

Ethics of Intention and Effect: Making Decisions on How to Act in a World Full of Need

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Introduction

In this paper I will present a few reflections and questions that pertain to all of us as Buddhist practitioners, and particularly those of us who work for the benefit of others. The main purpose of this paper is to show that, when we choose to help others in whatever way, the positive intention to do good and act ethically is not enough. We also need to be able to assess our effect, and use this information to re-inform our views, intentions and further actions. If we do not do this we are selling ourselves short. Below, I will briefly outline a model which shows how view, intention, action and result flow into and inform each other, and how our internal reasoning process can operate in the world; I will then use this model to ask questions that we all need to ask ourselves when engaging in altruistic activity and I will use my own reflections from 18 years of working in development and as a doctor to illustrate the challenges we face.

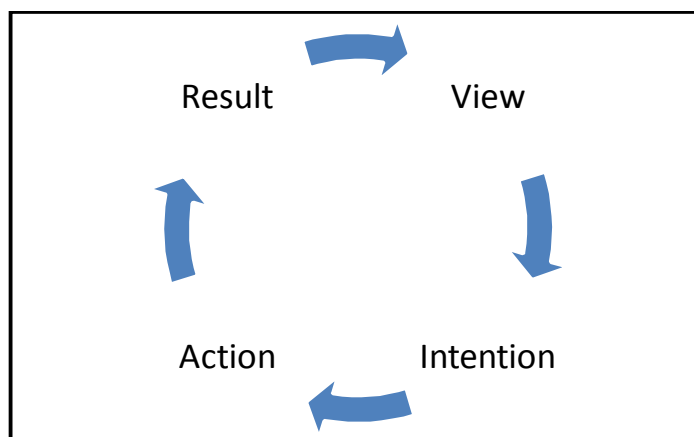
I am a practicing Buddhist in the Triratna Buddhist Order, and have been Ordained for 6 years. I have worked in development, partly in India but mainly in Nepal, for 18 years. My area of interest is the arena of Sexual and Reproductive Health. I have been a doctor of medicine for 12 years and work in a poor, inner city practice as a General Practitioner (GP) in East London, UK. I spend half my time working as a GP and half running a charity called the Green Tara Trust which works in Nepal.

The First Bodhisattva Vow

Although traditionally the vow to save all living beings from samsara, however innumerable, is considered a Mahayana concept, the intention to relieve the suffering of self and other is present from the time of the Buddha and in all traditions. The practice of developing the four brahmaviharas requires us to imaginatively put ourselves in the position of another; this means trying to understand the human condition, the 4 Noble Truth teachings on dukkha and the teachings on pratitya-samutpada. Once we start to practice, we cannot but want to respond to the suffering in the world around us; and there is so much. So, how do we choose to respond? After all, we always have a choice. The world now seems much smaller due to air travel, and as a Westerner with training as a doctor I can find any number of causes and people to help; how do we choose where to put our energy?

Model

This model comes from the way I see my own mind working and the process I see that we go through as individuals and groups working together on a common cause. It is largely based on the idea of a Buddhist trying to follow the Eightfold Path, and the interaction between this individual and the outside environment. The model is not exhaustive or perfect but will help to act as a reference to look at as we go through examining our intention and effect.



We can start in the circle with view. View here can be divided in two; the “higher” form, or perfect vision or view (often referred to as “supramundane”), and the “lower” form of right view (“mundane”). Our views perfect and otherwise, inform our intention or emotion. Once we have explored our intention in relation to our work, we move to deciding on an action. The action may be performed alone or as part of a group. Once you have completed your action, you go back and assess the result or effect you have had. This result will then inform further views, intentions and actions.

The cycle is iterative and augmentative (similar to the spiral path); as awareness builds, the result of our action can feed back in and make us re-examine our views. This can then allow us to consciously re-assess our intention in light of what we have found and re-direct our actions accordingly.

A number of things will affect this cycle. Using the model of the Noble Eightfold Path, these four stages will be penetrated and affected by the amount of awareness (7th arm) and concentration (or lower form of Samadhi, 8th arm) we have. It will be affected by our conditioning and karma. In order for the cycle to keep repeating in an augmentative fashion, there needs to be continuity of purpose.

