The Knowledge Project Keypoints — Meaning, Philosophy & Inner Life

The Knowledge Project Keypoints

Episodes in this pack: 6

How Brent Beshore Transformed 15 Companies Through Self Mastery

Guest: Brent Beshore
Date: 2024-06-11 · Duration: 2:10:22
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h19TEWB2lNg

KEYPOINTS

• Beshore's transformation began when a stranger told him he saw a lot of shame and fear in him.

On a walk at a small gathering in Colorado about three years earlier, a man asked to 'speak truth into your life' and said that shame and fear were damaging Brent's relationships. Brent would have rated his marriage a six or seven out of ten. Looking back, he calls it a two: 'Everything's relative', and he had never seen what a great marriage looked like up close. His first instinct was defensive ('you don't know me'), then he chose to surrender.

• Awareness without healing makes things worse before they get better.

The year after that walk was 'horrible'. He could see how broken his relationships were, mostly because of him, with no way to repair them, and self-help didn't work for him. A friend sent him to a counselor in his own town of Columbia, Missouri. After 25–30 three-hour sessions, he traced behaviors back to layers underneath that he'd always 'shoved down'.

• Always paying the bill can be a form of control.

His counselor asked how many of his last 100 shared meals he'd paid for. 'About a hundred.' Her reply: 'I wouldn't be your friend.' Real friendship means each person ceding control, and always paying builds quiet resentment. Now he says it would give him pleasure to pay but he'll respect their choice. He went on an apology tour to friends, and when they say no he feels loved rather than slighted.

• Heroes create victims: helping people who didn't ask can strip their agency and dignity.

He recounts five or six 'dramatic heroics' in his life that each ended with the friendship souring. Heroics feed the helper ('oh thank you, Brent'). Rising to meet a need someone asks you for is just being a good friend. Imposing help on a need they didn't voice turns them into a victim. Relationships also need to go both ways, so he's learning to ask for help himself.

• There are two fuels: fear and love.

A friend's analogy is clean versus dirty fuel. From outside, the car looks the same. Dirty fuel (fear, scarcity, needing praise) can be more potent in the short term, but it contaminates the engine. His stress was so self-inflicted that excess cortisol nearly cost him his right eye. He'd answer emails late on a Friday after a fight with his wife because people would praise his work ethic. His test now: do I have peace, or am I anxious? He contrasts outward-focused 'elders' with self-focused, 'incurved' elderly people, borrowing the idea from Pascal.

• Debt amplifies returns; it doesn't create them.

Debt makes good things great, destroys mediocre things and 'nukes' bad ones. The more predictable the future, the more debt you can use, though not necessarily should. Permanent Equity buys 'loosely functioning disasters' with $3–20 million of free cash flow, where volatility is high. He calls heavy leverage hubris, since debt helps only the buyer and seller, not employees, customers or communities. 'The lack of patience changes the outcome.'

• Permanent Equity's model aims to have everyone 'eat at the same table'.

Instead of the standard 2-and-20 model, with typical holds of two to three years and executives on 'tours of duty', the firm takes no fees or reimbursements of any kind. It earns a share of free cash flow as cash is returned to investors. That makes everyone want to reinvest in high-return, high-probability projects and avoid the 'bladder problem': the more cash you hold, the more likely you are to waste it. CEOs are paid on long-term free cash flow and often own 10–20%. The firm prefers to buy 51–70% and has never sold a company.

• Their biggest weakness is tolerating poor performance too long, mistaking nice for kind.

Beshore says traditional private equity holds people accountable better. His firm deferred to relationships and optimism despite warning signs, which he calls his own failure as CEO. Being kind means telling someone they're in the wrong role and that it's hurting them. 'Careers often die by suicide, not homicide': under the Peter Principle, people rise beyond their abilities and pride stops them stepping back.

• Investing is ultimately about predicting people's behavior, so he uses Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram.

Most people assume everyone thinks as they do. Brent is an extroverted, intuitive feeler and perceiver, and his wife is the opposite on every axis. Doing the tests together gave them empathy for each other. The firm tests the final three to five candidates for a role, not to box them in but to avoid projecting. One recently withdrew after seeing their results. He's an Enneagram 3w2: an achiever and people-pleaser whose worst fear is 'not being enough'.

• Look for misunderstood businesses, underwrite assuming no growth, and let price be your due diligence.

Every target has a moat (it has survived and earns good returns) and 'lids' (it isn't bigger). The investment memo maps both. When Brent once peppered Buffett with questions, Buffett replied: 'Price is my due diligence.' Turning a 30-year trajectory around quickly is hubris. A Harvard-trained searcher who arrived with grand tech plans spent his first year fighting fires instead.

