



# The 30 Day Stoic Reader

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New Stoa



# The 30 Day Stoic Reader:



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# Introduction

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Stoicism is a very old tradition that is enjoying a modern renaissance thanks to, in large part, the internet. One of the things the world wide web can do is connect disparate people who share common interests who might otherwise never have met. In a way, books have always done this, and you are reading the product of both of these.

I first became interested in Stoic philosophy by a fortuitous twist of Fate. I was taking an after-school Latin class in middle school (clearly I was one of the cool kids), and for class we had to choose a name by which we would be called. I went to my family bookshelf, and pulled down a leather book with gold foil embellishments. It was a copy of several of Plato's dialogues, Marcus's Meditations, and The Golden Sayings of Epictetus. I found the bits of the Crito I leafed through less than easy to digest, the same of the Meditations. But these little quips of writing, bumper stickers-like slogans almost, I could easily read and process.

So I chose to be called Epictetus, and although the name was Greek, my teacher let it slide. I found, as the years passed, that I would be drawn back again and again to these little excerpts from the Stoic thinkers. I didn't realize that they were of a school of thought at this point, and throughout high school and university I continued to read. Regardless of my exposure to other schools, cultures, travel, etc., I found something that resonated with me in these writers who called themselves philosophers and Stoics.

Over the past year and more, I've been more focused on my studies, and I wanted to produce something meaningful for myself and that others might benefit from as well. This work is the realization of that hope. This book will take you through, day by day, a plan of short excerpts and my thoughts will follow. After that, a few short exercises in the practical side of philosophy may follow.

Ah! This isn't just an academic exercise, you may think. This is true, and that leads us well right into the first week...



# Week 1

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For most people, when you say the word “philosophy” they imagine tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows, unkempt hair, and stuffy intellectual discussion. For most instances of the word, this might not be too far off. However, there is a whole aspect of philosophy which for centuries (excepting a few conspicuous exemptions) was lost. Up until the closing of the philosophical schools in Rome, philosophy was understood to be a tool for changing the way a person lives his or her life.

A philosopher was not necessarily an academic during this period, but a person who lived in a way which was conducive to the goals of philosophy. There were some disagreements as to how this was best done. One way of thinking said you must wear rough and simple clothes, sleep outside or on a hard pallet, and eat only the meanest and common food. Others saw this sort of regimen as possibly helpful, but not as necessary. The main thinkers of the school of Stoic thought believed the latter.

We as Stoic philosophers are suggested to expose ourselves voluntarily to less-than optimal comforts, so that we might not become overly attached to them. We do not need to sleep under furs and eat only beans, but we should pay attention to how attached we are to the standards of living to which we've become accustomed. Exercises like eating simple foods, skipping a meal, tolerating the heat and cold rather than reaching for the thermostat, walking when we could drive, etc. all help to reinforce what our focus *should* be, which is our moral and rational natures.

This week, the readings will focus on a few foundational concepts to help bring your attention to the things you focus on. Then, you can determine if your focus, your energy, and your priorities are in line with your goals for personal development and philosophy.

# Day 1

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## Taking up philosophy as a way of life

*"If you have an earnest desire of attaining to philosophy, prepare yourself from the very first to be laughed at, to be sneered by the multitude, to hear them say,*

*"He is returned to us a philosopher all at once," and*

*"Whence this supercilious look?"*

*Now, for your part, don't have a supercilious look indeed; but keep steadily to those things which appear best to you as one appointed by God to this station. For remember that, if you adhere to the same point, those very persons who at first ridiculed will afterwards admire you. But if you are conquered by them, you will incur a double ridicule. "*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 22)

Many people study philosophy, or own a few philosophical books. However, just as owning a guitar does not make you a musician, there is an important difference between the academic student of philosophy and those who desire to live as a philosopher. Men and women like Marcus Aurelius or Porcia Catonis were called philosophers by their contemporaries, not because they wrote great treatises on logic or metaphysics, but because they lived as philosophers. They chose to eschew some of the expectations of others in favor of working on themselves, to be better men and women. They chose to “make progress” even if they would never achieve the end goal.

Today, you are making that same choice. As commendable as that is, it is not enough. You will need to make this choice tomorrow. And the day after, and the day after that... Even that is not as accurate as we can be. You will need to make that choice one hundreds times each day, with every opportunity to choose between virtue and vice, between what's easy and what's right. It is no small thing.

Thankfully, based on the examples of those who have come before, we do not need to wear a rough cloak, live outside, and beg alms. We could, but we are not obligated to do so. Philosophers within the Stoic school have made the assertion that the thing which neither hinders nor helps our moral, rational natures must be *indifferent* to us. While they might be preferred based upon their ability to assist or hamper that which does directly effect our natures, they are not in and of themselves having a moral quality.

So, we can “do” philosophy right now, today. In our homes, at work, with friends, and inside our families. We can “do” philosophy, not just study it, in traffic, at the store, and while living our lives. We can live as philosophers.

Let's start right now, this very second. Read aloud the following commitment as an exercise:

“Today, Fate permitting, I will make choices according to nature which allow me to make progress as a philosopher.”

## Day 2

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### The goal of philosophy: *Eudaimonia* and *arete*

*"[A]s you know, our motto is 'Live according to Nature'... Well then, shall we act like other men? Shall there be no distinction between ourselves and the world? 'Yes, a very great one; let men find that we are unlike the common herd, if they look closely. If they visit us at home, they should admire us rather than our household appointments, he is a great man who uses earthenware dishes as if they were silver; but he is equally great who uses silver as if it were earthenware.*

— Seneca (Moral Letters, 5)

The Hellenistic schools of philosophy all in some way or other thought of themselves as the ideological descendants of Socrates. No direct sources exist, just the reports of others for what Socrates said, but by that time it was seen as self-evident that the goal of human life (sometimes called a *telos*) is *eudaimonia*. This word is often translated in English as “happiness.” A direct translation is something closer to “good spiritedness” or having a good soul. The Stoics debated the particulars, but some general trends arose. “Living according to nature” and “Having a smooth flowing life.”

I prefer the “Living according to Nature” motto. I see this a three-part obligation. One, is to live in accord with the universal nature; the second is to live in accord with your nature as a human, a moral and rational being; and third, to live in accord with your own personal nature. We can see trends and different ways humans have behaved, by themselves or with others in society, and as rational creatures, we can start to see preferred ways of behaving. Whether you codify that by the Golden Rule, or the Wiccan Creed, or “hey dude, be cool,” we can see that the very nature of ourselves which we also see in others implies a universally preferred behavior. Tying all of these things in together, we are able to reason out quite a lot for ourselves and how we should behave towards others.

The Stoics discuss nature, Zeus, God, all in the same breath (pun intended, more on this later). For most Stoic philosophers, these ideas all point towards the same thing. This is a personal consideration, and one which I think every person has to work out for him or herself.

The second Greek word that we should look at is *arete*, often translated as 'virtue.' For most of us from the modern, standard Western perspective, the word virtue carries a lot of baggage. It calls to mind stuffy and inhibited abbots, prescriptive rules for behavior, and oftentimes guilt. While that word may have been tainted for most us, it turns out that 'virtue' may not be the best translation for English. While there is still a moral and ethical component to the word, a better translation might be 'excellence.' Ah! That's a whole different critter!

Most folks would probably look at success in their career, hobbies, and endeavors as a mark of excellence. What does it mean to be excellent, in the philosophical sense? Here, we're looking for something more like having an excellent *character*. As philosophers, we're occupied by looking after our own moral and rational natures, and for us, this is excellence, this is virtue. This, is *arete*.

## Day 3

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### The Stoic Dichotomy

*“Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 1)

In these two short sentences Epictetus distills the core of Stoic philosophy. If you can internalize and act on these two sentences, you will be on your way to living well. Epictetus was a former slave turned philosopher who went on to influence the emperor Marcus Aurelius heavily through the writings attributed to him, and arguably all of post-Roman western civilization.

Epictetus is showing us the proper things for us to have a concern over. He is saying “look to those things which are yours,” and showing you how to determine that. It really is an amazingly compact lens for viewing the world. What things in your life are you focused on which really are not perfectly *up to you*?

*“The impediment to action advances action.  
What stands in the way becomes the way.”*

— Marcus (Meditations Book 5)

What Marcus is pointing out to us here, is that when we see that we have a problem, we know exactly what to work on. We are not stuck, without any idea of where to start. We look to the obstacle, and we work on that thing.

We can pair these two quotes together, and we can see that a core method that we can use to make progress in philosophy, to achieve its goal which is *eudaimonia*, is focusing our concern on those things which are “up to us.”

Today, when presented with problems, dilemmas, choices, or simply situations and objects, ask yourself:

Is this up to me?

Does this keep me from being virtuous?

If the answer is 'no.'  
Then it is nothing to you.