Although this cycle may be happening within us, we are working in the world, and so the external environment will have a huge effect on this process. The more developed we are, both in experience as Buddhist practitioners and as development workers, the more we will be able to see ourselves clearly and keep our continuity of purpose throughout our interaction with the world.

Inspiration: Perfect Vision

For those of us who have come to practice Buddhism in the West, we have come looking for answers to suffering, to loss. Most of us will have had some small flickers of Perfect Vision (*samyak drsti*); glimpses of things as they really are. These moments or visions are tiny breakthroughs into Reality, and give us a flavor of the Perfect Vision the Buddha described. In its fullness, Perfect Vision describes the enlightened state of complete penetration of the nature of Reality.¹ In some formulations, Vision is divided in two; Perfect Vision or those flashes of insight are referred to as supramundane. The mundane, which are sometimes referred to as View (*drsti*) are models that we can use as guiding principles to help us penetrate Reality. These models include the 10 silas, the Wheel of Life and the Spiral Path. Whilst the mundane “views” should not be confused with Reality itself, they can be used to help us practice more ethically: they set a benchmark to guide us in our practice and help set

¹ Sangharakshita: *Vision and Transformation, An Introduction to the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path*. Chapter 1, pp22-23. Windhorse Publications 1995

up the conditions for the arising of the Enlightened Mind. Moments of Perfect Vision are hugely important as they often act as our inspiration to practice, to connect with others and to continue to engage with the world.

Reflections:

- (a) From where do I specifically draw my inspiration to relieve the suffering of others?
- (b) Who are my role models, and what is it about them that inspires me?
- (c) If I am working in a team, can we explore these inspirations together, and do we have any joint inspirations?

Personally, I feel inspired by the description of the Buddha as “the trackless one”. This refers to the description of the Buddha’s Enlightenment, and since his practice of ethics is perfect at this stage, he leaves no karmic mark on the world. In the Dhammapada, it says:

“179. By what track can you trace that trackless Buddha of limitless range, whose victory nothing can undo, whom none of the vanquished defilements can ever pursue?

180. By what track can you trace that trackless Buddha of limitless range, in whom exists no longer, the entangling and embroiling craving that perpetuates becoming?”²

Reflecting on this image is helpful to work against the desire for fame, and pride. I am finding that, as long as the work that is done in the program I work in is positive, it does not matter so much that I personally did not do it. Once, when I was visiting the program area, I went to a woman’s health promotion group to assess the health promoter. I was invited to join by one of the women who was very proud of the group; she told me the name that they had given it, what it meant to her and the name of the organization that helped to set it up. She talked with me in Nepali and very informally. She told me about the problems they had had, and the things that were going well. She had no idea that I was the founder of that organization. It gave me great joy to know that she had no idea who I was, and if she had not talked so informally and frankly, I would not have had the opportunity to see things so clearly from her perspective. It almost felt like the work I had done was “secret” or “nameless” but was having a benefit, and I did not need this woman to be grateful to me in order to experience joy.

Right View: Exploration and Intention

Assuming we are inspired and committed to engaging in altruistic activity, we then come up against our mundane views or emotions. These are usually extremely imperfect and unintegrated, and we find that our motives for wanting to act in the world are very mixed. This is normal but is something we all find frustrating. We see a huge gap between “perfect” view and what we are really like; this gap is often seen by our ability to understand a concept intellectually but not be able to practice it.

My teacher, Sangharakshita expresses the gap in this way: “Why is there this terrible gulf, this terrible chasm, between our theory and practice, our understanding and our operation? Why are most of us most of the time unable to act in accordance with what we *know* is true, what we *know* is right? Why do we fail so miserably again and yet again?

The answer to this question is to be sought on the very depths of human nature. We may say that we “know” something, but we know it only with the conscious mind, with the rational part of ourselves. We know it theoretically, intellectually, abstractly. But we must recollect that man is not just his conscious mind. He is not all reason- though he may like to think he is. There is another part of us, a much larger part than we care to admit, which is no

² Buddhavagga: The Buddha. Translated from Pali by Acharya Buddharakkita, 1996-2011. <http://access.toinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.14.budd.html>

less important than our reason. This part is made up of instinct, of emotion, of volition, and is more unconscious than conscious. And this wider, deeper, and no less important part of ourselves is not touched at all by our rational or intellectual knowledge, but goes its own way, as it were dragging the mental part, still protesting, along with it.

