
Duty, Discipline, Determination

James Low, June 2011

Moving in the ocean of stimuli, consciousnesses are ceaselessly evoked. So much to react to, so much to do and so little time.

Our orientation to what occurs can be structured in three ways, 1) habitual, 2) intentional, 3) open immediacy.

Habitual

Mostly we operate habitually according to patterns, associations, tendencies, construals and so on, that were installed a long time ago. In this mode, a stimulus arises in the field of experience and is identified as being either 'external' environment or 'internal' thought, feeling or sensation. The stimulus evokes a habitual response such as excitement, boredom or fear. Then these responses lead to their linked pathways of action such as joyful mobilisation, depressed sinking, avoidance/retaliation and so on.

These pathways of response constitute our personality and feel necessary and 'natural' even when unpleasant, tedious, guilt-ridden etc. In the flow of stimulus/response, time goes by, life goes by.

Once the basic structure of life is established it tends to run on automatically unless interrupted. New tasks can become a terrible challenge as they force us to alter the way we do things. That gives rise to the struggle to keep life on track, mobilising brief focused intentions to rectify new trends that cannot be normalised. This is the usual pattern of operation of the five skandhas¹ and is the basis for samsaric existence.

In this context notions of duty adhere to the constraints and requirements we adapt to in the course of our socialisation. We find ourselves required to carry out tasks under a sense of importance and necessity and it becomes our duty to carry them out in whatever is considered to be the 'right' way. This can apply to anything from ironing one's shirts to fighting for one's country. Lurking behind the continuing performance of these tasks is a sense of fear and anxiety arising from the sense that something is at stake, that negative consequences would arise from their non-performance. This brings forth a disciplined, though perhaps not very conscious, commitment to maintain the patterns that one has adopted. The determination to maintain these ways of being is often revealed in the sadness and confusion that arises when, due to illness, redundancy etc., this is no longer possible.

Intentional

The second mode is governed by conscious intentionality organised around known guiding principles. This is the basis for any ideological/experiential system whether political, economic or religious. The more the ideology strays from the actual, the phenomenological, the more chaos such intentionality can create (e.g. Stalin's five year plan, Mao's Great Leap Forward, religious murder of witches and South American native peoples etc.)

In the dharma systems, the ideological and experiential are linked through view, meditation, activity and result in each of the 'nine vehicles'². Intention is vital if clarity is to be developed, for intention not only establishes a path of linked tasks but illuminates when the path is strayed from. For all the vehicles, duty, discipline and determination are required because of the pervasive tendency to become distracted and to act in the habitual manner outlined above.

In the Mahayana³ practice, duty is established through obligation and disciplined through vows. If all sentient beings have been our mother in a previous life then the care they offered us puts us under an obligation. Everyone we meet is someone we are in debt to – there is a non-negotiable duty to act for their welfare. This duty is supported by the Hinayana⁴ duty of focused attention developed through samatha and vipassana, meditations which respectively develop calmness and clarity, and through the vows of restraint. It is also supported by the vajrayana samayas⁵ which bind us to the regular use of powerful methods⁶ for the welfare of us all.

Duty is a sense of obligation. It is not the friend of the ego's flighty freedom, the desire to follow one's own inclination. When we accept a duty there is a diminution of the freedom to do as we like – although we may find a different kind of freedom within the constraints of duty. The fulfilment of duty requires the development of specific qualities notably those of the six paramitas⁷. In particular, patience is necessary for overcoming the irritation arising from the frustration of one's impulses by the necessity of the duty one is committed to. Duty often makes the ego sad which is why it helps to link it to a series of intentions: to help all beings, to do the practices necessary for this, to do the practices mindfully in spite of all obstacles including feeling a lack of interest. The expansive focus of the intention helps to contextualise situational difficulties and so keep them to their actual size.

Discipline supports intention by developing skills of non-distraction and the power to not be deflected or overwhelmed by contingent circumstances. Impulses can seem so vital and full of life – we often feel most alive when we are following them. Yet the impulse is like a river in the Sahara, suddenly roaring down the wadi only to vanish into the sand. Discipline implies being able to organise and manage one's time and energy so that tasks are attended to and completed in an orderly manner.

Discipline is dualistic in structure, with one aspect of ourselves keeping other aspects in check. It is a gathering of oneself, an aligning of small momentary intentions with the bigger enduring intentions to which we have committed ourselves. For most people, integration into the ground awareness is difficult if energy is very dispersed, so some degree of discipline is part of all the dharma paths and vehicles at some stage. A disciple is one who submits herself to discipline, who follows a path rather than wandering hither and thither. The goal is not gained without sacrifice, a sacrifice which is invariably resisted by the ego's need to maintain its familiar sense of self. For example, being on time requires being in time, submitting to the non-negotiable regularity of linear time. Finding, and aligning oneself with the specific, emergent rhythms of the world requires an attention to the ever-changing pulsations, movements which are not determined by one's own wishes.

