

STOICISM



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE HISTORY
& PHILOSOPHY OF STOICISM

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**A Beginner's Guide To The History
& Philosophy of Stoicism**

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INTRODUCTION

It can be an intimidating prospect for the uninformed reader to embark on a study of Greek Philosophy.

First of all, there might be the notion that only those with great intellectual capacity will ever be able to fully grasp the principles of this field of study. Apart from the intimidating prospect of entering into the world of Greek Philosophers, the prospective student may also find it well-nigh impossible to decide which specific branch of Greek philosophy to study.

This book will eliminate much of the apprehension that may accompany a desire to study the very rewarding disciplines of Greek Philosophy, as it will soon become apparent that these disciplines are not only reserved for the intellectual few, but rather a field of study which can be mastered by anyone who is willing to spend a little time reading about the basic principles involved. In this book, we are going to concentrate on the specific discipline of Stoicism; thereby dispensing with the potentially intimidating prospect of having to choose a specific branch of Greek Philosophical thought to study.

Why study Stoicism?

The best motivation for the study of this discipline is the fact that Stoic thought is prevalent in our modern society and we, often unknowingly, apply many of the principles of Stoic philosophy in our everyday lives.

Stoicism is also known as a school of *Hellenistic* thought, where the importance of Nature is emphasized as a cornerstone of the philosophy. During the course of this study, we will look more closely at the motivation for this belief in the importance of Nature, and further the development of this basic idea in the more advanced reasoning employed by the Stoic Philosophers.

The Greek Stoics viewed their Philosophy as a way of life, rather than a mere exercise for academics in the Ivory Towers of the Platonic Academy and other Universities of their time. This approach became known as the *lex divina*, which can be loosely translated as “Divine Law”. This is a very important concept, as it found its way into much of the Greek academic thought of the period, and it eventually influenced other disciplines, such as Roman Law, during later history.

The Stoics made a sharp distinction between things that are in our power and things that are not. Personal desire, dislike, opinion and affection are within our power, while certain aspects of our health, wealth, position and reputation are not.

The Stoics furthermore asserted the unity of the universe, and stressed man's duty as a part of this greater Cosmic composition.

Stoicism has had an enduring impact on later civilizations. Stoics were the first, for example, to propose the idea of globalism:

"There is no difference between Greeks and barbarians; the world is our city."

The most rewarding aspect of the study of Stoicism is the greater understanding it will provide us of the influence which this school of thought has had on the development of so many areas of academic thinking. It will also lead us to the inevitable discovery that we are still influenced, in our daily lives in the 21st Century, by the principles originally laid down by the founders of this school of Stoicism in the early 3rd century BC.

Stoicism is currently experiencing somewhat of a revival in 21st century popular culture, mainly because of its rational and logical approach to the challenges of our time. There has been a proliferation of Stoic references in modern movies and fiction; further increasing its popularity amongst a younger section of society, which would normally not be interested in an apparently pure academic pursuit such as the study of Philosophy.

This book will provide you, the reader, and prospective student of Stoic Philosophy with a broader understanding of the people and forces which combined to create one of the most enduring and influential Philosophies of all time.

CHAPTER 1:

Zeno of Citium and the Origins of Stoic Philosophy

Zeno of Citium was a Greek scholar from the area of Cyprus, and he is credited as being the founding father and most important early teacher of the discipline of Stoicism. He should be distinguished from *Zeno of Elea*, who was a Greek Philosopher from an earlier era.

The way in which *Zeno of Citium* stumbled upon the discipline of Greek Philosophy is a lesson to us all; to the effect that Philosophy can be found on the streets of your city and on the roads you may travel every day of your life.

Zeno was a sailing merchant during his early life, and after a shipwreck he found himself in a bookshop in Athens. There, he started reading a book about the teachings of *Socrates*. He was fascinated by what he read, and made enquiries about a suitable teacher who could instruct him in the teachings of this kind of Philosophy. This is no different, for example, from a visitor to modern day Paris who might discover a book about *yoga* in a Parisian bookshop and may decide, as a consequence, to find out more about the practice of *yoga*.

The librarian of the bookshop where *Zeno* made his enquiries suggested that *Zeno* make contact with a teacher by the name of *Crates of Thebes*, who became *Zeno*'s personal instructor in the art of Greek Philosophical thought.

Zeno also showed an interest in many other schools of Greek thought, including the well-known teachings of *Plato*, and he studied under various other teachers such as *Diodorus Cronus* and *Philo*. This broad approach to study followed by *Zeno* is something which is strongly recommended for anyone embarking on the study of any new discipline; to gain a broad understanding of all the varying points of view prevalent in such new field of study.

Zeno's investigation into all the different schools of Greek thought broadened his understanding, and made it possible for him to develop a Philosophy of his own — with reference to his own personality and personal beliefs.

It is told that *Zeno* was a modest young man, and that his early teacher, *Crates*, was somewhat irritated by this fact. *Crates*, therefore, instructed *Zeno* to carry a pot of lentil soup through a public place and then proceeded to break the pot of soup with his staff, while *Zeno* was carrying it. When he saw the embarrassment on *Zeno*'s face he told *Zeno* not to be so modest and embarrassed, as there was nothing to be ashamed of. It seems that *Zeno* never truly accepted *Crates*' point of view regarding this incident, and it must have had a great influence on the development of *Zeno*'s school of Stoic Philosophy, as he broke away from many of the entrenched teachings of his time to develop a Philosophy that was more in accordance with what *Zeno* considered to be the laws of Nature.

When *Zeno* started teaching his own students, they were originally called the

Zenonians, and they received instruction from *Zeno* in the ancient Greek building known as the *Stoa Poikile*, a popular area for academic discussions which was also frequented by the poets of that period. These poets were originally called the *Stoics*, but as *Zeno's* school of Philosophy became famous, *Zeno's* students took ownership of this name and eventually became known by it.

Zeno was a Phoenician by birth, and one of his endearing character traits was his enduring love and patriotism towards his place of birth. He refused to accept the highly coveted citizenship of Athens when it was offered to him; unwilling to do anything that might be interpreted as a betrayal of his country of birth. This information not only gives us an insight into the personality of *Zeno*, but also into the aspects of his thinking which gave rise to the development of Stoic Philosophy. The life of *Zeno* is both inspirational and motivational, as it shows the transformation achieved from his position of being a lowly merchant, to becoming one of the most influential thinkers of all time, all by the means of incorporating Stoic Philosophy as his way of life in the early Hellenistic Greek era.

There may be varying definitions of Stoic Philosophy available to the prospective scholar, but Stoic thought may very simply be defined as the achievement of happiness by living your life rationally and logically, according to Nature. This fits in with some of the facts we already know about *Zeno*, for example his modesty and his patriotism towards his country.

It should be understood that many of the academics of *Zeno's* day held the belief that nothing really mattered, and that life was a meaningless exercise in futility. They lost their belief in the classical virtues they were brought up with and many

of them indulged in whatever desires they had; forsaking all common virtue and decency to participate in orgies and other ways of licentious living.

