

## Article

# The Therapy of Desire in Times of Crisis: Lessons Learned from Buddhism and Stoicism

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**Abstract:** Desire is an important philosophical topic that deeply impacts everyday life. Philosophical practice is an emerging trend that uses philosophical theories and methods as a guide to living a eudaimonic life. In this paper, we define desire philosophically and compare different theories of desire in specific Eastern and Western traditions. Based on the Lacanian conceptual–terminological triad of “Need-Demand-Desire”, the research of desire is further divided into three dimensions, namely, the subject of desire, the object of desire, and the desire itself. The concept of desire is then analyzed from this triad and these three dimensions through different philosophical theories. This paper selects Buddhism as the representative of Eastern tradition, and Stoicism as the representative of the West, paying special attention to Stoicism’s “spiritual exercises” following Pierre Hadot. By exploring and comparing the Buddhist paths to liberation from suffering (i.e., the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path) and the two theoretical pillars in Stoicism (i.e., the notions of “living according to nature” and “the dichotomy of control”), practical guidance is then provided for understanding and regulating desire in times of crisis. This understanding and regulation of desire constitutes a philosophical therapy for today’s troubles, particularly those caused by excessive or irrational desires.

**Keywords:** desire; modernity crisis; philosophical therapy; philosophical practice; philosophy as a way of life (PWL); Buddhism; Stoicism; Four Noble Truths; Noble Eightfold Path; the dichotomy of control



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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development and atomization of modern society, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, people have encountered more mental stressors and psychological difficulties than previous generations (Kumar and Nayar 2021; Moreno et al. 2020; Pfefferbaum and North 2020; Scott et al. 2017; Srivastava 2009; Walsh 2011). It is under such conditions that the philosophical practice movement came into being and gained its popularity. Philosophical practice is a recently emerging but fast-growing field. The first philosophical practice institute was established by the German philosopher Gerd B. Achenbach in 1981, marking the beginning of the philosophical practice movement (Ding and Yu 2022). Later, in the U.S., Lou Marinoff’s best-selling book *Plato, Not Prozac!: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems* (Marinoff 1999) increased the movement’s popularity. Philosophical practitioners introduce philosophical theories, methods, and ways of thinking to the general public in order to correct erroneous ideas and assuage mental distress through applied philosophy. Therefore, philosophical practice is regarded as a practical schema used to treat the mental issues of modernity with philosophy—to replace Prozac with Plato (Marinoff 1999). Philosophical practice pulls philosophy out of the ivory tower, brings it to the masses, and reminds us that philosophy is first and foremost a way of life (Ambury et al. 2020; Chase et al. 2013; Hadot 1995; Sharpe and Ure 2021). The idea of

“philosophy as a way of life” (PWL) is dedicated to emphasizing that philosophy is, first and foremost, about transformation. In other words, philosophy can “help us rediscover different ways of perceiving the world, experiencing time, and thinking about ourselves”, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty (Kramer 2021; Sharpe et al. 2021).

Training desire is one way in which philosophical practice aims to transform its practitioners, as “desire” is one of the root causes of today’s harried souls and empty hearts (Ding et al. 2019). While desire is very dynamic in human lives, excessive and insatiable desires can lead to a variety of emotional and mental issues. In the history of Western philosophy, many philosophers have studied the concept and mechanisms of desire, providing valuable theoretical resources for using philosophical practice in the treatment of mental issues related to desires. For example, the Epicurean and Stoic discourses on happiness and passion in Hellenistic ethics (Nussbaum 2013), Kant’s theory of “Free will” and Hegel’s ethical system in German classical philosophy, Levinas’s theory of “Eros” (Levinas 1991) and Lacan’s reinterpretation of the Freudian idea of “death drive” (Boothby 1991) in modern and postmodern philosophy, all reflect the consistent concern Western philosophy has with moderating and directing desires. Contemporary philosophers have also deepened our understanding of desire as a concept, as a psychological mechanism, and as a socially informed construct (Crosby 1988; MacAskill 2013; Smith 1998; Taylor 2014). Moreover, desire is a central concern in traditional Chinese philosophy. Whether it is the desire theory of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, or the “no/few/moderate desire” view of Daoism in the pre-Qin period, or the detailed discrimination of Zen Buddhism on the desires in life, they all reflect the wisdom of the ancient Eastern saints on the management of desire.

In this article, we discuss how different philosophical traditions can be described as therapies of desire in this time of crisis. We consider Stoicism (i.e., the Stoic ethics; Jedan 2009; Nussbaum 2013) as the representative of Western tradition. As Pierre Hadot (1995) describes, Stoicism consists of “spiritual exercises” aimed at transforming the disciple intellectually, affectively, and morally. Additionally, Buddhism is explored here as a representative of Eastern tradition. Both Stoicism and Buddhism were developed during times of fierce social conflict. During these trying times, they served as forms of religious and philosophical therapy, bringing equilibrium to their practitioners. Our discussion proceeds in four parts: We begin by explaining the role of philosophical practice in the therapy of desire (Section 2). Next, we outline the historical development of the conception of desire in specific Eastern and Western traditions (Section 3.1), illustrating how desire constitutes the very dynamic of human life (Section 3.2). In particular, the three facets of desire (i.e., need, desire, and demand) are explored. We define these three facets conceptually, consider their influence on individuals and, finally, discuss how they relate to one another (Section 3.3). Furthermore, we analyze the Buddhist (Section 4.1) and Stoic (Section 4.2) conceptions of desire and how these traditions suggest that we ought to manage desire effectively. Finally, we briefly examine the similarities and differences between the two traditions’ views on desire (Section 5), especially the relationship between Epictetus’s three disciplines of the soul and the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path.

## 2. The Role of Philosophical Practice in the Therapy of Desire

### 2.1. *Philosophical Practice as a New Profession in Society and a New Paradigm in Philosophical Research*

Philosophical practice, also known as philosophical counseling or therapy, is a movement that arose during the 1980s in which philosophers (or those with related expertise) started to consult clients in private practices and discuss the application of philosophical concepts and principles (e.g., Socratic dialogue, conceptual analysis, argumentation, questioning, problematization, etc.) in everyday life. Explained another way, philosophical practice is the application of philosophy in daily life. A trained philosophical practitioner tries to correct people’s misconceptions and improve their thinking through philosophical exercises. In this way, the practical or existential problems that they encounter in their

daily lives can be well discussed and possibly resolved, leading them to find inner peace and profound happiness.

As shown by Socrates, philosophical practitioners are not confined to individual contemplation. Philosophical practice can also be conducted in public places such as cafes, libraries, classrooms, prisons, hospitals, companies, and even marketplaces. In these spaces, philosophical discussion can help ordinary people escape the banality of their everyday lives (Costello 2017; Fatić and Amir 2015; Marinoff 1999, 2002; Raabe 2001; Weiss 2022). To a certain extent, philosophical practice has developed into a new profession in society and a new paradigm for philosophical research. This can be demonstrated by the growing number of prominent philosophical practitioners, professional philosophical practice institutions, influential philosophical practice theories and methods, journals, books, academic associations, conferences, and globally admitted philosophical practice education and certification programs (Ding 2016; Ding and Yu 2022; Harteloh 2013; Lahav and Tillmanns 1995; Marinoff 2002).

Recently, philosophical practice has been garnering interest in academia and among professional counselors. Some areas that are currently being explored include, but are not limited to, (1) the aims, principles, and limitations of philosophical practice; (2) the methods and approaches used in philosophical practice (e.g., Socratic method, PEACE process, logic-based therapy, worldview interpretation, thought analysis, philosophical walks, etc.); (3) the application of Eastern and Western practical wisdom (e.g., Aristotelian eudaimonism and phronesis, the Stoic dichotomy of control, Confucian ethics of interpersonal relationships, the Daoist principle of “*wu-wei*”, the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, etc.) in philosophical practice; (4) the relationships between different styles of counseling (religious, philosophical, psychological, humanistic, artistic, medical, etc.); (5) the relationship between philosophical practice and other wellbeing-enhancing activities (e.g., prayer, meditation, yoga, Tai Chi, expressive writing, etc.); (6) the relationship and interactions between consultants and clients in philosophical practice; (7) the evaluation of the outcomes and validity of philosophical practice; and (8) “philosophy as a way of life” (PWL) in a hyperconnected world and postmodern society (Amir 2017; Cohen 2013; Lahav 2016; Schuster 1999).