Discipline simplifies life by allowing the issues, events and practices that are privileged by our intention to remain figural while relegating to the background those aspects that are deemed important by our habits. This of course is using the intentional artificial to simplify the habitual artificial as part of the task of deconstructing the artificial into its own natural ground. Finding the middle way with discipline, neither too tight nor too loose, is not easy for it requires an adult, non-defensive and non-blaming acceptance of our tendencies to go astray.

Determination is the force of will, the power to carry on despite all set-backs. It is the courage and strength to shape events rather than be shaped by them. It involves a resolute intention that will block and remove impediments. Determination requires a clear sense of the goal in order to find the path through rugged territory, often in the dark. Not to give up, not to turn away, but to keep heading home. However, the ego seeks a home that is different from the home sought by awareness. The ego's sense of home lies in the good and pleasing object, the feeling of comfort arising from the satisfaction of our desires. Whereas awareness seeks only to abide in its non-duality. Objects encountered along the path can be misappropriated as homes for the ego, thus making the journey very long and confusing. Each false home adhered to will vanish, due to its own impermanence and the fickleness of our fancies. Each eviction or abandonment brings a degree of disorientation. Determination is the force that allows us to avoid these temporary distractions and to continue mindfully following the central intention whatever the terrain. The enemy of determination is leakage, letting energy and focus be dispersed through the porosity that comes from being interested in everything.

However, balance and perspective is vital otherwise duty, discipline and determination will reveal their shadow aspects of drudgery, distraction and depression. Where duty loses its enlivening inspiration and becomes simply a demand to do what must be done it becomes drudgery, and the person compliant with it a mere drudge, an empty anybody yoked to a task that has lost its meaning.

If discipline becomes enforced beyond a person's capacity they are likely to protect themselves with distraction. The too-tight disciplining of attention that will not allow any free movement will lead to its opposite, aimless distraction, for the mind's natural activity is movement not fixation. Over-coercion will lead to the compensatory search for release through undirected wandering.

When determination is applied to push through an unending stream of difficulties exhaustion of body and spirit is likely to occur and this leads easily into depression and hopelessness. A dynamic balance is required so we have to allow a pulsation between the polarities of effortful striving and effortless ease. The middle way is not a matter of being fixed to the middle but of not getting lost in the extremes.

Open Immediacy

The third mode, open immediacy, places no restriction on what occurs because it is not looking for anything. There is no intention, no extension, no tension. Relaxed, open at ease, this is the state of completion needing nothing added to it. Unchanging, it is not a construct and so is free of beginning and ending; this is the truly indestructible vajra. In this state activity arises spontaneously without creating anything. The energy of openness performs all activity, is all manifestation, and so all the possibilities of samsara and nirvana arrive in it.

However, the relaxation that allows the letting go of conscious attention, also allows the arising of habitual patterns – and if they are not allowed to self-liberate, new webs of entanglement will begin.

Polarised notions of order and chaos can lead to an anxious over-involvement – a sense that it's all up to me and if I don't hold it together, everything will fall apart. This leads to busy pre-occupation which leaves no time or space to attend to the natural ordering of phenomena. Experience is, by its own nature, patterned, exhibiting form, structure and immediacy. Out of and within the ever-open purity of ungraspable being there is the immediate presence of the perfectly formed field of experience. Relaxation of anxious engagement is necessary to allow natural perfection to reveal itself as not what we thought it would be. Our thoughts seem to be the leaders and organisers of experience yet they express the after-the-factness of conscious intention. The act has already been initiated before it reaches consciousness. Egoic self-referencing consciousness is part of the post hoc narrative, the creation of an artificial order that follows the direct immediacy of the actual situation. The actual situation cannot be apprehended by thought yet it is revealed to open awareness unpreoccupied by thought.

This opens up a very different perspective from that embedded in the paths of striving. When we set a goal, such as developing compassion and wisdom, if we don't radically shift our frame of reference, we may find ourselves identifying our driven and constrained ego as the necessary vehicle of success. This is a big mistake as striving cut adrift from its ground of emptiness and lacking the motivation of compassion will simply become part of the problem.

Whether we follow a path of striving or seek a path of enjoyment we need to avoid collapsing into the object of our intention. In the arising of subject and object, whether in habitual or intentional ways, the key point of focus is the experiencer not the object of experience. Integrating with the simple state of experiencing presence is the always open door to ground, path and result.

