



EUDAEMONIA **Discipline, with Giovanni Dienstmann**

February 17, 2021

Kim Forrester 0:00

What is it that helps us break bad habits and form healthy new behaviours? How can we stick to long term goals or complete meaningful projects long after our enthusiasm has run dry? You're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. I'm Kim Forrester and today it's time for a deep dive into self discipline.

Intro 0:24

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:44

Giovanni Dienstmann is an international author, meditation teacher, and self discipline coach. He's trained in a wide range of modalities, including mindfulness, Zen Buddhism, and mantra yoga, and he is the author of the best selling book, Practical Meditation. It's my pleasure to be chatting with Giovanni today to explore the concept of self discipline, and to learn why it's vital that we build an unwavering commitment to our authentic goals and values if we truly want to thrive. Giovanni Dienstmann, it is just such a delight to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. Welcome.

Giovanni Dienstmann 1:22

Thank you very much, Kim. Such a pleasure to be here.

Kim Forrester 1:24

I felt that the whole concept of discipline with regards to well-being was really fascinating and I think that's because, for me, the word discipline conjures up unpleasant images, Giovanni. Okay? Images of having been growled at by my parents and teachers, or being judged as wrong, and punishment. When framed in that way, discipline really doesn't sound like something that's aligned with the idea of happiness and well-being at all. How do you define this concept of self discipline?

Giovanni Dienstmann 1:57

Yeah, I love this question because this is something that many people misunderstand. And that's why I say, I talk about self discipline and not discipline. Discipline is something that comes from the outside, in. And self discipline is something that is from the inside, out. I define self discipline as the art of living life in harmony with your highest goals. The art of living life in a harmony with your highest goals and your highest values. So if part of your highest goals is that you want to be always healthy and full of energy, and well, then that means that in your daily life, you're going to have to make decisions that take you a step closer to that ideal. And a decision that takes you a step closer

to your ideal might be, you know, to eat more healthy, or to sleep half an hour more today, or to practice meditation this morning. And every time that you make a decision like that, you are exercising self discipline, because you are prioritising something that will move you towards your long term goals. And it's not necessarily something that gives you any instant gratification. Part of our brain wants that instant gratification; that comfort, that pleasure, here and now. And that part is the obstacle to self discipline.

Kim Forrester 3:20

We all know the monkey mind. Absolutely, Giovanni. So you're saying there that self discipline is a commitment to what is most meaningful to us; it's a commitment to our values and our goals. But does that mean that successful self discipline begins even before we begin a project, even before we conceive of an endeavour? Is self discipline also, perhaps, about identifying the wisest goals and values, or being disciplined with regards the kind of people and environments that we choose to expose ourselves to?

Giovanni Dienstmann 3:56

Yeah, I love these questions. Absolutely. Self discipline makes no sense if we don't have a goal; if we don't have a strong sense of purpose. Self discipline is the tool that allows us to live on purpose. And so people who are not ambitious, who don't have any particular goal, self discipline makes no sense for them. For those of us who are type-A personalities, who want to make a change in ourselves or in our life, it is very, very, very likely that that change will not come easy. And if that change doesn't come easy, that means that we're gonna have to be consistent with a certain type of action or habit. And discipline is what allows you to be consistent with things that don't give you immediate result, but are aligned with the person you want to become.

Kim Forrester 4:44

So let's go back to that whole idea of discipline versus self discipline, because I'm still wondering how it is that we encourage ourselves to be aligned with our goals, and we encourage ourselves to be aligned with our values, without self criticism and without self judgement. Is there a particular vocabulary, Giovanni, that is wise for us to use when we're urging ourselves to be more disciplined? Are there words to avoid in our inner monologue? And are there particular phrases that you would suggest are healthier and wiser for us to use?

Unknown Speaker 5:18

Yeah. So I think an important distinction here is 'want to goals' versus 'have to goals'. Alright. So when we were kids, and we hate doing our math homework, and our parents say, "Hey, you have to do your math homework. It has to be ready for tomorrow", you know, that is discipline. Our Dad or Mum is disciplining us to do something that is good for us but we don't want to do. Now compare that with another kid that just loves math. No one needs to tell him to do the math homework. He will do the math homework, and he will seek more homework for him to do because he just loves math. Math is something that is enjoyable for him. Or perhaps it's something that is connected to his identity - he sees himself working with math in the future; that being a bigger part of his life. So for the first kid, you know, doing the math homework is a 'have to goal'. There's a sense of chore, of drag, you know. "I have to do something that I don't want; that I don't really understand why." And in the second case, it's a 'want to goal'. Like, I want to become better at math because either I enjoy