Thus we see that we cannot go against the emotions. The emotions are stronger than reason. If we want to put into practice what we know to be right, what we know to be true, we have to enlist, in one way or another, the co-operation of the emotions. We have to be able to tap those deeper sources within ourselves and harness them, also, to our spiritual life, so that we may *implement* what we know to be right and true. *For most of us the central problem of the spiritual life is to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding.* Until we have done this no further spiritual progress is possible. That is why Perfect Emotion comes as the second stage, or second aspect, of the Noble Eightfold Path, immediately after Perfect Vision.”³

In relation to work for the benefit of others, our experiences of Perfect Vision or *drsti*, our ideal views and where we are now with our mixed motives all combine as forces in us to determine our action. If we want our action to be effective, there are some things we need to do. Firstly, we need to be as honest with ourselves as possible about how we are; what is in our minds, our capabilities, our intentions. Secondly, we need to set up positive conditions to allow us to see all these forces as much as possible: these include practices to develop awareness, *samadhi* and ethics. Thirdly, unless we are taking action on our own, we usually need to be in communication with others in our work. Spiritual friendship, as the Buddha said to Ananda in the *Upaddha Sutta*, is the whole of the spiritual life. I will not dwell on the huge benefits of spiritual friendship here; just to say that it is very hard for us to fully develop and grow unless we are coming up against our imperfections and wrong views a lot; and being in communication with friends who are practicing and prepared to be honest will certainly help this. In addition, friendship and connection with others who are doing similar work to you in the world, who are more experienced at it than you, whatever their religious background, is hugely important.

Reflections:

- (a) What are my core beliefs and values in relation to this work?
- (b) Will I be able to express these values in my work and within my team? If not, do I want to work on this project?
- (c) With whom can I ongoingly explore and become more aware of my motives for doing this work, and how will I remind myself to be vigilant in continuing to examine my motives?

Action

In order for you to decide what action you want to take to relieve the suffering of another, you need to investigate and reflect on a few areas. These reflections can be done alone, or in a team. Your action may already be fairly well decided or limited by the team you have. For example, the team I work with in Nepal are all doctors of health or social work who specialize in sexual and reproductive health. We all have a preference for working in Asia, particularly in Nepal but would consider working anywhere if the project was right for the team. However, if you are starting from scratch, say an individual or a group who have a variety of skills, there are certain basic motivating factors you can ask yourself as an individual, then explore within your working group, to help you decide.

³ Sangharakshita: *Vision and Transformation, An Introduction to the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*. Chapter 2, pp35-36. Windhorse Publications 1995

Reflections:

(a) For whose benefit I am doing this?:

Again this is an examination of motives. It is likely part of the action you are doing to benefit yourself, but is it benefitting others enough for it to be worthwhile?

(b) Do you have enough skills and resources to undertake the action that is best for this situation? If not, can you find someone who does?

(c) Given the resources we have (people, money, community situation, time), what effect is possible?

(d) Are you under pressure to do something because your teacher or a funder wants something but you do not think it is the best use of resources? Is the community putting you under pressure to engage in a project you do not think is of benefit, and how do you address this?

(e) What is important in my work: helping huge numbers of people, or helping fewer with a better quality of interaction?

An example that I commonly come across is NGOs or religious organizations building hospitals in poor areas where there isn't even a primary health care center. Imagine a situation where people may be living with no sanitation and polluted water. There are not even basic health workers because they do not turn up for work at the Government health post, the drugs that are sent from the Government run out quickly or are stolen and you can only buy paracetamol at the tea shop. If you walk into that situation as a doctor, my experience is the first thing the community will ask for is a hospital. I have asked people in these communities why this is, and in my experience it firstly brings the community prestige and importance; they feel good about themselves and can boast about their community to others. Secondly, they wrongly believe that it will solve all their health problems. This is because of a lack of understanding of how health and disease work.

In the area of Nepal where I work there is fairly good water supply at the source but poor sanitation. So people go to the toilet in the water supply. They use this water for drinking, cooking and washing. Unsurprisingly, the areas with such poor sanitation have a lot of children dying under 5 from infectious disease. Improving sanitation by building toilets and changing hygiene practices would save many more lives than building a hospital, and it would be much cheaper. So already from this, we can see that my opinion is that money is better spent on improving sanitation whilst theirs is that they want a hospital.

