here would appear to be that, having understood that entities are impermanent, one will no longer crave and get attached to entities because one will understand that one's craving for and attachment to entities would entail eventual disappointment. One will give up the attempt to appropriate entities. Knowing entities to be impermanent, one will accept their alterations and demise. Apprehending the vicissitudes of the world, one will be unperturbed when possessed entities pass out of one's possession. Understanding the inevitability of one's own decay and death, one will have equanimity in the face of it. Awake to the impermanence of one's own self and all other objects, one will no longer crave and be attached. Without craving and attachment, there will be no cause of suffering.⁷

The Conundrum

There seems to be a serious problem with this Buddhist analysis, however, that perhaps the reader has already identified. If it is the knowledge of the impermanence of entities that will liberate one from craving and attachment, then why is it that one

may apparently understand that entities are impermanent and yet that this understanding does *not* result in one's liberation from craving and attachment? I, for instance, am not ignorant about the impermanence of entities. On the contrary, I know that entities change, and that they often change in disagreeable ways. I understand that what one possesses may well fall out of one's possession. And I know that all entities must pass away. Yet I am certainly not free from craving and attachment. Buddhism, according to the explanation that I have given, appears to say that my knowledge of, for example, my beloved's impermanence should eliminate my craving for and attachment to her. But the reality is that I do know that my beloved is impermanent, yet I still feel craving for and attachment to her.

Indeed, I would suggest that many people (Buddhists and non-Buddhists) have the conviction that things are impermanent. Yet it does not follow that they are without craving and attachment. If knowledge of the impermanence of entities is the antidote to craving and attachment, then why can one apparently have knowledge of the impermanence of entities and nevertheless crave and get attached?

How might one preserve the Buddhist claim that a knowledge of things as they actually are results in liberation from craving and attachment in the face of this objection that one can know that things are impermanent and yet still be subject to craving and attachment? This is the question that this essay will address.

In attempting to answer this question, the obvious strategy is to claim that although it is the case that one knows that things are impermanent, there is nevertheless some deficiency in one's knowledge of how things actually are. It is this deficiency that results in the continuation of one's craving and attachment. If one's knowledge of how things really are were complete, if the deficiency were overcome, then the craving for and attachment to entities would be eradicated.

But how precisely is this deficiency to be characterized? Here I will examine critically five ways—none of which is entirely unproblematic for the philosopher—in which a Buddhist might plausibly depict the deficiency. Indeed, the fourth and fifth solutions below indicate that the conundrum—although philosophically interesting—is perhaps an invented one, because many Buddhists would claim that the knowledge of impermanence is not, in fact, the complete knowledge required for the eradication of suffering. Buddhists do not usually claim that the knowledge of *impermanence* alone is a sufficient condition for liberation. Furthermore, I will suggest in conclusion that many Buddhists would themselves solve the conundrum by rejecting the thesis that *any* knowledge—even knowledge without deficiency—will, on its own, bring about liberation. The analysis of the link between knowledge and liberation that I have presented above is thus inadequate as a representation of Buddhist reflections on this matter, and the conundrum I have described is largely apparent rather than real.⁸

First Solution: The Lack of Constant Reflection

The deficiency in one's knowledge might be characterized as the lack of constant reflection on the impermanence of entities. It is because one only occasionally thinks about the impermanence of entities that craving and attachment still occur.

Let me explain. It is common to regard knowledge as a possession that one has, whether or not one is presently cognizing what one knows. For instance, I have the knowledge that $2 + 2 = 4$ even when I am not thinking that $2 + 2 = 4$. One does not generally say that I no longer know that $2 + 2 = 4$ simply because I am not presently thinking that $2 + 2 = 4$. The proof that I still have the knowledge that $2 + 2 = 4$ is that I can, on those rare occasions when it is required, have the correct cognition that $2 + 2 = 4$. Indeed, most things that one knows are only very rarely the object of one's cognitions. I know that London is the capital city of Great Britain, but I rarely think about it. I know that dinosaurs are extinct, but seldom do I have this cognition. And so on. Let me call this sense of the term "knowledge"—that is, knowledge as a possession that one has, whether or not one is presently cognizing what one knows—"knowledge 1."

In Indian philosophy, by contrast, there is a tendency to think of knowledge as an actual correct cognition. One sees this particularly clearly, for instance, in the mature Nyāya epistemology, where knowledge (*pramā*) is identified as a particular type of cognition (distinct from erroneous cognitions, memories, doubts, and so forth). Hence "*pramā*" is usually translated as "knowledge-episode" or "valid cognition."⁹ In this sense, one knows $2 + 2 = 4$ when one is presently thinking that $2 + 2 = 4$. Knowledge is a mental event that occurs at a particular time and then passes away, to be replaced by further and often different mental events. Thus, for instance, I am presently having the knowledge-episode, the correct cognition, that $2 + 2 = 4$. But soon this knowledge-episode will be replaced by other cognitions. I will stop thinking about the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. And my thoughts will then be of other matters. Let me call this sense of knowledge, as a correct cognitive event, "knowledge 2."

