



# THE DAILY STOIC

366 MEDITATIONS  
ON WISDOM,  
PERSEVERANCE, AND  
THE ART OF LIVING

FEATURING NEW TRANSLATIONS OF  
SENECA, EPICTETUS, AND MARCUS AURELIUS

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*Ego Is the Enemy*



366 Meditations on Wisdom,  
Perseverance, and the Art of Living

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**RYAN HOLIDAY**  
AND STEPHEN HANSELMAN

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Translations by Stephen Hanselman

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*From Stephen to my beloved Julia, who helped me find joy.*

“Of all people only those are at leisure who make time for philosophy, only they truly live. Not satisfied to merely keep good watch over their own days, they annex every age to their own. All the harvest of the past is added to their store. Only an ingrate would fail to see that these great architects of venerable thoughts were born for us and have designed a way of life for us.”

—SENECA

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The private diaries of one of Rome's greatest emperors, the personal letters of one of Rome's best playwrights and wisest power brokers, the lectures of a former slave and exile, turned influential teacher. Against all odds and the passing of some two millennia, these incredible documents survive.

What do they say? Could these ancient and obscure pages really contain anything relevant to modern life? The answer, it turns out, is yes. They contain some of the greatest wisdom in the history of the world.

Together these documents constitute the bedrock of what is known as Stoicism, an ancient philosophy that was once one of the most popular civic disciplines in the West, practiced by the rich and the impoverished, the powerful and the struggling alike in the pursuit of the Good Life. But over the centuries, knowledge of this way of thinking, once essential to so many, slowly faded from view.

Except to the most avid seekers of wisdom, Stoicism is either unknown or misunderstood. Indeed, it would be hard to find a word dealt a greater



injustice at the hands of the English language than “Stoic.” To the average person, this vibrant, action-oriented, and paradigm-shifting way of living has become shorthand for “emotionlessness.” Given the fact that the mere

mention of philosophy makes most nervous or bored, “Stoic philosophy” on the surface sounds like the last thing anyone would want to learn about, let alone urgently *need* in the course of daily life.

What a sad fate for a philosophy that even one of its occasional critics, Arthur Schopenhauer, would describe as “the highest point to which man can attain by the mere use of his faculty of reason.”

Our goal with this book is to restore Stoicism to its rightful place as a tool in the pursuit of self-mastery, perseverance, and wisdom: something

one uses to live a great life, rather than some esoteric field of academic inquiry.

Certainly, many of history’s great minds not only understood Stoicism

for what it truly is, they sought it out: George Washington, Walt Whitman, Frederick the Great, Eugène Delacroix, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant,

Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Arnold, Ambrose Bierce, Theodore Roosevelt,

William Alexander Percy, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Each read, studied,

quoted, or admired the Stoics.

The ancient Stoics themselves were no slouches. The names you

encounter in this book—Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca—belonged to,

respectively, a Roman emperor, a former slave who triumphed to become an

influential lecturer and friend of the emperor Hadrian, and a famous

playwright and political adviser. There were Stoics like Cato the Younger, who was an admired politician; Zeno was a prosperous merchant (as several Stoics were); Cleanthes was a former boxer and worked as a water carrier to put himself through school; Chrysippus, whose writings are now completely lost but tallied more than seven hundred books, trained as a long-distance runner; Posidonius served as an ambassador; Musonius Rufus was a teacher; and many others.

Today (especially since the recent publication of *The Obstacle Is the Way*), Stoicism has found a new and diverse audience, ranging from the coaching staffs of the New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks to rapper LL Cool J and broadcaster Michele Tafoya as well as many professional athletes, CEOs, hedge fund managers, artists, executives, and public men and women.

What have all these great men and women found within Stoicism that others missed?

A great deal. While academics often see Stoicism as an antiquated methodology of minor interest, it has been the *doers* of the world who found that it provides much needed strength and stamina for their challenging lives. When journalist and Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce advised a young writer that studying the Stoics would teach him “how to be a worthy guest at the table of the gods,” or when the painter Eugène Delacroix (famous for his painting *Liberty Leading the People*) called Stoicism his “consoling religion,” they were speaking from experience. So was the brave abolitionist and colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who

led the first all-black regiment in the U.S. Civil War and produced one of the more memorable translations of Epictetus. The Southern planter and writer William Alexander Percy, who led the rescue efforts in the Great Flood of 1927, had a unique reference point when he said of Stoicism that “when all is lost, it stands fast.” As would the author and angel investor Tim Ferriss, when he referred to Stoicism as the ideal “personal operating system” (other high-powered executives like Jonathan Newhouse, CEO of Condé Nast International, have agreed).