EXAMPLES

• $30,000 of Christmas gifts

Moved by a teacher's story, Brent and his wife anonymously bought gifts for every child at a poor school. A month later he learned some parents felt insulted, because the gifts took away their chance to give and raised questions for their kids. He later read When Helping Hurts.

• The no-debt aerospace deal

In fall 2019, advisers called them crazy for buying a stable aerospace business without leverage. When COVID cut demand in their segment by up to 88%, the team stayed cash-flow positive every month and hired while rivals negotiated with banks and laid people off. They bought parts at fire-sale prices and rebuilt systems. The business is now worth dramatically more.

• The 'construction' business that wasn't

A big Phoenix pool builder looked like a cyclical construction firm. Two questions changed the picture: 97% of revenue came

directly from consumers, and capex was tiny because construction was subcontracted. It was really a capital-light marketing and logistics business that others dismissed.

- **'I just work out every day'**

  Brent peaked at 252 pounds after a decade of on-and-off diets. Shane's comment that working out was part of his identity, so the only choice was what to do, and a friend's stern 'knock off the fat-kid jokes' flipped a switch. He now trains almost daily, saves alcohol for celebrations, and has quit caffeine.

- **Harry Bottle and Dempster Mill**

  In the early Buffett Partnership days, Dempster Mill was a troubled operating business. Munger introduced Buffett to Harry Bottle, who moved his family to fix it. Brent's point: small businesses can't be left alone. Their natural state is entropy, and early Berkshire was hands-on.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Ask how people feel loved**

  He asks his kids and friends, 'When do you feel most loved?' Loving people the way you want to be loved is really loving yourself. Most people can answer, and they're often surprised by what they say.

- **Scaling means repeatedly going back to zero**

  It took four years to buy a second business. Each stage requires reinvesting cash flow in a new layer of people and systems, with new culture problems, which is why he calls owning 15 companies 'a miracle'.

- **Know your conflict pattern**

  Everyone uses three moves in conflict, in their own order: move against, move toward (smoothing things over) and move away.

Jerry Colonna: How to Reboot Yourself

Guest: Jerry Colonna
Date: 2023-10-17 · Duration: 1:55:56
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8kuQdZgNn8

KEYPOINTS

• Hitting every external goal can leave you hollow if the shell was built for other people.

By about 38 or 39, Colonna was a successful, wealthy venture capitalist who had done everything he was supposed to—and was depressed enough to want to die. He felt 'hoodwinked,' though no one did it on purpose. He had walked around in a shell tailored to other people's projections. His skills, intellect and work ethic showed through, but he wasn't doing what he was put on Earth to do. A long gap between inner and outer self, he argues, breeds depression.

• We shapeshift for love, safety and belonging, and pass it down.

From school and family we attach identity to roles: the peacemaking youngest child, the early-parentified kid, the straight-A student, the athlete. One client said, 'I was bred to make my family members feel better.' Children who shapeshift to soothe a depressed father or anxious mother tend to pass the pattern to their own children, so changing it means breaking a lineage. It's never too late. In a Buddhist teaching, waking up in the last minute of a 20-minute meditation still counts as a wonderful session.

• Ask: how am I complicit in creating the conditions I say I don't want?

'Complicit' is deliberate: an accomplice in the bank job, not the one robbing the teller. The non-intuitive follow-up is: what's the benefit to me? A CEO of 15 complained that nobody worked as hard as she did. Colonna asked who hired them and what she got from being in charge; she grinned: 'I'm the boss.' Until you'll risk what the pattern protects, nothing changes. Being seen as a financial wizard had overcome decades of feeling poor, so he 'had to be willing to be poor in order to be free.'

• Name what a pattern does for you before judging it—most were built to keep you safe.

Shane said his public persona, Farnam Street, works as a protective shield. Colonna warns against the urge to self-criticize on spotting such a front: 'I'm such a bad person' is just another front, guarding the core issue. Curiosity, not shame, is what transforms. Tracing Shane's fear of wasting people's time, he noted that an embryo has no shame. It was learned somewhere along the way, and the feeling was as old as Shane could remember.

• Running on negative fuel works—until it hollows you out.

Shane framed a commenter's jab that he was 'enjoying his 15 minutes of fame' and used it as motivation, while praise slid off 'like a fried egg' from Teflon. Colonna sees catastrophizing as a family survival strategy common among descendants of immigrants, pogroms and famine: relax and something bad will happen. Imagine still being unable to take in the good at 84 on your deathbed. Shane's word for it was 'hollow.' As Josh Wolfe says, chips on shoulders put chips in pockets. But the goal is equanimity, so mistakes bring remorse and learning without risking self-worth.