The Buddhist might argue that, although one indeed understands that entities are impermanent, one most of the time does not have the cognition that things are impermanent. In other words, one has knowledge 1 of the way things really are but one only rarely has knowledge 2 of the way things really are.

In which case, the Buddhist might claim that the knowledge of the impermanence of entities that eradicates craving and attachment is knowledge 2. In order to eradicate craving and attachment, one must constantly be cognizing the impermanence of entities. It is this constant cognition of the impermanence of entities that is lacking in most people for most of the time. One is inattentive to the impermanence of entities, and hence, in one's forgetfulness of their impermanence, one craves and gets attached to entities.

This, it is important to note, does not entail that when one is inattentive to the impermanence of entities one has the false cognition that entities are permanent. To say that one is not currently attentive to the impermanence of entities is not to say that one has the misunderstanding that entities are permanent. One's ignorance is a lack of awareness rather than an active misapprehension. It is simply that one is not at the moment thinking about the impermanence of entities rather than that one is thinking that entities are permanent, just as when I am currently not thinking that $2 + 2 = 4$ I do not therefore erroneously cognize that $2 + 2 \neq 4$. If asked, one will say that one knows (assuming one is convinced by the Buddhist analysis) that entities

are impermanent just as, if asked, one will say that one knows that $2 + 2 = 4$. But one only rarely thinks about the impermanence of entities, just as one only rarely thinks about the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is only in uncommon moments that the impermanence of entities becomes the focus of one's attention. Thus, given the rarity of the mental events that focus on the impermanence of entities, there is plenty of opportunity for other mental events involving craving and attachment to arise.

Hence, perhaps, the well-known Buddhist emphasis on the need to cultivate mindfulness (*smṛti*), thorough attention (*yoniso manasikāra*),¹⁰ and so forth. There needs to be constant reflection—not just in formal meditation but also in daily life—on the transitoriness of entities. This constant reflection would leave no time for incompatible mental events informed by craving and attachment—in which case it is inattentiveness to the impermanence of entities that needs to be eradicated. The merely temporary and occasional cognitions of impermanence are thereby to be transformed into a permanent awareness.

However, this is not actually a satisfactory account of why one can have knowledge of the impermanence of entities and yet may still crave and get attached. For it seems clear that it is possible to be having the cognition of the impermanence of entities and at the same time to experience craving and attachment. I can be reflecting on the impermanence of the doughnut in the bakery, and yet also be craving that doughnut. I can reflect on the impermanence of my self and simultaneously feel intense attachment to myself. And I can be mindful of the impermanence of my beloved, and yet feel tremendous attachment toward her at the same time. So, there seems to be no reason why constant attentiveness to impermanence must rule out craving and attachment. Given that I can reflect on the impermanence of entities and yet simultaneously experience craving and attachment, it seems probable that even if I reflect on the impermanence of entities all the time (even assuming that this is psychologically possible), I may still be subject to craving and attachment.

Second Solution: Unconscious Misunderstanding

Why, then, is it that one can be reflecting, and even constantly reflecting, on the impermanence of entities, and yet at the same time may experience craving for and attachment to these entities? In answer to this question, it might be suggested that although one is reflecting on the impermanence of entities, one has at the same time an unconscious understanding (which is actually a misunderstanding) that entities are permanent.¹¹ It is the unconscious and incorrect understanding that entities are permanent that causes one to crave and get attached. It is not enough to be reflecting on the impermanence of entities in order to eradicate craving and attachment. In addition, the unconscious and incorrect understanding that entities are permanent must be removed.

According to this theory, one may have at the same time two contradictory understandings of how things actually are (one of which is right, one of which is wrong). There is understanding 1, that “entities are impermanent,” and understand-

ing 2, that “entities are permanent”—where one is aware of understanding 1 and unaware that one has understanding 2, and where understanding 1 is correct and understanding 2 is incorrect. (Perhaps, in the Buddhist context, understanding 2, given that it is unconscious, can be thought of as the consequence or trace of [incorrect] explicit beliefs that entities are permanent as held in one’s previous lives.)

It is tempting to think, however, that the notion of an unconscious understanding is an oxymoron, for an understanding of which one is unaware seems not to be one’s understanding at all. Is it not essential to the notion of “understanding” that one is aware of one’s understanding?

This objection appears to be misguided. For it seems that there *are* certain understandings that one may have in an unconscious manner. For example, one may understand the rules that govern one’s native language without being aware that one understands these rules. That one understands the rules, although not being aware that one understands the rules, is demonstrated by one’s ability to employ successfully the language in question. One understands the rules in a pre-reflective way. So, it would appear that the notion of an unconscious (mis)understanding is not an oxymoron after all.

However, what does seem doubtful is the notion that one may have a (mis)understanding of which one is unaware—for example, “entities are permanent”—when it is directly contradicted by an understanding of which one is aware—for example, “entities are impermanent.” Surely one’s conscious understanding that entities are impermanent would negate any (mis)understanding, of which one was previously unaware, that entities are permanent. It would seem that one may have the (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, without being aware that one has this (mis)understanding, or one may understand, while being aware that one has this understanding, that these same entities are impermanent, but one cannot have both these understandings at the same time. Thus, the Buddhist is advocating the rather dubious notion of a (mis)understanding of which one remains unaware, residing in a secret level of the mind (“the Unconscious”), and which can persevere even when one has a directly contradictory understanding of which one is aware.