But it’s for the field of battle that Stoicism seems to have been particularly well designed. In 1965, as Captain James Stockdale (future Medal of Honor recipient) parachuted from his shot-up plane over Vietnam into what would ultimately be a half decade of torture and imprisonment, whose name was on his lips? Epictetus. Just as Frederick the Great reportedly rode into battle with the works of the Stoics in his saddlebags, so too did marine and NATO commander General James “Mad Dog” Mattis, who carried the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius with him on deployments in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Again, these weren’t professors but practitioners, and as a practical philosophy they found Stoicism perfectly suited to their purposes.

## **FROM GREECE TO ROME TO TODAY**

Stoicism was a school of philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early third century BC. Its name is derived from the Greek *stoa*, meaning porch, because that’s where Zeno first taught his students. The

philosophy asserts that virtue (meaning, chiefly, the four cardinal virtues of self-control, courage, justice, and wisdom) is happiness, and it is our perceptions of things—rather than the things themselves—that cause most of our trouble. Stoicism teaches that we can't control or rely on anything outside what Epictetus called our "reasoned choice"—our ability to use our reason to choose how we categorize, respond, and reorient ourselves to external events.

Early Stoicism was much closer to a comprehensive philosophy like other ancient schools whose names might be vaguely familiar:

Epicureanism, Cynicism, Platonism, Skepticism. Proponents spoke of diverse topics, including physics, logic, cosmology, and many others. One of the analogies favored by the Stoics to describe their philosophy was that of a fertile field. Logic was the protective fence, physics was the field, and the crop that all this produced was ethics—or *how to live*.

As Stoicism progressed, however, it focused primarily on two of these topics—logic and ethics. Making its way from Greece to Rome, Stoicism became much more practical to fit the active, pragmatic lives of the industrious Romans. As Marcus Aurelius would later observe, "I was blessed when I set my heart on philosophy that I didn't fall into the sophist's trap, nor remove myself to the writer's desk, or chop logic, or busy myself with studying the heavens."

Instead, he (and Epictetus and Seneca) focused on a series of questions not unlike the ones we continue to ask ourselves today: "What is the best way to live?" "What do I do about my anger?" "What are my obligations to

my fellow human beings?” “I’m afraid to die; why is that?” “How can I deal with the difficult situations I face?” “How should I handle the success or power I hold?”

These weren’t abstract questions. In their writings—often private letters or diaries—and in their lectures, the Stoics struggled to come up with real, actionable answers. They ultimately framed their work around a series of exercises in three critical disciplines:

The Discipline of Perception (how we see and perceive the world around us)

The Discipline of Action (the decisions and actions we take—and to what end)

The Discipline of Will (how we deal with the things we cannot change, attain clear and convincing judgment, and come to a true *understanding* of our place in the world)

By controlling our perceptions, the Stoics tell us, we can find mental clarity. In directing our actions properly and justly, we’ll be effective. In utilizing and aligning our will, we will find the wisdom and perspective to deal with anything the world puts before us. It was their belief that by strengthening themselves and their fellow citizens in these disciplines, they could cultivate resilience, purpose, and even joy.

Born in the tumultuous ancient world, Stoicism took aim at the unpredictable nature of everyday life and offered a set of practical tools meant for daily use. Our modern world may seem radically different than

the painted porch (Stoa Poikilê) of the Athenian Agora and the Forum and court of Rome. But the Stoics took great pains to remind themselves (see November 10th) that they weren't facing things any different than their own forebears did, and that the future wouldn't radically alter the nature and end of human existence. One day is as all days, as the Stoics liked to say. And it's still true.

Which brings us to where we are right now.

