Discipline

March 28, 2025

The Buddha’s name for his teachings wasn’t Buddhism. Sometimes he called it the Buddha’s message, but more often he called it this Dhamma-Vinaya. Dhamma, of course, means the truth. Vinaya means discipline. As you’re training on the teaching, it’s not simply a matter of agreeing with what the Buddha had to say, but you’re going to have to subdue some of the thoughts in the mind that go opposed to the training. We see this in the formula for mindfulness practice. You keep focused on the body in and of itself, hard and alert and mindful, subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, the affairs of the world right now. You just put them aside. Don’t let them take over. Don’t let them invade. Of course, the world is not invading you. Your thoughts of the world are invading right now. So you’ve got to say no to them. So discipline is an important part. Even just in mindfulness practice, going into concentration practice, you have to set some limits for where the mind is going to go. And certain things are off-limits. An image they use in the canon is a group of monkeys who live in the Himalayas. And some of them stay in the area where only monkeys go. And some of them move into the areas where human beings go as well. And they’re in danger when they do that, because human beings set traps. If I catch the monkeys in the traps, they skewer them. The image there, the area where human beings also go, is sensuality. We’re fascinated with thinking thoughts about sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, anything that would get you out of concentration. You’ve got to learn how to say no. And part, of course, is giving yourself something attractive to stay with, like making the breath attractive. Contemplation of the body, that can be attractive in some ways. Not in the normal way that we think about it. But when you start taking apart and say, this body I have here that I’ve moved into this world and that gives me access to this world, what is it like? It’s useful as a tool. But is it good for anything more than that? And if we focus more on what we find beautiful in the body, it’s going to pull us away from our center here. What if you find that you can take the body apart? Think about all the different parts of the body. We have that list of the 32. That’s just a beginning. A lot of parts of the body that are not mentioned. For some reason, the eyes are not mentioned. But if you just take an eyeball out, it certainly wouldn’t be attractive. And sometimes it helps calm you down to do that, because the things you’ve got all worked up about don’t really have much there at all. Some people find that contemplation calming. But if you don’t, welcome it back to the breath. And again, subdue any thoughts with regard to the world. Things you like about the world, things you’re upset about the world right now, just put them aside. This is relatively easy to do while you’re at the monastery. When you’re out in the thick of it, it’s harder. But again, you have to subdue. You have to discipline yourself. Otherwise the world takes over. And when the world takes over, great aversion and delusion in your mind take over as well, because those are the values of the world. So when you leave the monastery, you have to have a sense of self-discipline. While you’re here, the environment helps subdue a lot of thoughts, because they’re not in your face. But when you go out there, they’re more in your face. You still have to say, “My practice is more important.” This is why we don’t talk so much about taking your practice into the world. Assuming that the world is the context, and you have to slip the practice in, fit the practice in. Think more in terms of you’re going to fit the world into your practice. In other words, the practice has to take priority. There’s a difference between things that are pressing and things that are important. The world comes at you and says, “This is pressing, this is pressing.” But the Dhamma focuses on issues that are really important. How are you going to face life? How are you going to face death as a whole? How are you going to prepare for death? The world says, “Forget about that. Be part of our economy.” It’s making you ignore the big issue in life. Given the fact that it’s going to end at some point, as the Buddha said, you’re going to go on someplace else. How are you going to prepare? What kind of preparation is actually useful? The world says one thing, the Dhamma says something else. This is where the discipline comes in. Saying “no” to the values of the world, “yes” to the values of the Dhamma. There are a couple of teachings that are helpful in thinking in these ways. One is simply that mindfulness is the governing principle. You want to take that in charge. Mindfulness, of course, takes many shapes because it depends on what you’re going to remember, what you’re going to keep. Part of what you have to keep in mind is your willingness to motivate yourself to stick with the practice, what you’re going to tell yourself about what’s important. You hear the teaching on what the Buddha calls the Three Governing Principles. It’s a really useful teaching. There’s the Self as a governing principle. There’s the world as a governing principle. There’s the Dhamma as a governing principle. The way the Buddha explains it, Self as a governing principle, is you remind yourself you came to this practice because you were suffering and you wanted to put an end to suffering. Have you changed your mind? Have you decided suffering is okay? But that one teacher called the Third and a Half Noble Truth that suffering can be managed, it’s okay. But when you actually look at suffering in the world, and this is the human realm, it can be really drastic. And who knows where you’re going to go? As the Buddha said, the number of people who go from the human life on to another human life or higher in human life is really small. Those who fall are much more numerous. So you think about what it really is in your true best interest. Try to keep that in mind. Your true best interest is to learn how to develop the skills you’re going to need. Again, to say no to your defilements, say yes to the good qualities of the mind. That’s how you show that you really love yourself. This is what it comes down to. Think about the Buddha. He took his happiness so seriously he was willing to leave home, go into the wilderness. It wasn’t just giving up. He was on a quest. He took his happiness very seriously. So do you take your happiness seriously? You’re just toying with your happiness. Think about that the next time you find yourself suffering. Say in the past, I must have done something. I was just toying around. I wasn’t taking things seriously. This doesn’t mean you have to be grim about it, but just that you have a very strong sense of the importance of getting your mind under control. This is considered to be one of the hallmarks of people who really master a skill. They see that. There’s a lot of advantage to mastering the skill, and there’s a lot of danger in not mastering the skill. So we have a very live sense of what the mind needs for its own true