There is another problem. If one is not aware of one’s (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, how can one know that it exists? It might be replied that although one is not conscious of one’s (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, it nevertheless governs one’s responses to the world. This unconscious (mis)understanding has enormous influence on one’s attitudes and behavior, despite being hidden from oneself and despite being contradicted by one’s conscious understanding. That is, the unconscious (mis)understanding of the permanence of entities makes one crave and get attached. The proof of the existence of the unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent is thus precisely the fact that one continues to crave and get attached, even when having the conscious understanding of the impermanence of things. If one, when reflecting on the impermanence of entities, did not have the unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, then one would not crave and get attached. One does, however, crave

and get attached while reflecting on the impermanence of entities. Therefore, the unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent must exist.

But surely there is a vicious circle here. The proof that one has such an unconscious (mis)understanding cannot be the very behavior of which the unconscious misunderstanding is meant to be the cause. If x is explained to have cause y , then x cannot itself be used as the proof for the existence of cause y . If craving and attachment are explained to have as their cause an unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, then it simply will not do to appeal to the existence of the craving and attachment as the proof that this craving and attachment are caused by an unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent.

However, granted that there is such a vicious circle, it might still be argued that although indeed one cannot prove that there is such an unconscious misunderstanding that causes craving and attachment, this does not establish that there is not such an unconscious misunderstanding. To fail to prove that y is the cause of x is not to prove that it is not the case that y is the cause of x . There might be an unconscious misunderstanding that entities are permanent, which causes craving and attachment, even though one cannot prove the existence of this unconscious misunderstanding. A hidden cause is not a nonexistent cause.

While this is true, it is nevertheless dubious to posit as a cause of an observed phenomenon x another phenomenon y for which there is no proof. Surely it would be more reasonable to look for other causes for which there is some proof, rather than appeal to such an unproven explanation for the existence of phenomenon x . The attempt to explain the existence of craving and attachment as caused by an unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent should give way to other explanations for which, at least, there is some proof. Otherwise, an unconscious (mis)understanding, not requiring any proof, might be posited as the cause for any sort of behavior. Suppose, for instance, that I like doughnuts. A friend might claim that the cause of my liking doughnuts is my (mis)understanding that doughnuts are good for my health. I may object that I like doughnuts, yet I do not have the (mis)understanding that they are good for my health. Actually, I like doughnuts while at the same time reflecting on the fact that they are bad for my health. The friend might reply that I must, in that case, have an unconscious (mis)understanding that doughnuts are good for my health. If this were not the case, the friend might say that I would not continue to like doughnuts. If I object that I do not have such an unconscious understanding, the friend might respond that in fact I do have an unconscious (mis)understanding, but, as it is unconscious, I am not aware of it! But such a notion of an unconscious (mis)understanding that doughnuts are good for my health is unproven and thus seems unhelpful as an explanation of the cause for my liking doughnuts. The friend would surely do better to admit that one must actually look elsewhere for the cause of my liking doughnuts! (Perhaps I like doughnuts because I find them delicious, and I therefore prefer to eat them despite knowing that they are bad for my health).

In fact, the explanation that one's craving and attachment are caused by an unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent is rather like the claim that

one's craving and attachment are a result of undetectable demons who possess one and compel one to crave and get attached. One can never prove that there are such undetectable demons that cause this behavior, because, even if there were demons, there would be no way of detecting them other than by appealing to their supposed effects—that is, the observable phenomena of craving and attachment. But as it is precisely these effects that the demons are intended to explain, the effects themselves cannot be used as evidence for the existence of the demons. It is true that in failing to prove that there are any such demons causing one's craving and attachment, one has not proven that there are no such demons causing one's craving and attachment, but—in the absence of the evidence for their existence—it seems unreasonable and fanciful to suggest that they are in fact the cause of one's craving and attachment. Like this claim that demons cause one's craving and attachment, the notion that one's craving and attachment are caused by an unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent introduces a mystery in the guise of an explanation.

However, it might be replied that my objection is quite unfair. Although it is true to say that one is not and has not been conscious of one's (mis)understanding that entities are permanent, this is not to say that this (mis)understanding must remain inaccessible to one's awareness. On the contrary, the Buddhist might say, one can become conscious of this (mis)understanding through the use of meditative techniques. Meditation thus provides the proof of the existence of the normally unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent. Perhaps this ordinarily unconscious (mis)understanding can come to one's awareness in the context of the mental absorptions (*dhyāna*) reputedly achieved in *śamatha* meditation (which makes the mind especially pliable and concentrated). Maybe this meditative training would give one the ability to plumb the depths, so to speak, of one's "Unconscious," so that one would see clearly one's ordinarily unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent. Perhaps, furthermore, continued reflection on the impermanence of entities in this meditative context, where the ordinarily unconscious (mis)understanding that entities are permanent has been brought to one's awareness, might enable one eventually to eradicate this (mis)understanding once and for all, thereby providing a complete release from craving and attachment.