## 2.2. *The Desire Dilemma as a Crisis of Modernity*

Philosophical practice has a tremendous import in our modern society (Marinoff 1999, 2002). This has become especially evident amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In times of crisis, as Jacques Lacan put it, people can feel “swept up or caught in the grip of a confused immediacy”; however, “do not give up on your desire”, which means “do your duty” (Badiou and Roudinesco 2014, p. 33). Similarly, according to Badiou and Roudinesco (2014, p. 61), Lacan’s contribution to contemporary society is fundamentally twofold: “On the one hand, it makes possible a limpid structural comprehension of the crisis as a symbolic crisis or crisis of the symbolic; on the other hand, he makes possible the affirmation of the irreducibility of the desiring subject as such”.

While there are various interpretations of our modern crisis (Bendle 2002; Boggs 1993; Duara 2015; Frosh 1991), in this paper we use this term to refer to the problems existing in modern society—more specifically, those problems faced by modern people since the European Enlightenment (Barnett 2004; Israel 2006). From the perspective of external phenomena, these problems generally include environmental pollution (Adam 1998; Mol and Spaargaren 1993), natural disasters (Kverndokk 2020; South 2013), energy crises (Love and Isenhour 2016; Malanima 2006; Spaargaren and Mol 1992), the threat of nuclear war (Albrow 1997; Dalby 1992), terrorist attacks (Di Cesare 2019; Mazarr 2007; Zafirovski and Rodeheaver 2013), the gap between the rich and the poor (Brian 2015; Lucas and Schimmack 2009; Reardon 2011), and vast moral decline (Bennett 2019; Turiel 2002). We can see that all of these problems are, to different degrees, associated with the multiplicity of human desires and the never-ending quest to satisfy them (Drury [1988] 2005, pp. 129, 134). According to Strauss ([1958] 2014, p. 230), while the world is characterized by scarcity and

the finite availability of natural resources, human desires are limitless and infinite. As a result, people crave a satisfaction that is fundamentally impossible, which then inevitably leads to the dilemma or paradox of desires.

Philosophical practitioners have paid extra attention to the inner mental aspects of people, especially the loss of values and meaning, depression, and anxiety in times of crisis (Feary 2020; Hațegan 2021; Raabe 2018; Repetti 2020). In the “increasingly isolated, uprooted, unstable, and gloomy world situation” (Sharpe et al. 2021), people (especially in the West) are currently confronting a crisis of meaning. This is “a state wherein the affects of absurdity, anxiety, despair and alienation effect a pervasive form of nihilism” (Vervaeke and Mastropietro 2021). The external, practical problems and the internal, existential problems are interwoven, resulting in the complex and unstable mental status of modern people.

While the theoretical and clinical research on this modern crisis is quite extensive in psychological counseling, it still needs to be further explored in the field of philosophical counseling or philosophical practice. Irvin D. Yalom, for example, has already given an extended treatment to the tradition of philosophical irrationalism. In his psychological novels *When Nietzsche Wept* (Yalom 1992) and *The Schopenhauer Cure* (Yalom 2005), philosophical ideas are brought into dialogue with ordinary, modern people. Through literature, Yalom provides tentative solutions to a series of mental crises that modern people may frequently encounter, such as existential suffering, paranoia, obsessive–compulsive disorder, and hysteria. Yalom (2002) criticizes the Buddha and Schopenhauer as “unnecessarily pessimistic”. Instead, he prefers a Nietzschean perspective, which encourages people to live their lives richly and to fulfill their potential and destiny.

Similarly, Keyes (2002) introduces the notion of mental health as a syndrome of symptoms including positive feelings and positive functioning in life. He describes the presence of mental health as “flourishing” and characterizes the absence of mental health as “languishing”. He also discusses the treatment and prevention of mental disorders, providing theoretical and practical guidance for people who find themselves languishing in life. More recently, Wu (2013) has examined the meaning and source of psychological distress, attempting to synthesize the ideas and methods of Epicureanism, Wittgenstein, Lou Marinoff, and Marxism, to confront universal boredom, loneliness, jealousy, alienation, and other mental health problems among modern college students.

Ultimately, the existing research on mental health problems is mainly concentrated in the fields of psychology and sociology. There is a noticeable lack of research from the philosophical perspective. In particular, philosophy has failed to explore the modern crises in light of the desire dilemma. In this paper, we take the desire dilemma as the starting point, philosophical practice as the foothold, and Buddhism and Stoicism as the theoretical background, so as to explore the possible ways of managing or even transcending the desire issues in the crisis of modernity.

### 3. The Philosophical Conceptions and Constitutive Dimensions of Desire

The word “desire” is difficult to define because it has varied uses throughout the history of philosophy. For example, it is difficult to distinguish desire from other synonyms such as “demand”, “want”, or “need”. In this tangled confusion that runs through the history of philosophy, no definitive definition has been provided. The prevailing view, though not without controversy, tends to regard desire as a mental state that is based on and beyond needs, which is sometimes manifested in the form of demand (Leather 1983; Lemaire 2014).

#### 3.1. Historical Development of the Philosophical Conceptions of Desire

In ancient Greece, desire and need were often intertwined with one another. Plato, for instance, delineated reason for thinking and desire for emotion. His understanding of desire assumed all of the functions of desire and need, which would be distinguished by later generations, in order to explain the generation and operation of emotion (Li 2022).

Epicurus, on the other hand, believed that human desires were divided into natural and unnatural ones. Some of the natural desires are necessary, such as appetite, and some are natural but unnecessary, such as sexual desire, while vanity and desire for power are neither natural nor necessary (Mayerfeld 1996; Zhang and Luo 2019). Rousseau's viewpoint is in line with Epicurus's, as he believes that natural and necessary desires can relieve pain, while natural but unnecessary desires can diversify pleasure without eliminating pain, and all desires that are not satisfied but do not inflict pain are unnecessary (Rousseau 2011). Like Plato, Epicurus and Rousseau unify the function of need and desire. However, they make a preliminary distinction between different types of desires. This sets the stage for the separation of desire and need in subsequent philosophical theories.

Throughout human history, the necessity of clarifying the boundaries between needs and desires emerged alongside the growth of industry and production. Karl Marx clearly proposed that human needs include natural needs and historically created needs (Heller 2018), bringing the logic of historical development into the distinction between needs and desires. While "false needs" are created by capitalism and its consumerist culture, "true needs" are natural needs that are given by our physiological nature (Chitty 1993; Heller 2018). In Marx's view, natural needs are the needs necessary to maintain the reproduction of human beings, while historically created needs are desires that go beyond the instinctive needs (Marx and Engels 1995, p. 286). Marx understands natural needs as true needs and historically created needs as desires. It is evident that Marx generally defines desires as demands that are not related to the maintenance of human survival. Instead, they are stimulated by specific historical conditions.

In the same vein, the Lacanian conceptual–terminological triad of "Need-Demand-Desire" structurally expresses the relationship between the three and precisely positions the concept of desire with the succinct formula "desire = demand – need". This implies that "desire is what remains after need is subtracted from demand" (Johnston 2022). In the translator's note of Lacan ([1977] 2001), it is especially emphasized how Lacan has linked the concept of "desire" (*désir*) with "need" (*besoin*) and "demand" (*demande*). For Lacan, the human individual is a living organism that has certain biologically innate needs. These needs are supposed to be satisfied by certain objects. Through the acquisition of language, the need is translated into demand, which presupposes "the Other to whom it is addressed, whose very signifiers it takes over in its formulation" (Lacan [1977] 2001, p. ix). However, what comes from the Other in response is treated "not so much as a particular satisfaction of a need" (Lacan [1977] 2001, p. ix), and the gap between the need and the demand that conveys it constitutes desire. Thus, desire is conceived as a "perpetual effect of symbolic articulation", which is fundamentally "excentric and insatiable" (Lacan [1977] 2001, p. ix). As a result, Lacan suggests that we should coordinate the desire "not with the object that would seem to satisfy it, but with the object that causes it" (Lacan [1977] 2001, p. ix), as in the case of shopaholics and fetishism. To summarize, needs carry biological significance; when needs are translated into demands, the surplus requirements constitute desires, which "take on the excess baggage of meanings over and above the level of brute, simple organic survival" (Johnston 2022).

