

Thoughts on Discipline (from a discussion thread on the difference between discipline and unconscious habit at the IITM discussion board)

by Ken Long



"Discipline vs Autopilot?"

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From a military perspective, I consider discipline to be a habit or state of mind wherein the soldier will do what should be done without supervision, despite the cost in terms of discomfort the required act may entail.

We train and over-train in order that the desired acts move into the domain of unconscious competence or force of habit, but we will be satisfied with conscious competence since success is the performance of the desired task whether unconscious or conscious.

Discipline, like any habit, itself needs reinforcement.

You can think of it on 2 levels: the discipline to continue to perform a specific task you have chosen to be a high priority, and then the "amount" of discipline in general that you have as a quality that you bring to all aspects of your life. For instance, I could be very disciplined on a specific behavior but live an otherwise undisciplined life.

The act of being task-disciplined can lead to a general increase in overall discipline but it needn't always happen that way. A way to bootstrap oneself is to parlay the success you experience from a task-discipline and transfer that into other domains where you desire more discipline.

There are plenty of folks who lose the high level quality of discipline that gave them success in the service once the structured life imposed by an organization that size is removed from their lives, and there are plenty of examples of the inability to apply the discipline they have built up from one task into other areas of life. That's not unique to the military. Las Vegas for instance makes a living on providing a context wherein the discipline of peoples' normal lives are suspended.

Like scheduled auto maintenance or muscular fitness, personal discipline is something that needs periodic attention and exercise to remain effective and healthy.

Like anything (exercise or any other domain) it's always hardest at the start of the program to use discipline to change behaviors, especially when we recognize that the state of nature is to drift into inactivity. That we have experienced success in upgrading our behaviors, though, does give us hope for being able to change.

Short answer on “disciplined vs autopilot”: it may be the best use of discipline to help us transition from conscious competence to unconscious competence, so that intentional behavior becomes habit, so we can focus our attention (our habit of discipline perhaps) on the next target task we want to incorporate. In that model, I'd consider "autopilot" to be habitual behaviors that we don't need to use discipline to perform, recognizing that there's always the chance of it drifting back up into conscious behavior.