If we look at the rise and fall of civilizations, it is easy to see how the ultimate destruction of great empires always closely follow the kind of so-called depravity which is brought about by this rejection of common decent values. For this very reason it is important to understand the impact of *Zeno's* emphasis on the living of a good life, according to the "Divine Laws of Nature", rather than just letting go of all original virtues and common decency.

It should be borne in mind that many principles of Stoic Philosophy are a part of our daily existence, and that we may take them for granted. However, in the days of *Zeno*, the teaching of these self-same principles was considered novel and revolutionary by the Athenians and Greeks scholars.

Let us take a closer look at how *Zeno* and the early Stoic Philosophers defined some important concepts of Stoic Philosophy:

Virtue

Zeno and the early Stoics argued that the only lasting and important thing in life is virtue. The early Stoics had a very specific definition of virtue and some of the most important aspects included in their definition were justice, moderation, courage and a general excellence of character. When we consider the concept of Stoic virtue we should always remember that the Stoics were not merely interested in defining this as an academic concept, but also in the practical application of this concept in order to make a real difference to real life situations and relationships.

The early Stoics further believed that all human beings have the innate ability to recognize virtue, and to distinguish right from wrong. This fundamental belief also creates the concomitant need to accept responsibility for one's actions, and it became the cornerstone of later schools of thought, such as the Roman scholars, who developed the teaching of Natural law from these precepts.

Emotions

It is a popular misconception that a Stoic is someone who tries their best to completely remove emotions from their life and existence; as if emotions are to the Stoic thinker somehow an evil concept. The true motivation behind the Stoic's conscious removal of emotion and passion from the decision making process, however, is not that emotions are altogether undesirable, but merely that rational decision making is preferable to the emotional equivalent.

In this regard, the central Stoics assert that our emotions are ultimately the product of the judgments we make, and that we should not put the cart before the horse by using emotions as a motivation for our judgments.

Stoicism teaches us that we can only experience and apply our emotions correctly when we follow the logical and rational way of making decisions, where after we may allow ourselves to experience the appropriate emotions resulting from those decisions. Thus we see that Stoicism, far from advocating the elimination of all emotion and desire, actually teaches us how to experience more complete and appropriate emotions.

The Stoics acknowledged the existence of emotions as much as they acknowledge any other aspect of human existence; they merely argue that emotions should not be allowed to take center stage, so to speak, at the expense of rationality and logic, in the greater cosmic scheme of the universal experience.

Harmonic Co-Existence

Stoicism also teaches us that we are social beings who need to find a way to live together in harmony if we hope to have a logical existence. *Marcus Aurelius* (*more on him later*) writes in his *Meditations*:

“We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature: and anger or rejection is opposition.”

The idea of the community of mankind has also been expressed in our modern popular culture and entertainment, for example in the famous song *Imagine*, written by John Lennon:

“Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man”

Stoicism also encourages us to live in harmony with nature, and to accept responsibility for the maintenance of nature and our environment. In this regard, a Stoic world view can help us develop and formulate a proper approach to ensure that we leave a rich inheritance for our children and our children’s children.

As noted already, virtue in the Stoic sense is always a concept which has to be applied to everyday life situations, and not merely a state of mind. This dictates a responsible approach to issues such as environmental maintenance.

CHAPTER 2:

The Three Pillars of Stoicism

Propositional Logic

The Stoic approach to logic is known as *Propositional logic* and it was introduced by *Diodorus Cronus*, one of *Zeno*'s early teachers.

Propositional logic, or *logos* as the Stoics referred to it, approaches the discipline of logical thought on the basis of statements or propositions. This distinguishes it from earlier schools of logic, such as Aristotle's term-based logic. *Chrysippus*, a Stoic of the *post-Zeno* era, further developed this system of propositional thought, and introduced a system known as *Syllogistic deductive reasoning*.

What is propositional logic? Let us break down the concept: A proposition, first of all, is a sentence which is either true or false. Take a look at one example of a proposition which you may have seen on an IQ test or a "brain quiz": Is the following proposition true or false?

"This sentence is false."

A quick analysis of the proposition "*This sentence is false.*" leads to the discovery that this proposition is always true, because: If the proposition (sentence) is true, then it is true that "*This sentence is false.*"

If the proposition (sentence) is false, then it is still true that "*This sentence is false.*"

This above kind of *paradox* is something, by the way, that we encounter in much of the Philosophical thought of the early Greek Philosophers, and it has found its way into our modern way of thinking in statements such as: "*Damned if I do,*

damned if I don't".

To return to the precise concept of a proposition, it can more clearly be defined as a sentence which is either true or false. If a proposition is true, then it has a *truth value* of "true" and if it is false it has a *truth value* of "false".

Following these rules, the following sentence is clearly a proposition, as it has a *truth value* of either "true" or "false": "*Grass is green.*"

The following sentence is not a proposition, as it has no inherent *truth value*: "*Please close the door.*"

The concept of propositions can be further developed; for example, an *atomic proposition* is one that does not rely on any other proposition for its truth or falsity. For the purpose of our current study, however, we just need to know the general meaning attached to the concept of a proposition.

Having investigated the nature of a *proposition*, we can now combine it with the second part of the concept of *propositional logic*, and examine what exactly *propositional logic* is.

Propositional logic is the process whereby two propositions are combined to create a third proposition, as follows: Proposition 1: "*Lions are animals*".

Proposition 2: "*All animals need to eat to stay alive*".

If the *truth value* of both Propositions 1 and 2 is “*true*”, we can combine them to form the following Proposition 3, which will also have a *truth value* of “*true*”:
Proposition 3: “*Lions need to eat to stay alive*”.

Propositional logic is the cornerstone of many modern applications, and not merely an archaic tool of Greek Philosophy. The principles of Stoic *logos* are still applied today in disciplines such as computer circuit design.

When it comes to a concept like logic it is easy to make the mistake of thinking in terms of the popular perceptions people may have of this concept, and to mistake the Stoic concept of logic thought with those popular notions. It is, however, important to make a definite distinction between the two. In terms of Stoic thinking, everything in the Universe is ordered by *divine logic*, whereas the popular concept of logic is more closely related to what Stoic thinkers would refer to as “*rational thought*.”

Rationality, or rational thought, is the process in terms whereof the Stoic approaches life and decision-making; free from the constraints of emotion and excessive passion. This approach makes it possible for the Stoic, at once, to take decisions based on the core issues affecting each situation, as well as achieving the most effective projected outcome based on a rational analysis.

The bottom line here is to find that place where you can truly look at a situation, analyze it and then decide on the best course of action to take, based on everything you know, rather than the emotions beating in your chest like drums of irrationality.

Propositional logic is the means by which you will achieve the end of arriving at the most rational and logical solution for every problem and challenge you may face in your everyday life. Although an in-depth study of this school of logic may be too time consuming an endeavor for you to embark upon, it will still be helpful for you to understand the basic construction of these ideas, as such an understanding will improve your insight into many modern propositions and arguments, as well as the mechanics behind the decision-making process of many modern world leaders and others in positions of authority.