Through redefining the major concepts that serve as the conceptual foundation of psychoanalysis—namely, the unconscious, repetition, transference, and drive—Lacan (1977b) distinguishes desire from drive and love. Unlike drive, desire is directed towards another subject—another person—rather than an object. This means that desire is no longer a question of satisfaction, but one that asks "what kind of object the subject constitutes for the Other" (Gammelgaard 2011). Notably, when reading Lacan's analysis of desire and *jouissance*, or enjoyment, Braunstein (2003) regards *jouissance* as the opposite pole of desire. If desire is fundamentally lack (i.e., lack of being), *jouissance* is positivity (a "something" lived by a body; a sensation that is beyond pleasure). While many researchers define *jouissance* as "the satisfaction of a drive" (Lacan 1992) or "the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom" (Evans 1996), Braunstein (2003) points out that the satisfaction proper to *jouissance* is neither the satisfaction of a need or demand nor the satis-

faction of any bodily drive. Rather, it is “linked to the death drive and thus related to the signifier and to history” (Braunstein 2003).

Finally, Deleuze’s concept of desire seems to be contrary to Lacan’s; however, they have much in common. While both of their theories of desire reach an ontological level beyond the dimension of everyday discussion, Deleuze fills up the deficiency of desire that was vacuumed by Lacan. Deleuze’s “desiring machine” is constantly engaged in the continuous production of emotional and libidinal energy triggered by the unconscious in various types of “Synthesis” (Colebrook et al. 2020; Ringrose and Coleman 2013; Tuck 2010). His understanding of desire is similar to Nietzsche’s “will to power”, in that it is full of energy, constantly flowing and generating, and incorporating all of the objects that it encounters as part of the “desiring machine” (Lash 1984; Schrift 2000; Smith 2011). To explore the radical, constitutive disjunction between the “virtual” world of the development machine and the “actual” workings of development interventions, De Vries (2007) proposes a Lacanian/Deleuzian perspective on development as a “desiring machine”. This machine “operates through the generation, spurring and triggering of desires, and by subsequently doing away with them” (De Vries 2007). To summarize, both Deleuze and Lacan understand desire ontologically; in this way, it is incongruent with animalistic need. Abundance and deficiency are regarded as two sides of desire—the original force and the essence of existence, respectively.

### 3.2. *Desire as the Very Dynamic of Human Life*

In the previous section, we have covered the mainstream views concerning desire in the history of Western philosophy, concluding with a relatively negative perception of desires. Furthermore, we have also emphasized the distinction between rational and irrational desires. It is worth noting that there are different ways of looking at the relationship between desire and need, which should be investigated from a more comprehensive and dialectical perspective by integrating it into a larger lexicon and taking into account variations observed from one language family to another. For example, with regard to early Chinese philosophy, Virág (2017) has found some passages in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* (with their ascetic tendencies) that “call for the suppression or control of emotions”, and other passages that “validate them as guides for proper living”. In the significant debate over the relationship between the “Principle of Heaven 天理” and “Human Desires 人欲”, neo-Confucian thinkers have sometimes been said to be “positively hostile to all natural desires associated with the body and bodily existence” (Marchal 2013).

The neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) has been particularly famous for his proposal of rejecting human desires by following the “Principle of Heaven” (Back 2015). It is argued that when human desires are out of control, the “Principle of Heaven” will be destroyed or even extinguished. However, if one succeeds in “returning to oneself and controlling one’s desires”, the “Principle of Heaven” will be restored and will “shine all the brighter” (Virág 2007). It is worth noting that Zhu Xi did not suggest that all desires were problematic. In his opinion, “the legitimate natural feelings and appetites of the human mind-and-heart” are different from the self-centered or selfish desires that threaten one’s moral existence; furthermore, “no appetite, desire, action, or activity was in itself evil; only selfish intent rendered it such” (De Bary 1989, p. 12). Therefore, while desires can and should be moderated, this does not necessarily imply a “suppression” or “trivialization” of desires (Munro 1988).

In the field of psychology, Maslow’s well-known “Hierarchy of Needs” has posited that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy from physiological needs, through safety, love and belonging, and esteem, to self-actualization (Maslow 1943, 1954). Maslow (1943) explains that humans are “motivated by the desire to achieve or maintain the various conditions upon which these basic satisfactions rest and by certain more intellectual desires”. He also emphasizes the significance of other basic problems about needs and desires, such as “the relation between appetites, desires, needs and what is ‘good’ for the organism”, and “the redefinition of motivational concepts, i.e., drive, desire, wish, need, goal” (Maslow

1943). The later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs places "self-transcendence" as a motivational step beyond self-actualization (Maslow 1969), which has brought forward important advancements in psychological theory and research (Koltko-Rivera 2006).

More recently, desire has also been described as good for human deliberation, because human deliberation requires human desire (Becker 2004). In particular, the belief-desire-intention (BDI) model of agency has become possibly "the best known and best studied model of practical reasoning agents" (Bratman 1987; Georgeff et al. 1999). In the BDI model, desire (i.e., goal, or the desired end state) is essential and necessary for the agent's decision-making because it decides "where we want to get (through our Goals)" (Georgeff et al. 1999). In other words, having a goal X is necessary to value or prize X in a way that motivates one to seek X—to desire X. According to Becker (2004), people may experience desire as a "push from within (an impulse) or a pull from without (an attraction)". People who have no desires at all will also have no ends. As a result, they are entirely unable to engage in practical reasoning that further leads to decisions and behaviors.

All in all, desires can be seen as the very dynamic of human life, which (1) distinguish between the moral and the immoral (De Bary 1989; Hou et al. 2022; Marchal 2013; Munro 1988; Virág 2007, 2017), (2) constitute the motivation of human survival and development (Brazil and Forth 2020; Chiesa 2009; Diamond 2004; Hatfield et al. 2010; Wright and Panksepp 2012), and (3) provide purpose and meaning needed for practical reasoning in human lives (Georgeff et al. 1999; Maslow 1943, 1969; Scott and Cohen 2020). As we conclude this section, it is important to reiterate that desire is not altogether negative, nor should it be indiscriminately avoided. In the following sections, we discuss how people can moderate irrational or excessive desires that may lead to vice or lack of meaning and purpose.

### 3.3. The Three Facets of Desire

As demonstrated above, philosophers can have different understandings of desire and its relationship with need and demand. Because we mainly build upon Lacan's understanding in this paper, let us briefly review it here. For Lacan, any need of the subject is in fact the subject's craving for the original completeness or the original "One", which encompasses not only natural and real "needs", but also the historical and unnecessary "desires". Lacan emphasizes that human desires are always directed toward the "Other", making their satisfaction essentially impossible. In the process of the subject's search for satisfaction, needs are verbally translated into demands, which produce alienation. The demands call for the satisfaction of the needs of the subject to the outside world in the form of signifiers. However, once expressed, the needs of the subject will lose a dimension, which cannot be filled by the specific objects. Through interpreting the tragedy of human desire in *Hamlet*, Lacan (1977a) claims that the very structure at the basis of desire (i.e., the "Need-Demand-Desire" triad) has lent "a note of impossibility to the object of human desire", and the dependence of Hamlet's desire on the Other subjects (e.g., his mother) forms "the permanent dimension of Hamlet's drama".