• 'Enough' is the antidote; reaching for the stars replaces fear.

Colonna left venture capital while his close friends Fred Wilson and Brad Feld became two of the world's most successful VCs. When he envies them, his journal says, 'dude, you have enough.' Over lunch Wilson told him he does the work he was born to do, which made him cry. He invokes the Buddhist hungry ghost, never sated, and says millions of them hold power. Breakthroughs come when brain and heart are relaxed. The healthy driver is Browning's line: 'a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?' I am enough, but what if I wrote a book that changed the world?

• Resilience needs discernment; otherwise it becomes stubbornness.

'False grit' is persevering for a hidden reason: founders cling to businesses with no product-market fit because they fear failure. A former boxer, Colonna rejects 'resilience is the ability to take a punch.' The goal is to slip punches and outlast the opponent. If a son plays badly at his first hockey game, explore what's at stake—shame, enjoyment, contributing to the team—rather than just forcing him back on the ice. The aim is knowing things can go wrong and you're still OK.

• Teach children words for feelings; growing up is a lifelong practice.

We tell kids to 'use your words' but never give them the words, especially boys, who hear 'I'll give you something to cry about.' Most people learn only two modes: silent passive aggression until they explode into active aggression. That gap, Colonna says, is why toxic workplaces hand power to people who can't speak about what they feel. At 60, after 18 years of meditation, he says he finally has 'a little flaming butter knife' of discernment, and that getting a bit better every day is 'glorious.'

EXAMPLES

• 'The story I'm telling myself is that you're leaving me.'

As Colonna carried laundry past her, his partner Ally said this, borrowing Brené Brown's line. He answered, 'Hun, I'm just doing the laundry.' Naming the old fear of abandonment instead of acting on it made the moment funny, not painful.

• The jeans and the ghost of childhood past.

When Ally looked him up and down, it triggered shame rooted in childhood violence and a fraught relationship with his body. Instead of reacting like the Hulk, he put a hand on his heart: 'You did nothing wrong… I just had a visit from a ghost of childhood past.' It became a moment of closeness.

• Three bosses named John.

A client's last three bosses were all named John—as was her father. Patterns in relationships repeat until you ask what you get from them.

• Taking a fix on yourself.

Journaling since 13, Colonna writes at sunrise with coffee on his Colorado farm—'right now I'm feeling…'—then meditates and exercises. The function, not the format, is the point: processing feelings so they don't spill onto others, like snapping at a son who asks for $20 because the market is down 7%.

• 'I am so proud of you, dude.'

After Colonna read a rough draft at the Do Lectures in Wales, his son Sam, 33, mouthed this from the back of the room. 'That's an extrinsic motivation, but I'll take that one.'

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Use OFNR.**
  From Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication: Observation, Feeling, Need, Request. 'You're always late; you don't care' fuses fact and story; separating them creates space between stimulus and response.
- **Love is safe.**
  If it isn't safe, it may be attachment, not love. Safety is partly your own job, such as learning words for feelings.
- **End draining friendships by owning your part.**
  'I don't want to feed the part of me that drinks; if we meet, we won't drink.' If the friend balks, that's revealing.
- **Success is equanimity.**
  Fixing a shorting fountain, a talk with his son, a call with his sister: material things are 'the container, not the content.'

Take Charge of Your Life: The Routine that Changed Everything with Jim Dethmer

Guest: Jim Dethmer
Date: 2023-03-07 · Duration: 2:20:08
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlMNMPZVWb4

KEYPOINTS

• Integrity isn't mainly moral. It's energetic wholeness, or 'full aliveness'.

'Integrity' shares a root with 'integer', meaning a whole number. Dethmer uses it to mean being fully alive in head, heart, gut and spirit. He likens it to old Christmas lights, where one loose bulb dims and then kills the whole strand. When his vitality drops, he checks four 'pillars' he learned from Dr. Katie Hendricks: take radical responsibility, feel your feelings, speak candidly, and be impeccable with agreements. Sleep, food and exercise matter too, but everyone already knows that. Few people play the game of 'let's be fully alive'.

• Radical responsibility starts with deciding in calm moments which game you'll play, then recommitting each time you drift.

Decide you're flying to San Francisco (responsibility), not Austin (blame), and buy the ticket during quiet reflection. Planes constantly drift off course and correct. When his wife Debbie gives him 'that look', the blame reflex says her face causes his discomfort. In fact he has outsourced his need for approval to her expression. He separates real victims, as he was as an abused child, from victim consciousness, such as blaming your parents at 70. Early in their marriage they allowed 24 hours of blame before recommitting. Then ask: How did I create this? How is it familiar? What's my payoff?