the process, or it's meaningful to the person I want to become. So the path of self discipline, you know, the way I teach it - I call it mindful self discipline, which is a term I coined - and that is to differentiate from the way that self discipline is taught out there. If you go to Amazon and you type self discipline, you see the books that come out, most of them have a very martial or military tone to that. It's in the cover, it's in the language and it's all about willpower and forcefulness. You know, you're forcing yourself to do the things you know are good for you. But for me, as a meditation teacher, which is my background, you know, it's not about forcefulness. It's about awareness. It's about being aware of who you want to become - of the ideal identity, that your ideal future-self - and then using that as a compass for your everyday life decisions. So I like to play, saying that self discipline is about the inner soldier - it's based on testosterone - while mindful self discipline is about the inner monk. And it's based on awareness.

Kim Forrester 7:34

That's just beautiful. I do wonder, though, Giovanni, the way that you describe self discipline, and the way that it sort of nurtures us into greater meaning and greater purpose in our lives, is it more about saying 'no' to ourselves or is it more about saying 'yes' to ourselves?

Giovanni Dienstmann 7:51

Hmm. And this is the thing, that decision comes, I think it's comes from Latin, and it means 'to cut'. Right? So every decision is, we are cutting away something. Whenever we're saying yes to one thing, we're saying no to many other things. Right now, you're saying yes to being here and recording an episode for your podcast, because that's meaningful for you. But you're saying no to so many other things that you could be doing in this moment, and many of them which would be pleasant and comfortable. So whenever we say yes to one thing, we're saying no to many other things. But what we don't realise is that when we're saying yes to certain indulgences to certain temptations, repeatedly - when we are compulsively saying yes to distractions, and social media, and news and apps, and games, and TV, and all of that - we are little by little saying no, repeatedly, to that part of us that has a deeper sense of purpose. And these things accumulate and leads to a life of boredom; a life that we are not fully engaged. For some people, it can make them depressed because there's no deeper sense of meaning or purpose. There's just trying to get more and more pleasure, and comfort, and distraction.

Kim Forrester 9:04

I love that and it makes complete sense to me. Yes, I'm sitting here now recording a podcast because it enlivens me, and it is incredibly fulfilling and meaningful for me. However, I could be choosing indulgence; I could be eating the ice cream that I know is in the freezer right now and watching a YouTube video again. So I can see how I have said no to many things to say yes, in a really lovingly self disciplined way, to the thing that will most fulfil me in this moment. Is that what you're saying?

Unknown Speaker 9:36

Yeah, yes. So, saying yes, versus saying no to ourselves. You see the whole dilemma of self discipline and willpower is that we are complex beings. And part of us wants something and the other part wants something else. Right? We have the three layers of the brain, which is a concept that you or one of your guests might have already explored. You know, there's the lizard brain. That

is the most primitive, the oldest part of the brain. And that part of the brain only cares about survival, avoiding pain, and experiencing pleasure, right now. It's a very narrow view of life. And the most evolved part of the brain, which is the prefrontal cortex, that part of the brain is involved with awareness and willpower, and setting goals, and rational thinking, and planning, and all of that. So it's like there are these two different beings inside of us. One of them is only concerned about living life in the moment. And, you know, surviving, avoiding pain, and experiencing pleasure right now. And the other one is looking at the long term. The other one is looking for fulfilment, not survival. Is looking for self actualization. And self discipline is this process of human evolution, where we go from the primitive brain to the more evolved brain. And we don't do that by shaming ourselves, like, "Are you going again for that donut? What are you doing?" You know, because shame is not helpful. And it's not helpful because a shame is a negative emotion, it creates emotional stress. And what we are really good at doing when we are in a state of emotional stress, is to seek emotional relief. And we do that by seeking instant gratification. So if you want to cut down on sugar in your life, and you end up eating a big slice of cheesecake one day where you didn't want to, if you shame yourself, you're creating a state of emotional distress. And in order to relieve that state, you will seek other sources of instant gratification, which may be sweets again. So instead of using shame, in mindful self discipline, we just become aware. We just become aware that, right now, I forgot about my goals. Right now. I told myself a story, an excuse, and I believed it. And I'm human, and that's okay. That's going to happen sometimes. What can I do better tomorrow? That's it. We don't add shame; no blame, no self criticism. These are not necessary. Just, "I see that I did this, I see that this is not advancing me towards the person I want to become. What can I do better tomorrow?"

Kim Forrester 12:14

I love that. It's just about choice. Giovanni, you are quite open in your work about your childhood. And you would describe yourself, I would say, as a rather unruly child with an enormous amount of pent up and unfocused energy. How has your life flourished, since you started understanding this concept of mindful self discipline?