To simplify your initial understanding and application of propositional logic, it is suggested that you simply start by looking at the basic propositions, or premises, that commonly form the basis from which some popular arguments are developed. You will discover that a great number of seemingly intricate arguments and ways of thinking are, in reality, based on a series of combinations of very simple and basic propositions. You may also discover how many popular modern arguments and assertions are based on false propositions; rendering the ultimate conclusion drawn from such faulty propositions unreliable.

Finally, you should make it a priority in the formulation of your own arguments to always make sure that you base them on solid and logical propositions, ensuring that your conclusions and ultimate assertions are rock solid and reliable.

Stoic Physics

Stoic Philosophy teaches us that the universe is a material, reasoning substance, known as “God” or simply Nature. This immediately provides further insight into the great divide between Stoicism and other *Hellenistic Philosophies* dating from the early Greek era, which mostly steered clear from the idea of a single deity altogether.

It has to be stressed, however, that Stoic Philosophy does not equate to the belief in a benevolent, Abrahamic-style God, ruling over a universe that he created. Stoic Philosophy, rather, teaches us that the Universe itself is God, and that all events are governed by *fate*, which is seen by the Stoics as the logic of the Universe. This provides motivation for Stoics to live their lives according to *reason*, or the logic of nature.

Stoic Physics, in the premises, is a natural Philosophy in terms whereof an attempt is made to understand and describe the natural processes of divine reason or *logos* which are at work in the Universe.

We have already seen how the Stoics view the universe as God, but this idea was further developed to identify certain aspects of the Divine and material substance of the universe.

Stoicism advises that there is a divine essence, or “pneuma”, which forms the basis of everything which exists. Stoics further identify a divine fire, or “aether”, which is shaped by *pneuma* according to divine reason, the *logos*.

Stoic Philosophy argues that the above processes are responsible for the continuous alternate formation and destruction of the universe, in a never-ending cycle or *palingenesis*. From this thought, the Stoics developed the teaching that the human soul forms an eternal part of the process and existence of the universe. This idea of the ultimate immortality of the soul is, of course, totally reconcilable with most modern religions.

Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics teaches the concept of freedom from "*passion*" by following "*reason*". From this we derive the modern idea of a "stoic" person being someone who is excessively rational, and not given to displaying passionate emotions. This is rather unfortunate, as the original idea of Stoic Philosophy was not to suggest that passion had no place in human experience, but merely that *reason* is the logic of nature, and that we should live according to this *logic*.

Stoic ethics represent a stark departure from the relativistic schools of thought of other Hellenistic Philosophies, which taught a Philosophy where no absolute right or wrong exists, only desirable and undesirable outcomes. This is, of course, in stark contrast with the teachings of Stoic thinkers such as *Marcus Aurelius*, who maintain that there is an eternal and absolute division between the concepts of good and evil; right and wrong.

It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to find any modern version of ethics that does not, at least in part, rely on basic Stoic teachings in its assertions concerning that which is ethically acceptable, versus that which is not. For this reason, it is desirable for us to have at least a basic understanding of the cornerstones of Stoic Philosophy in the area of ethical human behavior.

CHAPTER 3:

Seneca the Younger, Roman Statesman and Dramatist

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as *Seneca the Younger*, was a Roman statesman and dramatist who lived from 4BC – 65AD, and he was the tutor and later advisor to the infamous Emperor *Nero*. This latter fact may lead the uninformed reader to ultimately conclude that Stoic Philosophy may have been complicit in the heinous reign of the notorious dictator *Nero*, but the truth is that *Seneca the younger* was condemned to death for taking part in a conspiracy to assassinate *Nero*. It would seem, therefore, that the principles of Stoic Philosophy did not agree with the horrific deeds of Emperor *Nero*.

Although *Seneca* wrote for a relatively narrow circle of educated persons, and usually addressed his compositions to a particular friend or relative, his letters and essays display a Stoicism which has a greater application to a wider audience.

Seneca was a teacher who was, at once, in agreement with the most important aspects of Stoicism, and also at odds with some other aspects thereof. He was not a Philosopher who fitted in the mold of *Epictetus* (who we will discuss later on), as *Seneca* was a wealthy and influential man, given to occasional statements of pride and arrogance. Even though he occasionally made immodest statements

concerning his own progress in his writings, he was quite capable of humility, and once described of himself as *being* “*a long way from being a tolerable, let alone a perfect human being.*”

Seneca is well-known for the tragedies, or tragic dramas, written by him. It is not clear whether *Seneca* wrote these tragedies for recitation purposes only, or whether he also intended for it to be performed on stage. Despite our lack of factual knowledge in this regard, *Seneca*'s tragedies have been staged very successfully throughout history; also in modern times.

Seneca is probably best known for his tragedy titled *Oedipus*, in which the legendary king of Thebes kills his own father and marries his mother. The impact of this drama has been felt in numerous spheres, including the work of *Sigmund Freud*, who developed a psychoanalytic theory on the basis of the *Oedipus* tragedy. Freud's controversial psychoanalytic theory deals with the desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex, and the simultaneous rivalry with the other parent, similar to the story line in the *Oedipus* tragedy written by *Seneca*.

Seneca's life has been immortalized in the writings of famous authors, such as Dante and Chaucer.

It is difficult to pronounce a final judgment on the life of *Seneca the younger*. The influence of his Stoic writing on multiple intellectual spheres is undoubted. If he may be criticized in any way, it would only be for his involvement with a regime which operated in conflict with the principles of Stoic Philosophy.

Whatever our ultimate view of *Seneca* and his life might be, he will always be loved and remembered for his writing and his striking quotes, the more memorable of which are the following: *“One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood.”*

“Expecting is the greatest impediment to living. In anticipation of tomorrow, it loses today.”

“Life's like a play: it's not the length, but the excellence of the acting that matters.”

“Behold a worthy sight, to which God, turning his attention to his own work, may direct his gaze. Behold an equal thing, worthy of a God, a brave man matched in conflict with evil fortune”

“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.”

“Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.”

CHAPTER 4:

Epictetus and the Discourses

Epictetus was Greek Stoic who lived from AD 55 – AD 135.

Epictetus is a remarkable historical figure and Stoic thinker, whose teachings about life are still valid in the 21st century, in spite of our cultural distance from him.

Epictetus was born a lowly slave in Hierapolis, Phrygia, and lived in Rome until the time of his banishment, when he relocated to north-western Greece for the rest of his life. *Epictetus* was banished together with most of the other great thinkers of his time, when Emperor *Domitian* banished all philosophers from Rome.

Epictetus was one of the Greek Stoics who emphasized that Philosophy is a way of life, and not merely an academic school of thought. He was a quality, all-round academic who made his mark as an author, educator and thinker.