• Under most drama are four core wants: approval, control, security and oneness. We outsource them.

These come from Hale Dwoskin, teacher of the Sedona Method. They're natural, since being shunned by the pack once meant death, and 'we're all control freaks'. After age four to six we forget we already have them inside, so we chase money, alarm systems, second passports, or a mother's 'I love you' before she dies. It never works. Most modern threats aren't territorial but threats to identity, the 'mini-me'. Dethmer recommends meditation that reveals who you really are, not just better concentration, and names Loch Kelly and Sam Harris's Waking Up app.

• Discipline drives practices; devotion drives rituals.

A practice has a desired payoff and uses delayed gratification, like hitting 10,000 steps. A ritual is a physical act that 'points to another realm', done as an offering of attention. He rereads a poem, 'Lost', before walking his Michigan woods, then pauses to listen. He chose a wood-burning sauna for the ritual of lighting a fire in the dark, then spends 15–20 minutes giving Debbie full attention with no logistics. Shane's kids' after-school routine of shower, snack and homework is a healthy habit, Dethmer says, but not a ritual unless it opens onto something larger.

• When you withhold, you withdraw and then project. When you reveal, you connect and can own your projection.

Withholding a judgment (Debbie 'doesn't decide fast enough') makes you step back and then see confirming evidence everywhere: 'the death spiral of a relationship'. Revealing it, even something as small as wanting his daughter's boyfriend at a 16-person Thanksgiving, opens connection. Then you look for your own projection: where am I not deciding, or addicted to deciding too fast? Couples who are bored, he says, are 'almost always' not being candid with each other. A useful opener: 'Over here on planet Jim, I'm making up a story about you, and I want to check it out.'

• A feeling is just sensations, and most pass in minutes if you rest attention on them.

On his 17th birthday, Dethmer woke at 5 a.m. to his father having a fatal heart attack in the next bed. A nurse handed him the ring and watch. After breaking down in a hospital bathroom, he 'pulled himself together' to care for his mother and locked his feelings away into his early 30s. Holding emotions down is like holding beach balls underwater: exhausting, and he thinks it left him mildly depressed. People usually either vent feelings or suppress them. The third option is to feel the sensations fully until they release.

• Train the pause in advance, then use 'shift moves' during conflict.

A fight is a decision point, but no one taps you on the shoulder, so agree beforehand that either partner can 'call the game'. Moves: conscious breathing (4-7-8 or box breathing) to reset 'blood and brain chemistry'. Conscious listening: 'I stopped listening 15 minutes ago. Tell me again.' Separating fact from story, because 'facts never cause drama, stories cause drama'. And the drama triangle game. Expect to catch patterns the next morning at first, then an hour later, then in the moment. You can repair yourself inside even if the other person never cooperates.

• Being impeccable with agreements has four steps, and it's where trust is built or lost.

An agreement is who does what by when. Make clear agreements you have a whole-body yes to. Keep about 90% of them, when many teams keep 30–40%. Renegotiate as soon as you know you'll miss one, as a two-way conversation. Clean up broken ones without excuses. Tom Peters said there's 'no such thing as a small breach of integrity'. Gay Hendricks says all relationship drama comes from unaligned commitments or unclear, unkept agreements. Dethmer cleaned up joining this call a minute late by going to the wrong app.

EXAMPLES

• Shane's apology after the tech glitch

When an earlier recording failed, Shane apologized for 'wasting' Dethmer's time. Dethmer showed him three untested assumptions: Dethmer was having a bad time, Shane caused it, and time was scarce for him. In fact he was glad of the break. 'I won't grant you that power.'

• Feeling it in the jaw

Dethmer coaches Shane live: picture someone irritating, find the feeling in the body (a tense jaw), drop the story, and rest attention there. It 'just goes away'. Replaying grudges instead creates a thought-feeling loop that hardens into resentment.

• The CEO who was always late

In front of the CEO's team, Dethmer said he felt angry they'd started 10 minutes late and asked whether it was a pattern. The team laughed. Six or seven years later, the CEO is still punctual with him.

- **Three options for chronically late people**
  Invite them to agree, as he did with a barber who later started texting when he was running late. Trust them to be late and bring a book, as with his son. Or 'complete' the relationship without blame.
- **The drama triangle cards**
  He keeps plastic victim, villain and hero cards around the house. In a fight you throw them down, set a two-minute timer and exaggerate the fight. His partner Diana Chapman is 'world class at turning drama into play'.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Ordinary moments compound**
  Shane's point: unrepaired small slights matter more than big choices like whom you marry. Dethmer agrees that corrosion comes from a 'million little moments'.
- **Responsibility isn't license**
  Granting others responsibility for their experience doesn't mean you can treat them however you like. Approach them with love.
- **Children feel fully**
  Infants feel everything through to completion. Adults have to relearn it, so practice in safe, low-stakes moments first.

