

Discipline: Self-discipline

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

Dolphin <http://understanddolphins.tripod.com/dolphintraining.html> Discipline is one of those Victorian words we don't like the sound of. It stings with 'corporal punishment'. But that's not where the word began. It's always interesting to go back to the root word and see how it transforms with usage and time. Discipline in Latin means instruction and knowledge and the one who wanted this was called a *discipulus*/a disciple. By the Middle Ages it had come to mean 'mortification by scourging oneself'! In other words a rather harsh way of developing self-discipline. It now has the meaning of 'the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour, using punishment to correct disobedience'. There is no punishment in any of the Buddha's teachings. And he found self-mortification to be just more suffering. Yet, he demands of his ordained Sangha, the highest level of self-discipline. And of the lay Sangha a set of training rules which when followed diligently, lead to a base of purification. So how can we develop self-discipline without beating ourselves up? Or getting someone else to beat us up? First of all, we need to find a definition for discipline which encapsulates our aim. Our spiritual aim is twofold. We want to abandon unwholesome habits and develop beautiful ones. And we want to develop the inner strength to do this. Here, the way dolphins are trained may be of some help. When a dolphin fails to do a trick such as jumping through a loop, the trainer does not criticise, but as if it were ignores the mistake. Instead they renew their encouragement. On completion of the trick a present is given. It's known as 'positive reinforcement'. It works just as well on human beings! There's not much gained in blaming oneself, in harsh self-criticism, in self-recrimination, in threatening oneself. When we do something unwholesome, it's good to rest with the inner consequences. These may be a sense of failure, shame, guilt, remorse, anger and so on. Bearing with this is the 'punishment'. There's no need to pile on further misery. What is more, the action was done. We determine to bear whatever consequences equanimously. That's enough. And putting right what was wrong where possible. That's all that's asked of us. Then a firm decision not to do that again. Finally, consider how we might give ourselves a treat whenever we overcome a temptation. No matter how many times we fall back into the old habit, we keep repeating this process until slowly but surely, old unskilful habits lose their power. There is a touching discourse where the Buddha teaches his young son, Rahula, who took the lower ordination, samanera, at the age of seven, about the dangers of lying. He is gentle and progressive, always appealing to Rahula's better nature. You do not hear the Buddha calling him a bad boy or denouncing his action as those of a devil. This is how we should talk to the child within us. In time, Rahula became fully liberated. You can find the *Ambalatthika-Rahulovada Suttanta* (The *Ambalatthika Exhortation to Rahula*.) in this BPS Wheel Publication No.33 : <http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh033-p.html> When we do something wholesome, in the same way we accept the inner consequences of some form of joy and delight. This is our just reward, our treat. Of course, we

have to be careful not to do something wholesome in order to feel good, but putting aside this error, we accept that our inner atmosphere, the heart's delight, is the treat we receive from wholesome actions. That's enough. Whatever praise or gift comes our way, let that be a welcome consequence of reciprocal joy and gratitude, but never the purpose. Again the Buddha delights in another's success. Witness his exclamation when Kondañña achieves first Path and Fruit of Stream Entry after the first discourse, The Turning of the Wheel of the Law. "Then the Blessed One exclaimed: "Truly Kondañña knows. He really knows." And that is how Ven. Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña — Kondañña, the one who knows.' Again you can find various translations: BPS Bodhi Leaf 1 <http://www.bps.lk/olib/bl/bl001-p.html> Or <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html> In the same way, we can assume the character of the Buddha within us, and gently coax ourselves towards a consummate, gentle self-discipline and rejoice in our development of virtue.

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