

小懲大戒

xiao3 cheng2 da4 jie4

A former assistant labor commissioner was sentenced (判決) to two weeks in jail for having received payment to provide language courses but failed to deliver the service.

But the judge took account of the poor health of the defendant (被告) and the fact that he had repaid the victim and suspended (緩刑) the sentence for year.

When a jail sentence is suspended, it means the defendant does not actually have to serve it unless he or she breaks certain conditions, such a re-offending.

In other words, the judge was going easy on the offender. The Chinese idiom that describes this is 小懲大戒 (*xiao3 cheng2 da4 jie4*).

小 (*xiao3*) is small, 懲 (*cheng2*) is punish, 大 (*da4*) is big and 戒 (*jie4*), in this situation, means to warn, to admonish. Literally, “小懲大戒

Idiom by Lon Yan

” is “small punish, big warn.” It means to administer a light punishment as a serious warning against committing the same crime or mistake again.

A similar English expression is “a slap on the wrist” (拍打手腕). It means getting a mild reproof (責備) for doing something wrong.

In some countries, the punishment for stealing is to have the hand chopped off. By comparison, a slap is a very light punishment indeed!

If we take the characters 懲 (*cheng2*) and 戒 (*jie4*) from the idiom and put them together it becomes 懲戒 (*cheng2 jie4*), a term that means “punish and admonish.” The character 罰 (*fa2*) has the same meaning as 懲 (*cheng2*) - punish or penalize. In fact, these two characters are often used together in the term 懲罰 (*cheng2 fa2*), which also means punish or punishment.

Those who commit crime must face 懲罰 (*cheng2 fa2*) (punishment).