In order to clarify this we can consider five ways in which we as the subject can relate to the arising of experience. The first three ways occur primarily as 'internal' experiences, as thoughts arising in myself. This is the domain revealed and questioned by meditating with a prefigured focus. The more we can move from states of habitual fusion the more freedom we have to engage creatively with the potential of each situation we encounter.

1. Total fusion with the arising: an unmediated imperative e.g. 'I must sit down', or 'I hate you', in which there is only unlimited identification with what is arising. Other arisings are devoid of impact, and I am just this uninterrupted fact.
2. Noticed fusion, for example, 'I feel tired and I need to sit down soon.' Or 'I am aware that I hate you', in which there is some recognition of the fused state. This recognition may or may not influence the sense of inevitability of the trajectory of the state.
3. Defusion, which is achieved through recognition and the availability of the sense of agency able to manage the relation between 'myself' and the arising I am tempted to fuse with. For example, 'I know I'm tired, but I'll get a rest soon so I'll just keep going' or 'I know I can feel hatred for you but we have to work together so I'll keep it in check.' The balance or choice point of identification/disidentification is present in consciousness and can be tipped by an act of will, for here conscious intention is stronger than habitual assumption, impulse, foreclosure etc.
4. Recognition of flow, where the 'unbiased observing' view-point is settled into, allowing a sense of seeing what is going on in both 'object' and 'subject' arenas. Thus both the environmental field and its impact on the senses, and the experience of thoughts, feelings and sensations and all that is taken as constitutive of I, me, myself, are opened up to focused attention. This brings a sense of the impermanence of experience so that the

intensity of the moment has less power to capture identification and thereby create a small world. Thus 'I am tired', or 'I hate you' remain as part of the field; not removed or ignored yet also not able to dominate and control.

5. Non-dual awareness, where, by resting in open awareness, the movement of subject and object is unimpeded as the flow of non-reified experience. Presence is pervasive and so always already there, formless and without essence yet the illuminator of all. Its indestructibility is free of hopes and fears connected with gaining or losing any particular pattern of arising, whether 'subject' or 'object'.

Generally, the development of conscious intention helps to clear a space free of habitual pre-occupation. In this space focused activity for the benefit of others can be performed in the manner of a dream. This reveals activity as always already in integration with open immediacy.

Developing duty, discipline and determination are not lower practices but vital aspects of the falling away of intoxication by the fantasies of ego's imaging. For the activity of dharma to continue they are necessary aids, the supports that ease the passage back to the source that has not been left. Staying on track may sound restrictive but it opens the already open door.

Notes

¹ The five *skandhas* or heaps are the five basic components of a person according to the buddhist tradition. They are form, identified as shape and colour; feeling, identified as positive, negative or neutral responses to form; perception, identified as the interpretive response to feeling and form; associations, identified as the formulation of experience; consciousness, the mental apprehension of experience.

² The nine vehicles or *yanas* describe nine different views of our lived situation, each with their own corresponding methods of meditation, activities and results. They range from an attitude of renunciation and avoidance through embracing all beings to the perception of the divine nature of all appearance to the effortless, spontaneous liberation of all phenomena.

³ Mahayana or great vehicle refers to embracing the emptiness of all phenomena and the compassion that flows from that. Although we move in a world of seemingly real entities there is actually no phenomena, including ourselves, which has an inherent, self-defining essence. In recognising the illusory nature of experience great compassion arises for all those trapped in attachment to fictitious entities.

⁴ Hinayana or lesser vehicle refers to an approach to life marked by carefulness made necessary by the dangerous nature of the world we inhabit. Enmeshing involvement is available on all sides and therefore renunciation and clarity of intention is required in order to avoid attachment and its inevitable consequence, suffering.

⁵ Vajrayana *samayas* are commitments of the indestructible vehicle, the path of tantra or transformation. By binding oneself to a practice of identification with a divine being, the habitual

patterns of interpretation and action embedded in our usual sense of self is loosened so that a new sense of freedom is awakened.

⁶ Powerful methods are those which work with the energy which manifests as the illusory appearance of the world. In recognising the lack of fixity in our experience creativity is released to effect the necessary changes.

⁷ The six paramitas or transcendent qualities are generosity, patience, endurance, determination, discipline and wisdom. The development of these qualities provides the basis for sustaining the bodhisattva commitment to work for the benefit of all beings until they are enlightened. The qualities are transcendent because they are grounded in the understanding that all beings and all phenomena are devoid of inherent self-nature. This opens the way to a path without limit.