Following Lacan, we adopt a three-faceted view of desire (i.e., need, desire, and demand). In this view, "need" refers to the desire orientation that is inevitably stimulated by biological instincts and social history throughout a human life. "Need" plays a positive role in the survival and development of a subject and can be actively grasped and controlled by that subject. "Desire" is a residual dimension on the basis of need, which constantly drives the endless reproduction of desire itself and makes the satisfaction of desire fundamentally impossible. In this way, it might have a negative effect on the life of the subject. "Demand" is an expression of desire in the form of signifiers, including speech, writing, symbols, etc. In the Lacanian sense, once the desire is grasped by the consciousness of the subject, it is already expressed symbolically. What the subject perceives only becomes a demand when written by the "Other".

It is worth noting that, in this paper, desire is not divided into three parts of need, desire, and demand. Instead, desire takes on a trinitarian form: need, desire, and demand

form one ontological reality in a subtle state of superposition. All needs contain the potential for transition, development, and manifestation into desires. At the same time, all desires must be based on needs, and all conscious desires will become expressed demands. Expression often leads to alienation. The first alienation of desire is when it enters the subject’s consciousness. The second is when the subject of desire expresses demands in the form of sounds and words. This turns the original desire into a mythical impossibility and causes the continuous reproduction of desire. As noted by Evans (1996), the Lacanian concept of “alienation” differs greatly from the ways in which the term is employed in the Hegelian and Marxist traditions. For Lacan, alienation belongs to the imaginary order, which is “not an accident that befalls the subject and which can be transcended, but an essential constitutive feature of the subject” (Lacan 1977b, p. 215). Furthermore, according to Lacan (1993), alterity inhabits the innermost core of the subject, making subjects fundamentally and inevitably alienated from themselves and leaving no space for the “wholeness” or “synthesis” (Evans 1996). We depict this nuanced theory of desire in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Three facets of desire: definition, influence, and relationship.

Three Facets of Desire	Conceptual Definition	Influence on the Subjects	Relationship between the Three Facets
Need	In the process of unfolding human life, need is the desire orientation that is inevitably aroused by biological instinct and social history.	Need plays a positive role in the survival and development of the subject and can be actively grasped and controlled by the subject to a certain degree.	Needs contain the potential for transition, development, and manifestation into desires.
Desire	Desire is the residual dimension on the basis of need, which makes the satisfaction of desire fundamentally impossible.	While there are much more positive and dynamic understandings of “desire”, when one’s desire is excessive or irrational, it often has a negative effect on the life of the subject.	While desire is generally based on need, it is also what remains after need is subtracted from demand.
Demand	Demand is an expression of desire in the form of signifiers, including a series of forms such as speech, writing, and symbols.	Once the desire is grasped by the subject’s consciousness, it is already expressed symbolically, and what the subject gets in the inner perception can only ever be a demand written by the “Other”.	The desire that is realized by the subject is usually the expressed demand.

#### 4. Two Philosophical Traditions on the Therapy of Desire

##### 4.1. The Buddhist Path to Liberation from Suffering

Buddhism has mostly understood desires as human needs, demands, and motivations. There are various conceptualizations of desires, including the Four Nutriments, Three Desires, Five Desires, Six Desires, Six Nutriments, Seven Nutriments, Nine Nutriments, and Eleven Desires (Chen 2007). For example, the Four Nutriments 四食 refer to bodily nutriment (edible foods), the nutriment of contact (sense impressions), the nutriment of volition, and the nutriment of consciousness (Hanh 1999; Thich 2019). According to the Buddha, these four nutriments are responsible for the maintenance of beings and assist those seeking Enlightenment (Ranjan 2019, p. 79).

It is worth noting that the Six Desires in Daoism refer to human desire for life, desire against death, and the desire of human organs such as ears, eyes, tongues, and noses for sound, color, taste, and aroma, respectively. Conversely, in Buddhism, the Six Desires are the six kinds of cravings or thirsts that people have before Enlightenment, including the physiological desires of men and women 色欲, the desire for handsome or beautiful bodily appearance 形貌欲, the desire for dignified and charming demeanor 威儀姿態欲, the desire for pleasant voice and beautiful words 言語音聲欲, the desire for lustrous, soft skin 細滑欲, and the desire aroused when seeing the faces that one likes and is attracted to 人相欲 (Chen 2007; Ding 2011). According to Buddhism, the Six Desires are all obstacles

that require detachment because they prohibit people from attaining true knowledge of reality and liberation from the continuous cycle of rebirth (Metzner 1996, pp. 153–54).

All in all, according to Chen (2007), human desires and needs are multifaceted and can be roughly divided into seven levels, including the desire for life, physiological needs, emotional needs for sensory and inner pleasure, the social and emotional needs to be respected and loved, thirsts for knowledge and ideals, the desire for immortality and eternal happiness, and the desire to achieve complete liberation, i.e., Nirvana.

#### 4.1.1. Desire as the Cause of Suffering

It is argued by Wright (2009) that “no traditional religion had given desire a more negative role than Buddhism. Desire was named in the Four Noble Truths as the singular cause of suffering. Desire was precisely what was to be eliminated in enlightened life”. Buddhism fiercely criticizes the evil nature of desires, which includes the attachment, obsession, excesses, and unwarranted cravings for nutrients, sex, sleep, color, sound, aroma, taste, touch, wealth, fame, power, etc. The desire for these things is often called human desire. According to the Buddhist scriptures, in volume 8 of the *Samgiti-paryaya-sastra* 阿毘達磨集異門足論, there are cravings for possession 貪欲, cravings for obtainment 欲欲, cravings for closeness 親欲, cravings for love 愛欲, cravings for enjoyment 樂欲, cravings aroused by boredom 悶欲, cravings aroused by attachment 耽欲, cravings aroused by indulgence 嗜欲, cravings aroused by pleasure 喜欲, cravings aroused by collection 藏欲, and cravings for following one’s desires 隨欲.

Moreover, there are many kinds of suffering (*dukkha*) throughout human life (Groves and Farmer 1994). The first kind of suffering is bodily and mental pain. This includes being attached to the unloved, separated from the loved, not getting what one wants, or getting what one does not want. The second kind of suffering is potential suffering—the fear that something may happen to destroy current happiness or cause some future displeasure. The third kind of suffering is existential dissatisfaction, which includes disillusionment with one’s addiction or with a chaotic, stressful lifestyle. It is stated in *Samyutta-Nikaya* (“Connected Discourses” or “Kindred Sayings”, 相應部) that the realization of suffering is like a man discovering that his hair and turban are on fire, which impels him to action against the fire as soon as possible (Groves and Farmer 1994). This may partially explain why people are so eager to get rid of their sufferings.

Most significantly, in the *Samyukta Agama* 雜阿含經, the Buddha claims that craving is the origin of suffering 若眾生所有苦生, 彼一切皆以欲為本, 欲生、欲集、欲起、欲因、欲緣而苦生. The problem of suffering is the fundamental spiritual problem that Buddhism identifies and attempts to solve (Burton 2002). Many people turn to Buddhism because they are suffering and think that they can get rid of this situation by adopting Buddhist practices. There are different answers to the question of why craving causes suffering. A common Buddhist explanation is that the objects that one craves are impermanent (*anitya*)—things have no permanent, abiding essence. In this sense, they are without self (*anatman*) (Burton 2002). Burton (2002) further explains that craving is bound to lead to frustration because the object that one craves and becomes attached to will eventually be lost. When the objects of craving and attachment change, fall out of one’s possession, or pass away, one is disappointed and dissatisfied, producing suffering (see Table 1). On the other hand, according to Batchelor (2012), the only reasonable interpretation of the proposition “craving is the origin of suffering” is that craving causes one to commit actions that lead to being born, becoming sick, growing old, and dying.