## Day 4

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### *The universal nature of virtue*

*“No one has defied the law of nature and shed his humanity to the extent of being evil just for the fun of it. Ask anyone who lives by robbery whether he would prefer to acquire by honest means what he gains by pillage or theft. The man who profits by assaulting and striking down passersby would rather find his loot than seize it. You will find no one who does not prefer to enjoy the fruits of wickedness without being wicked. The greatest service nature does us is to make virtue shine her light into the minds of all of us. Even those who do not follow her, see her.”*

— Seneca (On Benefits, 4.17.3-4 )

One of the things which sometimes sticks out to modern readers, or is interpreted to be making malefactors not responsible for their acts, is the idea that no person willingly does evil. This was a key tenet of Hellenistic philosophy which we can see from Marcus:

*“Every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth...”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 11 )

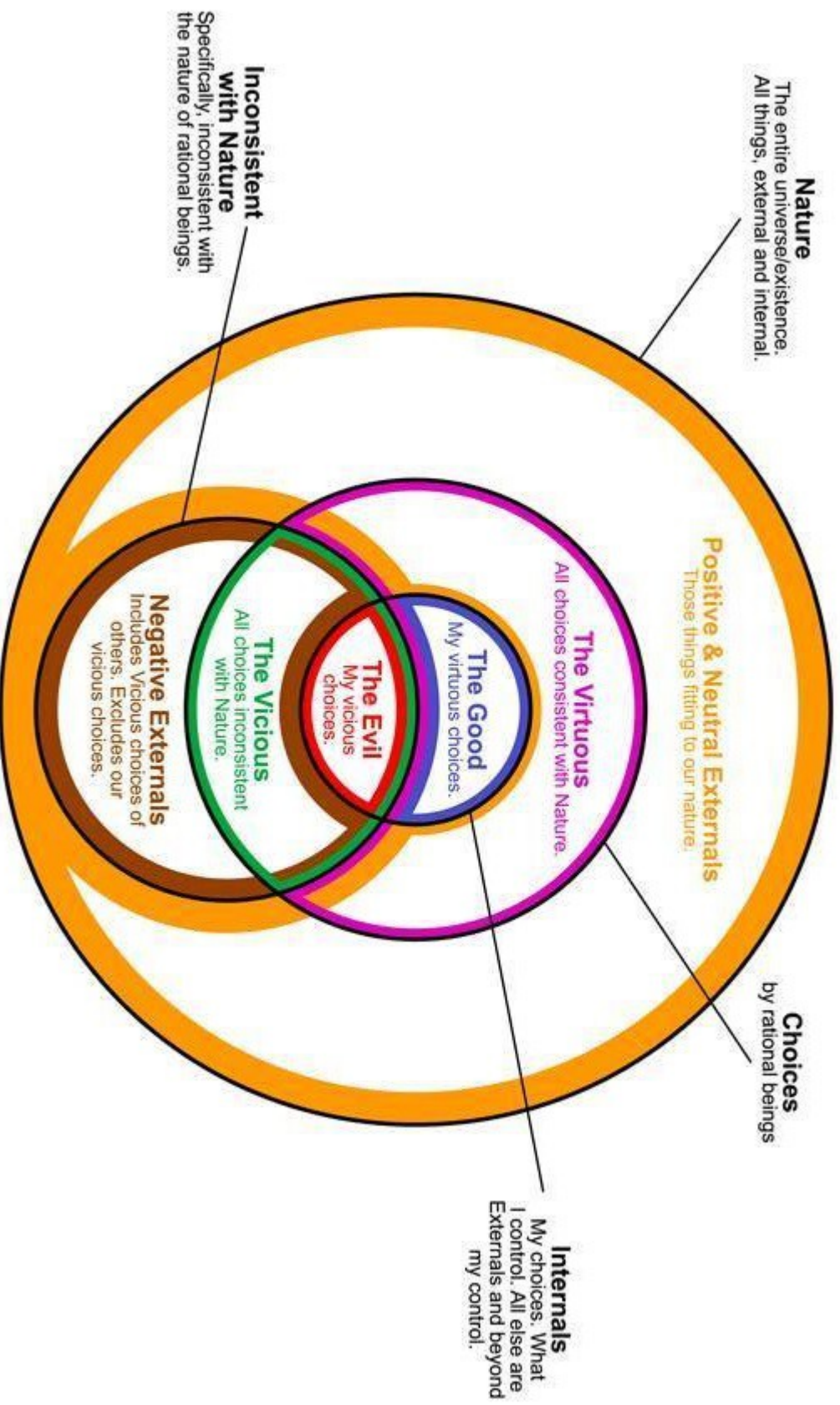
Logic and reason are processes, not results. We can be following logical means, but if the premises we start from are false, even though logical, we might end up with vicious actions. This, coupled with the idea that people do not do evil voluntarily (we might be to except sociopaths and other non-healthy minds), makes it understandable how evil things can occur in the world. It doesn't inherently forgive them, nor does exempt them from justice. It merely makes it comprehensible to us, and this is okay.

For you, is virtue collectively defined? Is it legalistically defined? Or is it personal? If it's personal, how does it compare to others' conception of the idea? Does it come from some objective source? Interesting trends arise when you think about such things. Despite most people's spoken respect for laws, they violate the ones they don't agree with. Red lights, drugs, seat belts... lots of things. When people are made to choose between what's legal and what's moral, legal nearly always loses.

Many things are universally repudiated. Harming children, murder, rape, abuse of the elderly. There seem to be some descriptively human universal codes of behavior. We often disagree on the minutiae, but almost never the big stuff. These trends can be defined through observation.

How can this conception of virtue inform and shape your interactions today?

## Relationship between the Good, Evil, Virtuous, and Vicious



## Day 5

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### Memento mori...

*“Keep before your eyes day by day death and exile, and everything that seems catastrophic, but most of all death; and then you will never have any abject thought, nor will you crave anything excessively.”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 21)

You're mortal, you know. One day you will die. Maybe today. Definitely tomorrow. Is that unnerving? It is to me, and at some point I hope for that to change. But for now, it's not a pleasant thought. When I was a teenager, death was scary because I felt that I hadn't yet lived. Now, as I'm getting a little older, and (Fate permitting) a little wiser, it's scary because I feel that I haven't lived well. Quite the difference, eh?

Reminding ourselves that our time here is limited helps to focus our attention: it's a funnel and a filter. Does the money in the bank really matter? Or does it matter that my family and friends know I loved them? And not just 'do they know' but did they experience it? Did I live that love? Did I do my duty, to myself, my neighbor, my community?

Not small questions. Tick tock, tick tock...

Living well is not a thing for the future. It's both urgent and important. What should you change so that when you close your eyes tonight, you sleep the deep sleep of a job well done? Well? Don't wait, do it.

*“Allow not sleep to close your wearied eyes until you have reckoned up each daytime deed.  
Where did I go wrong? What did I do? And what duty is left undone?  
From first to last review your acts and then  
Reprove yourself for wretched [or cowardly] acts, but rejoice in those done well.*

— Epictetus (Discourses 3.10.2-3)

*Although you are not yet a Socrates, you should live as someone who at least wants to be a Socrates.*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 50)



## Day 6

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### Oikeiôsis

*“Just as it is with the members in those bodies which are united in one, so it is with rational beings which exist separate, for they have been constituted for one co-operation. And the perception of this will be more apparent to thee, if thou often sayest to thyself that I am a member (melos) of the system of rational beings. But if (using the letter r) thou sayest that thou art a part (meros) thou dost not yet love men from thy heart; beneficence does not yet delight thee for its own sake; thou still doest it barely as a thing of propriety, and not yet as doing good to thyself.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 7)

Oikeiôsis is the opposite of alienation, it is familiarization; to make that which is strange to us “like family.” The Stoics viewed all rational critters as part of a single community. This doesn't mean that their goals will never be at odds, or that they won't sometimes injure each other, family life can be tough. But it does mean we have an obligation to the spark of divinity both within us and within them.

We should treat the people we come across in our community like family, folks from other states like our fellow citizens, and foreigners like our countrymen. This is a just a “one step” rethinking, because ultimately, we have an obligation to view them as part and parcel of the “universal reason,” just like we are.

*“... [I]mmediately upon birth (for that is the proper point to start from) a living creature feels an attachment for itself, and an impulse to preserve itself and to feel affection for its own constitution and for those things which tend to preserve that constitution...”*

— Cicero (de Finibus, 3.5)

Oikeiôsis is particular to the Stoic school of thought, and the word is notoriously difficult to translate into English. It hails all the way back to Zeno of Citium, and it shows us precisely *why* we need to act with justice and moderation to our fellow humans. All creatures have a desire to protect their own lives, but we as rational creatures can extend this to protecting our rational and moral natures above mere longevity of the body. We're concerned with quality of living, not quantity of days. And the expression of protecting what's ours extends to others, we see the same nature in them we see in ourselves.

How difficult must it have been for Marcus to live a goodly portion of his life abroad, fulfilling his obligation to Rome and her citizens, while fighting the tribes of Europe? He must have seen the similar nature of them in himself, and himself in them. I don't have an empire to rule, I just have to be less of an antagonist in traffic, kinder to my family, and more honest to myself and others. I also know, however, I'm the most difficult subject I will ever have to rule.

How can you treat others more like family today? How does that feed into your understanding of the social roles you have (both the ones assigned to you and the ones you've chosen)? How does the chain of every decision of the entire universe, which has brought you here now, which has provided this circumstance just for you inform the importance of your choices today?