But here the proponent of the position that there is an unconscious misunderstanding that entities are permanent that causes one's craving and attachment is appealing to a special experience as providing the proof that such an unconscious misunderstanding exists. This is a special experience to which I have not had access, and about which I must remain silent. And, I think, such an appeal to a special experience must remain unconvincing to the uninitiated outsider who is not party to the experience.

Third Solution: Theoretical versus Perceptual Knowledge

Rather than resorting to the problematic notion of an unconscious misunderstanding, the Buddhist might claim that one who reflects, and even constantly reflects, on the

impermanence of entities, and yet still craves and gets attached to these entities, has a merely theoretical knowledge, which is deficient insofar as it is not a knowledge by acquaintance. This is the difference between knowing about something and encountering it face-to-face, as it were. Theoretical knowledge is the knowledge of a fact, whereas knowledge by acquaintance is the actual perception of the phenomenon in question.

One sees this distinction commonly made in ancient Indian epistemology, where perception (*pratyakṣa*) is a distinct means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), in contrast to other means of knowledge such as inference (*anumāna*), verbal testimony (*śabda*), and so forth, which give knowledge of an entity without a perceptual encounter with the entity known. For instance, I know about the terrible floods that occur in Bangladesh (perhaps through the verbal testimony of the newspapers or of my Bangladeshi friend), but this knowledge is a different sort of knowledge from that which I would acquire if I were to go to Bangladesh and see the floods for myself.¹² The same might be said of one's knowledge of how things actually are. One may have the theoretical knowledge of how things really are, but fail to perceive entities as they actually are. Hence, one continues to crave and to get attached. It is only when one's perceptions are transformed—so that one's seeing of entities is in accord with one's theoretical knowledge—that craving and attachment for these entities will be stopped. The notion here is that a perception of things as they actually are will have more potency—more effect on one's craving and attachment—than a merely theoretical knowledge, just as perceiving the floods of Bangladesh for oneself is far more emotionally powerful than having a merely factual understanding of them.

However, it may be objected that if it is the case that the statement “things are impermanent” is the correct description of how things actually are, then it is surely not true that ordinary people fail to perceive this reality. On the contrary, the impermanence of entities is normally accessible to people's perception. One perceives all sorts of changes, and numerous instances of entities coming into existence and passing away. And in the course of one's life, one often perceives the impermanence of entities that are extremely dear to oneself. This is not merely a theoretical knowledge. It is a knowledge one has from direct experience. And yet one still craves and gets attached to these impermanent entities. So, even perceptual knowledge of the impermanence of entities, it seems, does not stop craving and attachment.

Fourth Solution: Perception of Entities as Fabrications

In reply to this objection, many Buddhists might claim that while perceptual knowledge is required in order to eradicate craving and attachment, the requisite perceptual knowledge is not in fact the perception of the impermanence of entities. On the contrary, such Buddhists might claim that craving and attachment can be eradicated only by the perception that the entities that one craves and to which one gets attached are fabrications, conceptual constructions. Thus, even perceptual knowledge of the impermanence of entities is deficient; the deficiency is to be overcome by seeing also that the entities that one craves and to which one gets attached do not exist independent of the mind.

The point here is that perceiving things to be fabricated is quite different from perceiving things to be impermanent. One might perceive, for instance, that a flower is impermanent without perceiving that the flower is a conceptual construct, that is, something that, like a hallucination, does not exist independent of the mind. And unlike the impermanence of entities, which is, as I have explained, ordinarily perceived, the fabricated nature of entities is certainly not normally perceived (indeed, it is not normally something that people believe, let alone perceive). One does not normally see (or even believe) flowers, for example, to be without existence independent of the mind.

The perception of the fabricated nature of entities is presumably to be induced by meditation. The dGe lugs tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, provides extensive explanations of meditative techniques—involving systematic reflection on the merely fabricated nature of entities combined with methods of *śamatha* (Tibetan: *zhi gnas*) meditation—which are designed to bring about just such a perception.¹³

But why would the perception of the fabricated nature of entities be any more effective at cutting off craving and attachment than the knowledge of the impermanence of entities? One possibility is that the Buddhist who has the perceptual knowledge of entities as fabrications thereby stops experiencing these entities completely. If this were so, it is true that craving and attachment for entities would be stopped, precisely because these fabricated entities would have been dispelled, and would no longer exist, even as appearances for the mind. But then the Buddhist would have achieved the cessation of craving and attachment at a very high price indeed, namely the annihilation of the entire everyday world of entities. The Buddhist here gets rid of craving and attachment by eradicating the very world that one might crave and to which one might be attached. Such “liberation by annihilation” no doubt would be an effective but also a very drastic and arguably an unappealing solution to the problem of suffering. To adapt a hackneyed but appropriate metaphor, the Buddhist might be accused of employing the sledgehammer of nihilism to crack the nut of craving and attachment.