Recently, Brewer et al. (2013) explored the Buddhist psychological models relating to the causes of human suffering—craving and attachment—through distinguishing the bodily, affective, cognitive, volitional, and conscious components of emotional reactions to triggers. They considered smoking as an example to demonstrate this process (Brewer et al. 2013). When environmental cues are registered through the senses (i.e., sight, smell, thought, emotion, bodily sensation), an “affective tone” automatically arises that is typically felt as pleasant or unpleasant. The valence of this affective tone is conditioned by

associative memories that were formed from previous experiences (mind). Subsequently, a desire or craving (e.g., the continuation of pleasant feeling or the cessation of unpleasant feeling tones) arises as a psychological urge to act or perform a behavior. This craving motivates action (smoke) and fuels the “birth” of a self-identity around the sense object (“If I smoke, I feel better”), creating a link between action and outcome that is established in memory (“me”). When this pleasant affective tone (or absence of an unpleasant affective tone) passes, one is left with “pain, distress and despair” in its absence. Once the cycle is complete, the individual is primed for the next time when they encounter a similar sensory stimulus (habit formation and reinforcement).

It is also worth mentioning that the three most prominent traditions in East Asia—i.e., Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—share some common beliefs about humanity, society, and universe, which then have significant influence on their philosophical and religious understandings of desires. All of these three traditions endorse “(1) harmonious view towards nature, (2) family as the core unit of daily life and resource for support, (3) harmonious social and interpersonal relations, and (4) avoidance of extreme emotional reaction” (Lam et al. 2010; Tseng et al. 1995). For these Eastern schools, Heaven and Man are united as One 天人合一, and humanity is considered to be a small part of the cosmos with no special superiority over other parts (e.g., animals, plants, and even non-sentient beings). Since humanity is considered to be one with nature, “ideas like mastering or conquering nature are alien to these traditions” (Joshanloo 2014). In order to realize human desires “in a manner consonant with social harmony and the common welfare” (Davis 1983), the three traditions are famously known to emphasize the necessity to live virtuously and righteously according to the Five Cardinal Virtues 五常 (i.e., benevolence 仁, righteousness 義, rites 禮, wisdom 智, and trustworthiness 信), Dao, or the Noble Eightfold Path.

There are also significant distinctions between these Eastern traditions. According to Chan (1955), the Daoist unity with the universe is “strictly individualistic and completely quietistic”, whereas the Confucian one is “essentially social and active”. While Confucianism regards the self as an extension of (and defined by) social relationships, Daoism believes that the self is but one of the countless manifestations of the Dao—an extension of the cosmos (Ho 1995). Furthermore, in order to enlarge the conception of the self and its place in society, nature, and the cosmos, Ho (1995) compared the different Eastern traditions with one another and with the core of Western understandings of these concepts. This suggests that future researchers should consider the possibilities (1) of a Confucian relational self without authoritarian and conservative elements, so as to leave room for the appropriate expression of desires, emotions, and feelings; (2) of a Daoist self that is more faithful to Chuang Tzu’s original ideas; and (3) of a Buddhist self that is full of wisdom and compassion, affirming life’s intrinsic worth, and without renouncing itself (Ho 1995).

#### 4.1.2. The Cessation of Suffering: The Noble Eightfold Path and Its Contemporary Application in the Treatment of Addiction

As described above, suffering is caused by craving (trsnā)—a mental state that leads to attachment (upādāna). Attachment occurs when an individual acquires the object that they crave. While craving and attachment may take various forms, Buddhism is concerned with the cessation of suffering, which occurs by eliminating its cause. In other words, by eliminating craving and the resulting attachment, we can eliminate suffering (Burton 2002). The Buddhist path to salvation prescribes “ridding oneself of passions and desires”, including one’s attachment to life, which implies “a total detachment from not only worldly objects but also the ego itself” (Ho 1995). In fact, the Buddha considers the source of attachment to be multilayered. He regards his own Enlightenment as a multistep process, leading him to develop many successive stages in the Wheel of Suffering, each based on the next: likes and dislikes, sensations, contact with events through the senses and the mind, the illusion of mind and matter, consciousness, reaction, and ignorance (Hayes 2002).

The Four Noble Truths 四聖諦—one of the best known and oldest formulations of Buddhist doctrine—outline how craving leads to suffering. The Buddha declares that the

Four Noble Truths are a fundamental way in which one can truly understand the indisputable and undeniable truths that cause human suffering. The Four Noble Truths can also be seen as encompassing the Buddha's diagnosis and treatment of the persistent problems of human nature by presenting four linked steps to understanding human existence and suffering: life is suffering 苦聖諦; the origin of suffering is craving 集聖諦; the cessation of suffering is Nirvana 滅聖諦; the way leading to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path 道聖諦 (Batchelor 2012; Burton 2002; Groves and Farmer 1994). It is logically inferred that, to be freed from suffering, irrational desires or cravings must be eliminated (Alt 1980; Herman 1979; Visvader 1978).

Desire or craving is usually regarded as the endless pursuit of material interests or sensory enjoyment. However, this understanding does not align with the Buddha's unique understanding of life's anxieties, nor does it align with the reality of human anxieties more generally (Gu and Feng 2016). Prior to abandoning the earthly world, all of the Buddha's (Siddhattha Gotama) material interests and sensory enjoyments had been satisfied to a certain extent. Given that his desires or cravings did not lie in those secular things, there were other objects of desire that caused his suffering. We can understand this further by considering Zen Buddhism, which synthesizes Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to form a deeper understanding of desire. While the Zen concept of desire is closely related to the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, Zen does not care too much about the levels of needs. Instead, it pays more attention to exploring the deficient nature of desires that can never be satisfied (see Table 1). The object of desire in Zen also does not merely refer to specific things, but rather a kind of intentionality that always points towards the "Other". This intentionality is always changing its objects and can never be fully satisfied, thus bringing anxiety and panic to the subject. This suffering of anxiety also motivates Zen to adopt a transcendental ethical attitude towards desire.

Now that we have considered the cause of suffering, we can turn our attention to its cessation. The Buddhist path to ending suffering is through the practice and training of the Noble Eightfold Path 八正道, i.e., the "how to" activities of the Buddhist path to liberation, which cover the three areas of wisdom, ethics, and concentration or mental discipline (Humphreys 2018, p. 203). The Noble Eightfold Path consists of Right View 正見 (an accurate understanding of the nature of things), Right Intention 正誌 (avoiding thoughts of attachment, hatred, and harmful intent), Right Speech 正語 (refraining from verbal misdeeds such as lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and senseless speech), Right Action 正業 (refraining from physical misdeeds such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct), Right Livelihood 正命 (avoiding trades that directly or indirectly harm others, such as selling slaves, weapons, animals for slaughter, intoxicants, or poisons), Right Effort 正精進 (abandoning negative states of mind that have already arisen, preventing negative states that have yet to arise, and sustaining positive states that have already arisen), Right Mindfulness 正念 (awareness of body, feelings, thought, and phenomena (the constituents of the existing world)), and Right Concentration 正定 (single-mindedness) (Bodhi 1984; Davis 2014; Kumar 2002; Lopez 2021).

According to the Buddha's teachings, the only way to get rid of desires or cravings is to practice the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to Nirvana. Nirvana, then, is the ultimate destination for people to free themselves from the confusion of desires. Nirvana is closely related to Enlightenment. In many ways, Enlightenment is Nirvana. According to Kapleau (1965, pp. 340–41), Nirvana is "the realization of selfless 'I'; satori, the experience of Changelessness, of inner Peace and Freedom. Nirvana (with a small 'n') stands against samsara, i.e., birth-and-death. Nirvana (or more exactly, pari-nirvana) is also used in the sense of a return to the original purity of the Buddha-nature after the dissolution of the physical body, i.e., to the Perfect Freedom of the unconditioned state". Nirvana and Enlightenment are two sides of Zen meditation, which allow individuals to achieve Enlightenment and reach Nirvana. As Suzuki (1991) has claimed, "Satori is the *raison d'être* of Zen, without which Zen is not Zen". The essence of Zen Enlightenment is the loss of consciousness, knowledge, or even cognition (Gu and Feng 2016). Through Zen Enlight-

enment, people can fundamentally transcend the suffering caused by desire and craving. When people succeed in getting rid of their self-consciousness and cognitive bondage, entering the original state of non-emptiness and non-existence, they will naturally be free from the shackles of desires that abound in the secular world.