## **A PHILOSOPHICAL BOOK FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE**

Some of us are stressed. Others are overworked. Perhaps you're struggling with the new responsibilities of parenthood. Or the chaos of a new venture. Or are you already successful and grappling with the duties of power or influence? Wrestling with an addiction? Deeply in love? Or moving from one flawed relationship to another? Are you approaching your golden years? Or enjoying the spoils of youth? Busy and active? Or bored out of your mind?

Whatever it is, whatever you're going through, there is wisdom from the Stoics that can help. In fact, in many cases they have addressed it explicitly in terms that feel shockingly modern. That's what we're going to focus on in this book.

Drawing directly from the Stoic canon, we present a selection of original translations of the greatest passages from the three major figures of late Stoicism—Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius—along with a few assorted sayings from their Stoic predecessors (Zeno, Cleanthes,

Chrysippus, Musonius, Hecato). Accompanying each quotation is our attempt to tell a story, provide context, ask a question, prompt an exercise, or explain the perspective of the Stoic who said it so that you may find deeper understanding of whatever answers you are seeking.

The works of the Stoics have always been fresh and current, regardless of the historical ebb and flow of their popularity. It was not our intention with this book to fix them or modernize them or freshen them up (there are many excellent translations out there). Instead, we sought to organize and present the vast collective wisdom of the Stoics into as digestible, accessible, and coherent a form as possible. One can—and should—pick up the original works of the Stoics in whole form (see Suggestions for Further Reading in the back of this book). In the meantime, here, for the busy and active reader, we have attempted to produce a daily devotional that is as functional and to the point as the philosophers behind it. And in the Stoic tradition, we've added material to provoke and facilitate the asking of big questions.

Organized along the lines of the three disciplines (Perception, Action, and Will) and then further divided into important themes within those disciplines, you'll find that each month will stress a particular trait and each day will offer a new way to think or act. The areas of great interest to the Stoics all make an appearance here: virtue, mortality, emotions, self-awareness, fortitude, right action, problem solving, acceptance, mental clarity, pragmatism, unbiased thought, and duty.

The Stoics were pioneers of the morning and nightly rituals: preparation in the morning, reflection in the evening. We've written this book to be

helpful with both. One meditation per day for every day of the year

(including an extra day for leap years!). If you feel so inclined, pair it with a notebook to record and articulate your thoughts and reactions (see January 21st and 22nd and December 22nd), just as the Stoics often did.

The aim of this hands-on approach to philosophy is to help you live a

better life. It is our hope that there is not a word in this book that can't or shouldn't, to paraphrase Seneca, be turned into works.

To that end, we offer this book.





PART I

*The*  
**DISCIPLINE of**  
**PERCEPTION**

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## JANUARY

### CLARITY

January 1st

### CONTROL AND CHOICE

“The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own . . .”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.5.4–5

The single most important practice in Stoic philosophy is differentiating between what we can change and what we can't. What we have influence over and what we do not. A flight is delayed because of weather —no amount of yelling at an airline representative will end a storm. No amount of wishing will make you taller or shorter or born in a different country. No matter how hard you try, you can't *make* someone like you.

And on top of that, time spent hurling yourself at these immovable objects is time not spent on the things we *can* change.

The recovery community practices something called the Serenity

Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Addicts cannot change the abuse suffered in childhood. They cannot undo the choices they have made or the hurt they have caused. But they *can* change the future—through the power they have in the present moment. As Epictetus said, they can control the choices they make right now.

The same is true for us today. If we can focus on making clear what parts of our day are within our control and what parts are not, we will not only be happier, we will have a distinct advantage over other people who fail to realize they are fighting an unwinnable battle.

January 2nd

## **EDUCATION IS FREEDOM**

“What is the fruit of these teachings? Only the most beautiful and proper harvest of the truly educated—tranquility, fearlessness, and freedom. We should not trust the masses who say only the free can be educated, but rather the lovers of wisdom who say that only the educated are free.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.1.21–23a

Why did you pick up this book? Why pick up any book? Not to seem

smarter, not to pass time on the plane, not to hear what you want to hear—there are plenty of easier choices than reading.

No, you picked up this book because you are learning how to live.

Because you want to be freer, fear less, and achieve a state of peace.

Education—reading and meditating on the wisdom of great minds—is not to be done for its own sake. It has a purpose.