Giovanni Dienstmann 12:42

So when I was a child, all of this energy was expressed as anger. And it was very easy to piss me off and to get me really angry, and I had troubles at school for it. So that energy was not consciously managed. It was just going to the easiest outlet. As the years passed, and I started doing meditation when I was really young - the first time when I was 14, but then more daily, when I was 15 and 16 - I started to get control of this energy, little by little, and then to channel it towards my life goals. So that's what allowed me to flourish and not to deny that energy; not to shame myself for it. But you know, that energy, that we all have that emotional energy that sometimes shows up as anger. That is a precious energy that can be channelled constructively in your life. I like to think of self discipline as a way to channel that energy.

Kim Forrester 13:37

Well, when we are children - and when we have children - we all know what anger and undisciplined behaviour looks like. Right? The tantrums, and the anger, and the unruly behaviour. But as an adult, that anger will be expressed in far more subtle ways, I would say. What are some of the behaviours that you'd say we should look for as adults, that are showing us that we are lacking in self discipline?

Giovanni Dienstmann 14:04

I think it's the tendency to blame others and to excuse ourselves. So basically, the tendency of not taking responsibility for our life. It's a sign of maturity to take full responsibility for our life, for our emotions. And that, if we are not where we want to be, if we're not feeling the way we want to be, that doesn't mean that there have not been any external influences. It doesn't mean that the environment doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that genetics doesn't play a role. No, all of these things are there. But ownership is about taking responsibility that I still have a choice. And if I choose to take responsibility for my life, to take control of my life, there is a lot that I can do. And when I'm focused on what I can do, I am not focused on blaming others. When I'm focused on blaming others, I'm creating a state of being a victim. And the victim is powerless. The victim is not interested in self discipline because self discipline tells you that you have a power and I'm going to teach you how to exercise it. And it's the opposite of victimisation.

Kim Forrester 15:10

Giovanni, you sort of touched on this earlier on when you were talking about us feeding our lizard brain. I am interested in these internal and external obstacles that you teach. You say that we have internal and external obstacles that prevent us from truly engaging our self discipline. What are some of these internal obstacles that we should look out for?

Giovanni Dienstmann 15:32

I'd like to say that there are seven main obstacles to self discipline. I'm just going to list them. Right? And they are procrastination, low motivation, forgetfulness, distractions, excuses, doubts, and fears. So these are the four internal obstacles that prevent us from achieving our goals - and the two that most people are really familiar with are procrastination and distractions. We live in a world that everything around us is designed to break your focus - everything around us is designed to break your discipline - because that's how they sell you things. They sell you things by marketing to your lizard brain. Now the lizard brain is a very powerful force, and if they can market to your lizard brain, you're going to buy something. So if the whole world around us, if our society, was feeding our self disciplined self, we would be in a very different world. But we just look around us and almost nobody is disciplined. Most people are stressed, perhaps even anxious, and cannot focus. The attention span is becoming shorter and shorter. And it's because everything around us is not helping us to develop focus, awareness, discipline, willpower. It's not helping. So if we want to have more of that in our life, we need to do something radically different. We need to review the role of technology, and distractions, and pleasures in our life. One of the main messages of the system that I teach is the 80/20 principle with your aspirations. For most of us, we have allowed distractions to take over our life. It has become a compulsion. And we are not aware of what that's doing to us. If you watch a documentary, like the Social Dilemma that starts opening up your eyes to like, what is this doing to me? Like, what is this doing to my brain, to my capacity to to focus and to be well without needing to constantly, you know, respond to something? So yeah, it's about ... the 80/20 principle is about, you choose to put 80% of your time, your energy, your attention, on your long term goals, on your aspirations; on those things that in the moment, in your last day on earth, when you look back in your life, you will feel regretful if you haven't achieved them, and you feel fulfilled if you have. Those are your aspirations. And a good life from the point of view of mindful self discipline is, 80% of our energy goes to our aspirations, and 20% of our energy goes to pleasures, comforts, and distractions. Like this, we can have both of them in their right weight.

Kim Forrester 18:23

I love that. Because I was wondering if it's possible to over-focus on discipline. So it seems to me that an excess of anything is not good for us, and so maybe an excess of self discipline could lead to unhealthy behaviours like rigidity, or inflexibility, or obsession, Giovanni. So you're talking there about the 80/20 principle. Is that a way for us to balance our desire for self control? Or am I totally misguided?