The main academic work of *Epictetus* is [*The Discourses*](#), a series of four books dealing with the Philosophy of *Epictetus*, all of which were written down by *Arrian*, who was a scholar studying under *Epictetus* at the time.

Epictetus taught that *reason* alone is good, and any irrational action is evil. This is classic Stoicism, and *Epictetus* developed this concept by concluding that the most important object of philosophy was to purify the mind from fluctuating emotions and the opinions of pleasure.

Epictetus — as a writer — had a knack for provocation, and he wrote in such a way as to challenge the Philosophical ideas of his time. Living as an emancipated slave and Stoic philosopher in the Roman Empire, *Epictetus* inhabited a world that is radically different from the modern Western world. Yet, in spite of everything that distances him from us, *Epictetus* remains a strikingly relevant voice on modern matters such as human dignity, autonomy, and integrity. The prevalent thought in the *Discourses* is the assertion that nothing lies completely within our power except our judgments, desires and goals. Even the body and its movements are not entirely controlled by us. The lesson we should learn from this, according to *Epictetus*, is that no external forces can constrain or frustrate us unless we choose to allow it.

A Stoic approach, according to *Epictetus*, requires us to accept our circumstances and to do the best we can with the hand that we are dealt. *Epictetus* asserts that the eventual outcome of our lives is not determined by how fortunate we are in the circumstances that we experience, but rather by our own judgments, and the way in which we respond to the circumstances that befall us.

The following passage from the works of *Epictetus* provides a succinct summary of his advice to the student of Stoic Philosophy: “*How long are you going to wait before you demand the best for yourself, and in no instance bypass the discriminations of reason? You have been given the principles that you ought to endorse, and you have endorsed them. What kind of teacher, then, are you still*

waiting for in order to refer your self-improvement to him? You are no longer a boy, but a full-grown man. If you are careless and lazy now, and keep putting things off and always deferring the day after which you will attend to yourself, you will not notice that you are making no progress, but you will live and die as someone quite ordinary.

From now on, then, resolve to live as a grown-up who is making progress, and make whatever you think best a law that you never set aside. And whenever you encounter anything that is difficult or pleasurable, or highly or lowly regarded, remember that the contest is now: you are at the Olympic Games, you cannot wait any longer, and that your progress is wrecked or preserved by a single day and a single event. That is how Socrates fulfilled himself by attending to nothing except reason in everything he encountered. And you, although you are not yet a Socrates, should live as someone who at least wants to be a Socrates.”

The cultural and historical significance of the writings of *Epictetus* are clear and significant. He was revered by many of his contemporaries, including the Emperor *Marcus Aurelius*. Early Christian writers also made approving mention of *Epictetus*, and the translations of his works became very popular during the 17th and 18th centuries.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, however, *Epictetus* and his teachings were largely misunderstood, and considered by many to have become irrelevant. During this period, it was believed that his teachings only had a broad popular appeal, lacking in depth and creativity. Since the 1970's, however, *Epictetus* has started regaining some of his former status as a powerful thinker on ethics and education, in particular.

The contribution *Epictetus* made to theology and Christianity are unquestionable, as his main message resonates strongly with the teachings of Christianity. There are notable parallels to be drawn between some of his teachings and the content of the biblical New Testament. It is therefore not surprising that many Christian scholars quote his work with approval, and it is possible to interpret many of his Philosophies along Christian theological lines.

It is notable how his Stoic approach enabled *Epictetus* — even as a slave with little control over his externals — to preserve his internal freedom and moral integrity to such extent that he became one of the founders of a classical Philosophy that still pervades our modern way of thinking today. *Epictetus* achieved a focus on the choice to control those aspects of his existence which were within his reach; not obsessively attempting to choose and influence the outcome.

This Stoic approach has been incorporated in a popular prayer of our time, which goes as follows: “*God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.*”

Epictetus left us with a body of work which is still very relevant and valuable in the 21st century, and we may also remember him for some of his striking quotes: “*Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them.*”

“*Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.*”

“Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it.”

“Don't just say you have read books. Show that, through them, you have learned to think better, to be a more discriminating and reflective person. Books are the training weights of the mind. They are very helpful, but it would be a bad mistake to suppose that one has made progress simply by having internalized their contents.”

“If anyone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make excuses about what is said of you but answer, "He was ignorant of my other faults, else he would not have mentioned these alone.”

“There is only one way to happiness, and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power or our will.”

“If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid.”

“First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.”

CHAPTER 5:

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor from 121 AD - 180 AD, is arguably the most famous Stoic of all time.

Marcus Aurelius was the last of the so-called “Five Good Emperors”, and his life story has been told in numerous historic writings and even movies of our time. He is best known, as a philosopher, for the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, which is the most important historic source available to us today concerning the works and teachings of the early Stoic Philosophers.

Marcus Aurelius was a dedicated student during his early life; studying and mastering the disciplines of Latin and Greek. He was chosen by Emperor Hadrian to be his successor, and his “*Aurelius*’ reign” was marked by the many successful wars fought by him. His two decades as Emperor were marked by continual conflict in the form of a series of invasions from German tribes, as well as conflicts with the Parthian Empire in the East.

The most famous portrayal of *Marcus Aurelius* is undoubtedly in the blockbuster movie *Gladiator*, where he is portrayed as a good emperor of Rome who is ultimately murdered by his evil son. The portrayal of *Marcus Aurelius* as a good Emperor is most likely factually correct, but the truth about his death is that he died of smallpox; not at the hands of his son as depicted in the movie *Gladiator*.

Even though he was not murdered, *Marcus Aurelius* did have to deal with betrayal during his reign, as there was an internal revolt in his government, led by *Avidius Cassius*. This insurrection, however, failed to gain any real momentum, and was ultimately swiftly subdued.

Marcus Aurelius' Meditations is divided into 12 books, each book representing teachings from specific periods of his life. It is believed that *Marcus Aurelius* wrote these books only for his own benefit, yet it has become a staple of all scholars of Stoic Philosophy. The writing style prevalent in the *Meditations* is simple and conversational, making it easily accessible to the new student.

Marcus Aurelius repeatedly makes the argument in his *Meditations* that it is essential to analyze your own actions and judgments in order to find your logical and rational place in the universe. Another theme we encounter in the *Meditations* is a classical Stoic one, namely that everything comes from nature, and everything shall return to nature in due course.

Marcus Aurelius compared the new-born soul to a sheet of paper ready to be written upon. This clear sheet of paper is ultimately filled in as the senses write their impressions, fantasies and experiences on it to complete the ultimate personality and character of each person.

Marcus Aurelius argues that the highest good is to live a virtuous life, free from evil and vice as far as possible, and that — in living such a life — we may find true fulfillment and make a lasting contribution to the universe. When it comes to ethics, *Marcus Aurelius* takes an absolutist approach, teaching that there are no degrees of good and evil, but rather that these two are absolute and eternal

opposites. In this assertion, he follows a teaching which is in accordance with Christianity and many other religions.

In further agreement with the teachings of Christianity, *Marcus Aurelius* taught that every Stoic aspired to the ideal of being a “Wise Man” as much as every Christian strives to be a likeness of Christ.