## Day 7

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### Amor fati

*“Remember that you are an actor in a play, and the Playwright chooses the manner of it: if he wants it short, it is short; if long, it is long. If he wants you to act a poor man you must act the part with all your powers; and so if your part be a cripple or a magistrate or a plain man. For your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another's”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 17)

The Stoic conception of fate is often confusing to newcomers to the school. Hopefully, we can break it down and make it a little easier to comprehend. The Stoics, like most of their philosophical contemporaries, had an understanding of causes. For the Stoics specifically, fate could be viewed as a long chain of very complex causes which necessarily and mechanistically bring out certain results. Hypothetically, if you could know all the causes, you could predict with perfect accuracy the entire history of the universe. Pretty cool.

The trouble is, one of those causes is you. One is me. And every other rational creature who has ever existed. We are “causes in ourselves.” We have a nature, and like a shape of the wheel dictates that when pushed it will roll, our natures shape our reaction. But we're also the pusher. We can decide to push, or not. We can wobble, roll smoothly, or we can act like a coin spun on its edge. All are expressions of our nature, all are parts of fate.

We're often suggested by thinkers like Marcus not to desire things happen as we want, but as they do:

*“Consider that everything which happens, happens justly, and if thou observest carefully, thou wilt find it to be so. I do not say only with respect to the continuity of the series of things, but with respect to what is just...”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 4)

Here, Marcus isn't just talking about causes (continuity of the series of things), but that the universe is unfolding according to a benevolent purpose in a cosmically beneficent manner. While things may at times seem to us, the individual, to be hard, bad, unfair, unjust; we should rest content in the knowledge that it is just as it is supposed to be

Richard Bach is unlikely to be considered a Stoic, but I'll leave you with this little slice of humble pie:

*“Imagine the universe beautiful and just and perfect.  
Then be sure of one thing:  
The **Is** has imagined it quite a bit better than you have.”*

— Richard Bach (Illusions [1977] )

## Week 2

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### The Discipline of Assent and Stoic Logic

*“Consider not what he does, but what you are to do to keep your own faculty of choice in a state conformable to nature. For another will not hurt you unless you please. You will then be hurt when you think you are hurt. In this manner, therefore, you will find, from the idea of a neighbor, a citizen, a general, the corresponding duties if you accustom yourself to contemplate the several relations.”*

--- Epictetus (Enchiridion 30)

Part of the organizational beauty of Stoicism, especially after Marcus got a hold of it, is this three-part scheme which is reflected in the classical divisions of philosophy, and the disciplines we as practitioners should inculcate within ourselves. The divisions of philosophy are Logic, Physics, and Ethics. They correspond to the three disciplines, of Assent, Desire, and Action. This week, we're going to be focusing on Logic and the Discipline of Assent.

Traditionally, there was some disagreement about the order of these things to which a student should be introduced. So it's important to understand that these are part and parcel of a whole. We have to learn things sequentially, it's a restriction of our central nervous system, but they all meld and support each other. The interconnected importance of them were described in several ways, classically. Like an egg, an animal, or garden. Each is made up of distinct parts, but all together, they form something greater than the sum which does not exist in the same way without the others.

Logic is a process, not a result. This means that we can use a perfectly logical form, and end up with something unacceptable. Casually in conversation, when you pose the question to someone, “Is that logical?” it acts as a proof of quality. When we're discussing morals and ethics, and how we should lead our lives, it's more complicated.

“A man is starving and needs to eat, so he steals so that he may eat.” Is it logical? Yes. Is it moral? Ah! Maybe? Definitely not? Of course? The issue should be clear, right? Logic is a process not a result, and so what goes into the process at the beginning is really of the utmost importance. And this is where the Discipline of Assent enters. Through this Discipline we make sure that we're giving our logical faculties “good data.” This is important if we care about the result, which surely we do. By exercising the Discipline of Assent well we are “*keeping our faculty of choice in a state conformable to nature.*”

*‘Remember, however, before all else, to strip things of all that disturbs and confuses, and to see what each is at bottom; you will then comprehend that they contain nothing fearful except the actual fear.’*

--- Seneca (Moral Letters, 24)

## Day 8

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### The black box of our thinking.

“When one of those who were present said, "Persuade me that logic is necessary,"  
he replied: 'Do you wish me to prove this to you?'

The answer was, "Yes."

'Then I must use a demonstrative form of speech.'

“Granted.”

How then will you know if I am cheating you by argument?

The man was silent.

'Do you see,' said Epictetus, 'that you yourself are admitting that logic is necessary, if  
without it you cannot know so much as this, whether logic is necessary or not necessary.'

— Epictetus (Discourses, 2.25)

Much of our thinking and processing occurs at a level below our experience and/or awareness. Think back to the summer of your fifth year. Stop. How did that happen just now? What process occurred? Raise your right hand. After the decision to do it, what did you mentally *do* that caused that to happen? Since many functions of 'us' are not immediately apparent to us, we can treat it like a machine in a box that we can't open. We can feed it inputs and watch what the outputs are, and maybe create thought-models of what's going on inside. It stands to reason that we need keep track of the inputs and the outputs, then.

This might not be a perfect analogy; logic is a very powerful tool, but it is merely a process. It is similar in that if our inputs are not of certain quality, the machine will do its thing, but we might end up with something unacceptable on the other side. If we feed it bad inputs (in our case assenting to impressions willy-nilly), we're going to get bad outputs. Bad outputs are why we're here, reading books on philosophy, and seeking to make changes in our lives. The Stoic Discipline of Assent is for assaying the impressions we receive before we assent to them, since controlling those inputs is a good way to alter the output. It's relation to Logic is... well... logical!

The Stoics talked about a variety of impressions, one of which is *katalepsis* (κατάληψις) which means 'grasping.' These are truly assented impressions. Take for instance, if one were standing under the sun, and he had the impression “it is day.” The impression would bear a certain mark of truth which is undeniable which would not be present if he were standing under the moon and other stars. Now, the hardcore skeptics might say, “maybe your mind is altered, maybe your senses faulty, maybe a demon controls your thoughts, or you're just a brain in a jar...” or any number of hypothetical objections. However, for practical philosophers, these are sort of non-starters, and are not borne out by our experience. We might be brains in a jar, but we can be good brains, nonetheless.

So, it is up to us filter out the true impressions from the false ones. To use logic as a tool to help us do that, and by doing so to pay special attention to the value-judgments we make as to our impressions and our lives. So, how can we go about looking after all that? Glad you asked....

## Day 9

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### Objective description

*“When we have meat before us and such eatables we receive the impression, that this is the dead body of a fish, and this is the dead body of a bird or of a pig; and again, that this Falernian [wine] is only a little grape juice, and this purple robe some sheep's wool dyed with the blood of a shell-fish: such then are these impressions, and they reach the things themselves and penetrate them, and so we see what kind of things they are.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 6)

One of the tools which we are given to help keep our faculty of assent in good condition is to examine the impressions presented to us. Our bodies are designed to rely information to us, our mind parses it, and our soul experiences it. However, we also get the chance to add to this process. We get to add value-judgments to them, and we shall see what an issue this can be.

Yesterday, I wanted to go for a walk outside, but the weather was inclement, and I did not go. Many people would be put off having their plans thwarted. “I wanted to walk, and I couldn't go. How unfair!” Do we see the value-judgment? Epictetus tells us that :

*“Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things...”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 5)

So, our first step to avoid making these judgments automatically (so we can make them intentionally, or withhold them entirely), is to make sure we are seeing things as close to the way they really are as is possible. For instance, maybe my neighbor is a bit of a gossip, and he says something about me which I then discover. What happened? I can view it in one of two ways:

- *My neighbor spoke poorly of me, and injured my reputation in the community. He wronged me.*
- *My neighbor spoke about me in a certain way. Anything else? No, nothing else.*

If you, yourself, were having these thoughts, which one would cause you more stress? Remember, one of the benchmarks for excellent living is a *smooth flowing life*, and while tranquility is not an end in and of itself, as a by-product of virtuous behavior, it may have some value in that it helps us to make better choices and judgments as we go along. This isn't true only for ourselves, but while we do our social roles also:

*“When you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs, be careful that the appearance may not misdirect you. Instead, distinguish within your own mind, and be prepared to say, ‘It's not the accident that distresses this person., because it doesn't distress another person; it is the judgment which he makes about it.’ As far as words go, however, don't reduce yourself to his level, and certainly do not moan with him. Do not moan inwardly either.”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 16)

## Day 10

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### Suffering is a choice

*“Anger and frustration hurt us more than the things we are annoyed about hurt us.”*

--- Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 11)

The external circumstances of the world effect us in the present, either we are sick right now or we are healthy. However, our judgments about these things project into the past and the future. Our thoughts about an event which happened years ago can keep us awake at night, worrying us and causing us to suffer. We may not be able to change the events of the past, and we may not be able to mitigate the events of the future. Our thoughts are always 'up to us,' however.

*“Make a decision to quit thinking of things as insulting, and your anger immediately disappears.”*

--- Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 11)

Socrates was reportedly not very attractive to look at; and others commented on it, we are told. Is the shape which nature has given to our face 'up to us' ? Absent plastic surgery (and then only to a point), the answer is generally no. You'll notice a particularly specific point in Marcus here. He is telling us to stop thinking of things “as” insulting, not to stop thinking about them. We are not urged to repress our thoughts, repress our emotions, or otherwise stifle our natural processes. We're told to use our ruling faculty to change our perspective. This is a crucial and important difference.