Giovanni Dienstmann 18:52

No, this is this is exactly it. There is a term in the scientific literature for what you said, and it's called hyperopia. Hyperopia is when you're just focused on long term goals all the time. Right? And you don't stop to smell the roses; you are not grateful and content for the things you have already achieved. You're not enjoying the small pleasures of life. You're just focused on the long term goals. And that state does not lead to happiness. It may lead to productivity, it may lead to career progression, and it may lead to a lot of money, but it does not lead to happiness and well being. And you know what? For most people, if you are unbalanced by having too much self discipline, then eventually you will burn out and you will regret it. And then people may end up on the other extreme. So too much self discipline, unbalanced self discipline, is definitely not good and that's why I talk about the 80/20 principle.

Kim Forrester 19:49

Well, I love what you're saying there Giovanni because it means that after I've completed this recording and done some editing, I can go to the freezer and eat that ice cream. That's great! You touched on the science there, and I want to explore this a little bit more with you. How does self discipline lead to happiness according to the research? What evidence is there that it's actually worth our while to build greater self control?

Giovanni Dienstmann 20:16

Yeah. So there is the famous marshmallow experiment, where they put these kids in a room, and they had an option to eat a marshmallow right now, which was in front of them, or to wait until the researcher comes back for an indefinite amount of time. And when the researcher comes back, if they haven't eaten the marshmallow in front of them, they would get two marshmallows. So basically, that's the test of willpower, or self control, or self discipline. And some kids ate the marshmallow immediately or soon after, while other kids they were able to resist. And they did that by putting the marshmallow away, closing their eyes, turning around; not playing with the fire, not playing with the temptation. And then they followed up these kids after decades to see where they were in life. And this study, together with other studies show that people who have stronger willpower - people who have more self control and self discipline - they end up having better health, better emotional well being, better relationships. They have more fulfilling lives, they don't get into trouble, and many things like this. So it seems that out of all the character traits we can have, the ability to control our impulses, the ability to manage that lizard brain, is at the core of being able to live a good life.

Kim Forrester 21:43

Wow, self discipline, mindful self discipline, really does seem to be a form of self care, self compassion. It's a gift to ourselves if we choose to follow that 80/20 principle and make sure that we

are focusing our energy, and our time, and our resources into the things that are going to leave us feeling most fulfilled and uplifted. My final question, Giovanni is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. Can you share a morning reminder with my listeners? Now this might be a practice, a favourite mantra, an affirmation - something that can help us become more self disciplined in our daily lives.

Giovanni Dienstmann 22:28

So that's a big question. I'm going to try to be short. So there are three pillars of self discipline. Aspiration, which is having an empowering goal, something that you want for yourself. Awareness - and that's why it's mindful self discipline. And action. So in the morning, I like to say that, ideally, we would have a morning routine that can be anything from 30 minutes to two hours. And that morning routine is something that is fixed every day; we do it exactly the same way. And that morning routine would ideally contain two essential components. One is a daily meditation practice, because meditation is the best way to train your awareness. Meditation is a practice of awareness of mindfulness; it makes you more in touch with yourself, and that is a foundation of self discipline. So that is one thing that would be there for anyone who cares about self discipline. And then the other thing is, every morning, take a step towards your most important goal. So for those who want to be healthier, and/or be fit, it might be to do 20 minutes of physical exercise. For those who want to write a book and share their knowledge, their wisdom, with the world, you might be, you know, write 1000 words. For those who want to grow in your career, it might be to study and develop a new skill. Whatever your goal is, whatever your aspiration is, make sure that every day in the morning without fail, you take a step forward towards your aspiration. And then whatever happens the rest of the day, if you don't get to work on the most important things for you for the rest of the day, at least every morning, you're taking a step forward.

Kim Forrester 24:15

I love that. Giovanni Dienstmann, I was a self discipline sceptic, and I must say the way that you presented though, it is so inviting. It feels so gentle, and so nourishing. So, how can people find out more about you, and mindful self discipline?

Giovanni Dienstmann 24:35

So if people want to start a meditation practice, then you can go to www.liveanddare.com. There is a free course there that they can take. If people want to learn about the book, a book called Mindful Self Discipline, then they can go to mindfulselfdiscipline.com and, there, they will find information about this whole system, buy the book, the mobile app, and also how they can get one-on-one coaching with me if they're interested.

Kim Forrester 25:06

Well, Giovanni, I am just so incredibly grateful for you gifting your time and very, very thoughtful insights today on the podcast. Thanks for coming along.

Giovanni Dienstmann 25:15

Thank you very much, Kim. I really enjoyed it.

Kim Forrester 25:17

The American President Harry Truman once said, "In reading the lives of great men, I found that the first victory they won was over themselves. Self discipline, with all of them, came first." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe and check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well be kind to yourself, and harmonise your life with self discipline.