A more attractive alternative is perhaps possible. A Buddhist who has the perceptual knowledge of entities as fabrications might continue to experience these entities while perceiving these entities to be fabrications. Thus, the everyday world of entities would continue to appear for such a Buddhist, but, unlike an ordinary person, this Buddhist would not perceive it to be mind-independent. In perceiving entities as fabrications, he would see the existence of entities to be more tenuous than when he perceived merely the impermanence of entities. Fabricated entities have a weaker, less substantial existence than unfabricated entities. Thus, it is by perceiving entities as having such an extremely tenuous form of existence that the Buddhist stops craving and getting attached to them. Seeing an entity to be transient, one might still crave and get attached to it, but perceiving the entity to have no existence independent of the mind would surely stop one’s craving and attachment once and for all.

This Buddhist would thus continue to function in the world, but—insofar as he sees entities in their fabricated nature—he would function in the world without

craving and attachment. The world would be for the Buddhist like a magic show in which he participates. However, unlike the other participants, he would see the magic show for what it is; he is not taken in or tricked by it.

However, it might be objected that it does not follow necessarily that one would stop craving and attachment if one saw a coveted entity to be a mere fabrication. It seems possible that one might continue to crave and be attached to an entity even if one could see clearly that the entity is completely a mental construct. Even knowing entities to be mere fabrications, I might so enjoy experiencing them that my craving and attachment continue unabated. A fantasy object can sometimes be desirable even when one knows it to be nothing more than a fantasy.

Furthermore, it is a moot point whether it would in fact be psychologically feasible for a person to continue to function in the everyday world while perceiving that the entities that constitute that world are fabrications. It seems possible that one's engagement with the everyday world must be based on the assumption that this world is not simply a fabrication. Could one really continue to function in a world of entities that one has seen to be conceptually constructed? Is it psychologically possible, for instance, that I might have a conversation with you while perceiving you (and, indeed, myself!) to be fabricated? It is arguable that the effect of such a perception would in fact be the collapse of this everyday world into total chaos. In that case the perceiver might well be free from craving and attachment but would most likely be found in a mental hospital.

Whether or not Buddhists who perceive the fabricated nature of entities would be able to preserve their sanity and continue to function in the everyday world is thus disputable. What seems clear, however, is that the position that entities are fabrications has been popular within the Buddhist tradition and has taken a variety of forms. Three of its manifestations are in Abhidharma, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka.¹⁴ Abhidharma philosophy claims that all entities with parts are simply conceptual constructs on the basis of their parts. Further, even the partless, atomic physical and mental events (*dharmas*) out of which all entities with parts are constructed are themselves momentary—they are radically impermanent (although they are not conceptually constructed). Liberation from craving and attachment requires the perception that the everyday world of tables, mountains, selves, and so forth is a conceptual construct founded on evanescent atomic physical and mental events.

In Yogācāra it is claimed not just that entities are impermanent but also that the entire ordinary world of dualisms is a fabrication, a product of deluded conceptualization. The only entities that are unfabricated, that is, that exist independent of conceptual construction, are the momentary mental events that make up the flow of nondual consciousness. Liberation from craving and attachment is a result of perceiving the dualistic world of entities to be a fabrication that occurs on the basis of the nondual flow of momentary consciousness-events.

Madhyamaka takes the teaching of the fabricated nature of entities to its logical conclusion. Mādhyamikas claim that one must see not only that all entities are impermanent but also that all entities are entirely conceptual constructs, including the *dharmas* of the Abhidharma and the nondual flow of consciousness of the Yogācāra.

There is absolutely nothing that is anything other than a fabrication. Liberation from craving and attachment follows from the knowledge that each and every entity is totally empty (*śūnya*) of unfabricated existence.

Note that the Mādhyamika might accuse the Ābhīdharmika and Yogācārin of still positing a very subtle basis for craving and attachment—that is, the unfabricated but momentary *dharmas* or nondual consciousness-events, respectively. Craving and attachment can only be completely eradicated, the Mādhyamika might contend, when even this very subtle basis has been shown to be merely a conceptual construct. But the Ābhīdharmika and Yogācārin can surely respond that this objection is misguided. In fact, people do not get attached to momentary *dharmas* or nondual consciousness events; it is the world of everyday objects constructed on the basis of these unconstructed entities that people crave and to which they get attached. I do not crave and get attached to the atomic parts of my new car, for instance, but I certainly may crave and get attached to the new car that has these atoms as its parts. One needs only to perceive, therefore, the conceptually constructed nature of the everyday entities that are the actual objects of one's craving and attachment.