A Practical Guide on Finding Inner Peace | Jack Kornfield | Knowledge Project Podcast 156

Guest: Jack Kornfield
Date: 2023-01-10 · Duration: 1:41:30
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9ayv-y4XBo

KEYPOINTS

• There are two kinds of suffering.

After Dartmouth, avoiding the Vietnam draft, Jack Kornfield joined the Peace Corps in Thailand. He then entered Ajahn Chah's forest monastery on the Laos border, where the teacher greeted him with: 'I hope you're not afraid to suffer.' One kind of suffering you run away from, and it follows you everywhere. The other you face, and it's the gateway to freedom. The bell rang at 3 or 3:30am. Monks tapped the paths with sticks to warn off cobras, walked 5 to 10 miles barefoot for alms, and sat up all night at least once a week. His Ivy League education, he says, gave him half the curriculum. Nobody taught him what to do with his rage at a violent father, how to listen with compassion, or how to be with his fears.

• If you're going to be angry, do it right.

Kornfield had survived his childhood by being the family peacemaker, and thought he was a peaceful person. Then, in the monastery, anger out of all proportion began to surface. Ajahn Chah said, 'Good.' Go back to your hut in the hot season, close the door and both windows, wrap yourself in all your robes, and sit there until you know anger. Hear the stories it tells, feel its energy pulsing through your body, and stop running away from it. The general skill: name the emotion — sadness, fear, longing, delight — feel where it lives in the body, and see its story. Then emotions become visitors rather than captors, and your 'window of tolerance' widens.

• Emotions aren't just yours.

As mindful witnessing deepens, you stop taking emotions so personally. The grief or longing is part of the grief and longing of the world, shared with humanity, and that brings spaciousness. Kornfield notes this isn't purely mental perspective-taking. It's embodied: this is what the body feels like when grief sweeps over. A strong reaction to a small slight is a signal of past conditioning or trauma — not good or bad, just something there, which keeps playing out if you stay unaware of it.

• Thank the critical voice, then water better seeds.

Our inner commentary tries to keep us safe from pain, humiliation and loss. So rather than judging unhealthy thoughts, Kornfield says, 'Thank you for trying to protect me. I'm okay. You can relax.' Then drop beneath the story to the fear driving it. Practise loving-kindness: picture someone easy to love and repeat, 'May you be safe and well, may you be healthy, may you be happy and at ease, may you be held in love.' It feels mechanical at first, like piano practice, then becomes a default. Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching: the mind holds seeds of joy and of fear, and how you live depends on which seeds you water.

• Self-compassion is strength, not weakness.

At a meeting of Western teachers with the Dalai Lama, they asked about students' self-hatred. He was confused, asked how many had experienced it — nearly every hand went up — and said Tibetan has no word for it. Following the mindful self-compassion training of Chris Germer and Kristin Neff, first notice the judgmental voices. Don't fight them, which is just more judgment; say, 'I see you.' Then reflect on common humanity: baldness, like most struggles, happens to tens of millions, and it isn't something you did wrong. What grows is a quiet dignity rather than brash confidence.

• A mindful pause changes the rest of the day.

As a therapist, Kornfield had clients sit quietly for five minutes before talking. Someone arriving with road rage can hardly listen to themselves. A pause — a few breaths, stepping away — keeps one trigger from flavouring the whole morning. Practice makes the response automatic. Kornfield admits he's a 'speed freak,' but when someone slows him down, he now instantly wishes them well — not because he's saintly, but because he's practised. Ram Dass's image helps: treat your personality like a pet, with kind bemusement. Don't beat the puppy, and don't let it run the house.

• Forgiveness doesn't condone — it frees you.

Forgiveness isn't forgetting. See clearly what happened, feel the suffering, and resolve to stop it continuing. Then decide not to carry the hatred, or cycles like Hutus and Tutsis or Northern Ireland's Catholics and Protestants never end. Two former prisoners of war meet 25 years later. One asks, 'Have you forgiven our captors?' 'Never.' 'Then they still have you in prison.' It can be a long process, and it's mainly for the benefit of your own heart.

• Intention steers everything.

Crash your car through a neighbour's fence in rage, or because the accelerator stuck: identical from outside, entirely different consequences. Set a long-term intention, as simple as 'I vow to be kind,' as a compass. In conflict with his wife Trudy, Kornfield pauses and asks, 'What's my best intention?' 'What did you mean?' fuels an argument. 'What did you mean? I want to understand' shifts it from blame to care. Watch impact too, because good intentions can still cause harm.