Remember that imperative on the days you start to feel distracted, when watching television or having a snack seems like a better use of your time than reading or studying philosophy. Knowledge—self-knowledge in particular—is freedom.

January 3rd

### **BE RUTHLESS TO THE THINGS THAT DON'T MATTER**

“How many have laid waste to your life when you weren’t aware of what you were losing, how much was wasted in pointless grief, foolish joy, greedy desire, and social amusements—how little of your own was left to you. You will realize you are dying before your time!”

—SENECA, *ON THE BREVITY OF LIFE*, 3.3b

One of the hardest things to do in life is to say “No.” To invitations, to requests, to obligations, to the stuff that everyone else is doing. Even harder is saying no to certain time-consuming emotions: anger, excitement, distraction, obsession, lust. None of these impulses feels like a big deal by

itself, but run amok, they become a commitment like anything else.

If you're not careful, these are precisely the impositions that will overwhelm and consume your life. Do you ever wonder how you can get some of your time back, how you can feel less busy? Start by learning the power of "No!"—as in "No, thank you," and "No, I'm not going to get caught up in that," and "No, I just can't right now." It may hurt some feelings. It may turn people off. It may take some hard work. But the more you say no to the things that don't matter, the more you can say yes to the things that do. This will let you live and enjoy your life—the life that *you* want.

January 4th

### **THE BIG THREE**

"All you need are these: certainty of judgment in the present

moment;

action for the common good in the present moment;

and an attitude of gratitude in the present moment for anything

that comes your way."

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 9.6

Perception, Action, Will. Those are the three overlapping but critical disciplines of Stoicism (as well as the organization of this book and yearlong journey you've just begun). There's more to the philosophy

certainly—and we could spend all day talking about the unique beliefs of the various Stoics: “This is what Heraclitus thought . . .” “Zeno is from Citium, a city in Cyprus, and he believed . . .” But would such facts really help you day to day? What clarity does trivia provide?

Instead, the following little reminder sums up the three most essential parts of Stoic philosophy worth carrying with you every day, into every decision:

Control your perceptions.

Direct your actions properly.

Willingly accept what’s outside your control.

That’s all we need to do.

January 5th

## **CLARIFY YOUR INTENTIONS**

“Let all your efforts be directed to something, let it keep that end in view. It’s not activity that disturbs people, but false conceptions of things that drive them mad.”

—SENECA, *ON TRANQUILITY OF MIND*, 12.5

Law 29 of *The 48 Laws of Power* is: Plan All The Way To The End.

Robert Greene writes, “By planning to the end you will not be overwhelmed by circumstances and you will know when to stop. Gently guide fortune and help determine the future by thinking far ahead.” The

second habit in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is: begin with an end in mind.

Having an end in mind is no guarantee that you'll reach it—no Stoic would tolerate that assumption—but *not* having an end in mind is a guarantee you won't. To the Stoics, *oiêsis* (false conceptions) are responsible not just for disturbances in the soul but for chaotic and dysfunctional lives and operations. When your efforts are not directed at a cause or a purpose, how will you know what to do day in and day out? How will you know what to say no to and what to say yes to? How will you know when you've had enough, when you've reached your goal, when you've gotten off track, if you've never defined what those things are? The answer is that you cannot. And so you are driven into failure—or worse, into madness by the oblivion of directionlessness.

January 6th

### **WHERE, WHO, WHAT, AND WHY**

“A person who doesn't know what the universe is, doesn't know where they are. A person who doesn't know their purpose in life doesn't know who they are or what the universe is. A person who doesn't know any one of these things doesn't know why they are here. So what to make of people who seek or avoid the praise of those who have no knowledge of where or who they are?”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 8.52

The late comedian Mitch Hedberg had a funny story he told in his act.

Sitting down for an on-air interview, a radio DJ asked him, “So, who are you?” In that moment, he had to think, *Is this guy really deep or did I drive to the wrong station?*

How often are we asked a simple question like “Who are you?” or “What do you do?” or “Where are you from?” Considering it a superficial question—if we even consider it at all—we don’t bother with more than a superficial answer.

But, gun to their head, most people couldn’t give much in the way of a substantive answer. Could you? Have you taken the time to get clarity about who you are and what you stand for? Or are you too busy chasing unimportant things, mimicking the wrong influences, and following disappointing or unfulfilling or nonexistent paths?