well-being. That’s the self as a governing principle. The world as a governing principle is explained in the canon as knowing that there are beings in the world who can read minds. What if they’re going to read your mind right now? This reflection is meant to induce a sense of shame, a healthy sense of shame. Unhealthy shame is the shame that’s the opposite of pride. Healthy shame is the opposite of shamelessness. The attitude is, “I don’t care what other people think. I’m just going to do what I want.” The people who read your mind, the ones who really matter, are the ones who would hold you to high standards. And they’re holding you to high standards out of compassion, like the best teachers you had in school. The ones who are not just friendly, but the ones who had a very strong sense that the subject they were teaching was important, and they wanted you to do well. So they held you to a high standard. Those are the ones you learn from, those are the ones you benefit most from. We want to have that same sort of sense of an inner teacher. And whether or not somebody’s reading your mind, you can think of people who practiced seriously, with dedication. What would they think if they saw you slacking off? It’s a passage in the canon where a monk is in the wilderness and he’s sick. And the question is, is he going to go back and try to find a doctor someplace? He decides, “No, I’m going to stay in the wilderness. I’m going to take the example of those great heroes of the past, who used their mindfulness, who used their concentration to cure their illnesses.” So it’s good to have a sense of the inspiring people who’ve gone before us. Back in the 19th century, education had a big focus on reading the lives of heroic people. People who had overcome adversity, people who had done admirable things, even when it was very difficult. What Schiller would call “people who acted in dignity.” It’s interesting that literature nowadays is more interested in people that you can identify with in their weaknesses. My weakness is in that person, this person. We don’t read much about heroes. Heroic men, heroic women. But it’s good to have a sense of that. This is why we have the lives of the Ajahn’s. This is what people do. The problem with some of those lives is that they often seem superhuman. We have to remember they went through a lot of difficulties themselves. That’s why one of my favorite of the biographies was actually an autobiography by John Lee, where he had matched very freely his weaknesses and how he overcame them. Some of the things he did, in terms of the effort that he put forth, were really strong. Stronger than you might feel you’re up to. But at least you know that he wasn’t born ready to be an Arahant right away. So when you can see unskillful thoughts in your mind, you don’t just give up and say, “Well, I’ve got these unskillful thoughts, I must not be cut out for this.” It’s because you have unskillful thoughts that you’re really out of practice. Take the example of those who’ve done the same thing in the past. You try to keep that in mind. Again, mindfulness is a governing principle. And finally, there’s the Dhamma as a governing principle. We have this Dhamma that faces the big questions in life. How are you going to handle aging? How are you going to handle illness? How are you going to handle death? It gives clear advice. Paints a very clear picture of what the challenges are, but also how you’re going to meet those challenges. It was found by somebody who put his life on the line when he gained the Dhamma, taught it for free. This is not a business. This is a gift. It’s being passed on, passed on. It was given in the hopes that people would benefit from it. It’s not the case that the Dhamma is always available. It’s always true, but it’s not always taught. You’ve got this opportunity now. The Dhamma is still alive. So you don’t want this opportunity to pass you by. So the important thing about maintaining discipline is what you keep in mind. It’s all too easy in our world, where we have these screens. They are so easily available. They come up and there’s the whole world in your hand. And they just suck you in. You have to learn how to deal with these screens. It’s good to think of them as a large store. You’re going to buy something, and you’re going to have a very clear sense of what you want to buy. You go into the store, you get it, and you get out. Otherwise you start wandering the aisles and you end up picking up things and getting distracted from what you really need. Your time is wasted. Your money is wasted. You have to have a clear idea. This is what I need. I’m not going to the store just to explore what the possibilities are out there. One of the things I might want, I go for what I need and I get out. You should have the same attitude towards the internet. Or the social media, whatever. You approach them for what you need, and then you get out. Because you have more important work to do. You’ve got to work on your own mind. There’s no app that’s going to get you awakened. It’s all done right here, right at the spot where the body and the mind meet, at the breath. That’s where you have to stay focused. That’s where you have to have the values in mind. Think of yourself as a governing principle, what your true needs are. The world as a governing principle. People have compassion for you, what they want to see you do. And the Dhamma as a governing principle. Standards for what really is important. What losses are important, what losses are not important. The world tells you that if you lose your health, you lose your wealth, you lose your relatives, it’s horrible. But the Buddha says, no, it’s more important that you realize these serious losses in life would be your virtue and your right view. See, those are the things you’ve got to hold in mind. And do what you can to see the importance of these things, and make them attractive. An important part of discipline is not just forcing, forcing, forcing yourself. You have to learn how to psych yourself out, so you really want to do these things. You find meditation attractive. You find virtue attractive. All these practices, you want to see that they have their allure. The Buddha said all things are rooted in desire. So you have to cultivate the desire to do the path, and make it your governing principle. And that’s how discipline, how it works. We don’t like the word discipline. We think of disciplinarians with a stick in their hand ready to beat you. But discipline basically means that you have a very clear idea of what you really need in life. And you’re willing to stick with that, and learn how to say no to the other things that come up that would get in the way. No matter how important they insist that they are, you’ve got more important work to do. So basically what you’re doing is you’re exercising your power of choice. It’s not so much that you’re submitting to somebody else’s rules. You’re exercising your power of choice as to what’s really important in your life. And don’t give in to the currents out there in the world that would pull you down.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250328_Discipline.mp3>