Furthermore, the Ābhīdharmika and Yogācārin might argue not only that it is unnecessary, in order to cut off craving and attachment, to know that everything whatsoever is conceptually constructed, but also that the Mādhyamika is wrong to claim that everything whatsoever is conceptually constructed. If everything were conceptually constructed, as the Mādhyamika claims, then there would be no unfabricated basis on which the conceptual construction could take place. There would be nothing out of which conceptually constructed entities could be constructed, and thus the conceptual construction would not get started, as it were. The Mādhyamika must be a nihilist, despite claiming (as this name indicates) to tread the Middle Path between the extremes of nihilism and eternalism. This debate—about whether or not there is an unfabricated basis for the fabricated objects of the everyday world—is one that has run and run in the Buddhist tradition.¹⁵

But, irrespective of this debate, it should be appreciated that all these Buddhist antirealist notions of how things actually are make a highly contentious ontological claim. It is far from clear that these Buddhists are right to say that much or all of the world is a fabrication. This disputable ontological claim may be contrasted with the assertion that entities are impermanent, which has considerable plausibility precisely because it is quite obvious from one's ordinary experience that the entities that one experiences have a transient nature.¹⁶

Thus, craving and attachment might be stopped by the perception of the fabricated nature of most or all entities, but it has not in fact been established that most or all entities indeed have a fabricated nature. In that case, if one somehow convinced oneself—and even perceived—that (in the case of Mādhyamika) all entities are fabrications, or that (in the case of Ābhīdharmika and Yogācāra) most entities are fabrications (the unfabricated entities being merely momentary events), one's conviction may well be quite wrong, and one's perception may be erroneous. One might become liberated from craving and attachment but this might be a liberation based on ignorance rather than knowledge!

The difficult business here is to provide the proof that reality is as these antirealist Buddhists claim it to be, for without such proof their supposed perception of things as they actually are may simply be a mistake, a hallucination. This is not to say, of course, that, without the proof, their perception is necessarily wrong. But, arguably, given that entities appear to be (on the whole) unfabricated (although impermanent), the onus is on these Buddhist antirealists to prove that the entities that appear to be unfabricated are in reality fabricated. Otherwise, for these Buddhists liberation from craving and attachment depends on what is actually an implausible knowledge-claim.

Fifth Solution: Knowledge that One Ought Not to Crave

For the Buddhist who does not want to resort to such contentious antirealism but who does want to claim that a knowledge of how things actually are produces liberation, the conundrum that one may know the impermanence of entities without eradicating craving and attachment might be solved in another way. Such a Buddhist might claim that one can know (a) the impermanence of entities, without necessarily understanding that (b) the craving for and attachment to impermanent entities will bring suffering and that, as a consequence, one ought not to crave and get attached to these entities.

The deficiency in one's knowledge, in this case, has to do with the inability to understand an implication of the impermanence of entities, that is, the implication that one ought to stop craving and getting attached to impermanent entities, because such craving and attachment will cause suffering. Not understanding that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities, one might continue to crave and get attached.

This deficiency in one's knowledge is analogous to the case of the smoker who knows that cigarettes contain tobacco, but who does not know that tobacco is harmful to one's health and thus that one ought not to smoke cigarettes. There is an implication in the fact that cigarettes contain tobacco of which the smoker is unaware. There is thus a deficiency in one's knowledge that might cause one to continue smoking cigarettes.

However, while it does seem to be true that one might know that (a) entities are impermanent, without understanding that (b) one ought not to crave and get attached to such impermanent entities, there are two serious problems with the claim that the failure to understand (b) is the cause of one's continued craving for and attachment to entities.

First, is it really the case that impermanent entities ought not to be craved and ought not to be the objects of attachment? Buddhists may think that one ought not to crave and be attached because the suffering involved in craving for and attachment to impermanent entities eventually exceeds whatever happiness they may provide. But is this claim actually correct? One might quite plausibly argue for the opposite position: one might claim that the pleasures associated with craving for and attachment to impermanent entities do in fact outweigh the suffering entailed by the dis-

agreeable changes in and the eventual loss of these entities. In this case, contrary to the Buddhist analysis, one would be quite justified in continuing to crave and get attached to impermanent entities.

Indeed, it may even be argued that the impermanence of entities ought actually to lead one to crave the entities more intensely, to make the most of the limited time during which one has possession of these entities. And similarly, one's awareness of one's own impermanence ought to lead one to crave more intensely, while one still has the opportunity, the entities from which one will inevitably be separated by one's impending death. The Buddhist claim that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities is far from being a self-evident truth.

Perhaps the Buddhist might claim that one ought not to crave and get attached because craving and attachment are selfish and appropriative emotions, and selfish and appropriative emotions are inherently bad. But, in relying on this argument, the Buddhist is no longer claiming that one ought not to crave and get attached because entities are impermanent, but is saying rather that one ought not to crave and get attached because craving and attachment are essentially selfish. And the Buddhist's contention that it is always wrong to be selfish might still be questioned.

Alternatively, the Buddhist might conceivably argue that although the happiness resulting from craving and attachment to impermanent entities may sometimes outweigh the suffering entailed, it is nevertheless the case that the happiness is finite, and thus not fully satisfying. By contrast, the achievement of the unconditioned, *nirvāṇa*, is thought by the Buddhist to be fully satisfying. In order to achieve *nirvāṇa* one must, according to Buddhism, be free from craving and attachment. Thus, one ought to give up one's craving and attachment for impermanent entities, in order to achieve the fully satisfying happiness of the craving-free and attachment-free *nirvāṇa*. Of course, this reasoning relies on the debatable claim that there is or can be a state of fully satisfying happiness, devoid of all craving and attachment.