EXAMPLES

• Malaria in a six-by-seven hut.

Lying sick on the floor, Kornfield was visited by Ajahn Chah. 'This is suffering, all right... makes you want to go home and see your mother, doesn't it? You know how to do this.' The teacher's steadiness was the transmission.

• 'I will not bequeath bitterness.'

A woman in a brutal divorce — her husband was hiding money and turning the children against her — got a tough lawyer, as Kornfield advised. But she also vowed never to say a bad word about their father.

• Stones for the dead.

At a retreat for young men leaving LA, Oakland and Chicago gangs, the hoods stayed up until each was asked to bring back a stone for every young person they knew who'd been killed and say their name. Some came back with their hands full. Kornfield later lit a candle in silence with Google vice presidents too.

• Shay's bowl.

A teacher battled a defiant seventh-grader all year. On the last day, the girl returned with a ceramic bowl: 'Thanks for trying to like me.' The teacher, now a district superintendent, still keeps it on her desk.

• Number your top ten tunes.

Most thoughts are repeats. On retreat, Kornfield has people number their recurring worries — the daughter, the stock portfolio — so they can say, 'Oh, number three. Thank you.'

OTHER RELEVANT

• Empathy feels; compassion acts.

Watching a child being bullied, empathy resonates like a sympathetic violin string; compassion walks over or tells the principal.

• When you eat and read, just eat and read.

Presence doesn't mean slowness — even grocery shopping can be enjoyed rather than careened through.

• Discernment over judgment.

See clearly what serves without the negative charge, and don't struggle alone — every tradition has its community.

William Irvine: Living a Stoic Life | The Knowledge Project #123

Guest: William Irvine
Date: 2021-11-02 · Duration: 1:09:57
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSIErua5q04

KEYPOINTS

• He set out to become a Zen Buddhist and came out a Stoic, because Stoicism is easy to try.

At 50, in what he calls a mild midlife crisis, the philosophy professor decided to become a Zen Buddhist and turn it into a book. To show the alternatives, he looked at the Stoics, whom he had met only in a 1970s logic class; his professors said living well wasn't 'the proper business of a philosopher'. Both schools aim at the same goal: a life full of positive emotions like delight and joy, with as little anger, anxiety and regret as possible. Zen gets there through meditation that might pay off tomorrow or in 30 years. Stoicism offers techniques you can learn in minutes and 'test-drive with no one being any the wiser'. He expected A Guide to the Good Life to sell about 12 copies. Now general-audience books on Stoicism appear at more than one a day.

• Real Stoics were cheerful people who enjoyed things without clinging to them.

The 'lowercase-s stoic' who feels nothing and grits his teeth is a misconception. The ancients weren't anti-emotion. They tried to prevent negative emotions from arising and nip them in the bud, and they were 'connoisseurs of positive emotions'. Offered fine wine, a Stoic drinks it. When it runs out, he asks for water. The school spans a wide range: Seneca, the era's billionaire and greatest playwright; Marcus Aurelius, the emperor; and Musonius Rufus, who said a cave would do. Seneca is Irvine's current favorite, 'but ask me next week'.

• We're wired for dissatisfaction. The savanna's 'cool dude' got eaten.

An ancestor who gazed contentedly at the sky, living in the moment, was eaten by a lion or had no food when mealtime came. The restless planners survived and are in your family tree. That wiring misfires in a world where the problem is overeating, not hunger, and where possessions aren't limited to what you can carry. So we keep raising our standards: 'if only I had…'. We're like 'thirsty people chasing mirages in a desert'. Seen from our ancestors' point of view, we live in a dream world, with running water, toilet paper and a phone that can order pizza in Hong Kong, yet we complain about not having the latest model.

• Negative visualization: briefly imagine losing what you take for granted, then savor it.

Irvine leads Shane through it. Close your eyes and imagine that darkness is all you'll ever see. Then imagine your eyes are glued shut and can never open. Let that sink in, then open them: 'Isn't that absolutely incredible?' He insists it should be a 'flickering thought', never dwelling, which would be 'a recipe for a disastrously suicidal life'. The Stoics were 'emotional preppers', ready for things to get worse, which made them grateful for what they had. His wife sometimes hears him shout 'Thanks for existing!' from the back bedroom after he imagines her gone.

• Turn the dichotomy of control into a trichotomy.

Epictetus divided things into what you control and what you don't. Irvine adds a middle category: things you partly control. You can't stop an asteroid. You can choose your values, your goals and, with effort, your responses. In a tennis match you can't control your opponent's training, strategy or effort, but you can control your practice, conditioning and game plan, so put your attention there. Anxiety often comes from fixating on what you can't control. Choosing your values is itself within your control, and you can then build a strategy toward them.

