

# How To Develop 'Black Belt' Self-Discipline & Focus

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Hi, I'm Pete, a Personal Development Coach, Trainer and Kung Fu teacher based in the UK and I help people improve their self-discipline and focus so they can achieve their long-term goals.

I've been studying Kung Fu since 2002 and was awarded my Black Sash (Kung Fu has sashes, not belts!) in 2007. I'm still a student of the art to this day and have a busy school of my own. I've also been a Personal Fitness Trainer since 2008 and am now a Movement Specialist, helping people overcome injury and reclaim their fitness.

As a martial artist, teacher and trainer I've learned that self-discipline and focus are two things that many people want, but few people have. We all have dreams, goals and ambitions, but often struggle with taking action, stick to a plan and avoid distractions in pursuit of them (despite our good intentions!).

My goal is to help you master your self-discipline and focus so you can overcome the obstacles blocking your path to success.

# What Is Self-Discipline?

Self-discipline is often thought of as the ability to do the things we know we should be doing and stay “on task” as we do them. It’s also thought of as the ability to say “no” when we need to.

While these definitions are not wrong, they are focused on the *outcome* of self-discipline and not self-discipline itself.

Let me explain...

If you look up the word ‘discipline’ in the dictionary you’ll see multiple definitions:

1. “Training to act in accordance with rules; drill.”
2. “Activity, exercise or regimen that develops or improves a skill; training.”
3. “Punishment inflicted by way of correction and training.”

The word ‘self-discipline’ has another definition:

1. Discipline and training of oneself, usually for improvement.

Taking the word at its true meaning, self-discipline is ‘the training of oneself’; it is a process; it is something you *do*.

In other words self-discipline is a process of executing an action or series of actions.

If you take view that self-discipline is training yourself and you use the word “training” as a reference point, things start to change.

Here are the definitions of the word “training”...

1. The education, instruction or discipline of a person or thing that is being trained
2. The status or condition of a person who has been trained

When you view self-discipline as training, a different story starts to appear.

## The Training Paradigm

Training is a process that is undertaken to produce an end result, often over a long period of time. Training for a sub 3 hour marathon for example, takes *years*. Training for a new job can take *weeks* and fitness training is done on an ongoing basis for *fun!*

In other words training is voluntary, is long-term and even enjoyable!

Every good training plan has an outcome and defined method to use to get to that outcome. A good training plan will also allow for *flexibility* and *adaptation* as you progress through it.

## The ‘Kung Fu’ Approach To Training

Kung Fu literally means “*time*” and “*effort*” and reflects the practice of a discipline. The term is not exclusive to martial arts training either; you can use the principles of ‘Kung Fu’ with painting, cooking, writing or anything else that requires time and effort. Most importantly, the foundation of Kung Fu is *daily practice*.

Taking this approach to develop self-discipline is real game changer.

Instead of waiting for inspiration, a surge of energy or a feeling of guilt to come, think of self-discipline as *daily practice*.

## Daily Practice

The word practice is defined as:

1. Habitual or customary performance; operation.
2. Habit, custom.
3. Repeated performance or systematic exercise for the purpose of acquiring skill or proficiency.

Self-discipline is a skill developed over time via forming habits through regular *practice*.

## The Power Of Habits

If you study people that have great amounts of self-discipline they seem to do the things that need to be done naturally and habitually. They are usually the kind of people that embody what they do and they have appear to have good habits.

Habits are subconscious actions that we do without thinking and we often don't even notice we're doing them until we think about it or they're pointed out to us.

The key is to consciously build habits around developing competencies.

You may have seen the Four Stages Of Competence in human psychology:

1. Unconscious Incompetence
  - You don't know you can't do something and don't know it's value
2. Conscious Incompetence
  - You become aware you can't do something and realise it's value.  
Mistakes are made in this stage as you learn the new skill.
3. Conscious Competence
  - You can do it with conscious effort, perhaps broken down into steps
4. Unconscious Competence
  - You can do it without trying and even do it while performing another task

A good analogy for this is driving a car...

As young child you don't know the value of driving a car, then as you grow older you realise it's value and become aware of your skill deficit as you start learning to drive. Through the learning process you become competent at driving with conscious effort. Then as experience increases you become able to drive without thinking about it.

# How To Use Habits To Build Better Self-Discipline

We can use the same framework of learning to help us improve our self-discipline by using habit formation as a tool.

1. Awareness of our biggest opportunities for improvement
2. Conscious effort to form habits
3. Success through conscious action
4. Success through unconscious action

If we spend time first becoming aware of where we lack self-discipline and then go to work developing these areas, we can start creating habits through conscious effort and eventually end up doing the things we need to do habitually.

A healthy diet is a great example of this. Changing something as fundamental as your diet can take a huge amount of conscious effort and making permanent changes can take a long time. Once changed fully though, you'll find very hard to change back to your old eating habits!