January 7th

## **SEVEN CLEAR FUNCTIONS OF THE MIND**

“The proper work of the mind is the exercise of choice, refusal, yearning, repulsion, preparation, purpose, and assent. What then can pollute and clog the mind’s proper functioning? Nothing but its own corrupt decisions.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 4.11.6–7

Let’s break down each one of those tasks:



Choice—to do and think right

Refusal—of temptation

Yearning—to be better

Repulsion—of negativity, of bad influences, of what isn't true

Preparation—for what lies ahead or whatever may happen

Purpose—our guiding principle and highest priority

Assent—to be free of deception about what's inside and outside our control (and be ready to accept the latter)

This is what the mind is here to do. We must make sure that it does—and see everything else as pollution or a corruption.

January 8th

## **SEEING OUR ADDICTIONS**

“We must give up many things to which we are addicted, considering them to be good. Otherwise, courage will vanish, which should continually test itself. Greatness of soul will be lost, which can't stand out unless it disdains as petty what the mob regards as most desirable.

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 74.12b–13

What we consider to be harmless indulgences can easily become full-blown addictions. We start with coffee in the morning, and soon

enough we can't start the day without it. We check our email because it's part of our job, and soon enough we feel the phantom buzz of the phone in our pocket every few seconds. Soon enough, these harmless habits are running our lives.

The little compulsions and drives we have not only chip away at our freedom and sovereignty, they cloud our clarity. We think we're in control—but are we really? As one addict put it, addiction is when we've "lost the freedom to abstain." Let us reclaim that freedom.

What that addiction is for you can vary: Soda? Drugs? Complaining?

Gossip? The Internet? Biting your nails? But you must reclaim the ability to abstain because within it is your clarity and self-control.

January 9th

## **WHAT WE CONTROL AND WHAT WE DON'T**

"Some things are in our control, while others are not. We control our opinion, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything of our own doing. We don't control our body, property, reputation, position, and, in a word, everything not of our own doing. Even more, the things in our control are by nature free, unhindered, and unobstructed, while those not in our control are weak, slavish, can be hindered, and are not our own."

—EPICTETUS, *ENCHIRIDION*, 1.1–2

Today, you won't control the external events that happen. Is that scary?

A little, but it's balanced when we see that we can control our opinion

*about* those events. You decide whether they're good or bad, whether they're fair or unfair. You don't control the situation, but you control what you *think* about it.

See how that works? Every single thing that is outside your control—the outside world, other people, luck, karma, whatever—still presents a corresponding area that *is* in your control. This alone gives us plenty to manage, plenty of power.

Best of all, an honest understanding of what is within our control provides real clarity about the world: all we have is our own mind.

Remember that today when you try to extend your reach outward—that it's much better and more appropriately directed *inward*.

January 10th

## **IF YOU WANT TO BE STEADY**

“The essence of good is a certain kind of reasoned choice; just as the essence of evil is another kind. What about externals, then?

They are only the raw material for our reasoned choice, which finds its own good or evil in working with them. How will it find the good? Not by marveling at the material! For if judgments about the material are straight that makes our choices good, but if those judgments are twisted, our choices turn bad.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 1.29.1–3

The Stoics seek steadiness, stability, and tranquility—traits most of us aspire to but seem to experience only fleetingly. How do they accomplish this elusive goal? How does one embody *eustatheia* (the word Arrian used to describe this teaching of Epictetus)?

Well, it's not luck. It's not by eliminating outside influences or running away to quiet and solitude. Instead, it's about filtering the outside world through the straightener of our judgment. That's what our reason can do—it can take the crooked, confusing, and overwhelming nature of external events and make them orderly.

However, if our judgments are crooked because we don't use reason, then everything that follows will be crooked, and we will lose our ability to steady ourselves in the chaos and rush of life. If you want to be steady, if you want clarity, proper judgment is the best way.

