

On Discipline – Sensei Sylph Dominic Hawkins - Oct 2017

Discipline is one of those funny words that we have in our language where we may make the same word-sounds, but we often mean unbelievably different things. Being involved in Martial Arts for so long, the word often comes up, either from new families enquiring about classes, from enduring students when reflecting on their martial art journey, or even from astute students of spiritual philosophy when applying their ideologies to their internal world.

Sometimes parents tell me that they are “wanting to get their child involved in Martial Arts for the discipline” or so that their child will “learn discipline”.

One time I even replied to a parent “I hear what you are saying, but I think that what you mean by discipline and what I mean by discipline are two completely different things. You mean an externally applied form of behaviour modification, either through punishment, shaming, guilt or belittling. I mean an internal inspiration to choose behaviours that will reap them the rewards that they are wanting to experience”.

If, when we say “Discipline” we really mean “repression of desires in pursuit of an ideal” then we probably need a different word that denotes that. Discipline is written about largely in the spiritual texts of the old world, both Taoist works and Budo and is described in many psychological texts as a way of remaining focused on a transcendental, over-arching desire, in the light of which other smaller desires which are in contradiction become uninteresting.

We see this easily in our day to day world. It is the difference between having a transcendental (that is, a perspective of a larger or “beyond” thought) goal that excites us by which our other steps are referenced to constantly, or having a set of “ideals” (things which are not yet values) which we think that if we force ourselves to adhere to, that we will one day become.

I chuckle to myself whenever I see the young teenage boy in class, who trains half-heartedly and attends class because his parents force him to, transform instantly when there is some cute girl/boy in the class with him, and suddenly, as if by magic, his attitude changes, his focus on the techniques change, he begins taking the class very seriously and his behaviour does a 180* backflip. Watching the teacher, listening to the teacher, focusing on the techniques, copying the movements, practising the movements slowly and correctly all begin to happen without a word of “request” from the teacher or the boy's parents, despite months of pushing before hand.

What has changed?, well, now the boy in our story has a transcendental desire, something that he now holds above and beyond his other daily desires. Perhaps he wants to win the affection of this other person in the class, and picks up that this person is someone who respects those who are good at what they do and who input effort into their activities or their work. Suddenly, for the boy to step closer to his transcendental desires of winning them over, they themselves realise (though often not consciously) that their usual behaviour is no longer a path to what they want. That if they want to be able to perform the techniques well, that they need to learn them well and the easiest way to start

is to watch the teachers when they are teaching, listen to them when they are talking. Suddenly, the behaviour of the boy changes massively in the classes, and it is usually noticeable by everyone else around them, even if they think that nothing has changed.

This funny example helps us to see this play out in a very macro way, but we are all constantly doing this on a moment by moment basis. For those with children, I'm sure that you can relate to the odd "mature" feeling of knowing that you ultimately have slotted your children's wellbeing into your transcendental desires, and that some of your own attitudes, behaviours and priorities change without someone else having to "punish you" into change.

The opposite of this, the attempt to modify someone's behaviour, even if it is our own, "without" first identifying a transcendental over-arching desire to move towards, becomes a forceful "I should, I shouldn't" rather than "I want to, I will". In children we see that, if this form of behaviour modification works at all, it is usually based on gaining the attention and acknowledgement of another person (the parent, the teacher), or the fear of repercussions of actions if they "go against the rules". This form of discipline is often seen to fail once the "authority figure" leaves, or dies (literally or figuratively), and once the external reason that was maintaining the change in behaviour has gone the behaviour suddenly returns as if no real change ever occurred.

The interest in internal-inspiration methods of behaviour modification based on identifying clear transcendental desires which spontaneously cause other day-to-day choices to become put under the microscope is a big job, it requires individual relationships with other people, especially in a setting such as a martial art class where there are needs for the structure of the class to continue in a specific pattern. It is certainly "easier" in the short term to use shame/guilt/humiliation/punishment as "behavioural motivators", especially with large class sizes, but it is a strategy that will fail to cause or evoke any real changes in the people other than a repression of desires.

The difference of the internal dialogue should change from "I shouldn't do this thing that I want to do, I will get in trouble, I will become a bad person, I will not be allowed back, etc.." to a dialogue that is more in the direction of "It would be fun to do this thing that I want to do right now, but I know what I want, and I already know that I simply can't achieve/experience it if I head off down this path, so it's ok, I'll just move on from this".

At the basis, this is summarised in modern psychological terms in NLP as the difference between "moving directly towards something or simply moving away from something" and is often shown in a simple diagram of a circle with a dot in the centre (where you are now) and another dot outside the circle somewhere else on the page (where you want to be in life/character/experience/etc..). It's a simple model to show that if you are simply "moving away from something unwanted" that you could be going in any direction and not necessarily towards the "wanted" experience, it would require luck to do so. Conversely if you can be clear about the "wanted"

experience, then any choices that you make about this topic will be leading you in a direct line towards the manifestation of that experience.

The most powerful thing that the teachers are taught do here at The Dojo (especially with the Kids) is to spend some time getting to know the kids individually enough to get a sense of what excites them, what is inspiring to them, what it is that they are wanting and to then find ways of framing the language, the activities and the work with that child towards that end.

A person example of mine is from when I was a young teenager studying Martial Arts in Sydney in 2000/2001 with my first teacher, Sensei Geoff Smith, I had quite an alcohol problem (trying to fit in socially as a 13 year old in the Northern Beaches of Sydney). My teacher made little comments here and there about this over half a year while at the same time continually stepping up the "here, let me show you this extra advanced martial art technique" that he was showing me in class as well as offering me a position assisting teaching with one of the kids classes alongside him. After a few months of setting these things up (at a point where I am certain that he knew that I was now thoroughly hooked on Martial Arts and the dojo life), he then presented to me, exceptionally casually and calmly, the option that I could "either" continue with drugs and alcohol or continue to train at the Dojo, but not both. I answered him immediately without needing to think it through, and the feeling had changed to "Ok, this is simply how things have to change so that I can continue towards what I now want", instead of the lip that I remember giving my parents when they tried to tell me what to do, albeit out of their care and worry for me.

Ahh, the wisdom of an adolescent boy.....