A great definition of a habit is something you can't stop yourself doing - wouldn't it be great to not be able to stop ourselves from doing what needs to be done?

# Focus

Before we move on to talking about how to form a new habit, we need to talk about focus. Focus and self-discipline are two sides of the same coin, with focus the other side of self-discipline.

Most people consider focus the ability to concentrate and avoid distraction but there are different ways that we can focus. Short-term focus, for example, is about holding concentration, and long-term focus is about strategy and planning.

If focus is about *concentration*, *strategy* and *planning*, then self-discipline is about *execution* or *action*.

Without focus our actions lack direction. Without action our focus doesn't produce results.

Action + No Focus = No Direction

Focus + No Action = No Results!

A good way to define focus is “The holding of short and long-term attention”.

Self-discipline and focus also feed into and support each other. We need to practice self-discipline (action) to help keep us focused, and we need focus to practice self-discipline.

There are two type of focus we need to develop; long-term and short-term focus.

# Long-Term Focus

Long-term focus is about the mind, visualisations and long-term goal setting. Defining our desires and ambitions for our life is one of the most important things we can do to achieve the success that we want in our lives.

Having a long-term vision of where you want to be can be a great source of inspiration when motivation drops.

Here's a few ideas to help you develop your long-term focus:

- ❑ Define what long-term success looks like for you
- ❑ Spend time everyday remembering what you want to achieve
- ❑ Visualise how things will look and feel for you when you have achieved them
- ❑ Remember the things that are important to you - *why* you do what you do

Spending time every day focused on the long-term outcomes we want to create in our lives really helps to focus the mind.

# Short-Term Focus

Short-term focus on the other hand, is about our physical world; our physical energy and our environment. Optimising our physical energy and environment is key to build short-term focus. If our energy levels drop we find it difficult to hold short-term focus.

Here are a few ideas to help you build short-term focus:

- ❑ Drink enough water
- ❑ Eat food that brings you long-term energy
- ❑ Structure blocks of time for productivity
- ❑ Turn off distractions in productivity time
- ❑ Take regular and structured breaks
- ❑ Enjoy your breaks - switch off and do something completely different
- ❑ Strive for good quality sleep

The real magic with short-term focus comes when you combine all of the elements above in a way that brings you your highest level of natural energy and focus.

## Combining Long-Term & Short-Term Focus

When we combine our long-term focus with our short-term focus we get 'centered' and have a useable strategy for productivity. All we have to do then is execute it!

If you feel you're losing focus it may be time to build a new habit around minimising distractions, or your nutrition or just remembering your long-term goals and why you're doing the things you're doing.

## Focus Without Self-Discipline

It's perfectly feasible to be focused (physically and mentally 'switched on') but to lack self-discipline and action. In this situation you may feel awake and physically ready but find yourself easily distracted from the task at hand.

## Self-Discipline Without Focus

If you're the kind of person that can work hard and avoid distractions regardless of how physically and mentally tired you are, you have a big advantage. Without focus though, you may stay on a task for too long when your time would be better spent elsewhere.

## Using Self Discipline & Focus Together

When you use self-discipline and focus together you really start to feel like you're 'on your game'. You are physically and mentally alert, have a plan and are executing against that plan.



In the diagram above you can see that I've used the Yin Yang symbol. This is because like the Yin Yang model, self-discipline and focus feed into each other.

When we practice self-discipline we become focused and when we are focused, we can practice self-discipline.

Knowing that self-discipline and focus work as a continuous cycle can help us identify areas where the cycle may be stopping. If your focus drops, for example, you may find your self-discipline dropping too. In this case, spending more time focusing long and short-term can be what gets us back on our game.

# Your Biggest Opportunities For Growth

It's time to figure out where your biggest opportunities for growth lie. What parts of your life do you know you need to work on your self-discipline and focus and what parts of your life are you unaware of that could use some work?

These are big questions so don't worry if you can't answer them right now, though I'm sure a few will jump out at you! Our goal here is to bring to light our biggest opportunities for growth and then consciously form habits around them.

# How To Form A New Habit

It is thought that habits take at least 30 days to build and this process requires a good amount of conscious effort. We only have a small amount of will power every day and it is best utilised to form a new habit.

As you go through the first 30 days of building a new habit you will experience resistance and a force pulling you back to your old behaviour. This is perfectly normal but because of the willpower it takes to overcome this 'habit gravity' it is wise to only build one habit at a time.

To understand habits a little better we need to look at another hierarchy:

1. Actions
2. Routines
3. Habits

Actions are task performed through conscious effort. Routines are groups of conscious actions. Habits are subconscious actions or groups of actions.