January 11th

## **IF YOU WANT TO BE UNSTEADY**

“For if a person shifts their caution to their own reasoned choices and the acts of those choices, they will at the same time gain the will to avoid, but if they shift their caution away from their own reasoned choices to things not under their control, seeking to avoid what is controlled by others, they will then be agitated, fearful, and unstable.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.1.12

The image of the Zen philosopher is the monk up in the green, quiet hills, or in a beautiful temple on some rocky cliff. The Stoics are the antithesis of this idea. Instead, they are the man in the marketplace, the senator in the Forum, the brave wife waiting for her soldier to return from battle, the sculptor busy in her studio. Still, the Stoic is equally at peace.

Epictetus is reminding you that serenity and stability are results of your choices and judgment, not your environment. If you seek to avoid all disruptions to tranquility—other people, external events, stress—you will never be successful. Your problems will follow you wherever you run and hide. But if you seek to avoid the harmful and disruptive *judgments* that cause those problems, then you will be stable and steady wherever you happen to be.

January 12th

## **THE ONE PATH TO SERENITY**

“Keep this thought at the ready at daybreak, and through the day and night—there is only one path to happiness, and that is in giving up all outside of your sphere of choice, regarding nothing else as your possession, surrendering all else to God and Fortune.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 4.4.39

This morning, remind yourself of what is in your control and what’s not in your control. Remind yourself to focus on the former and not the latter.

Before lunch, remind yourself that the only thing you truly possess is your ability to make choices (and to use reason and judgment when doing so). This is the only thing that can never be taken from you completely.

In the afternoon, remind yourself that aside from the choices you make, your fate is not entirely up to you. The world is spinning and we spin along with it—whichever direction, good or bad.

In the evening, remind yourself again how much is outside of your control and where your choices begin and end.

As you lie in bed, remember that sleep is a form of surrender and trust and how easily it comes. And prepare to start the whole cycle over again tomorrow.

January 13th

## **CIRCLE OF CONTROL**

“We control our reasoned choice and all acts that depend on that moral will. What’s not under our control are the body and any of its parts, our possessions, parents, siblings, children, or country—anything with which we might associate.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 1.22.10

This is important enough that it bears repeating: a wise person knows what’s inside their circle of control and what is outside of it.

The good news is that it’s pretty easy to remember what is inside our

control. According to the Stoics, the circle of control contains just one thing: YOUR MIND. That's right, even your physical body isn't completely within the circle. After all, you could be struck with a physical illness or impairment at any moment. You could be traveling in a foreign country and be thrown in jail.

But this is all good news because it drastically reduces the amount of things that you need to think about. There is clarity in simplicity. While everyone else is running around with a list of responsibilities a mile long—things they're not actually responsible for—you've got just that one-item list. You've got just one thing to manage: your choices, your will, your mind.

So mind it.

January 14th

## **CUT THE STRINGS THAT PULL YOUR MIND**

“Understand at last that you have something in you more powerful and divine than what causes the bodily passions and pulls you like a mere puppet. What thoughts now occupy my mind? Is it not fear, suspicion, desire, or something like that?”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 12.19

Think of all the interests vying for a share of your wallet or for a second of your attention. Food scientists are engineering products to exploit your taste buds. Silicon Valley engineers are designing applications as

addictive as gambling. The media is manufacturing stories to provoke outrage and anger.

These are just a small slice of the temptations and forces acting on us—distracting us and pulling us away from the things that truly matter. Marcus, thankfully, was not exposed to these extreme parts of our modern culture.

But he knew plenty of distracting sinkholes too: gossip, the endless call of work, as well as fear, suspicion, lust. Every human being is pulled by these internal and external forces that are increasingly more powerful and harder to resist.

Philosophy is simply asking us to pay careful attention and to strive to be more than a pawn. As Viktor Frankl puts it in *The Will to Meaning*, “Man is pushed by drives but pulled by values.” These values and inner awareness prevent us from being puppets. Sure, paying attention requires work and awareness, but isn’t that better than being jerked about on a string?

January 15th

## **PEACE IS IN STAYING THE COURSE**

“Tranquility can’t be grasped except by those who have reached an unwavering and firm power of judgment—the rest constantly fall and rise in their decisions, wavering in a state of alternately rejecting and accepting things. What is the cause of this back and forth? It’s because nothing is clear and they rely on the most



uncertain guide—common opinion.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 95.57b–58a

In Seneca’s essay on tranquility, he uses the Greek word *euthymia*, which he defines as “believing in yourself and trusting that you are on the right path, and not being in doubt by following the myriad footpaths of those

wandering in every direction.” It is this state of mind, he says, that produces tranquility.