Second, even if it is true that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities, it seems *prima facie* untenable to claim that one's continued craving for and attachment to the entities that one knows to be impermanent is in fact caused by the failure to understand that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities. For it can be objected that a person who knows both (a) the impermanence of entities and (b) that one ought not to crave and get attached to such impermanent entities would not necessarily stop craving and getting attached to impermanent entities. It seems that a person might know both the impermanence of entities and also that one ought not to crave and get attached to such entities, and yet might continue to crave and get attached. One's knowledge that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities is no guarantee that one will not crave and get attached to these entities, just as one's knowledge that one ought not to smoke cigarettes is no guarantee that one will not smoke cigarettes.

Take, for instance, my craving for my beloved. I may know that my beloved is impermanent. And I may understand that I ought not to feel craving for my beloved because I will suffer when she changes in a disagreeable way, or when she ceases to be my beloved, or when she dies. Nevertheless, the fact that I know

that my beloved is impermanent and that I ought not to crave her does not entail that I will not feel craving for her. My passion for my beloved may well override my understanding.

The problem here is essentially the same as that which occurs with the Socratic position that to know the good is to do the good. No one does wrong knowingly. This position seems obviously faulty, insofar as people seem able to know what they ought to do and yet refrain from doing it, and know what they ought not to do and yet cannot resist the temptation to do it anyway.¹⁷ As Portia declares in *The Merchant of Venice* (I.ii.12–19):

If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions; I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching. The brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temper leaps o'er a cold decree. (Evans 1974)

People are not simply rational beings, and emotions can pull one in a direction opposite to that recommended by one's understanding. One's emotions are fickle; they do not automatically follow one's intellect. One is often compelled by passion to do the wrong thing (or to refrain from doing the right thing), despite knowing better.

In that case, contrary to the Buddhist analysis that I have presented here, craving does have autonomy from one's understanding, and thus the craving for impermanent entities does not, after all, result only from a deficiency in one's knowledge. And, therefore, liberation from craving and attachment does not follow from the attainment of knowledge alone. Even knowing that entities are impermanent, and that one ought not to crave and get attached to them, one often finds oneself enslaved by craving nevertheless.

The Buddhist might, however, dispute this claim that craving has autonomy from the understanding. He or she might say that people who claim to understand that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities and yet still crave and get attached to these entities are in fact being dishonest or are self-deceived. Despite paying lip service to the view that impermanent entities ought not to be craved, such people really think—wrongly, according to the Buddhist—that, despite the fact that one will lose that to which one is attached, the joys gained by attachment to impermanent entities can be greater than the pain of the loss of the impermanent entities. Thus, they really think that it is right to crave and be attached to impermanent entities. Such people may not admit that this is what they really think, but it is nevertheless true that such a view motivates their craving for and attachment to impermanent entities. Thus, their claim that they know that they ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities, and yet nevertheless do crave and get attached to such entities, is disingenuous, a façade concealing their actual view—a wrong view, according to the Buddhist—that impermanent entities are worthy objects of craving and attachment. So, their craving is, after all, rooted in their understanding, or rather misunderstanding, that impermanent entities are worth craving.

Conclusion: Wisdom Rather than Knowledge

Alternatively, perhaps many Buddhists might actually be willing to agree with the claim that craving has autonomy from one's understanding. The Buddhist may say that one does not think that the eradication of craving and attachment follows simply from the understanding of the impermanence of entities and the understanding that one ought not to crave and get attached to such entities. Craving and attachment can indeed continue, even when one knows the impermanence of entities and that one ought not to crave and get attached to these entities. Such a Buddhist might say that knowledge alone, even knowledge without any deficiencies, does not bring about liberation. On the contrary, the eradication of one's craving and attachment also requires detailed and systematic attention to and transformation of one's conduct. It is only by actually noticing and stopping craving and attachment as it manifests in one's every thought, word, and bodily action that craving and attachment will be eradicated. Knowledge of the impermanence of entities and the importance of eliminating craving and attachment to these entities needs to be complemented by changes in one's morality (*śīla*), in order to ensure that activities involving craving and attachment do not occur.¹⁸

Knowledge might here be described as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation. One needs to know that entities are impermanent, and one needs to understand that one ought not to crave and get attached to impermanent entities. This knowledge is essential because it provides the justification for one's endeavors to eradicate craving and attachment. Without this knowledge one would not try to put an end to one's craving and attachment; the knowledge gives one the rationale for making the attempt. But it is the ability to stop craving and attachment in one's conduct that enables one to make what one ought not to do into what one does not do. And this ability is as much a result of consistent effort, determination, and the cultivation of habitual virtuous behavior as of knowledge. Buddhist spirituality—as represented in formulas such as the Noble Eightfold Path—is concerned not simply with knowledge but also with ensuring that one's conduct comes into accord with what one knows. Buddhism is a path of effort and action as well as knowledge. For Buddhism construed in this way, perhaps one might say that liberation is the result not of knowledge alone but rather of wisdom—the wise person being the individual who knows the impermanence of entities, who knows that one ought not to crave and be attached to such entities, and who, finally—by means of constant attentiveness to and transformation of his or her mental, verbal, and bodily conduct—does not crave and get attached to entities.¹⁹ Whether human nature is so constituted that such wisdom is in fact attainable is, of course, a debatable point.