Because of the common use of the lower-case word “stoic” people often mistakenly confuse Stoicism with emotional repression. We are concerned with the domestication of ourselves, but this is not the same as bottling up and repressing things.

Since we can choose whether or not we add these value-judgments, and how we do it, suffering in effect becomes a choice. If you've ever hung around military folks, or been one yourself, you might have heard the phrase “embrace the suck.” We can't always choose what the world throws at us, but we can always choose how we respond to it.

*“I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment?”*

--- Epictetus (Discourses, 1.1.22)

# Day 11

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## Constant vigilance

*“To let one's mind go lax is, in effect, to loose it.”*

--- Musonius Rufus (Fragment 52)

With every decision, with every thought we shape the people we are. We are constantly practicing and training our minds, every second of every day. The small failure today is the great failing tomorrow. Philosophical betterment of self is not something that happens tomorrow, or next month, or next year. It needs to happen right now. It needs constant vigilance and attention.

We know, and we saw last week, that we are not yet a Sage or a Socrates. We will fail. And we should not let that dissuade us from undertaking such an important task. The Oracle at Delphi had written above it “Know thyself.” We are all progressing in this arena, and it is the work of a lifetime. There was a time in my life when I didn't know *why* I chose certain things, avoided others. I don't have it all figured out, and it took some serious changes (most of them involuntary) to bring me to a place where I could start to do that. I don't succeed every day, but my intention is directed towards that goal, and that is a very good start.

I remember when I was younger thinking when I saw the 'know thyself' command, *How can I not know myself?* Admittedly, that was because I had a very shallow understanding of the idea, and now I realized how much more there is to it. Every time we do something on “auto-pilot” we're building habits. Before we know it, we've created a whole life of habits, and we're barely even processing our lives. We're passengers when we should be the captains.

This is where the Stoic idea of *prosoche* comes in, which means something like intention or mindfulness. It's not exactly the same as Buddhist mindfulness, but it is a delimiting of the present, a lived in moment, and an intentional experience of the now. There's a paper on *prosoche* on the College of Stoic Philosophers' library site, and I would refer interested folks to it. [Prosoche: Illuminating the Path of the Prokopton](#)

We have to build the habits and the experience of an examined life. We give away our focus, our attention, and our active-principle of our lives so easily, when ultimately, it's the thing that is us; it's all that we really have. The ancient philosophers tell us that the long lived man and the short lived man all lose the same thing, the present. After some serious thinking on the subject, I'm coming around to that perspective. So take your present. Live it. Do not let your mind go lax, and be about the work of a human being easily and with cheer.



## Day 12

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### Philosophy in the laboratory of real life

*“If a person gave your body to any stranger he met on his way, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in handing over your own mind to be confused and mystified by anyone who happens to verbally attack you?”*

— Epictetus (Enchiridion 28)

Since our purpose is not to write a great treatise on the nature of the universe, but rather to live a life as good men and women, our philosophy must survive and thrive in the rigors of the real world. We will deal with real people, with all their motivations, proclivities, failings, and sometimes twisted goals. During all of this, our obligation is to protect our moral and rational nature while being of service to our human community.

In the above section of Epictetus's Handbook, we're reminded that just as many seek to control their bodies, we should be even more concerned with our internal state. But how easily does the passerby steal our minds from us? “That guy cut me off in traffic, what a jerk!” Here we've made several value-judgments. One, that being cut off in traffic wrongs us, and two, that cutting off others in traffic makes someone a jerk. We injure ourselves with the first one, and to extend with the second also. The bigger damage in the second judgment is that it will likely contribute to our failing in our social roles with that person.

How much better to take control of our minds and not make that judgment? Quite significantly. We can even preempt the issue by having a rule we follow: “When driving I will follow the customs of my country, and secondarily, whenever possible, let others go first.” ‘Let others go first’ might actually do you a bit better in other walks of life as well; give it a spin and see.

The hassles and trials of society, and of life in general are not an evil unto themselves, they are merely the context for virtue or vice. Epictetus was a slave, and Marcus an emperor. Clearly, station is not a determiner for virtue. It is an important precept in this school of thought that we view hardship, pain, and loss as *indifferent*, since these are external to us. This allows us to exercise what is up to us, our responses and our judgments:

*“Again, can anything be more certain than that on the theory of the school that counts pain as an evil, the Wise Man cannot be happy when he is being tortured on the rack? Whereas the system that considers pain no evil clearly proves that the Wise Man retains his happiness amidst the worst torments. The mere fact that men endure the same pain more easily when they voluntarily undergo it for the sake of their country than when they suffer it for some lesser cause, shows that the intensity of the pain depends on the state of mind of the sufferer, not on its own intrinsic nature. “*

— Cicero (de Finibus, 3.5)

## Day 13

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### An internal dialogue to help judge impressions.

*“As we exercise ourselves against sophistical questions, so we ought to exercise ourselves daily against appearances; for these appearances also propose questions to us. “A certain person's son is dead.”*

*Answer: the thing is not within the power of the will: it is not an evil. ”*

*“A father has disinherited a certain son. What do you think of it?”*

*It is a thing beyond the power of the will, not an evil. ”*

*Caesar has condemned a person.”*

*It is a thing beyond the power of the will, not an evil. ”*

*The man is afflicted at this.”*

*Affliction is a thing which depends on the will: it is an evil. He has borne the condemnation bravely.”*

*That is a thing within the power of the will: it is a good. “*

--- Epictetus (Discourses, 3.8.1)

'The rich inner' life of Stoicism might seem strange at first, especially if one is familiar with the eastern spiritual traditions. There is a fairly stark difference, there. One of the practices we are suggested to inculcate is to ask our controlling faculty questions, and get answers. In the above passage, we see Epictetus going through a series of questions and answers to arrive, logically, at a point which is conducive to maintaining our inner state conformably to nature. This is not just a colorful way of discussing a theory, but a practical exercise you can begin today!

One of the core tenets of Stoicism is that we get to make a judgment when our bodies or thoughts present an impression to our ruling faculty. Merely because our eyes see a thing, or our ears hear a noise, or our body experiences something from the environment, does not mean anything for our internal state unless we allow it. For most folks, this judgment has been trained to be automatic, they do it without thinking and without weighing the merits. They attach a value-judgment like “this is good for me” or “this is bad for me” instantly.

So, since we've lived a goodly portion of our lives making these little attachments automatically, it takes an exceptional effort to change that. The sort of 'cosmic irony' here is that once you notice the judgment, it's pretty easy to attach the philosophically correct value to it, oftentimes “it is indifferent.” It's the noticing that's difficult.

*“If you are struck by the appearance of any promised pleasure, guard yourself against being hurried away by it; but let the affair wait your leisure, and procure yourself some delay.”*

--- Epictetus (Enchiridion 34)

Until we can get to that point where we pause before the judgments, we're advised to suspend judgment entirely. When an impression is particularly strong, or in an area of relative weakness for us, we're advised to take a break, and delay the judging process. In modern psychology and psychiatry this is often called “cognitive distancing” and is related to many practices of modern therapeutics, not coincidentally.

## Day 14

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Changing yourself is not easy.

*“The philosopher's school, ye men, is a surgery: you ought not to go out of it with pleasure, but with pain. For you are not in sound health when you enter: one has dislocated his shoulder, another has an abscess, a third a fistula, and a fourth a headache. Then do I sit and utter to you little thoughts and exclamations that you may praise me and go away, one with his shoulder in the same condition in which he entered, another with his head still aching, and a third with his fistula or his abscess just as they were? Is it for this then that young men shall quit home, and leave their parents and their friends and kinsmen and property, that they may say to you, "Wonderful!" when you are uttering your exclamations.*

— Epictetus(Discourses, 3.23)

We never get a break from ourselves. Every second of every day for our whole lives, we are constantly building and reinforcing who we are. We're steeped in it. It's a story we tell ourselves. The kind of person we are... or aren't. We make thousands of decisions every day, building and training ourselves for the story we will tell tomorrow. Some of this is nature, some is nurture, and we have tens of thousands of hours of practice as to 'who we are.'

We're here to change that.

It necessarily cannot be easy, from a physiological standpoint, a practical standpoint, and a spiritual one. Physiologically, because our habits are literally reinforced in our neural pathways, practically because inertia is a hell of thing, and spiritually because it is our duty, and those are rarely easy. Yet, we still know, at some level this is something we must do. It is very likely the hardest thing we will ever do, and one of the things that is most worth doing.

So prepare yourself. Bolster your courage, stiffen your spine. There's a damned job ahead, and we're going to do it. Today, tomorrow, a hundred days from now, a decade. Whatever it takes. But do not for a moment think it will be easy. It will be hard, and you will earn it. Drop by drop.

*“He who learns must suffer.  
Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart  
until, in our own despair, against our will,  
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”*

— Aeschylus

## Week 3

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### The Discipline of Desire and Stoic Physics

*“Bear and forbear.”*

--- Epictetus

The Discipline of Desire and the study of physics go together. The philosophical understanding of physics does not require a large hadron collider, nor any other sort of quantum machinery. Which is especially lucky for us, since those are pretty thin on the ground. No, the philosophical physics is a study of nature, cosmology, theology, and in a word, man's place in the universe. The Discipline of Desire is the lived realization of that understanding.