It is worth noting that over the last 30 years, the value of the Noble Eightfold Path for the cognitive behavioral treatment of addictive behaviors has been well explored in the West (Brewer et al. 2013; Groves 2014; Groves and Farmer 1994; Kumar 2002; Marlatt 2002). From a Buddhist perspective, addictive behavior may be seen as a false refuge and a source of attachment that inevitably leads to suffering (Groves and Farmer 1994). Although the Buddha's main focus was helping people to attain Enlightenment, he was also aware of the problems caused by addictive behaviors such as drinking and gambling (Groves 2014). According to Marlatt (2002), the impact of right effort, or right motivation, in the Noble Eightfold Path is implicit in the transtheoretical stages-of-change model of addictive behavior change (i.e., precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance) proposed by Prochaska et al. (1993). The practice of meditation and the Noble Eightfold Path has offered a clear and distinctive alternative to the 12-steps approach and the disease model of addiction (Groves and Farmer 1994). The Noble Eightfold Path has played an especially influential role in the development of the Spiritual Self-Schema (3-5) therapy designed for HIV prevention and addiction treatment (Avants and Margolin 2004; Avants et al. 2005; Beitel et al. 2007; Margolin et al. 2006). Dylan (2014) also combines the Noble Eightfold Path and yoga therapy (NEPY) as an approach for women living with substance abuse challenges. The initial qualitative feedback gathered from the focus groups suggests positive responses to the NEPY model. In the future, we can expect the emergence of more research applying Buddhist wisdom such as the Noble Eightfold Path to the diagnosis and treatment of the mental issues that people consistently suffer from in their daily lives (Ding et al. 2022).

#### 4.2. Desire Management of Stoicism

Stoicism was one of the most important philosophical schools during the Hellenistic period. During this time, war plagued the Mediterranean, and the contemplative rationalism nurtured under the order of the classical Greek period had been fiercely shaken. The significance of existence and the purpose of life became issues that philosophers were eager to explore. Hellenistic philosophy generally emphasizes how philosophy can be a sort of therapy for the struggles of daily life, such as anxiety and excessive anger.

On the topic of desire, philosophical schools in this period had varying views. Epicureanism distinguishes three kinds of desires: natural and necessary, natural though not necessary, and neither natural nor necessary (Roskam 2007; Sedley 1998; Vander Waerdt 1987). Epicurus argues that the pursuit of happiness is in fact a response to natural and necessary desires, which limits desires to the level of needs and avoids the outward expansion and self-circulation of insatiable desires (see Table 1). Thus, for Epicurus and his followers, only certain kinds of desires are licit—those that are both natural and necessary. All other desires cause disturbance of the soul and prevent individuals from obtaining *ataraxia*—tranquility of the soul.

The Stoics generally take a restrained attitude towards desires, and their discussion of desires is intertwined with the concept of “passion”. They advocate that passions should be rejected if they deviate from reason. Furthermore, they contend that one's desires and cravings should be regulated by the Logos of nature, allowing the soul to maintain consistency and harmony. For example, Sharpe (2014a) points out that Epictetus's *Handbook (Enchiridion)* sets forth a distinct set of existential practices meant to align an individual's thinking, desire, and action with philosophical truth through habituation. In the following section, we focus on the Stoic interpretation of desires and how they propose mitigating them through the use of these “spiritual exercises” (Hadot 1995).

#### 4.2.1. Living according to Nature and the Dichotomy of Control

According to Becker (1999, p. 150), the Stoic theory of emotions is closely connected to their conception and identification of the ultimate good, which they understood as “living well”, “happiness” (eudaimonia), or “the fulfilment of all desires” (excluding “the intermittent satisfaction of momentary wants”). The Stoics claim that, for the wise man, happiness is always in his power—that he possesses all that he needs to be happy. Such a virtuous life is “what we all naturally desire, or would desire, if we were capable of fully grasping its benefits to ourselves as well as to those who benefit from being the recipients of virtuous actions” (Becker 1999, p. 151). People who desire happiness in this Stoic sense must desire virtue for its own sake, to regard virtue as an end rather than a means, because happiness consists in the virtue itself (Becker 1999, p. 168). While admitting that “desires can conflict, or conflict with other sorts of considerations”, Becker (1999, p. 169) summarized the inferential rule from desires to norms as follows: If  $e$  is an Endeavor for agent  $s$ , and  $d$  is a Desire of  $s$  to do or be  $c$  in  $e$ , and  $d$  is a Sufficient reason in  $e$  for  $s$  to Undertake  $c$ , then (nothing-else-considered)  $s$  ought to Undertake to do or be  $c$  in  $e$ .

Furthermore, Pigliucci (2020) proposes that there are two theoretical pillars of Stoicism: the notion of “living according to nature”, and what modern Stoics call “the dichotomy of control”. When faced with the black hole of desires that swallow almost everything, and with the despair of never being able to fill this hidden black hole in the soul, the Stoics use the Logos (Reason) to draw boundaries and establish norms for cultivating virtue and living the good life. For the Stoics, irrational desires were generally excluded, belittled, and suppressed as antagonistic to happiness.

The Stoics’ management of desires aims to enable people to practice how to live consciously “in that we pass beyond the limits of individuality, to recognize ourselves as a part of the reason-animated cosmos, and freely, in that we give up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us, i.e., actions which are just and in conformity with reason” (Hadot 1995, p. 86). Thus, it can be said that the Stoics grasp desire from an ethical point of view. They do not divide human desire into “real needs” and “false needs” on the basis of some abstract criterion. In Stoicism, the three facets of desire (see Table 1) are also integrated and indistinguishable. However, Stoics do judge whether or not a desire is reasonable, given that unreasonable desires lead to the subversion of reason by passion, making souls suffer because of it. The Stoic ideal of “indifferent”—having no desires for the wrong things—is similar to the Confucian goal of “not-being-moved-in-the-Mind 不動心”, since both of them refer to a state of consciousness in which reason dominates sensibility and is not affected by anything but still maintains one’s willpower (Chen and Chen 2022; Lu 2020). The Stoics believe that passions and beliefs are intimately intertwined. False beliefs—those are contrary to cosmic rationality—fuel our passion for unreasonable things. Thus, correcting irrational beliefs about the world and the self will lead to the rejection of irrational desires and passions, making way for a good life of inner peace (Zhang 2009).

The Stoics therefore also believe that people, as the subjects of desires, need to manage inordinate desires. To prevent one’s soul from suffering from the stubborn disease of desire, one must live in accordance with the Logos (Reason) of nature and lead a rational life, actively reducing one’s excessive desires. They should become indifferent, having no irrational desires for external objects. The Stoics understand the objects of irrational desires as those external factors that are beyond our control. Epictetus suggested that “On the one hand, there are things that are in our power, whereas other things are not in our power. In our power are opinion, impulse, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is our own doing. Things not in our power include our body, our possessions, our reputations, our status, and, in a word, whatever is not our own doing” (Handbook 1.1, Seddon 2005, p. 12). Thus, to reduce unnecessary suffering and achieve inner peace, one must abandon the attachment to the myriad of uncontrollable desires.

It is evident that the Stoics consider the specific objects of desires to be ever-changing and difficult to grasp. Therefore, this indeterminacy of the specific objects of desires makes

the Stoics keenly aware of another level of desires—the uncontrollability of the objects of desires and the impossibility that irrational desires can actually be satisfied (see Table 1). As Epictetus (1983, p. 12) explains:

“What a desire proposes is that you gain what you desire, and what an aversion proposes is that you not fall into what you are averse to. Someone who fails to get what he desires is unfortunate, while someone who falls into what he is averse to has met misfortune. So if you are averse only to what is against nature among the things that are up to you, then you will never fall into anything that you are averse to; but if you are averse to illness or death or poverty, you will meet misfortune. So detach your aversion from everything not up to us, and transfer it to what is against nature among the things that are up to us. And for the time being eliminate desire completely, since if you desire something that is not up to us, you are bound to be unfortunate, and at the same time none of the things that are up to us, which it would be good to desire, will be available to you. Make use only of impulse and its contrary, rejection, though with reservation, lightly, and without straining.”