Notes

The reflections in this essay are the basis of a book, *Buddhism, Knowledge and Liberation*, forthcoming from Ashgate Publications, in their World Philosophies series.

- 1 – K. R. Norman, trans., *Poems of Early Buddhist Monks (Theragāthā)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), p. 25.
- 2 – The translation is my own. For the Tibetan text and another English translation, see Lindtner 1982, pp. 112–113.
- 3 – Throughout this essay, technical Buddhist terminology will be given in Sanskrit, unless the context requires Pāli or Tibetan.
- 4 – There is, however, a caveat. Buddhists generally also posit an unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) sphere attained by the liberated person. It is debatable whether this unconditioned sphere is to be understood as (a) simply the sublime state of the liberated person who is no longer conditioned by craving and attachment, or also (b) a permanent reality that transcends the conditioned (*saṃskṛta*) world of impermanent entities, a permanent reality that is apprehended by the liberated person and into which the liberated person passes, in some undefined sense, after death (the *parinirvāṇa*). In the case of (b), the Buddhist claim that everything is impermanent actually means that every *conditioned* thing is impermanent.
- 5 – I am indebted to Finnis 1983, pp. 34 ff., for the distinction between instinctual or pre-rational desires and desires that are motivated by understanding.
- 6 – For more discussion of this issue, see Collins 1998, pp. 186–187.
- 7 – It can, of course, be objected that even if one can, by knowing entities in their true nature, eradicate one’s craving for and attachment to entities, one would still be subject to the various types of suffering to which the body is susceptible due to accident, disease, and old age. But many Buddhists would accept this point, as is clear, for example, from accounts of the historical Buddha’s final months before his decease, during which he evidently experienced much bodily pain, although bearing it with mental equanimity. See the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (trans. in Walshe 1987, pp. 231–278). Note, however, that Buddhism shares with many forms of Indian religion and philosophy the assumption that sentient beings are subject to rebirth, and that ignorance of how things actually are fuels the rebirth process. In this case, according to the Buddhist, one who has extinguished ignorance (and the resulting craving) does, in fact, insofar as one stops future rebirths, eradicate (after the present life is lived out, at any rate) even the pain involved in having a body.
- 8 – It may be objected that this essay lacks evidence for its claims, in that I rarely show whether any text or person actually subscribes to the body of beliefs that I construct. However, my principal intention here is to present a set of philosophical arguments that explore the possible connection between knowledge and liberation. While these arguments are based on some fundamental Buddhist ideas, I am not primarily concerned with grounding them in textual sources. Admittedly, this approach has its limitations and will be frustrating to the historian, who may accuse me, perhaps with some justification, of having arbitrarily constructed a form of transcultural Buddhism.

- 9 – See Matilal 1986, pp. 97–140.
- 10 – I give the Pāli terminology here, as this is the language in which this phrase usually occurs.
- 11 – See Padmasiri de Silva’s claim that Buddhism advocates that there are unconscious wrong beliefs that fuel one’s craving. In defense of his claim, de Silva points to the notion—found in the Pāli *suttas*—of the dormant proclivity (*anusaya*) toward (wrong) views (*diṭṭi*): “Wrong beliefs exist at the level of dormant dispositions (*diṭṭhānusaya*) and account for the unconscious roots of prejudices and strong biases which colour our emotional life” (de Silva 1991, p. 43). There are other notions within the Buddhist tradition that might be interpreted as implying the existence of an unconscious level of understanding. There is, for example, the Yogācāra concept of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), and the common Tibetan notion of innate (*lhan skyes*) misconceptions of reality.
- 12 – For further discussion of the *pramāṇas*, see Burton 1999, pp. 127–140.
- 13 – See Hopkins 1983, pp. 43–123.
- 14 – The summary interpretations of Abhidharma, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka that I present here are not, the reader should note, uncontentious. This essay presents one understanding of these three forms of Buddhist thought, and other readings are also possible.
- 15 – For textual evidence for, and more discussion of, this debate and the Abhidharma, Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka positions as articulated here, see Burton 1999, pp. 87–121, and Burton 2000.
- 16 – However, note that the position that all entities are impermanent is not necessarily correct. Even if all entities that we experience are impermanent, it may be that there are entities that we have not experienced that are permanent. In other words, the proponent of universal impermanence is here confronted by the problem of induction.
- 17 – See Macintyre 1967, pp. 21 ff., for a brief analysis of the Socratic position.
- 18 – See Damien Keown’s claim that “ethical perfection is a central ingredient in the Buddhist summum bonum. The two basic values or categories of human good which are recognised by Buddhism are moral and intellectual excellence,” and “the final perfection to be attained by those who follow the path to Arahatsip is best understood in terms of a binary model, that is to say as the perfection of morality (*śīla*) together with the perfection of insight (*paññā*)” (Keown 1992, pp. 22, 38).
- 19 – Such a Buddhist would seem to be in agreement with the moral philosopher Philippa Foot, when she claims that wisdom is “partly to be described in terms of apprehension ... but since it has to do with a man’s attachments it also characterizes his will” (Foot 1978, p. 7).

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