A key component to this is an understanding of Fate, an acceptance of it, and a cheerful disposition to human life. The Stoic school is one of 'cosmic optimism,' which means that there is a belief that the universe is operating towards a beneficent end. Of course, small things (either as lower tier consequences, indirect results, or possibly by design), might be experienced by individual creatures and judged “bad” by the less philosophically minded of them. Yes, despite that, we believe it is working towards the good.

Epictetus' famous slogan, above, reminds us to endure what fate allots us, and voluntarily control our passions and desires, circumscribing them with a hard philosophical rule. *“Bear and forbear,”* is a pretty compact command, but contains within it a core useful truth. The importance of these short words has changed for me as time has passed and my studies have progressed. Even if it does not resonate with you today, I urge you to come back to it, and see what you might find there at some point in the future.

Topics like these will be our focus for the coming week. Hopefully, by now, you are seeing a change in your thought processes. For me, it was an understanding that every impression, mood, whim, or thought has a subtle opportunity to place a value-judgment on it. Previously, I wasn't using that opportunity. Some automatic process of my mind was applying the judgments (sometimes, it still does). But, it can be up to your ruling faculty, your conscious mind to do this. That was one of the first big realizations I had, and if it hasn't happened for you yet, it's just down the road.

Let's move into the discussion of the Discipline of Desire now...

## Day 15

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### The Inner Citadel

*“It is possible for you to retreat into yourself whenever you please.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 4)

One of the great things about 'philosophy as a way of life,' is that it does not require you to retreat to a mountain monastery, shutting yourself off from the world. In fact, that could possibly end up counter-productive. No, philosophy as a way of life is useful right now, at work, at home, in rush hour traffic. It takes place within us, with a rich inner life, and the real world gives us plenty of opportunity to exercise virtue and excellent character, not as a theory but in the here and now.

*“No one can stop you from undertaking action with justice,  
self-discipline, and practical wisdom.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 8)

I've mentioned the “rich inner life” which we Stoic philosophers are suggested to inculcate, and the above quotes from Marcus drive that home. We are not asking for a showy display of virtue, these are things which directly are not observable by others, but indirectly will show through every action we take. Epictetus tells us that if you want to practice self-discipline, on the hottest of days, when your thirst is very great, fill your mouth with cool and refreshing water. Hold it there, and then spit out. Tell no one.

That last part can be the particular challenge for some folks (this author, for one). Virtue for the sake of public praise probably isn't what it pretends to be. For this reason, we always have our internal retreat, an Inner Citadel which is untouched by the whims and passions of human life. A core place wherein lives our ruling faculty, our consciousness, or soul, or (as the ancient philosophers might have said), our *daemon*.

Philosophy as a way of life is a deeply personal and internal exercise. Surely, the people in our lives will ask questions, our behavior may change, and our inner states decidedly should change. So, affirm this week to act with justice, self-discipline, and practical wisdom: at work, at home, and in society.

But do so *quietly*.

## Day 16

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### A wider perspective

*“Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well.”*

--- Epictetus (Enchiridion 8)

This is lame advice. It sets you up to be a doormat. It's the perspective of weak person, a victim.

That's what I told myself the first few times I read it. First from Epictetus, and then later in Marcus as well, not coincidentally. Some inner part of me rebelled at the idea. “But I want what's mine! I *deserve* to be treated a certain way, to get certain things!” This little voice of mine yelled loudly, and sometimes it's easier to hear the loud voice over the wise one.

I thought about this some more, and I came to the beginning of a realization. I say the beginning, because realization is still coming into being for me, but I can see it on the horizon. It came at me sort of sideways, in some ways it's an article of faith. The universe is working to some good end. That's it. And sometimes, the subjective experience of a rational creature isn't the most important thing. That, coupled with the idea that every hardship is an opportunity to exercise virtue allows you to assent to the whole of creation.

Every cause, every happening of the whole universe has been brought about to give *you* the opportunity to exercise virtue. This toughness, this stress, this whatever has been painstakingly ordered from the very first cause to give you a test.

So, say yes to it.

That sounds really simple. It might be overly simplistic, but sometimes core truths appear simple. The application of that truth might be quite difficult, however. So instead of being thwarted, wounded, harassed and harried; you get the opportunity to assent to a universe of time and space, to exercise the very best that humanity has to offer.

That sounds like a strong, formidable, and empowering position. That's the position of someone willing to look at the lowest lows and the hardest hardships, and stand firm. That's good advice.

## Day 17

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### Creature comforts and comfort-seeking creatures.

*“Pleasure on the contrary, according to most Stoics, is not to be reckoned among the primary objects of natural impulse; and I very strongly agree with them, for fear lest many immoral consequences would follow if we held that nature has placed pleasure among the earliest objects of desire.*

— Cicero (de Finibus, 3.5.17)

It's a pretty short logical step to recognize that pleasure is not a good in and of itself (assuming you're not an Epicurean). Pleasure is insidious, it works its way around the edges offering a moments reprieve from... whatever. Whether its overly soft food, sweets, alcohol, drugs, sex, warm blankets, toasty feet, dry clothes, the list is nearly endless. Pleasures, however, quickly become masters.

The Stoics do not demand a total abstinence, that's too easy. Instead, we're admonished to understand how and when certain pleasures are rightly undertaken. This fits with one of the four Cardinal Virtues, which is in Greek is called *sōphrosynē* (σωφροσύνη). In English temperance, and is generally understood to mean “moderation” esp. in the case of alcohol, but more truly in respect to all the passions or emotions. It is “the middle path.” However, in the Greek, *sōphrosynē* means something different. When translated to Latin, the word they used was ‘*decorum*.’

A better English translation would be “fittingness,” meaning that state of a critter fitted and suited to its appropriate functions in its particular context. When meeting your spouse’s boss, extra politeness would be fitting. When celebrating a birthday, the consumption of a moderate amount of alcohol would be fitting. When reprimanding a child in your care, a certain amount of firmness tempered by mercy and concern for his or her well-being is fitting. “Fittingness” is a much more difficult mandate than ‘temperance,’ and it's one which should circumscribe our desires and passions.

Chances are, you already know the things that are a challenge for you. I don't need to make a list, you can probably name five things off the top of your head which are pleasures-become-passions for you. Which is excellent, because it's those five things you can begin to work on immediately. What did Marcus say? The obstacle becomes the way. A good way to handle your passions is to replace it with a virtuous action. Watching too much Netflix in the evening? Take an hour's walk. If you have a family, double-bonus for fulfilling your social role as well.

*“Nothing is meaner than love of pleasure, the love of gain, and insolence. Nothing is nobler than magnanimity, meekness, and good-nature.”*

— Epictetus (Fragments, 46)



## Day 18

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Virtue as a choice, not a knack.

*“Stand straight, not straightened.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 3)

For some, this idea might seem unfair. Let's imagine two people. One of whom naturally and easily makes good decisions. There's no test here, he simply has a knack for acting well and being good. The second person does not, the second person does all of the same actions, exercises the same social roles just as well, but agonizes over them. This second person has to do the opposite of his internal motivations.

Who is more virtuous?

A person who is truly fearless cannot be courageous. Only the person shaking with terror, whose body threatens to betray them, whose instinct it is to run, and goes anyway can be courageous. Of course, virtue is not a competition, at least with anyone other than yourself. But we can use this analogy to focus on the areas where we lack. If self-discipline is easy for us, then maybe philanthropy is the area to focus on. If we are naturally charitable, but we could stand to be a bit tougher with our passions, then this is the area which our virtue can really shine.

We need to do the tough thing. Who feels accomplished to walk across a field, instead of summitting a mountain? Marcus has told us, the obstacle is the way. So turn away from the shores, hit the open seas. Climb the heights, plunge the depths.

Do the hard things.

## Day 19

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You're doing austerity wrong... or maybe that's just me.

*"One of the Spartans saw Diogenes the Cynic holding his arms around a bronze statue in very cold weather, and asked Diogenes if were cold; and when Diogenes said 'No', the other said 'What great thing are you doing then?'"*

— Plutarch (Apophthegmata Laconica 16 )

The Spartans were lauded by our ancient philosophical forbears, as a sort of 'naturally' Stoic people. Their short and terse way of speaking eventually birthed our word “laconic” meaning in the manner of pithy witticisms, being named for the area from which they hailed, Laconia or Lacedaemonia . The above quote is an example of that style of wisdom, and it gives us an interesting morale. The purpose of our voluntary austerities should be to train ourselves to hardship, to bear what's difficult with equanimity, and **not** to do so for public praise or as a spectacle.

I know from my own experience, that it is very easy to do something which seems to others to be hard but for ourselves is no great pain, and to *feel* like we're doing some great philosophical thing. This is an ego-lesson which I still have to learn, and struggle with. I like to sleep on the floor under a wool blanket (seriously, it's good for the back), but others see it as a great inconvenience. So, if I'm practicing hardship, sleeping on the floor should be right out for me. I like simple foods as well as fancy ones, but eating home-cooked bread and lentils is no great challenge for me (for a few weeks anyway), so I need to choose other avenues, like cutting out sugary drinks.