We can see that, similar to Buddhism, Epictetus’s approach to the cessation of suffering is also the detachment, or the elimination of desire. When emphasizing “the dichotomy of control”, he claims that the desires that need to be eliminated are those that are not up to us, i.e., the uncontrollable; however, the things that are up to us (i.e., the controllable) are permissible. He further clarifies that, even for the things that are controllable, if they are against the Logos of nature—such as eating or drinking too much—we should be cautious that they will bring us misfortune, so that we should better be averse to these things and never fall into them. We continue to discuss this issue in depth in the following section.

#### 4.2.2. Three Disciplines of Desire/Aversion, Action, and Assent

“Life is full of misfortune and disappointment, so how can we be happy and flourish?” To answer this question, Seddon (2005) explains that Epictetus’s ancient teachings are for those who wish to live the philosophical life—that is, to live happily in the world without being overwhelmed by it. In order to accomplish this, one must learn how to sustain emotional harmony and a “good flow of life”, despite what fortune has in store for them. Furthermore, the three disciplines—desire/aversion, action, and assent—allow the Stoic prokoptōn (trainee) to pursue the eudaimonic life (Seddon 2005, p. 14). Specifically, in Epictetus’s *Discourses (Diatribai)*, he contends that there are three areas of study in which a person who is going to be good and noble must be trained (*Discourses* 3.2.1-2, Epictetus 1995). The first discipline concerns desires and aversions. This ensures that they may never fail to get what they desire nor fall into what they would avoid. The second discipline concerns the impulse to act and not to act, and appropriate behavior in general. This involves acting in an orderly manner and after due consideration, and not carelessly. The third is concerned with freedom from deception and hasty judgement, and whatever is connected with assent.

The first discipline most directly relates to our concerns in this paper, given that it touches on desires and aversions. It was also of chief importance to Epictetus. As he explains, “Of these [three areas of study], the principle, and most urgent, is that which has to do with the passions; for these are produced in no other way than by the disappointment of our desires, and the incurring of our aversions. It is this that introduces disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; and causes sorrow, lamentation and envy; and renders us envious and jealous, and thus incapable of listening to reason” (*Discourses* 3.2.3, Epictetus 1995). In other words, as the Noble Truths of Buddhism have similarly put it, passion is the origin of desire and aversion, and since the disappointment of our desires is the origin of all the misfortune in our life, it could be naturally inferred that, in the eyes of the Stoics, passion is the origin of human suffering. Truly, it is “the only real source of misery for human beings” (Seddon 2005, p. 15).

According to Seddon (2005, pp. 15–16), the discipline of desire teaches that most of the things we desire (wealth, fame, power, and so forth) are not up to us. Thus, we become easily frustrated (worried, depressed, envious, angry, fearful, etc.) when we try, and fail, to obtain them. To avoid these negative emotions that accompany this frustration, we should limit our desires to our own dispositions and moral character. The Stoic *prokoptōn*, for example, when pursuing those “preferred indifferent external” things that are needed for fulfilling both those functions and projects that they deem appropriate for them as individuals, will not be distressed by setbacks or failures, nor will they be troubled by obstructive people, nor shaken in the face of other difficulties (illness, poverty, or lack of recognition, for instance) (Seddon 2005, pp. 15–16). After all, none of these things are entirely up to them. By maintaining this consciousness—of what is truly good (virtue)—and remaining aware that indifferent things are beyond their power, the Stoic *prokoptōn* exercises self-discipline and self-mastery.

Pigliucci (2020, pp. 388–89) further cautions that training people to desire only what is within their control does not mean that the Stoics do not value externals. Externals are, in fact, categorized as preferred or disfavored “indifferents”, meaning that they have value (*axia*), but not moral valence. For example, being wealthy (or poor) or famous (or unknown) does not make you a good (or bad) person. As Epictetus describes, “The following are non-sequiturs: ‘I am richer, therefore superior to you’; or ‘I am a better speaker, therefore a better person, than you’” (*Handbook* 44). Moreover, he believes that the discipline of desire concerns the nature of the cosmos (Ding 2018). Desire serves as the ethical value behind the laws of the cosmos; that is, it requires people to accept their limited control of the world and accept everything that happens around them. Ultimately, the Stoics distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable desires in terms of value judgments; they advocate that we control our desires and follow cosmic reason, so as to avoid suffering and obtain virtue. This has obvious import given the dilemma of desires that plagues modernity.

#### 4.2.3. Temperance as a Cardinal Virtue, and Its Role in Positive Psychology

The Stoics—especially Seneca—recognize four cardinal virtues that can be used as a moral compass to navigate life: prudence (or practical wisdom), courage, justice, and temperance (Pigliucci 2020, p. 387). Each of these four cardinal virtues is further comprised of subordinate, or secondary, virtues. For example, for the primary virtue “Temperance” (*sophrosyne*), which is about the impulses (*hormai*), its subordinated virtues include the following: good ordering (*eutaxia*), *epistēmē* of when things should be done; propriety (*kosmiothes*), especially of seemly behavior relative to one’s social role; sense of honor (*aidēmosyne*), especially careful to avoid just blame; and self-control (*enkrateia*) (Sharpe 2014b, p. 38). Similarly, the Stoics divide vice into foolishness, injustice, cowardice, and intemperance. They argue that there is a unity of the virtues, meaning that to have one virtue is to have them all. Although the virtues are unified, they do apply to different spheres of practice (Stephens 2020, p. 35). Interestingly, Epictetus hardly talks about the four cardinal virtues, which are far more prominent in the work of Seneca. Conversely, Seneca does not mention the three disciplines. Given this diversity in Stoic thought, it is evident that there is more than one way to be a Stoic (Pigliucci 2020, p. 389).

Among the four cardinal virtues, temperance concerns self-control and acting in such a way that is proportional to the circumstances, neither over-reacting nor under-reacting (Pigliucci 2020, p. 388). Because of these reduced desires, wise men will not need great wealth, fame, or power. The recognition of the natural limits will bring them temperance and the other virtues (O’Keefe 2020, p. 425). For example, Zeno was said to have shown the utmost temperance, practicing great frugality, wearing a thin cloak, and eating raw food (Stephens 2020, p. 26). The early Stoics are believed to have formed their philosophy in reaction to the views of Aristotle (Sandbach 1985). For Aristotle, prudence is like the Global Positioning System of the virtuous person, and temperance is the steering wheel; prudence indicates the right direction, and temperance (understood as moderation, restraint, self-discipline) takes it there (Kaak and Weeks 2014, p. 358).

Nevertheless, Wong (2006) reminds us that we must not confuse the Stoic doctrine of “extirpating the passions” with the idea of suppressing all emotions. The Stoics understand “passions” as those emotions that are “excessive” by rational measure and, therefore, contrary to the Stoic supreme principle of “following nature”. Becker (1999) further exploits this distinction between appropriate emotions and inappropriate passions in a different direction. He proposes to give special feelings for others a place in a “Stoic good life”, which actually means “the harmonization of reason, desire, and will” (Becker 1992). Similar to modern psychology, Stoicism also believes that when passions have become too intense and overwhelming, people will literally stop thinking; self-control is necessary for a healthy life and, in order to maintain or restore self-control, people should reduce negative affect such as fear, rage, or panic (Becker 2004). Becker (1999, pp. 110-1) grants that the wise Stoic will “calibrate the strength, depth, and dissemination of our attachments to the fragility and transience of the objects involved”, so that the attachment will not be so strong, deep, and disseminated that its rupture makes people incapable of exercising their agency.