Some memorable quotes from the works of Marcus Aurelius are the following:

“Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.”

“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature.”

“I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinions of himself than on the opinions of others.”

“We ought to do good to others as simply as a horse runs, or a bee makes honey, or a vine bears grapes season after season without thinking of the grapes it has borne.”

“A noble man compares and estimates himself by an idea which is higher than himself; and a mean man, by one lower than himself. The one produces aspiration; the other ambition, which is the way in which a vulgar man aspires.”

“Let not your mind run on what you lack, as much as on what you have already.”

“Because your own strength is unequal to the task, do not assume that it is beyond the powers of man; but if anything is within the powers and province of man, believe that it is within your own compass also.”

“Nothing has such power to broaden the mind as the ability to investigate systematically and truly all that comes under thy observation in life.”

“Confine yourself to the present.”

“The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing.”

CHAPTER 6:

Stoicism's Influence On Roman Life and Thought

As seen in previous chapters, Stoicism had a strong influence on Roman thought and Philosophy, bearing in mind the impact of Statesmen and writers such as *Seneca the younger* and *Marcus Aurelius*.

It would be accurate to state that Stoicism was the single most important Philosophy in Rome, with the concept of Stoic *logos* becoming the cornerstone of Roman Philosophy. The Romans developed this idea to ultimately teach that the universe is logically ordered by God and that this rational order is the *logos* or "meaning" of the universe. Herein lies a departure from original Stoic Philosophy, which taught that the universe itself is God.

The Romans believed that God was using the expanding Roman Empire to implement law and order across the known world, and therefore each Roman citizen owed a duty to God and the Roman Empire. This duty of patriotism reminds us of *Zeno of Citium*, who refused Athenian citizenship as a gesture of patriotism towards his own motherland. The Romans saw their duty towards the state as a religious duty, and believed that the respect shown to Roman authorities is also a respect shown to God and His *logos*.

We still see this Stoic approach today in what is often described as a “Duty towards God and Country.” The line of Stoic Philosophy is clearly visible, as it carries Philosophical thought from the early Hellenistic Greek Philosophers, such as *Zeno*, through to the Roman Empire and its emperors, for example *Marcus Aurelius*, right up to modern day Europe and the rest of the modern civilized world.

We may pause here for a second to consider the striking impact that Stoicism as a Philosophical teaching had on Kings and rulers, when most of the teachings of this school of thought emanated from the minds of poor men like *Zeno* and *Epictetus*, who never lived in a palace or even had any measure of material wealth in their own lives. The historic value of Stoicism is unquestionable, as it clearly held a broad appeal — not only to the population of early Greece, but also to Kings and sages during the time of the Roman Emperors, right through to the Empires and governments of the 21st century.

It should be borne in mind that the impact of Stoicism on Roman thought is further significant when we take into account that later civilizations relied heavily on Roman teachings. In this regard, we may consider the development of many modern languages from Latin, as well as the impact of Roman Law on so many modern legal systems.

If any additional motivation is required to inspire a more energetic study of Stoicism, it may be considered how the Stoic teachings of the slave *Epictetus* are so powerful that it eventually influenced the rise and fall of Kings and Empires.

CHAPTER 7:

Stoicism and Christianity

At the outset it will be clear that Stoicism, in the purest original form taught by *Zeno* and other Hellenistic Philosophers, is not fully compatible with Christianity. The original Stoic idea that the Universe is God is not reconcilable with the Christian belief, where it is claimed that a benevolent God who created the Universe remains in control thereof as a Divine Ruler.

We have to credit Stoicism, however, as being the first school of thought — before the life and times of Jesus Christ — which moved away from the idea that nothing really matters — a fatalistic belief that was prevalent before the advent of Stoic thought. The early Stoics also moved away from the idea of several different gods towards *monotheism*, or the belief in a single deity, which is clearly an aspect of agreement with Christianity.

Apart from the above points of similarity between early Stoicism and Christianity, there are schools of later Stoic Philosophy that are, in their entirety, clearly fully compatible with Christianity — such as the Philosophy of the Roman Stoics who believed that each Roman had a “duty towards God and Country.”

We see a further area of agreement between Stoicism and Christianity in the way both demand from us that we serve the Will of God, rather than blindly

following our own selfish desires. Even though the Roman Stoics do not always clearly identify the god that they serve, their aspiration to serve the Will of a power higher than themselves is something which is also found in Christianity. Some Philosophic scholars might argue that Christianity borrowed some of its principles from Stoic thought, but Christian scholars will counter this argument by pointing to the Bible as the source of all Christian faith.

It would be most accurate to conclude that Stoic Philosophy developed to a place where it became compatible with classic Christianity. In the final analysis, however, important differences remain between Stoic philosophy and Christian faith.

CHAPTER 8:

Stoic Philosophy Today

As we have gone over in previous chapters, Stoic Philosophy has found a place in our modern way of thinking, not only in books and movies, but also in the expression of a “duty towards God and Country.”

If we examine the spheres of actual influence of Stoicism on our modern civilization more closely, we can see it as a significant force in modern Politics as well.

Bill Clinton, on occasion, described Barack Obama as “*a man cool on the outside, but who burns for America on the inside.*” Whether you believe this notion to be correct or not, this is a classical description of the Stoic thinker, who removes emotion and passion from his rational approach to logical thought. It also reminds us of the Roman Stoics of classical times, such as *Marcus Aurelius*, who wrote that dispassionate consideration is the best approach to the challenges of life and government. While many modern politicians obviously struggle to reach this ideal, it is interesting that this particular image of the perfect leader exists in the first place, in the minds of politicians and the public alike.

In regards to the issue of today’s ongoing process of globalization, we also see the influence of Roman Stoicism and its desire to bring law and order to the rest of the world. This is something which quickly strikes a chord with the approach

we have seen from the USA in modern times, where it has sought to “free” certain countries in the Middle East from “dictatorships.”

It would be fair to suggest that a Stoic approach to leadership in the 21st century is preferable to a more emotional approach, especially when we consider the unlikely-but-possible threat of a Nuclear Third World War. Stoicism teaches us that we have to control our emotions and inner passions first, before we are qualified to exert an influence on the world around us. Stoicism has had a significant impact on our modern age of enlightenment, and it is important to note — by way of example — that the first declaration of human rights was written by authors who were strongly influenced by Stoicism.

From the early days of emperor *Marcus Aurelius*, world leaders have found that a Stoic attitude is always the safest bet when it comes to matters of State, as this assures the least degree of embarrassment in the event of failure, whilst assuring the absence of great arrogance in the event of success. These considerations have hugely contributed to the popularity of a Stoic approach in the decisions and actions of modern world leaders.

Apart from its influence on modern politics, Stoicism has also found its way into modern entertainment. A good example of this is the dispassionate and overly logical character of “Spock” of the incredibly popular “Star Trek” series, which is explicitly based on Stoicism. Another popular example is the movie *Gladiator* which depicts — as mentioned previously — the life and times of the famous Stoic Emperor *Marcus Aurelius*.