Clarity of vision allows us to have this belief. That’s not to say we’re always going to be 100 percent certain of everything, or that we even should be. Rather, it’s that we can rest assured we’re heading generally in the right direction—that we don’t need to constantly compare ourselves with other people or change our mind every three seconds based on new information.

Instead, tranquility and peace are found in identifying *our* path and in sticking to it: staying the course—making adjustments here and there, naturally—but ignoring the distracting sirens who beckon us to turn toward the rocks.

January 16th

## **NEVER DO ANYTHING OUT OF HABIT**

“So in the majority of other things, we address circumstances not in accordance with the right assumptions, but mostly by following wretched habit. Since all that I’ve said is the case, the person in training must seek to rise above, so as to stop seeking out pleasure

and steering away from pain; to stop clinging to living and abhorring death; and in the case of property and money, to stop valuing receiving over giving.”

—MUSONIUS RUFUS, *LECTURES*, 6.25.5–11

A worker is asked: “Why did you do it this way?” The answer, “Because that’s the way we’ve always done things.” The answer frustrates every good boss and sets the mouth of every entrepreneur watering. The worker has stopped thinking and is mindlessly operating out of habit. The business is ripe for disruption by a competitor, and the worker will probably get fired by any thinking boss.

We should apply the same ruthlessness to our own habits. In fact, we are studying philosophy precisely to break ourselves of rote behavior. Find what you do out of rote memory or routine. Ask yourself: *Is this really the best way to do it?* Know why you do what you do—do it for the right reasons.

January 17th

## **REBOOT THE REAL WORK**

“I am your teacher and you are learning in my school. My aim is to bring you to completion, unhindered, free from compulsive behavior, unrestrained, without shame, free, flourishing, and happy, looking to God in things great and small—your aim is to learn and diligently practice all these things. Why then don’t you complete the work, if you have the right aim and I have both the

right aim and right preparation? What is missing? . . . The work is quite feasible, and is the only thing in our power. . . . Let go of the past. We must only begin. Believe me and you will see.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.19.29–34

Do you remember, in school or early in your life, being afraid to try something because you feared you might fail at it? Most teenagers choose to fool around rather than exert themselves. Halfhearted, lazy effort gives them a ready-made excuse: “It doesn’t matter. I wasn’t even trying . ”

As we get older, failure is not so inconsequential anymore. What’s at stake is not some arbitrary grade or intramural sports trophy, but the quality of your life and your ability to deal with the world around you.

Don’t let that intimidate you, though. You have the best teachers in the world: the wisest philosophers who ever lived. And not only are you capable, the professor is asking for something very simple: just begin the work. The rest follows.

January 18th

### **SEE THE WORLD LIKE A POET AND AN ARTIST**

“Pass through this brief patch of time in harmony with nature, and come to your final resting place gracefully, just as a ripened olive might drop, praising the earth that nourished it and grateful to the tree that gave it growth.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 4.48.2

There are some stunningly beautiful turns of phrase in Marcus's

*Meditations*—a surprising treat considering the intended audience (just himself). In one passage, he praises the “charm and allure” of nature's process, the “stalks of ripe grain bending low, the frowning brow of the lion, the foam dripping from the boar's mouth.” We should thank private rhetoric teacher Marcus Cornelius Fronto for the imagery in these vivid passages. Fronto, widely considered to be Rome's best orator besides Cicero, was chosen by Marcus's adopted father to teach Marcus to think and write and speak.

More than just pretty phrases, they gave him—and now us—a powerful perspective on ordinary or seemingly *un* beautiful events. It takes an artist's eye to see that the end of life is not unlike a ripe fruit falling from its tree. It takes a poet to notice the way “baking bread splits in places and those cracks, while not intended in the baker's art, catch our eye and serve to stir our appetite” and find a metaphor in them.

There is clarity (and joy) in seeing what others can't see, in finding grace and harmony in places others overlook. Isn't that far better than seeing the world as some dark place?