How do you resolve this? There are various ways, and there will always be differing views between what you think is best and what others think. But who is "right"? There are usually many ways to engage with a problem, and there are many ways that work. At a community level, one way is to spend time with the community and work out all the different needs and wants, do your own assessment and then make a decision. Where I work, the poorer areas wanted their own hospital even though there is a good primary care post 30 minutes away by ambulance. After spending 4-5 days in workshops with community members, the most common underlying need was to have healthy babies and for the women, to be able to deliver their babies safely. Since our charity wants to maximize sustainability for the community and work with changing health behavior, we were able to agree on a 5 year program to do this together. So in this way we found common ground, a cause that the community feels motivated to engage with and thus a program plan.

This gets us into the area of funding, and so I am also asking this question because you may feel torn between the desires of many people and what they want: a funder, your Buddhist team, the community you want to help, and yourself. In fact, pressure may be put on you to do a program that you can see will not work. Individual funders in Nepal and India

are still very keen to fund solid things that they can see such as hospitals and schools. They often want their name put on the top. Their decision to want to do this is not usually coming from a place of knowledge. Raising money for a building is comparatively easy, but the cost of running and maintaining it is huge. Unless someone is prepared to continue funding the ongoing costs forever, it may be worth reflecting if it is worth starting to build at all. In the poor area I described above, there is no motivation on the side of the community to maintain a hospital and so, I am sure if an NGO came and built one it would stand empty. In addition, if you want to just look at the numbers of lives saved, spending money on improving primary care services, such as assisting Government health posts to function well, or on training motivated people in the community to teach health promotion through groups will help many more people and be much cheaper than a poorly thought-out hospital. Of course hospitals in some areas are necessary, but not before the community even has a functioning primary care facility and clean running water.

For myself, I am motivated by helping larger numbers of people which means working more in the area of primary care and public health, rather than hospital medicine, but all are important and necessary. Ethically, I think the most important thing is that the help that is given is appropriate to the situation, and in order to find out what the situation is you need to gather the necessary information from relevant sources in the planning stage before the action.

In Nepal our charity runs a health promotion program in an area for 10,000 people. Its aim is to improve people's health behavior so that they attend antenatal care when pregnant. We know from research in this field that if people can get to their antenatal checks both the woman and her child are less likely to die or suffer complications. There are 2 strands to the program; one is working with community groups to help change their ideas and behavior around pregnancy. The second is that we strengthen the Government services so that the quality of care they are giving is improved. We use basic level Nepali health staff as health promoters who run groups, visit women in their homes, run mass events and train other women to run their own groups. Much of our budget is spent on training staff and community people so that when we go, they stand a good chance of being able to continue the program on their own. We are 3 years into this program and so far the results are good. The women have become empowered more quickly than expected, are setting up their own NGOs to start businesses and save money separate from the men, and more are going for their checkups. We have not built our own health facility on purpose; we are investing our time and money in PEOPLE and it is hoped that these changes will be long-lasting.

Resources:

With regards to resources, we are limited by funds so cannot work in an area larger than 10,000 people at the moment. We are limited by time, as all the Westerners involved who oversee and fundraise for the program work for free, and have other jobs in order to earn money. We are limited by the community and their motivation to change. However, since we have been working there for 3 years the community is becoming more motivated and empowered and we are seeing more change happening. They are also becoming more reliant on each other and less on the program. We are limited by the boundaries of health promotion research; this means, for this program, we do not start any action unless it is related to maternal and neonatal care. Local and national politics has an influence on local resources, and as we combine our resources with the communities this has an impact.

As Buddhists, we have an obligation to work in a way that is as ethical as we can manage, but also to use resources as effectively as we can. We also want our action to have as positive an effect as possible. If we can see that the action a community want is not going to be effective, we have to make a decision about whether or not to engage with it. If a funder

wants us to get involved in a program that we do not think is an effective use of resources, we have an obligation to talk to them and try to change their minds. It is interesting that in Nepal, for a long time there have been parallel Government and NGO systems and finally, NGOs are starting to work with the Government to help them achieve their objectives. People such as myself who have been working there for many years have had enough of seeing the same services duplicated, and it is hoped that the NGOs working with the Government can help support them to make them more effective. Since Government services will continue to be funded it makes more sense to work with them as they will be there for the long term.