It would be fair to say that the Philosophy is experiencing a modern day revival,

as its application and value in real life situations becomes more apparent and popular. In our modern society where everything seems rushed and pressurized, it is clear how the Stoic approach to rational and level-headed thinking may prove a valuable asset. There has been a proliferation of online Stoic websites, and Stoicism has clearly been adopted as one of the top Philosophies of choice in 21st century pop culture.

This widespread popular appeal of Stoicism today is in line with the original thinking of the founders of this Hellenistic school of thought, as it was always intended to be a way of life, and not merely an academic exercise. *Zeno of Citium*, as previously mentioned, was one of the major proponents of the application of Stoic Philosophy to everyday situations. *Marcus Aurelius' Meditations* is another recorded example of how an early Stoic thinker applied the Philosophy to all spheres of his life.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Stoic thought is one of the pillars of our modern society, as it has become the way of thought for Heads of State as well as writers of Hollywood screenplays and popular fiction. It is almost peremptory, for anyone who seriously endeavors to understand the dynamics of the 21st century, to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of Stoic Philosophy and thought. Without such basic understanding, you may find yourself perplexed at the decision-making process of those in authority, and you may end up experiencing emotions of trepidation and anxiety, rather than an insight into daily events and decisions taken on the global stage.

When you have completed your initial study of Stoic Philosophy, you may feel satisfied with the basic understanding and insight it has provided, or you may

wish to further your studies of this school of thought. There are many avenues available for this exercise, as nearly all Colleges and Universities offer courses in the study of Stoic Philosophy. If this option is too expensive or unrealistic, you may start investigating the possibility of finding good books to read on the subject. Remember that this is how the founder of Stoic thought, *Zeno*, first formed an interest in the general study of Philosophy.

Always remember, that it is better to form a general understanding of Stoic principles and then apply at least a few of these in practice, than to merely digest as much as possible on the subject without ever assimilating these principles into your daily life.

You should try to develop the habit of looking at the modern world through the educated eyes of the Stoic sage; forming an insight into the hidden reasons for the dynamics at work in the world, and cultivating an appreciation for the logical and rational mechanics of the cosmic universe which is home to us all.

CHAPTER 9:

Applying Stoic Principles to Your Everyday Life

Discomfort

Many disciplines teach the training of oneself through discomfort. This is nothing new, for example, to the sphere of the military. Self-denial is a means to the end of achieving mastery over the dictates of pleasure and passion, in order to reach a level of concentration and logic which becomes a valuable asset in decision-making in every sphere of human existence.

There is a misconception held by some that Stoics have no interest in worldly goods and pleasures. This is not correct, as previously stated. The acceptance of a period of discomfort, similarly, is not an absolute end in itself for Stoic thinkers, but rather a means to the end of training in order to pursue spiritual progress and purification. Stoicism teaches the occasional, deliberate use of temporary discomfort in order to achieve mastery over the eternal appetite for material goods and sensual pleasures.

If this exercise of self-deprivation is followed correctly, it will leave you with an increased sense of appreciation for what you already have. In the *Discourses*, it is a main aspect of *Epictetus*' teaching, based largely on his own experiences of hardship as a slave, to use adversity as a form of active training to build character.

Let us now take a closer look at some specific examples of Stoic exercise.

Morning Reflection

This exercise is something which is common amongst people of faith, and there is no reason why a Stoic approach should not be incorporated with such morning reflection. Stoic thought is not intended, in this instance, to replace the specific religion that forms the vehicle of morning reflection, but rather as a means of enabling a purer reflection on the issues of faith which may affect the rest of your day. This process of reflection may commence after clearing the mind of unnecessary emotion and distracting passions.

Every morning, sit in quiet reflection for about 5-10 minutes, picking out for specific reflection key events or specific challenges that might arise during your day.

During your time of reflection, you should try to achieve a “view from above” in order to form an insight of how insignificant your existence and daily challenges are in the greater cosmic scheme of things, as this will have the effect of minimizing the stress that you experience during your day in facing your challenges.

Morning reflection should also be an exercise of planning on how to include more virtues and fewer vices in the day to come. Even if this planning effects the inclusion of only one additional virtue during the rest of your day, the exercise would have been fruitful enough to make it worth repeating.

You may also find value in the exercise of “stripping” away the layers of each thought and decision that you may encounter during your day. Every situation

has many layers, just like an onion has, and it is helpful to identify these layers before making decisions based on the superficial appearance of the situation. Each layer of the specific situation is influenced by the unique set of facts involved and the personal prejudice or preference which you bring into the situation. By stripping away the superficial layers, it is often possible to make far more effective decisions based on the core issues involved.

During your morning reflection, you may ask yourself — for example — what might be achieved by spending time and energy on a certain problem which you know you will have to face during your day? Often the answer to this question is “Nothing.” If there is no prospect of any value arising from solving the problem, it might be better just to ignore it altogether and not waste time and energy on the problem. It may also be helpful to consider whether you have the qualities that are required to address a certain problem. If you don’t, it might be better to leave the solution to such problem to someone else who is better qualified to deal with it.

Finally, remember to incorporate in the planning of your day the teachings of *Epictetus*, to the effect that you should only focus on the choices within our reach, and not obsessively attempt to force one particular outcome of your efforts.

Philosophical Journal

Many people keep a journal, or diary, as a means of recording things that happen to them on a daily basis. Whilst this is an interesting way of keeping track of personal events, it doesn't really lend itself to self-improvement as it is merely an exercise aimed at recording personal history. If we think about the way in which *Marcus Aurelius* kept track of his progress by way of his journal — known today as the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* — we see that he had a far more effective way of gaining insight from daily events in his life. *Marcus Aurelius* not only recorded these daily events, but also analyzed them to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanics and dynamics at work in his life. This latter method of recording and analysis is a practice of Stoicism in the purest sense.

It is important to review, on a regular basis, the events and insights recorded in your personal Stoic journal, to ensure your linear and consistent development according to the personal insights gained by this exercise.

The keeping of a Philosophical journal need not be a new project altogether. It can also simply be the adaptation of your existing daily entries in your diary, with the added component of analyzing the data you have recorded in this way. Instead of merely writing down the particulars of something like the purchase of a new suit, you may analyze this event by writing a comment underneath the specific entry in your diary to state — for example — how you focused on purchasing a suit which would be durable and appropriate for your working environment, rather than choosing a flashy outfit to compensate for possible feelings of inferiority.

Take An Interest In Charity

This is a virtue espoused by most religions, and it is also part of the Stoic school of thought, as it removes the focus from selfish passions and emotions.

Remember that showing an interest in the welfare of others, or Philanthropy as this exercise is also known, does not necessarily require great sums of money. Philanthropy can be achieved through simple means, such as donating superfluous food and clothing to a homeless shelter, or even just offering to help an old lady across the road.