When you are practicing your ability to live in the world as it is (which is in effect what we're doing), do so with intent, and with a good heart. Do not do so for ego, for fame, for admiring eyes and words. Do it for you, and that is a very, very difficult lesson to learn for some, this author included.

This is a highly personal and challenging thing, to face-up to the story you've told yourself and the world about yourself, and to deny it. To face the fact that you've built up a character of traits you like for people to think of you. It's hard and it will hurt.

Do it anyway.

## Day 20

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### The nature of the gods

*“He, filled with the god he carried in his silent mind,  
poured forth from his breast words worthy of the shrine:  
‘What question, Labienus, do you bid me ask? Whether I prefer  
to meet my death in battle, free, to witnessing a tyranny?  
Whether it makes no difference if our lives be long or short?  
Whether violence can harm no good man and Fortune wastes her threats when virtue lines  
up against her, and whether it is enough to wish for things commendable and whether what  
is upright never grows by its success?  
We know the answer: Ammon will not plant it deeper in me. We are all connected with  
the gods above, and even if the shrine is silent we do nothing without God’s will; no need  
has deity of any utterances: the Creator told us at our birth once and always whatever we  
can know. Did he select the barren sands to prophesy to a few and in this dust submerge  
the truth and is there any house of God except the earth and sea and air and sky and  
excellence? Why do we seek gods any further?  
Whatever you see, whatever you experience, is Jupiter.  
Let those unsure and always dubious of future events  
require fortune-tellers: no oracles make me certain,  
certain death does. Coward and brave must fall:  
it is enough that Jupiter has said this.’ So declaring  
he departed from the altars with the temples credit intact,  
leaving Ammon to the peoples, uninvestigated.”*

--- Cato

--- Lucan (Pharsalia)

In the above excerpt, the General Cato is leading his troops through a foreign land, and come across a Temple to Ammon. He is urged to stop, to consult the oracle, and see their fate in the Roman Civil War. Cato replies thus, and does not consult the oracle.

Jupiter or Zeus or God is all around us, all we see, all the matter and energy of the world *is* god. There is no particular need for special buildings. Epictetus tells us the good man is pious, but does this mean we are only to sit in a building for a short time each week? No, we have a greater obligation, which is to see the whole cosmos as sacred, and to do good always.

*“All things are implicated with one another, and the bond is holy; and there is hardly anything unconnected with any other things. For things have been co-ordinated, and they combine to make up the same universe. For there is one universe made up of all things, and one god who pervades all things, and one substance, and one law, and one reason.”*

--- Marcus Aurelis (Meditations, Book 7)

## Day 21

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### Pneuma and breath

*“The human soul is pneuma, a fragment of the pneuma that constitutes God's soul.”*

— John Sellars (Stoicism)

The cosmology of the ancient Stoics saw an active and passive aspect to the universe. We might say matter and energy. For them, like other ancient cultures, this was tied to the breath and sometimes to a creative fire. Either way, there was seen a force which mixed and permeated matter, activating it in a crucial way. The Stoics called the *pneuma* or 'breath of life.'

Most modern Stoics are interested predominantly in ethics, but it is important to understand that one of the things which made the School so successful was that it was quite exhaustive and for the people explained much of the universe. While the metaphors might seem strange, the Stoics' conception of the universe is very similar to our own. They believed in a cosmos which was surrounded by an endless void, which periodically would die in a great conflagration cycling endlessly. We believe in an ever expanding universe, made up of large amounts of vacuum, which may either end in ice-death or fire-death. Not too different, really. If you imagine a Big Bang type singularity, expanding until gravity pulls us back in to a fiery conflagration it seems pretty spot on.

*“For they [the Stoics] claim that the soul is a kind of pneuma, as is nature too; the pneuma of nature is more fluid and cool, while that of the soul is drier and hotter. Consequently, [they also think this]: that pneuma is a kind of matter proper to the soul, and in form the matter is either a symmetrical blend of airy and fiery substance; for it is not possible to say that it is either air alone or fire alone, since the body of an animal does not appear to be either extremely cold or extremely hot, but rather it is not even dominated by a great excess of either of these”*

— Galen (On the Habits of the Soul)

We live in a world in which inert chemicals have formed into organic compounds which resulted in life. Could *pneuma* explain the 'how' of that? Maybe so. Maybe not. We can read in Seneca how the School was and is non-dogmatic on many points. The particulars can change as new information is available, the key point is for the Logos to shape our understanding.

The world of the Stoics was built on logic, and their system strives towards internal consistency in line with the observations they could make at the time. What has managed to stick around, and what maybe science is catching up to, is certainly interesting. As we move forward, I wonder what cues we can take from the past?

## Week 3

### The Discipline of Action and Stoic Ethics

*“As the good chorus singers do not render solos, but sing perfectly well with a number of other voices, so some men cannot walk around by themselves. Man, if you are anybody, both walk around by yourself, and talk to yourself, and don't hide yourself in the chorus. Let yourself be laughed at sometimes, look about you, shake yourself up, so as to at least find out who you actually are!”*

— Epictetus (Discourses 3.14.1-3)

A superficial reading of the Stoic conception of feelings and emotions might lead one to suspect that the Stoics were cold and mechanical. However, we know that there is such a thing as “Stoic cheerfulness.” Knowing one's place in the universe and rejoicing in it is a profoundly positive position to have. Most of the time, in the literature, when we're discussing “the passions” we are explicitly referring to the unhealthy passions, and it seems we often neglect the *eupatheia*.

Passions				
Neutral	The Good Passions		The Unhealthy Passions	
	English	Greek	English	Greek
Elation	Joy/Cheerfulness	<i>chara/euphrosunos</i>	Pleasure	<i>hêdonê</i>
Aversion	Caution/Discretion	<i>eulabeia</i>	Fear	<i>phobos</i>
Desire	Well-wishing	<i>boulêsis</i>	Craving	<i>epithumia</i>
	--		Pain	<i>lupê</i>

The above chart is an attempt to organize the various passions, it is pulled fairly directly from [Don Robertson's blog, here](#). We are not attempting to be robotic and cold humans, but to live intentionally and rationally. To domesticate, rather than repress our emotions and feelings, after we have assented to their validity. While Stoicism is often draped in discussions of hard choices, the rack, exile, and death; there is an often under-represented side of it, which you should spend time mulling over.

We know from studying behavior change, that when replacing negative habits (and thought patterns should certainly qualify, here) that it is far better to replace a negative habit with a good one. The same might be said passions, and for everything except *pain* we have an option. Just like we have a virtue for every vice.

## Day 22

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### On Stoic love

*How, then, shall I become affectionate?—As one who is noble, as one who is fortunate; for reason never accepts that one be wretched, or that one depend on something else, or even blame either god or human being. Thus be affectionate so as to maintain these things; if, however, by virtue of this natural affection, whatever it is you call by that name, you are going to be a slave and miserable, it does not profit you to be affectionate. And what keeps you from loving someone as a mortal, as one who may leave you? Did not Socrates love his own children? Yes, but as a free man, as one who remembers that it is necessary first to be a friend to the gods.*

— Epictetus (Discourses, 3.24.58-60)

Stoics love, you know. “Now hang on a minute!” You might want to say, “Aren't we all about squashing some passions here? What's more passionate than love?!” You're a bit worked up, and that's understandable. Yes, Stoics love. We have just seen that there's a list of things the Stoics called “good passions,” in which it is advisable we make some progress.

Love is one of those. Our love is expected to be freely given, without expectations and strings. Our love should not rob us of our faculties, and should not injure our moral and rational natures. Our love should never be a lever we use to force ourselves to feel self-pity, or bitterness, or sorrow; nor to do the same to others; nor allow it to be done to us.

Love was of a special concern for the Greeks, they had several words we sometimes lazily all translate by the word 'love.' There is the brotherly sort, the kind of friends, the kind of family, the kind of every human who crosses our path. There's mere affection, and there's erotic love (which requires some extra attention).

Erotic love can sweep us away to the highest highs and the lowest lows. It can make us a slave, what would we not do for our beloved? It is said that the Sage takes steps to be cautious in such undertakings (caution being one of those good passions, contra fear). Epictetus and Marcus both address erotic love, Marcus uses the method of objective description, and Seneca has much to say on the issue in Natural Questions 1.16.

*“[Sex] is the friction of a piece of gut and, following a sort of convulsion, the expulsion of some mucus.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 6)

A cursory reading might seem like the classical Stoics viewed human sexual behavior unfavorably, but that seems a very shallow interpretation to me. The lesson I take, is that like anything in life, sex can be misused, and so one's exercise of it must be cautious. This is a fine lesson for any age, and maybe more especially our own. In what way can we use our capacity for love for virtuous and excellent ends today?

## Day 23

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### Our relationship with the passerby

*“Men have come into being for one another;  
so either educate them or put up with them.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, No)

We see Marcus discussing how rational creatures have come into being for each other, to work together. Like bees of the hive, or the opposite rows of teeth. We are moral and social animals. We, from a modern western perspective, are usually quite individualistic, and (I think) this is quite healthy. However, that is not the end all and be all of life. We often find a sense of fulfillment, of satisfaction, and a deep enjoyment of life in our relations with others.