Routines are powerful. They are groups of actions that produce a specific result. Most of us have a morning and evening routine, you may follow a specific workout routine at the gym and athletes often have a pre-game ritual they go through to get 'in the zone' before competing

If we follow a routine for long enough it becomes a habit. Unfortunately this applies to bad habits too!

*What are you good and bad habits? What routines do you currently have in your life that serve you and what routines could you change for a better outcome?*

## Exercise

Write a list of the areas in your life where you lack self-discipline or focus and choose **one** to work on by consciously forming a new habit for 30 days:

*I lack self-discipline and/or focus in the area of \_\_\_\_\_ because I \_\_\_\_\_.*

For example...

*"I lack self-discipline in the area of time management because I'm always late."*

Or...

*"I lack focus with work because I'm too easily distracted."*

Or...

*"I lack self-discipline in the area of recreation and relaxation because I'm always working or thinking about work."*

Then decide one action that you can do to help form a new habit to better practice self-discipline.

Problem	Action-Oriented Solution
<i>"I lack self-discipline in the area of time management because I'm always late."</i>	Practice setting an alarm to leave on time for 30 days.
<i>"I lack focus in the area of work because I'm too easily distracted."</i>	Plan specific time slots for productive work. Plan regular structured short breaks. Switch off distractions when you're being productive.
<i>"I lack self-discipline in the area of rest and recreation as I'm always working or thinking about work."</i>	Schedule your rest and recreation time. Plan blocks of uninterrupted rest and relaxation time. Find activities you find relaxing. Turn your computer or phone off at a set time every night.

You can make this list as long as you like but choose your first task wisely. It's a good idea to start with a relatively easy task that will have a positive effect on building other habits.

For example, building the habit of drinking a glass of water first thing will increase your physical energy and concentration which will then help you form more challenging new habits.

Remember it takes at least 30 days to form a new habit so even your progress may seem slow you'll be forming 12 new habits per year. Habits compounded on top of each other can be transformative for your life.

# Self-Discipline & Focus Mindsets

Here are few mindsets to remind you about self-discipline and focus

- Self-discipline is doing the things that need to be done
- Self-discipline is a practice, not an end result
- Self-discipline is action
- Focus is the 'other side of the coin' to self-discipline
- Focus is short-term and long-term
- Focus is concentration, strategy and planning
- Focus without self-discipline lacks action
- Self-discipline without focus lacks direction
- Self-discipline and focus are developed through creating habits
- Habits are created over at least 30 days
- Habits require willpower so should only be built one at a time

## Combining Self-Discipline And Focus For Increased Energy, Motivation And Productivity

When you combine focus and self-discipline you will experience new levels of energy, motivation and productivity...

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \textbf{Long-Term} & & \textbf{Short-Term} & & \textbf{Self-Discipline} & & \textbf{Energy,} \\ \textbf{Focus} & & \textbf{Focus} & & & & \textbf{Motivation} \\ (\text{Goal setting,} & + & (\text{Physical energy,} & + & (\text{Action, habit} & = & \textbf{\&} \\ \text{planning, vision}) & & \text{environment}) & & \text{creation}) & & \textbf{Productivity} \end{array}$$

# Personal Development & Growth

There is a saying in Buddhism - “The path is the goal.”

We can take this philosophy and apply it to self-discipline and focus; by attending the processes of self-discipline and focus we can have confidence that we are *doing* self-discipline and focus.

Self-discipline and focus are a practice; a method of achieving success. Success is a subjective term and means different things to different people. The paradox is when we arrive at success we have grown and “success” then becomes recalibrated to mean something else.

The constant in this process is our own development and two of the key practices we use in this process are Self-Development & Focus, so get practicing!

## What Next?

Hopefully you have found the information here useful. My goal is that the model of self-discipline and focus I have proposed has provoked some thought around your own biggest areas of opportunity for growth.

Self-discipline and focus are not about forcing yourself to do something against your will through gritted-teeth determination. Yes, there are times when you need to persuade yourself into action through self-reward, self tough-talk or even guilt but these methods only work in the short-term. For long-term success the creation of habits and continued effort is key.

Building well chosen habits and developing good focus can be transformative for your life and over time, your habits will become a part of you.

What we're really talking about here is self-image; the image you hold of yourself in your mind and the actions you make because of it. If you do something for long enough you identify yourself with that action.

"I'm the kind of person who...*[is always late etc]*" is a statement of self-image.

When it comes to self-discipline and focus, self-image is important. Saying the words "I have no self-discipline" usually means you have a tendency to focus on short-term enjoyment and perhaps avoid the short-term pain of hard work.

Of course we're talking about deeper work here and becoming away of your own self-image and values is an important part of your personal development and growth.

Personal Coaching is a great way to gain a new level of awareness of yourself and get to work on reaching the next level in your life.

If you think you could benefit from personal coaching visit [www.petefry.co.uk/coaching](http://www.petefry.co.uk/coaching) to learn more.