Result and Assessment of Effect

If we are to learn from our actions, we need to be able to get a sense of our effect in the world. If we assess our action by looking at the result, we can find out what went well and what did not. We can then change the way we work accordingly. We also need to learn from others doing similar actions and see what results they got. In development language, we refer to ongoing checking of results as monitoring and the end assessment as evaluation. Most programs will evaluate in the middle of the timeline also.

Assessing the result of our actions can be exciting as well as painful; we get to see what has changed for the better, what has changed for the worse and what has stayed the same. As Buddhists, it is important not to be vague or miss this part out by convincing ourselves that we can never see ALL the effects of our actions, since everything is inter-dependent. This is true, but it should not stop us from looking and making tentative conclusions. Most programs will spend approx 8-12% of their budget on this, and it is money well spent.

With regards to the health promotion program in Nepal, we spend approximately 20% on monitoring and evaluation; as well as having a direct effect on the people involved, our intention with the program is to research which health promotion methods work most effectively in this community. The information we get is used by us to work with various Government and University bodies to create a new Health Promotion curriculum for all health workers in Nepal. If we want our action to have national level consequences, our research has to be very full and meticulous. Nepal has not educated its health workers in Health Promotion until now, and this data is being used to create the training curricula for health workers nationally. So even though the charity and field program are small, we hope to be able to have a significant effect at a national level. We hope that the end result is that Nepal has a new Health Promotion curriculum with methods that have been tried and tested by us as well as other NGOs working in a similar field. For me, this end result makes the time and effort involved worthwhile as it should contribute to improving the health of many more people.

Continuity of Purpose

This whole process of going through vision/ view, intention, action and result needs to be penetrated by as much awareness as possible. This is the 7th part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and includes awareness of ourselves, the environment, things and other people. We also need as much concentration as possible and this is often referred to in the initial stages of perfect Samadhi, the eighth limb of the Noble Eightfold Path. If we have enough awareness and concentration, then this helps to give us continuity of purpose, or samprajana. The more concentration and awareness we have, the more we can have continuity of purpose in our work, and the more effective we will be. These three elements; concentration, awareness and continuity of purpose are the positive driving force or energy that keep the process augmentative.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha is giving a discourse to some monks. In it, he refers to penetration of Reality; firstly, by being fully focused and secondly, continuing to keep our focus, on four areas; the body, feelings, mind and mental qualities. In the sutta, The Buddha expounds how this is to be done for each of the four areas.

For example, in the section referring to focus on the body, in the section on the breath, the Buddha says:

"And how does a monk remain focused on the body in & of itself?

[1] "There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building — sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore [lit: the front of the chest]. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.' Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, 'I am making a long turn,' or when making a short turn discerns, 'I am making a short turn'; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long' ... He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself."

At the end of his discourse, the Buddha emphasizes the insight that one would have if one had the ability to keep perfect focus in all four areas:

"Now, if anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven years, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"Let alone seven years. If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for six years... five... four... three... two years... one year... seven months... six months... five... four... three... two months... one month... half a month, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"Let alone half a month. If anyone would develop these four frames of reference in this way for seven days, one of two fruits can be expected for him: either gnosis right here & now, or — if there be any remnant of clinging/sustenance — non-return.

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow & lamentation, for the disappearance of pain & distress, for the attainment of the right method, & for the realization of Unbinding — in other words, the four frames of reference.' Thus was it said, and in reference to this was it said."

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratiified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.'⁴

Reflections:

Often, the Satipatthana Sutta, with these elements of focus and continuity of purpose, are discussed and taught within the realms of meditation teaching. But we can see that the Buddha is encouraging us to develop these qualities so that they are ever present. In relation to work and engagement with the world, continuity of purpose may mean different things to each of us, so I would like us to ask ourselves:

- (a) How do we link continuity of purpose in meditation to continuity of purpose in engagement with the world?
- (b) What are the ethical qualities associated with having continuity of purpose in my work, and the ethical implications if it is lacking?
- (c) On my own, and with my team/ colleagues, how can I/ we improve our continuity of purpose in relation to our work?
- (d) What does continuity of purpose look like when we have it/ see it in others?