This principle is closely related to the idea of Christian charity, and is something which not only proves to be of value to those in need, but also cultivates a selfless approach and leads to the elimination of selfish desires and emotions.

Self-Retreat

We have often heard the saying: *“When you try to run away from your troubles you end up running towards them”*. For this reason, it is never a good idea to attempt geographical relocation as a means of solving a problem. The Stoic teaching of self-retreat is a far more effective solution. The problem with running away from challenges is that you always take yourself with you, whilst self-retreat is the exercise which forces you to rather examine your own motives and character.

A quote by *Marcus Aurelius* in this regard sheds some valuable insight on the precise scope of the problem:

“People seek retreats for themselves in the countryside by the seashore, in the hills, and you too have made it your habit to long for that above all else. But this is altogether unphilosophical, when it is possible for you to retreat into yourself whenever you please; for nowhere can one retreat into greater peace or freedom from care than within one’s own soul, especially when a person has such things within him that he merely has to look at them to recover from that moment perfect ease of mind (and by ease of mind I mean nothing other than having one’s mind in good order). So constantly grant yourself this retreat and so renew yourself; but keep within you concise and basic precepts that will be enough, at first encounter, to cleanse you from all distress, and to send you back without discontent to the life to which you will return”

In order to develop a full insight into the nature of yourself, an exercise of introspection and self-retreat is necessary to identify those aspects of your

personality and character which need to be improved or corrected. When these adjustments are made, it will no longer be necessary to run away from challenges brought about by character defects, as most of these challenges will no longer cross your path after you have removed the flaws in yourself that continually gives rise to them in the first place.

Reflection at the End of the Day

This is closely related to another aspect of Stoic exercise which we have already looked at, namely the reflection on events recorded in the daily Philosophical journal.

End of day reflection, however, is much broader than the mere consideration of the events written down in such journal, as it also requires reflection upon these events and the application of a Stoic interpretation to these events. Often you may discover that a simple daily event had a much deeper meaning and impact than you first realized, when you take the time to reflect upon it at the end of the day.

It will also be helpful to ascertain whether the day has been spent in a productive and meaningful fashion, when reflective consideration is given to whether you succeeded in exercising virtue and removing vice during your day.

Consider how anything that you did badly or neglected during the day can be done differently in the future, and remember to also praise yourself appropriately for anything you did well during the day.

Self-Control

This exercise, once again, is closely related to practices we encounter in religion, such as fasting.

By means of the exercise — or training — of self-control, we may establish a greater command over our senses and emotions, for example by refraining from eating for a day or taking a long walk without shoes. This helps us to get out of our comfort zone and to, once more, appreciate the comforts and blessings that we often take for granted.

There is significant interest in our modern society in the concept of self-control, as the proper exercise thereof has been shown to be a great booster of productivity and effective work performance. A large body of research has been directed in recent years to the end of cultivating more self-control and willpower.

A healthy regimen of physical exercise is an activity which not only strengthens the body, but also increases self-control, and therefore it should be part of the routine of every student of Stoicism. Here, once again, we move away from the idea that Stoicism is a Philosophy reserved for a group of academics, contemplating the meaning of life in some Ivory Tower of knowledge. Stoicism is a way of life, and if we apply its teachings correctly it will contribute to a greater degree of health and fulfillment in all spheres of our human experience.

Analyze Your Emotions

Stoicism teaches us that outside forces do not ultimately determine our emotions, but rather that our emotions are created by our reaction to outside forces. Remember that you are the blank document or sheet of paper that *Marcus Aurelius* wrote about. It is up to you to fill in the blank space by choosing your reactions and the extent of your own personal growth. It is up to you to make sure that the entries on your blank sheet are as virtuous and meaningful as possible.

Learn to accept responsibility for your emotions and not to lay blame at the door of your circumstances, and remember to look within yourself for inspiration when you run into an obstacle. Finally, you should always analyze the effectiveness of your response to the problems that you face during your day.

In taking the time to analyze your emotions, you should concentrate on the origin of your emotions and determine whether you allow them to dictate your decisions on a daily basis, or whether your emotions are a natural and appropriate result of the proper implementation of logical and rational decisions in your life.

It is important to be realistic and honest in analyzing your emotions, as it will be an exercise in futility to assign false motives for the way you feel and act in certain situations; making it impossible for you to address the areas of improvement in this regard. Keep the analysis of your own emotions and motivations private, as it becomes a matter of variable subjective opinion if you ask a friend or relative to help you complete this important assessment. After all

is said and done, you have to take responsibility for your own analysis and the areas for improvement identified by your self-assessment.

It is also up to you to come up with practical steps to implement a plan of action for the improvements required. You should also make sure that you monitor your progress in and you may even decide to keep a separate journal in this regard, to record the areas where you have succeeded in making significant progress, and to indicate those areas where you can become more rational and logical in your approach.

Handle Failure Correctly

In this regard it may be helpful to consider the following quote of *Marcus Aurelius* from his *Meditations*:

“Does what’s happened keep you from acting with justice, generosity, self-control, sanity, prudence, honesty, humility, straightforwardness, and all other qualities that allow a person’s nature to fulfill itself? So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune.”

It is a great challenge to face criticism after spending a lot of effort and energy on a project. The most important thing to remember in such circumstances is to remain in control of your emotions, and to face criticism in the most rational and logical way possible, free from personal passion. Even if this approach does not eliminate the criticism, it will ensure that you do not lose additional time in the undue internalization of criticism. This is the best way to bounce back, and make sure that you get started on your next successful project as soon as possible.

It is also good to bear in mind that even unfair criticism sometimes holds a kernel of truth, and that you may ultimately benefit and learn from it, provided you remain logical and rational in your self-assessment.

Most of all, it is important to never allow failure or criticism to rob you of your motivation and inspiration, as these qualities are the driving force behind your ultimate success and therefore should never be subject to someone else’s praise or approval.

Apply Your Knowledge

The Stoic approach to the application of knowledge is similar to the Christian teaching to the effect that “*Faith without works is dead.*” Remember that merely reading a good book will not change your life for the better, unless you also apply its principles to your every-day routines. Reading may prepare your mind — it might even help you avoid making some foolish mistakes — but in the end it is the action you take, based on the knowledge you have gained, which will ultimately ensure your success.

This admonition to apply the knowledge you have gained through reading calls to mind the teachings of *Epictetus*, to the effect that the mere reading of a book is utterly useless unless applied to the aspects of one’s daily existence. Learn to be diligent in applying Stoic principles in the same way that the other actors in Nature are diligent in applying skills and knowledge. The following quote from the *Meditations* of *Marcus Aurelius* is relevant in this context:

“Do you have less respect for your own nature than the engraver does for engraving, the dancer for dance, the miser for money or the social climber for status? When they’re really possessed by what they do, they’d rather stop eating and sleeping than give up practicing their arts.”

Practice Honesty in Self-Assessment

It is important to maintain a balanced approach when doing self-assessment. Your approach should not be overly critical, yet not too lenient either. When you have identified an area where you can improve, you should not merely intellectually acknowledge the need for change, but you should also plan the steps you are going to take to implement such changes in your life.

