

Mental Discipline

The Buddhist path begins with the development of a disciplined mind. This includes gaining control over views, intentions, emotions, thoughts, choices, speech, and actions. No progress begins, and no attainments are gained, without mental/emotional discipline. The cultivation of mental discipline, which leads to all positive mental states, is the true path, and to be deeply rooted in the stability of that discipline, the true goal.

Mental discipline equals happiness. This is a truth that is often counterintuitive and hard for some to accept. Many associate mental discipline with repression or denial of joy, spontaneity, fun, or just being silly. However, rightly understood, mental discipline is about clarity and not merely constraint. It's about knowing and holding rationally accepted boundaries of both our internal and external environments. It's about being skillful in adapting and cultivating behaviors that bring us closer to our goals (happiness). Conversely, the lack of mental discipline is like living in a clouded reality where we lazily are oblivious to the importance of our choices and actions. This is a numb, careless, and often childish state of mind where we simply coast through life being carried about by our impulses and desires. A delusional state, similar to being drugged, in which we remain detached from reality and our true potential.

All things are mind. Our reality, both internal and external, is an interpretation created by our minds. Even our physical world, although empirically real, is known merely through sense information delivered to and interpreted by the mind. Meaning, the mind is the most significant aspect of our lives. Therefore, the development of the mind and cultivation of mental discipline is clearly the most important work at hand.

The cultivation of mental discipline is the cultivation of free will. It's to develop a stable free will that is not under the control of one's desires, emotions, fears, hormones, animal nature, ego, or the will/actions of others. To cultivate a stable and mature mind that is not vulnerable to manipulation, exploitation, deception, or maltreatment by others or by oneself.

How to cultivate mental discipline. Practices of mindfulness, meditation, contemplation, noting/labeling, and/or holding vows are powerful tools for developing mental discipline.

Ode to Mental Discipline

An important daily contemplative prayer

I will no longer allow my emotions to dictate my state of mind.
I will no longer allow my desires and impulses to covertly shape my life.
I will no longer allow my habits to blindly direct my life's course.
I will no longer allow my fears to rob me of opportunity and happiness.
I will no longer allow others to manipulate my emotions and self-worth.

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I will be strong and confident.
I will cultivate clarity and remain truthful with myself.
I will develop diligence and an unwavering resolve for improvement.
I will make conscious mature choices; and hold myself to those choices.
I will become wholly responsible and in full control of my life from this day forward.

Venerable Tenzin Tharpa