• Treat setbacks as tests, and reframe within five seconds before anger catches fire.

You're locked in your skull for life with two roommates: one with anger issues ('you should be furious about what he said') and an anxious one who whispers worries as you fall asleep. Both are evolutionary leftovers. In his book The Stoic Challenge, Irvine catches the first smolderings of anger and gives himself about five seconds to reframe. Each setback becomes a test with two parts: find a workaround, and don't get upset while doing it. A broken pipe costs a few hundred dollars to fix. The damage comes from the flood, and most harm from setbacks is likewise self-inflicted. Even practicing Stoics feel 'meta-anger', anger at being angry.

• Choose whose opinion counts: mentors, limited mentors and anti-mentors.

One negative comment outweighs a thousand compliments, so Irvine stopped watching the chat during Zoom talks after spending seven minutes reacting to a single jab. Praise from strangers whose values you don't know means little, which is why he keeps social media to a minimum. Praise from a mentor deserves celebration. He keeps 'limited mentors', such as rowing coaches whose criticism he welcomes. An anti-mentor plays a different game, often the social-status game. If they approve of you, you're doing something wrong, and their disdain is a good sign: 'like bringing a hockey stick to a baseball game'.

• Failure, especially public failure, is a sign you're attempting hard things.

Irvine doesn't enjoy failing, but he's 'a big fan of failure' because it shows someone is trying things that are hard for them. If you never fail, the Stoic advice is to switch to something harder. Criticism is a different matter. It used to cost something: attacking a neighbor made onlookers wonder whether you'd do the same to them. Now anonymous pile-ons let some people treat outrage as a day's work ('I piled on to 18 people today, I've earned my beer'). Shane adds that critics who aren't in the arena rarely add much.

EXAMPLES

• The 400-million-year-old rock

Near his home, which once lay under an ancient sea, he picked up a fossil and 'freaked out' while onlookers saw just a rock. Delight and awe take a little effort to open your mind to, as with a blue sky that didn't have to be blue.

• Last place, still ahead

A competitive sculler, he often places poorly, but racing is Stoic training: fighting the voices urging him to slow down two-thirds of the way through. Even in last place, he beat 'the 7.5 billion people who didn't show up at the starting line.'

• Don't take the shortcut

Shane once cut a 10-mile run short and struggled for three months not to do it again. Irvine agrees that one big win for the quitting voices 'gives them superpowers'.

• Answering an insult

Make a joke of it, or better, give no response at all and carry on. If they repeat it, say 'Yes, I heard you the first time' and keep talking. He wrote a whole book on insults, A Slap in the Face.

- **The psychological immune system**

Just as a pediatrician relative advises that kids should 'eat a pound of dirt', people raised in psychological bubbles with no challenges crumble at the first irritant.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Self-discipline is self-rule**

If you aren't controlling the one life you have, someone or something else is. 'What a waste.'

- **People you're allergic to**

Keep your distance where you can. Remind yourself 'that's just Bob being Bob'. We still need 'vitamin P': people.

- **Skeptical and open-minded**

Open-minded without skepticism fills your head with conspiracies; skeptical without openness misses truths. Lay out many options and seek intelligent opponents to learn from, not to refute.

The Angel Philosopher Naval Ravikant on Reading, Making Decisions, Habits, and the Purpose of Life

Guest: Naval Ravikant
Date: 2019-08-17 · Duration: 2:02:19
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGY2To_HW98

KEYPOINTS

• Reading an hour a day puts you in a tiny minority, and the habit matters more than the book.

As a latchkey kid in New York, raised by a single mother working several jobs, Naval spent every afternoon at the library until it closed. Nobody told him what he should read, so he climbed from comics to mysteries, fantasy, sci-fi, science, math and philosophy. He reads one to two hours a day, which he thinks puts him in the top 0.01%, and credits it for any material success he's had. Like exercise, the key is doing it daily: the best book is the one you're excited to read. Even when broke, he treated books as an investment. He buys about ten times more than he finishes.

• Treat books like blog archives: skim, skip, and reread the great ones.

Blogs and the internet shortened everyone's attention span. Naval brought books back by reading them like blogs: jumping around until something grabs him, and finishing without guilt only if it's good. Most nonfiction makes one point and then piles on examples. He drops a book if the author states something plainly false, like dismissing thermodynamics, because then he can't tell true from false. He would rather reread about 100 great books, among them Sapiens, the Durants' Lessons of History, Krishnamurti, Osho, Matt Ridley and Feynman. He prefers originals like Adam Smith and Darwin over a hundred retellings, since most bestsellers are read for social approval and the rewards in life come from leaving the herd.