I think continuity of purpose is a very positive quality. I associate it with being focused, relaxed and flexible. In my work, it helps to have a goal to work towards, otherwise I can feel uninspired, BUT for me I am happy for the way I work to change along the way if I find a more effective method. When I lack concentration and awareness, I lose any continuity of purpose- I can forget why I am working and who it is really meant to benefit. This is when working with others who have a similar purpose can help to remind us and bring us back. If we do not have colleagues then we have Sangha friends who can help, but we have to remember to communicate with them so they can help us see ourselves clearly.

Time to ourselves and the external environment

It is hard enough having focus when we are working on our own; it is made much harder when we come into contact with the world around us. We have no choice about this if we want to work with others. All of our internal processes; our vision, intentions, actions, results, awareness, concentration and focus will be affected by the outside world, and can derail us from our continuity of purpose. This is why it is important that when we engage with the world, we also put time aside for ourselves for reflection, meditation and spiritual friendship so we can at least see what is going on for ourselves. This will help us to retain the positive qualities present in our internal processes and remind ourselves of our mission when we are working.

The external environment can completely ruin or radically help any plans or program we have. If we are doing a long term program things may well change in time, and a program that looked like it would succeed in the beginning may well hit problems down the line. The external environment is anything or anyone outside our actions or those of our team, which is most of the universe. We can assess the likelihood of success before we even start; doing a needs assessment is an important part of the program cycle, as it may show us our efforts are likely to succeed in one area more than another. Also, all of us are prepared to take different amounts of risk and we are the only ones that can make that decision for ourselves. The external environment includes the receptivity of the community you will work with, the political situation locally and nationally including wars and the natural environment such as terrain, weather systems and natural disasters.

⁴ Satipatthana Sutta: Frames of Reference, Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bikkhu 2008-1011. <http://accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html>

When I started working in Nepal there was no war; since then there has been ongoing fighting and disruption. I feel committed to the country in many ways and the situation has only been too risky for me to be there for about 18 months in 18 years. All our programs have been affected by political disruption such as road blocks, bombings, and local political struggles, which in the past resulted in progress being slower than expected. I have found that in order to work in the field in Nepal, I need regular time out to see my friends who are not involved in the program, and to have periods of time alone, even if it is in my flat in Kathmandu with the noise of dogs barking outside, when I do not answer the phone or see anyone, so that I can be quiet.

Many Buddhists will not work within any political arena due to the ethics that are practiced in those circles. In the UK, I can easily be a doctor and not be involved in local politics. However, in Nepal it is a different story. At a local level, politicians will invite themselves to be a part of your program if it looks good for them, and if they do not like your program they will cause disruption. In the past one group tried to steal money and goods from us, but the community were able to respond skilfully and without violence with some direction from us. Since our program also wants to make changes at a national level, we have to be prepared to talk to national-level ministers and politicians but we do not need to spend much time with them. We also do not need to give into the pressure of corruption. It helps us to divide the national level work amongst the team so it does not all fall on one person.

Deciding how and when to quit

If one has continuity of purpose, this does not mean one has to continue working against all the odds even if the program is failing. As we have seen, the external environment can have a much larger effect sometimes than our own efforts and it is often out of our control. As individuals or as a team, we need to decide to leave the program unfinished (for example if our lives are threatened) or to finish it early (if we are not having a positive effect). We have to weigh up the consequences of our actions; the benefits and losses if we stay or go, and sometimes going is the most sensible option. This assessment of consequences, when done with positive intention and consideration of all involved, is a very positive process and has a different quality to “dropping” a program with no consideration of yourself or others involved.

Summary

In summary, as Buddhists working to benefit others, we have a duty to ourselves and to the world to set up the conditions so that our actions are as beneficial as possible. In order for this to happen, we need to work out what our intentions are, and inspired by positive intention, work out practically how this could manifest through action. We have to see things through, so that we can assess the effect we have had. In order to shed light on this process, we need concentration and awareness, which we develop in many ways but mainly through meditation. Once we have some self awareness and concentration we can bring continuity of purpose to the process. Continuity of purpose will keep the process of view leading to intention then action and effect in motion, like a positive, driving wheel. The more aware and concentrated we are, the more continuity of purpose will be present. We will want to see things through and allow our effect to inform further actions. The external environment will have a huge impact on us; we need to take this into account in our personal practice and program of work. If we can commit to practicing in this way, we can work towards refining not only our intention but increasing the positive effect we have in the world.