On the other hand, positive psychologists have recently classified 24 “character strengths”, or psychological ingredients (i.e., processes or mechanisms), that define the virtues that are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers, i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 13). Among these six core virtues, “temperance” refers to strengths that protect against excess, including forgiveness and mercy (forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful), humility and modesty (letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; not seeking the spotlight; not regarding oneself as more special than one is), prudence (being careful about one’s choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted), and self-regulation or self-control (regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions) (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 30). We can certainly benefit a lot from developing these character strengths and practicing them in different domains of our daily life, so as to increase our life satisfaction and make a full and eudaimonic life possible, especially in a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Buschor et al. 2013; Peterson et al. 2007; Proctor et al. 2011; Schutte and Malouff 2019; Zhao et al. 2022).

## 5. Discussion

Due to the differences in the domains of discussion and the socioeconomic backgrounds of Buddhism and Stoicism, an all-embracing comparison between their views on desires would be challenging. They represent the wisdom of the ancient Eastern and Western philosophers, respectively, in managing desires in the real world—especially in times of crisis. With the development of history and the changes in the social economy, the problems associated with desires in modern society have been different from those discussed by Buddhism and Stoicism. However, the eternal significance of their theories lies in the fact that they can still inspire us in modern society.

We can summarize that both Buddhism and Stoicism generally vote for an attitude of temperance or transcendence towards desires. This is not simply equal to the elimination of all desires. Desire is commonly accepted in both the ancient Eastern and Western traditions as a kind of self-circulating and ever-strengthening disposition, which could be harmful if we allow it to develop freely and excessively. At the same time, if we want to truly transcend our desires, we must achieve a state of unity with the cosmos, following the Logos (Reason) and conforming to the basic needs of life while reducing the excessive ones (see Table 1).

When speaking of the difference between these two traditions, (Zen) Buddhism emphasizes Enlightenment and transcendence from one’s own experience, renouncing distinctions and differences, so as to be free from any bondage and to be one with the original. This makes excessive desires incompatible with transcendence. The Stoics, on the other

hand, emphasize the dichotomy of control, the regulation of desires in life by the Logos, and the conscious suppression of irrational desires. In summary, the Stoics tend to let nature take its course and make false desires impossible to arise, while the Buddhists advocate more for the artificial mandatory control of desire, in which the free will and agency of humans as the subjects of desire are vividly and fully manifested.

Furthermore, [Humphreys \(2018, p. 184\)](#) has investigated Epictetus's three disciplines of the soul and their relation and harmony with the Buddhist Eightfold Path. He concludes that the discipline of desire/aversion is related to the realization, insight, knowing, and reflecting on Right View (of desires and aversions), leading to Right Intention, which involves exercising proper control over our desires and aversions. The problem of impulse and repulsion is being able to perform appropriate actions (*kathēkonta*) and control the mental activity that drives or motivates us. Being aware that our conduct, speech, efforts, and livelihood might lead to our suffering and a failure in undertaking our duties and responsibilities to others and society as a whole, the discipline of action is related to Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood, and Right Effort. Finally, the discipline of assent subjects our impressions to critical examination so that our interpretation and judgement about the impressions does not add anything subjective that could result in a poor judgement. As a result, we must have the Right View of things and the Right Intention, supported by Right Mindfulness (right awareness and attention) and Right Concentration (right focus) in relation to our impressions and what we assent to ([Humphreys 2018, p. 184](#)).

Additionally, it is interesting and inspiring that Epictetus characterizes the signs that someone is making progress towards *aretē* (moral excellence) and a eudaimonic life as follows:

“They blame no one; they praise no one; they find fault with no one; they accuse no one; they never say anything of themselves as though they amount to something or know anything. When they are impeded or hindered, they blame themselves. If someone praises them, they laugh inwardly at the person who praises them, and if anyone censures them, they make no defence. They go about as if they were sick, cautious not to disturb what is healing before they are fully recovered. They have rid themselves of all desires, and have transferred their aversion to only those things contrary to nature that are in our power. They have no strong preferences in regard to anything. If they appear foolish or ignorant, they do not care. In a word, they keep guard over themselves as though they are their own enemy lying in wait.” (*Handbook 48*, [Seddon 2005, p. 28](#))

Such a portrait of the ideal character not only applies to the Stoics, but also fits the enlightened Buddhists who have practiced the Noble Eightfold Path. Therefore, we can see that, although the Buddhists and Stoics have nuanced views about desires, they both advocate for the restraint and regulation of desire. This, of course, can inform the desire dilemma of modernity ([Pigliucci 2020](#)) and is worthy of further research in the future.

In the end, we must acknowledge that the comparison between Buddhism and Stoicism is, of course, not something new. Nevertheless, our paper focuses on interpreting or elaborating one aspect or dimension (i.e., the desire-related concepts and ideas of Buddhism and Stoicism) instead of giving a comprehensive historical description of them as many other studies have done ([Ding et al. 2022](#)). By offering a synthesis of the way “desire” is situated in the history of philosophy, religious praxis, and in the contemporary philosophical practice movement, we demonstrate how the wisdom of ancient traditions can revive and constructively engage the problems that plague modern society, particularly those that result from excessive or irrational desires. While the existing literature mainly focuses on the theoretical discussion of desires, we have further illustrated how the practical dimension of philosophical theories can be applied in dealing with modern problems through concrete tactics and strategies in positive psychology and the cognitive behavioral treatment of addictions. Furthermore, we also acknowledge that there are other contemporary descriptions of desire aside from the Lacanian approach. We chose to adopt the Lacanian conceptual–terminological triad of “Need-Demand-Desire” because of its clarity

and ease of use. This clear structure (see Table 1) elucidates well the relationships between need, demand, and desire. Amidst the desire dilemma of modernity, such a clear understanding will undoubtedly help people analyze and distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable desires.

## 6. Conclusions

The desire dilemma in modern society has made the discussion of desires particularly dominant. Philosophical practitioners are concerned with the therapy of desire in times of crisis and regard it as a challenge to academic philosophy. According to one of the most influential philosophical practitioners, Lou Marinoff:

“While philosophy and practical are two words not likely to be linked in most people’s minds, philosophy has always provided tools for people to use in their everyday lives. When Socrates spent his days debating major issues in the marketplace, and when Lao Tzu recorded his advice on how to follow the path to success while avoiding harm, they meant these ideas to be used. Philosophy was originally a way of life, not an academic discipline—a subject to be not only studied but applied. It was only in the last century or so that philosophy became completely consigned to an esoteric wing of the ivory tower, full of theoretical insight but empty of practical application.” (Marinoff 1999)

In our current society, where consumerist culture is prevalent, philosophical practice can help us understand how to control and regulate desires. By absorbing and practicing wisdom from the Eastern and Western traditions, philosophical practitioners can help people overcome the excessive and irrational desires that have become so common in our modern lives.

Accordingly, in this paper, we adopt a three-faceted view of desire based on the historical development of the philosophical conception of desire (see Table 1), and we further distinguish the subjects and objects of desire from the desire itself. We have illustrated that the Buddhist path to liberation from suffering is the elimination of or detachment from excessive or irrational desires. According to the Four Noble Truths, desire is the cause of suffering, and the cessation of suffering naturally goes back to putting an end to the source of suffering, i.e., desire, by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path (i.e., Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration). On the other hand, through investigating the two theoretical pillars of Stoicism, i.e., the notions of “living according to nature” and “the dichotomy of control”, we have also shown the Stoic way of desire management, with particular focus on Epictetus’s “three disciplines” and Seneca’s “four cardinal virtues”.

As for the specific judgment of desire and the specific practice of its regulation in real life, it also depends on the sincere examination and analysis of people’s current situations and their particular cognitive behavioral patterns. In modern society, the interpretation and intervention of the desire dilemmas by Buddhism and Stoicism might be limited and biased. However, such exploration has at least provided a principled direction for restraining desire from exceeding its limits and viciously expanding, so as to reduce or completely eradicate the negative consequences that accompany excessive desires and cravings. Although life and society are both constantly evolving, the ancient wisdom of Buddhism and Stoicism can still work as a compass for the eudaimonic life. They are very practical philosophies for the 21st century and beyond (Pigliucci 2020), especially in times of crisis (Chase 2021; Kramer 2021; Sharpe et al. 2021).

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