Most of our social roles are dictated by other people. We cannot be a spouse by ourselves, nor a parent, nor a teacher or student. We are sons and daughters because of our parents, community members, and helpers. Most of the roles which affirm our existence are tied to other folks. We find something important in relation to others.

And while we are trying to make ourselves better, we must recognize this means others are in a similar boat of imperfection. Sometimes people are mean, base, crude, vicious. Marcus reminds us, that our position as philosophers implies an obligation either to help, or tolerate. We were once in the same place, maybe even worse, as the person who unthinkingly behaves contrary to his or her nature. Fate may even put us in that same place again.

It seems to me, that I fail now in my moral and rational duties more often than before I studied philosophy. It's probably not true, but in fact I just notice more of the failings. I may even fail less frequently, but I am more deeply aware of it. The same spark in me that feels shame at such things is present in others. It does not matter that they *\*do\** feel that way, but that they are *constituted* to feel that way. That's what we share.

How can you be more empathetic to your fellow humans, your brothers and sisters today?

## Day 24

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### On work and duty

*“At daybreak, when reluctant to rise, have this thought ready in your mind: ‘I am getting up to do a human being’s work’. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bed-clothes and keep myself warm?”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 5)

Sometimes it seems like if we had just an ounce more of motivation for a certain project or job, that would make all the difference. Maybe, wanting the motivation to do something might actually be the problem. Feeling motivated can be a preference for a certain emotional state which isn't strictly required for you to do your duty.

You have some social roles, some assigned to you by nature and fate (human, rational creature, etc.), and others you've freely chosen (parent, employee, etc.). So, working even if you don't want to in the moment is an expression both of your will and your nature. If we set a mind to do a certain thing, the hardship we may experience is part of what we chose! Who goes to the pool and expects not to get splashed?

Marcus tells us when we do not want to get out of bed that we have the work of a human being to be about. Bees, cows, birds, all of them do happily what they are obliged to do and surely you're at least as capable as one of those. It's not your duty to laze around on the couch, or make yourself warm in the blankets. You have the work of a human being to do. Do not wait for some fleeting, ephemeral good feeling to work.

When we look at others, we admire how hard they work. We might say, “Oh, I wish I had the ability to enjoy lazing about!” Every soul needs a break, but most of us feel a need to do something productive after enough down-time. It is in our nature. We can see the virtues of work ethic, of self-reliance, of fortitude in others, yet we make excuses for ourselves when we fail to meet those standards. Should we not be at least as hard on ourselves as we are on others? Maybe harder?

Do your duty because you choose it; and that will make the all the difference.



## Day 25

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### Morning preparations

*“Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him, For we are made for co-operation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 2)

Marcus would begin his day with a regimen, that would help him frame his mind and his day in a certain way, he would remind himself of the manner in which he should act. Passages such as these have caused some historians to interpret Marcus as depressed, pessimistic, and morose. However, we know that these sections were an intentional exercise in “philosophical journaling,” he was preparing himself for the worst that the world would throw at him, the basest nature of man, that he might be better able to weather the world.

Regimens are important to this perspective, and starting off the morning with an affirmation to live philosophically, check-ins during the day, and a reflection at night are a good start. We've seen Marcus' morning affirmation, so take today to come up with a short quote or write something yourself that you can use to begin each day in a philosophical mindset for the world as it actually is.

*“Remember that as it is a shame to be surprised if the fig-tree produces figs, so it is to be surprised if the world produces such and such things of which it is productive; and for the physician and the helmsman it is a shame to be surprised, if a man has a fever, or if the wind is unfavourable.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 8)

Each morning we arise to engage in the world of men. Like being splashed at the pool, it is an expression of our will that we deal with people who mistakenly understand the good. Keep this in mind as you go about your day, you choose every second of every day to be here, doing this. Might as well do it well.

## Day 26

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### *Indifference, not inaction.*

*“ 'Station in life,' then, can be changed from that of a dignified and competent gentleman of culture to that of a panic-stricken, sobbing, self-loathing wreck in a matter of minutes. So what? To live under the false pretense that you will forever have control of your station in life is to ride for a fall; you're asking for disappointment. So make sure in your heart of hearts, in your inner self, that you treat your station in life with indifference, not with contempt, only with indifference.”*

--- Jim Stockdale (Courage Under Fire)

Something about the life and trials of Jim Stockdale stand out to me. Maybe it's because his life is so far outside of my own experience. Maybe it's because he seems to be a modern realization of these ideas that interest me. Maybe it's because what he lived through, and thrived in as a person, terrifies me. Probably, it's some of all of these. The topic for today is not torture nor captivity, but *indifference*.

There are not many topics in the Stoic school which are as keenly misunderstood. Some of that probably leaks over from the eastern traditions, which many folks dabble in before finding Stoicism. Firstly, let me state that *indifference* is not inaction, is not contempt. So, what it is? Indifference is the outlook we take which protects our rational nature. It inures us to loss, keeps us safe from sweet pleasures, and allows our rational and ruling faculty to its job.

If a child falls and scrapes her knee, it would be immoral to bend over and say, “your hurt is an *indifferent* to me.” No. Even the most advanced Sage would pick her up and comfort her, because that's the right thing to do. However, the child's scrapped knee would not wound the soul of that Sage. Stoic *indifference* is hard, because it requires a total knowledge of what you are doing, thinking, and behaving like you do. It requires utter attention to your inner state.

The Sage and the fool may both do the same thing, outwardly. But the Sage does it with his whole self. She is *indifferent* to anything other than her own excellence, but she's not a frozen statue. The severe asceticism of the guru who sits all day is difficult, no question. It is at least as difficult (maybe more so) to maintain that equanimity in the world.

And that's what we are called by Nature to do; to maintain our *indifference* while fulfilling our social roles and working on our own virtue. No mean feat, that.

## Day 27

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### The harsh dichotomy of Stoicism

“Every non-sage is mad.”

— Cicero (Paradoxa Stoicorum)

A metaphor exists of philosophy being two patients in the hospital, and the philosopher is the one closer to the window, explaining what he sees outside to the other patient. Neither one is well, but one has a better view. The Hellenistic philosophers were fairly well in agreement that only the Sage was wise, and everyone else was foolish. The Stoics took an interesting perspective, saying that all foolishness, all moral faults, are effectively equivalent as they are all non-wise or non-virtuous. This is a pretty uncompromising position to take.

The Stoics do allow for the one making progress or *prokopton*. The *prokopton* *knows* he is not wise, and this makes a big difference. She is training, striving, and working towards wisdom. She may not get there, but she tries none the less. Whether or not Sages have existed in our world is debated. Many point to Socrates and Diogenes of Sinope as possible examples, and some have even thought of Cato as a possible contender for the title.

Regardless, we can take a cue from Marcus. Whether or not Sages exist, is the universe constituted such that they could? Humans have conceived it while endeavoring to be as reasonable as possible, as an extension of their Logos. We have, intuitively, a mental benchmark in our minds as to what the most virtuous person would look like. Every time we take action, we can feel a proximity to the polar extremes of goodness or ill. We see in ourselves, and in others, various places on this continuum. Whether or not we'll ever stand at the end is immaterial, but we are making progress towards one end or another.

While we are going about our days, fulfilling our social roles, and generally living in society, are we carrying ourselves as *prokoptontes*? Socrates was famous for claiming he knew nothing, and through a series of questions and answers, he would elicit a similar conviction in others. This was so famously adopted that we refer to it as the Socratic Method. However, despite his claims to the contrary, Socrates knew a thing or two about a thing or two.

We might not be a Socrates, but we can behave as one who at least *wants to be* a Socrates: *Prokoptontes*.

## Day 28

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### Acceptance and Fortitude

*“Remember that neither the future nor the past pains thee, but only the present. But this is reduced to a very little, if thou only circumscribest it, and chidest thy mind, if it is unable to hold out against even this.”*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 8)

With all this talk about fate, acceptance, and desiring the world to be as it is, not as we want it to be, you might come up with the idea that a practicing Stoic would be a bit of a doormat. However, the examples we have of historical figures is pretty much the opposite of that. We have emperors, generals, politicians, serious men and women who underwent great physical pains, even death, over a refusal to compromise their integrity. We see in Socrates and Cato men who willingly took their own lives rather do something they saw as viscous. Men like Jim Stockdale, who were subjected to torture and imprisonment, yet maintained their sense of self, their equanimity, and their own excellence. Hiparchia, who flouted custom and tradition to study philosophy with Crates.

It certainly seems like a paradox.

But is it? Epictetus instructs us to pay attention to what is “up to us” and what is “not up to us.” Typically, we now think of our judgments, our assent, and our ruling faculty. Are we not also critters who interact with a physical world? The Serenity Prayer may be a bit of Stoicism that traveled into and through early Christianity, to the present day.

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

There are things which are up to us, and we have social roles. Within these spheres we should endeavor with courage and fortitude to exercise our judgment and virtue. Our acceptance of fate entails an acceptance of our role in fate as well. While it may seem like we're trying to have our cake and eat it, too; what we see here is an injunction to do all that we can and should, and nothing we cannot or should not. It's an incredibly tough standard to meet.