January 19th

## **WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOUR CHOICE IS**

“A podium and a prison is each a place, one high and the other low, but in either place your freedom of choice can be maintained if

you so wish.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.6.25

The Stoics all held vastly different stations in life. Some were rich, some were born at the bottom of Rome’s rigid hierarchy. Some had it easy, and others had it unimaginably hard. This is true for us as well—we all come to philosophy from different backgrounds, and even within our own lives we experience bouts of good fortune and bad fortune.

But in all circumstances—adversity or advantage—we really have just one thing we need to do: focus on what is in our control as opposed to what is not. Right now we might be laid low with struggles, whereas just a few years ago we might have lived high on the hog, and in just a few days we might be doing so well that success is actually a burden. One thing will stay constant: our freedom of choice—both in the big picture and small picture.

Ultimately, this is clarity. Whoever we are, wherever we are—what matters is our choices. What are they? How will we evaluate them? How will we make the most of them? Those are the questions life asks us, regardless of our station. How will you answer?

January 20th

## **REIGNITE YOUR THOUGHTS**

“Your principles can’t be extinguished unless you snuff out the thoughts that feed them, for it’s continually in your power to reignite new ones. . . . It’s possible to start living again! See things

anew as you once did—that is how to restart life!”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 7.2

Have you had a bad couple of weeks? Have you been drifting away from the principles and beliefs that you hold dear? It’s perfectly fine.

It happens to all of us.

In fact, it probably happened to Marcus—that may be why he scribbled this note to himself. Perhaps he’d been dealing with difficult senators or having difficulties with his troubled son. Perhaps in these scenarios he’d lost his temper, became depressed, or stopped checking in with himself.

Who wouldn’t?

But the reminder here is that no matter what happens, no matter how disappointing our behavior has been in the past, the principles themselves remain unchanged. We can return and embrace them at any moment. What happened yesterday—what happened five minutes ago—is the past. We can reignite and restart whenever we like.

Why not do it right now?

January 21st

## **A MORNING RITUAL**

“Ask yourself the following first thing in the morning:

What am I lacking in attaining freedom from passion?

What for tranquility?

What am I? A mere body, estate-holder, or reputation? None of these

things.

What, then? A rational being.

What then is demanded of me? Meditate on your actions.

How did I steer away from serenity?

What did I do that was unfriendly, unsocial, or uncaring?

What did I fail to do in all these things?”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 4.6.34–35

Many successful people have a morning ritual. For some, it’s meditation. For others, it’s exercise. For many, it’s journaling—just a few pages where they write down their thoughts, fears, hopes. In these cases, the point is not so much the activity itself as it is the ritualized reflection. The idea is to take some time to look inward and examine.

Taking that time is what Stoics advocated more than almost anything else. We don’t know whether Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* in the morning or at night, but we know he carved out moments of quiet alone time—and that he wrote for himself, not for anyone else. If you’re looking for a place to start your own ritual, you could do worse than Marcus’s example and Epictetus’s checklist.

Every day, starting today, ask yourself these same tough questions. Let philosophy and hard work guide you to better answers, one morning at a time, over the course of a life.

January 22nd

## THE DAY IN REVIEW

“I will keep constant watch over myself and—most usefully—will put each day up for review. For this is what makes us evil—that none of us looks back upon our own lives. We reflect upon only that which we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future descend from the past.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 83.2

In a letter to his older brother Novatus, Seneca describes a beneficial exercise he borrowed from another prominent philosopher. At the end of each day he would ask himself variations of the following questions: *What bad habit did I curb today? How am I better? Were my actions just? How can I improve?*

At the beginning or end of each day, the Stoic sits down with his journal and reviews: what he did, what he thought, what could be improved. It’s for this reason that Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* is a somewhat inscrutable book—it was for personal clarity and not public benefit. Writing down

Stoic exercises was and is also a form of practicing them, just as repeating a prayer or hymn might be.

Keep your own journal, whether it’s saved on a computer or in a little

notebook. Take time to consciously recall the events of the previous day. Be unflinching in your assessments. Notice what contributed to your happiness and what detracted from it. Write down what you’d like to work on or

quotes that you like. By making the effort to record such thoughts, you’re less likely to forget them. An added bonus: you’ll have a running tally to