• Your top priority is the one you'll never claim to lack time for.

'I don't have time' really means 'it's not a priority.' A fuzzy set of ten or fifteen priorities means you achieve none. Naval ranked his: physical health first, then mental, then spiritual, then family, then everything else. So every morning he works out for however long it takes, 'even if the world is imploding,' and misses only a handful of days a year. The workout also helped him cut back on drinking. Late nights ruined the next morning's session, and he realized he drank to get through social settings he didn't enjoy, so he narrowed his social circle and switched to red wine, which naturally limits itself.

• Happiness is what's left when nothing feels missing.

Naval sees happiness not as positive thoughts, since every positive implies a negative, but as the absence of desire, especially for external things. When nothing is missing, the mind stops racing into the past or future and goes quiet. Clinging to happiness ends it. He is trying to quiet his 'monkey mind': brushing his teeth before this interview, he caught himself rehearsing imaginary answers and returned to just brushing. Children are happy because they're absorbed in the moment. He thinks people chase thrills, flow and alcohol largely to escape the voice in their heads.

• Life is a single-player game, so drop jealousy.

Society rewards competitive games others can see, like fitness and money, but training yourself to be happy is entirely internal: 'you're born alone, you're gonna die alone.' Naval cites Warren Buffett's question: would you rather be the world's best lover known as the worst, or the worst known as the best? Jealousy faded for Naval once he realized he couldn't take just one person's body and another's money; he would have to become that whole person, which he didn't want. Meditation doesn't give you control over your mind at first, but it shows you how out of control it is, and seeing that separation is a kind of liberation.

• Hold a few values you won't compromise on.

Naval's values: honesty, so his words match his thoughts and he never splits his mind to manage what he says; only long-term dealings, because everything good compounds; only peer relationships, neither above nor below anyone; and no anger, which the Buddhists compare to a hot coal you hold while waiting to throw it. He follows Buffett's rule of criticizing the general approach and praising specific people. Freedom used to mean being free to do anything. Now it means being free from anger, from reactivity, from obligation. Looking back decade by decade, his biggest regret is not what he did but the anger and emotion he brought to it.

• Avoid errors rather than chase brilliant calls, and set up systems.

Leverage means being right a bit more often is worth hundreds of times more; a 10% edge on a billion dollars is $100 million. Studying complexity theory taught Naval how little anyone can predict, so he focuses on eliminating what won't work rather than picking winners. Angel investing suits this because you can lose only what you put in but can make 10,000 times it. He would rather see 10,000 companies, back 500 with a chance and double down on the five winners than bet big on ten. His goal is to do well in 999 of 1,000 possible versions of his life. He doesn't use checklists for decisions, and he warns against copying others: 'no one in the world is gonna beat you at being you.'

• Watch for integrity, simplicity and long-term thinking.

How people treat others shows their integrity. If someone says 'I'm only taking advantage of him, I'd never do that to you,' remember how easily they can redefine who counts as a friend. People with integrity negotiate generously, and those who talk up their own honesty are usually covering for something. 'The closer you want to get to me, the better your values have to be.' Real understanding builds up from basics: a charlatan explains simple things in complicated ways, while Feynman built math from the number line to pre-calculus in three pages. Naval looks for founders who know their field, love the work and are willing to commit ten years. Great people get great outcomes; you just have to be patient.

EXAMPLES

• The box of tablets.

Naval recalls a story of a box of Android tablets left unopened in a remote village. When people came back months later, the children had hacked them, taught themselves English and were teaching each other. Tools are everywhere; the desire to learn is what's scarce.

• Schools teach to an obsolete design.

Kids lose one rung of the math ladder and fall back on memorizing. Naval would teach the basics thoroughly, plus nutrition, relationships and how to build technology.

- **A second check on his calendar.**
  The present Naval overcommits the energetic future Naval. His fix: wait 48 hours before committing, or say yes only if he would do it right now.
- **Hard choices, easy life.**
  His trainer Jerzy Gregorek says: easy choices, hard life; hard choices, easy life.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Micro over macro.**
  Naval gave up on macroeconomics, calling it unfalsifiable. Microeconomics and game theory are essential. Change yourself before the world.
- **Pain is a moment of truth.**
  Suffering is when you finally see reality as it is. Admit setbacks publicly so you can't fool yourself.
- **The new car.**
  Naval admits he was 'addicted to the desiring' while waiting for a new car he knew he'd stop caring about.
- **Meaning is personal.**
  There may be no intrinsic purpose, so you make your own. Find the question that matters to you.