By exercising our Discipline of Assent, Desire, and Action; using our ruling faculty, and keeping our logical processes in good order; we find that we are in a position to do quite a lot. We acknowledge that we are not perfect, but we are making progress. We exist in a real world with real people and real consequences. So, we live according to our own nature, fulfill our duties and responsibilities, and live as philosophers: the only truly free folks.

## Week 4

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### Putting it all together

*“The willing are led by fate, the reluctant dragged.”*

— Cleanthes (Hymn to Zeus)

Being a human is an interesting proposition. We recognized that we have free will, or at least we believe we do which is similar enough to not be an issue for the Stoics, and also that we live in a universe bound by chains of causes, a deterministic universe. Whether you believe in the hand of god, or the laws of physics, or the weaving of Clotho: there is some part of the universe which is ordered and prescribed for you. There's a parable, of the dog tied to a cart. The dog is certainly free to try and run in the opposite direction, to fight, to claw and flail. He is free to lay down, and be dragged. He is also free to choose for himself to follow the cart, and his way will go much easier, but not only ease is the issue here, he's going where he's meant to go. He's fulfilling his role as 'dog.'

We have roles also, some we have chosen, and some have been assigned to us. We are all rational creatures, humans, and we have chosen others. We might have chosen service worker, doctor, lawyer, police, teacher, parent, lover, spouse. We have many roles, and the chain of causes has us tied to it. So we should run alongside.

We should run, correct the other other dogs who are fighting amongst themselves to run with us. We have the opportunity to do kindnesses, to love, to work, to play, to learn, and to better ourselves. All of these we can do from our position tied to the cart. Whether emperor or slave, citizen or any other; we have *freedom enough* to work on ourselves, which is the real freedom.

None can stop us from acting well, from being honest and upright. We have the freedom to chose to do hard things. Philosophy gives an ultimate freedom that cannot be found elsewhere.

But we have to earn it.

## Day 29

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We train for a purpose.

*“Do you only bear in mind the general rules: “What is mine, what is not mine; what is given to me; what does God will that I should do now? what does He not will?” A little before he willed you to be at leisure, to talk with yourself, to write about these things, to read, to hear, to prepare yourself. You had sufficient time for this. Now He says to you: “Come now to the contest; show us what you have learned, how you have practiced the athletic art. How long will you be exercised alone? Now is the opportunity for you to learn whether you are an athlete worthy of victory, or one of those who go about the world and are defeated.” Why, then, are you vexed? No contest is without confusion. There be many who exercise themselves for the contests, many who call out to those who exercise themselves, many masters, many spectators.”*

— Epictetus (Discourses, 4.4)

We've come full-circle to philosophy as a way of life. We laid down the ground work for changing our thoughts, perspectives, and judgments. Now, we need to go out into the rough-and-tumble. Philosophy is not an idealized dance in the clean and sterile ballrooms of the world. It is a wrestling match, a boxing bout, a fight. Armed with the tools of your trade, trained in the skills and practices of the ancients we need to go out into the world and live these things we've come to believe.

A system to make you a better person which falls apart at the first challenge is a system which does not merit practicing, and as you work on yourself following the first-steps you've seen here, you will likely find this an excellent tool for keeping your head in the world.

So pick your fight partners or take what Fate gives you. You have the tools!

For angry bosses you have patience. For the trials of work you have fortitude. For fear of change and risk you have courage. For the pleasures of the mind and pleasures of the flesh you have discipline and self-control. So take out your virtues, exercise them in the world as you find it and the roles in which you find yourself. You carry about you an *Inner Citadel*, which is untouchable from the outside without your permission.

Keep your mind, your *daemon*, your soul in good condition. Treat your reasoning faculty well, and those you find in others as well. It's a worthwhile journey. So, we have trained for this purpose.

## Day 30

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### Prayers and divine assistance.

*“Lead me, O Zeus, and thou necessity.”*

— Epictetus (Discourses, 4.4)

The world is a funny place. The classical Stoics were sometimes accused of being atheists (the horror!). If you spend enough time on the internet discussing our School, you'll surely stumble across the firm theist versus the deist versus the militant Atheist with a capital A camps. It's a heated debate, and maybe it's one you'd like to wade in on. I take a cue from Marcus on his question of “whether providence or atoms.”

The arguments of the School for treating the universe as a divine and rational creature seems to me to have merit. I also understand that some folks feel very strongly about this issue, usually less strongly than I do myself. Like Marcus discussing an afterlife, if it's for the good it will be, and if it's not it won't. If the universe is constituted to have gods, then it will. If it is good and reasonable, then it will be. I was legitimately quite surprised to find this enough of an explanation for me, I suspected I would need to argue it.

So, whether you believe in a personal god à la the Abrahamic context; or a pantheon of human-like characters like the Greeks, Hindus, Celts, and others; or you find the argument that the universe in and of itself is so wondrous that the term 'god' is not misplaced when discussing it; or merely a mental shorthand: you may find that the results are the same. We are brought to the conclusion that our purpose, our path, and our values can be determined by a keen view of Nature.

So we, as Cleanthes and many before us, may reasonably ask for such guidance. We can pray or meditate. Marcus tells us,

*Begin, then, to pray for such things, and thou wilt see. One man prays thus: How shall I be able to lie with that woman? Do thou pray thus: How shall I not desire to lie with her? Another prays thus: How shall I be released from this? Another prays: How shall I not desire to be released? Another thus: How shall I not lose my little son? Thou thus: How shall I not be afraid to lose him? In fine, turn thy prayers this way, and see what comes.*

— Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 9)

So rather than pray for “stuff,” we should pray for the virtues to live well. Whether you direct that to the universal reason, to the gods, or to the spark of divinity in yourself is of course a very personal matter. Despite all the nitty-gritty of philosophical life, I would urge you not to let the fields of theology lie fallow. Extend your tools, your reason to this, and you will be the better for it.

## Day 31

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“Considering all these things...”

*“Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be.  
Be one.”*

--- Marcus Aurelius (Meditations, Book 10)

It's the last day for us. We've come quite a long way in that time. We've learned a bit of extensive and complicated vocabulary. We've learned to think in some new ways, and we gained the first inklings of a new power. We can shape who we are. We are not mere victims of chance, but rational creatures, causes in and of ourself. We are building the person we will be, the sort we would admire with each choice. We are learning to live intentionally, and with a full heart.

We've seen the importance of *arete*, human excellence or virtue. We've seen how discriminating between the good, the bad, and the indifferent are a key to this excellence. We've discussed the social context in which we find ourselves, and our privileges, rights, and obligations as social and rational creatures.

We've argued about what it is to be a good person, and talked about tools to get there.

Let's go be one.

*"[Stoicism] is an ancient and honourable package of advice on how to stay out of the clutches of those who are trying to get you on the hook, trying to give you a feeling of obligation, trying to get moral leverage on you, to force you to bend to their will...it's a formula for maintaining self-respect and dignity in defiance of those who would break your spirit for their own ends."*

--- - Jim Stockdale, (Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot, p.177)



# Works Cited

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  - [Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus' Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior.](#)

## Note:

I have endeavored to include references which are freely available and can be read online at no cost to the reader. Sometimes, I used other translations for the quotes in the above passages, so the phrasing may differ. For some works, this was not possible, and I included link to where the books might be purchased. I make no commission nor have any investment or interest in those sellers and/or sites.

For bang for you buck, it's hard to beat this:

- [The Stoic Six Pack, Various](#) (\$0.99 for Kindle or Kindle browser extensions and apps)

## Other works of reference and note

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Despite the twists of fate taking from us the lion's share of Stoic literature, there are many good works on the subject. These lists are not even remotely exhaustive of the topic, but I hope it will be enough to get your started on your own course of study. I have found my time working with the [College of Stoic Philosophers](#) to be well-spent, and I recommend both their [SES Course](#) and the [Marcus Aurelius School](#) to interested parties. This endorsement was not asked for, and is given freely and happily. I have included a couple works associated with the School here.

- [Stoic Spiritual Exercises](#), E. Buzaré
- [The Inner Citadel](#), P. Hadot
- [Philosophy as a Way of Life](#), P. Hadot
- [Stoicism and the Art of Happiness](#), D. Robertson
- [Words of the Ancietnt Wise: From Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius](#), W. Rouse
- [Stoicism](#), J. Sellars
- [Stoic Glossary and Pronunciation Guide](#), G. Wasson
- [The Stoic Handbook](#), E. Wiegardt

Another resource which is quite large and covers a broad range of topics is D. Robertson's blog and site.

- <http://philosophy-of-cbt.com/> and
- [Stoicism Today at Exeter](#)

## Closing

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This project was completed as part of the [Marcus Aurelius School](#) hosted by the [College of Stoic Philosophers](#). I hope you have found some small use in it, the exercise of writing it has helped me to better understand where my attentions need to lay in regards to our school. They say that you teach best what you most need to learn, and the writing here has a personal quality which at first I was trying to avoid, but which really seems like it needs to be present; if not for you than for me.

I want to thank you for working through this past month with me, and I wish you luck and success (Fate permitting) in your studies. Any suggestions, critiques, messages, or hate mail can be forwarded on to me from [www.kevinpatrick.info](http://www.kevinpatrick.info)

Thanks again,



--- K.L. Patrick  
[www.kevinpatrick.info](http://www.kevinpatrick.info)