Some people are far too self-deprecating in the assessment of their weaknesses and failures, whilst others concentrate way too much on their own strengths. It is only by taking an honest look at both those areas that you will be able to achieve a linear progress in the perfection of your character, according to Stoic principles.

Honesty in self-assessment is one of the most important tools available to us to facilitate change and improvement of our character, as we are privy to the most accurate information about ourselves. This enables us to be the best judge of our own character. Too often we live our lives based on the expectations our parents had for us as we grew up; or else we hold on to some criticism someone might have expressed towards us in a fleeting moment.

These considerations should always take a back seat to the firsthand knowledge we have of ourselves, and the honest self-assessment we do based on such self-knowledge. The quality of knowledge which we have of our own character and motivations will improve as we become more skilled in analyzing our actions. This will further enable us to identify the influences which constitute the most important driving forces in our decision making process.

Eliminate Procrastination

It is easy to follow all of the practical steps outlined in this book and to still fail, simply because you postpone the implementation of the changes you have decided to make in your life, based off your studies and self-analysis. Make sure you don't fall at the very last hurdle by procrastinating. The best way to prevent this is to start off with one or two simple changes to your daily routine, perhaps just by practicing a friendlier attitude towards a difficult co-worker, or by making a conscious effort to remove exaggerated emotions from your decision-making at work.

Live in the Present

It is important to remove from your day the continual projection towards the future, in expectation of the better life which might be yours when things have improved in your favor. Reflect upon the way *Epictetus* found fulfillment and meaning in his life, when he was forced to exist as a lowly slave who could not even decide the shape of his daily routine. Consider also the following quote from *Seneca the younger*:

“Nothing, to my way of thinking, is a better proof of a well ordered mind than a man’s ability to stop just where he is and pass some time in his own company.”

We live in an age of distractions, but instead of seeing this as a negative, try to use it as an inspiration to set aside time for the more meaningful endeavors of reflection and analysis during your busy day.

It might surprise you how often you spend hours out of the present by thinking and fantasizing about a future trip, vacation or experience that you are looking forward to. There is nothing wrong with future projections, as long as they remain rooted in the present. It will eventually become a habit for you to stay more in the present time, and you will immediately notice the positive impact that this will have on your general level of productivity.

Pursue Happiness

The “pursuit of happiness” is as popular today as it was in the times of *Zeno* and *Epictetus*. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" is a well-known phrase in the *United States Declaration of Independence*, proving the importance of this concept, not only in our popular culture, but also in our concept of inalienable human rights.

The heading of this exercise might, however, be misleading, as the Stoic concept of “happiness” is not exactly the same as the modern popular concept thereof. The Stoic definition of happiness can be found in the teachings of *Zeno* and *Epictetus*, where it is stated that the ultimate goal of Stoic Philosophy is the attainment of an existence in tune with the divine rationality and logic of the Universe, free from the constraints of excessive emotion and passion.

Some modern concepts of happiness are closely linked to the experience of certain emotions and sensual pleasures, whilst happiness in the Stoic philosophical sense is much more than this. The true Stoic believes that happiness exists in finding your logical place in the universe, and by existing in harmony with others in the grand cosmic scheme of things. For this reason, the Stoic chooses to retain control of his own destiny, including his happiness, and not to hand it over to matters beyond his control. This is the approach which you should strive towards in your pursuit of happiness, as it will have the effect of making you the master of your own destiny.

Just like the rest of the above exercises which are suggested for the new student of Stoicism, the pursuit of happiness should be planned and reflected upon on a

daily basis, to ensure that continuous progress is made in this area. You will know that you are achieving the kind of happiness that Stoics have pursued through the ages when you reach equilibrium with your circumstances, as well as a contentment born from a generosity towards your fellow beings and a gratitude for your blessings.

Whilst it may seem like an exaggerated academic approach to study and analyze something as seemingly simple as happiness, you may just ask yourself how many people you meet on a daily basis are happy in any sense of the word. You will probably conclude that this number is less than 10%, which goes to show that happiness is not something which is achieved automatically. It is only when you set defined goals, based upon rational and logical precepts, that you will start moving towards true Stoic happiness.

Once again, the kind of happiness that a great section of modern society chases after is, at best, fleeing and — very often — totally unattainable. Some will state that happiness can only be achieved by the attainment of “true love” or “eternal bliss” and it should be readily apparent — even to the untrained student — that these ideals are not only unreasonable and irrational, but also born from fantasy rather than common human experience.

Make the pursuit of happiness as much an exercise of Stoic thought as a reward in itself for the attainment of your goals. It is important to always maintain a balanced approach in this regard, as it is easy to lay too much stress on the pursuit of happiness, at the expense of other important aspects of Stoic philosophy. You may find that a blind chase after happiness alone, at the expense of concepts such as self-control and goodwill towards others, may have the exact opposite effect than the one intended, namely that it will leave you

feeling discontent and unsatisfied, rather than deliriously happy.

Final Thoughts On Stoic Exercises

The exercises outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list, and you may even come up with some of your own. The important aspect to note is that you will only have success in implementing Stoic principles in your daily routine if you start with practical steps and maintain them thereafter. It will be fruitless to embark on this journey if you ultimately lose inspiration and abandon the initial steps you have taken to improve yourself and your life by way of Stoic exercise and principles.

Your aim should be to make these exercises and principles a way of life, and to implement them the same way you have implemented the knowledge you gained by studying at college or university, or by qualifying yourself through some other means for your chosen career.

CONCLUSION

This book has laid out the basic foundation of Stoic Philosophy and its daily application in the 21st century. It is by no means a complete summary of all the principles and teachings of this popular Philosophy, and you, the reader, may find additional reward in further, more in-depth studies of this school of thought. It is not necessary to change your personal religion or inner convictions to apply Stoic principles to your daily life. As stated before, you may choose your own pace in making Stoic principles a part of your being. It might be good to start off by simply taking time to analyze the entries in your journal, or to briefly reflect on how you may perform the daily tasks of your chosen profession with a more rational and logical approach.

There are many new Stoic concepts and exercises which you may want to assimilate, all at once. Try not to make the mistake of trying to “build Rome in one day”, by attempting the realization of all aspects of Stoic Philosophy immediately, all at the same time. Choose the areas where you see the most room for improvement in your way of thinking, and start off by keeping a journal of the steps you plan, and ultimately take to improve in those areas. Before moving on to a new area, make sure that you have mastered the first areas of improvement, and do not neglect to persevere with your exercises in every sphere of Stoic thinking which you have chosen to make a permanent part of your daily experience.

Whatever part of the teachings and exercises of Stoic thought you may choose to apply, it is guaranteed to improve your ability to make important decisions in a

logical and rational way, rather than basing these decisions in your life on the passions and emotions stirred up by the situation.

A new day dawns, and with it comes new opportunities to further explore and develop the self.