

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

EMBRACING STOICISM IN MODERN TIMES

Why Stoicism Is Relevant Today

Your Actionable Guide To A Calmer Mind — Chapter One. About a 13-minute read.

While I was writing this book, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was well into its Delta variant phase.

People liberated from masks and lockdowns found themselves once again bound to comply with the renewed mandates. Children ready and eager to attend face-to-face classes were again forced back into online schooling. Restaurants, bars, and small businesses just getting back on their feet were again required to shut down. Every move made towards normalcy has been withdrawn. We found ourselves back to square one.

Faced with the protracted onslaught of this virus that, it seemed, would not go away for the next few years, I felt compelled to take a look at the finished chapters. The book's title, "Embracing Stoicism in Modern Times," necessitated a brutally honest assessment about what had been written so far and whether the teachings of Stoicism were still applicable, given the "new normal." Is it possible that "modern times" have changed so much in the past year to render Stoic principles no longer relevant? After all, there has never been a time when the whole world was locked down, masked, socially distanced, home-bound. Maybe the paradigm shift introduced by the pandemic was so massive that we have to rethink our entire approach to life.

After a careful reconsideration of Stoicism in modern times, I have concluded that while "modern times" may have changed, Stoicism's relevance to it remains intact. The reason is

that while our external environment constantly changes in uncertain ways, Stoicism focuses our attention on what is internal to us, which is constant and always certain.

It is remarkable how technology and commerce have made our vast world so much more compact that we share many similarities wherever we may live. Whether living in the large metropolises or quiet countryside, we may be working at the same jobs or conversing on the same topics electronically. We are limited by the same constraints and subjected to the same pressures that impact our private lives. We aspire to lead productive lives and attain a level of comfort and prosperity earned by our labor. But likewise, we want a balanced life that provides sufficient opportunity to enjoy our family, friends, and leisure activities.

These aspirations are laudable and intrinsic to our humanity. However, striking a perfect balance between our conflicting role expectations is next to impossible in modern life. To excel at one almost precludes any satisfactory fulfillment of the other. A successful executive of a multinational company will seldom have time for fatherly duties. A mother who devotes her time and attention to solicitously raising her children through their formative years to young adulthood will almost certainly forego any prospects of a successful professional career. The inner conflict between these two innate but diverging pursuits is the cause of dissatisfaction and regret, whichever side we choose.

If we devote ourselves to accomplishing one role to exclude our other potential roles, then imagine the utter frustration at not fulfilling a personal dream or ambition. What most of us do is compromise, divide our time between roles, or combine them as far as they are compatible. And, still, regret is bound to happen to some degree because we only live once, and there is no reset button to go back and relive what has already transpired.

Throughout life, problems such as these jeopardize our search for happiness. Confronting them requires adopting a philosophy according to which we could live a righteous and fulfilling life. This book aims to provide you with insights that will help you lead a balanced, virtuous, and happy life. Stoicism is an outlook on life that is guided by logic and reasoning. It sheds light on problematic situations that we often find ourselves in, which could be peacefully resolved if properly thought through and acted upon.

You may well be familiar with the fundamentals of Stoicism, or you may have an idea about how this philosophy has helped others with whom you are acquainted, which explains why you were drawn to select this book. But your interest in Stoicism's relevance to modern life is indicative of a deeper interest in knowing how this philosophy can help you live better. This book was written with you in mind, a reader who desires to practice Stoicism as a lifestyle rather than merely become acquainted with it in theory.

The key takeaways in this book include three elements: the Stoic perspective and its reasoned approach, the methods and techniques by which this approach is actualized, and the life-long advantages you may realize by adopting these practices. You may naturally doubt whether Stoicism is the answer to your search for self-improvement; after all, it has its roots in principles that were first developed in ancient times. How could people then have any concept of the problems we encounter in the 21st century? And even if it was relevant today, could people like us, with no formal background in philosophy, find concrete meaning and purpose in life through this philosophy?

I have discovered the benefits of adopting the Stoic outlook in my daily life not from a formal study of Stoicism but from the search for a practical lifestyle that ensures what we all seek to attain — a more tranquil and meaningful existence, whatever the conditions in the social milieu, whether in normal times, or times of crisis and disaster, or even during a pandemic. Like you, I blend a career and family life, seeking fulfillment in both. I contend with constraints that limit all human beings and confront problems that face us all. And just as I have followed others before me who have shown me the way, I also invite you to take a leap of faith with me in discovering for yourself what benefits Stoicism holds for you.

Are you ready to take this journey with me? If the answer is yes, then turn the page, and let's begin.

— Dianna Gene P. Aquino

Why Stoicism Is Relevant Today

Jimmy is a Vietnamese exchange student who enrolled in freshman high school in the U.S. English is a second language for him, so he spoke haltingly and awkwardly. Shy and sensitive, it was not long before he was ridiculed and bullied over social media by his classmates — or so he felt. He became extremely despondent, and halfway through the school year, asked to be sent home.

Cecile is a shopaholic. She can hardly resist the lure of attractive department store displays featuring clothes, fashion accessories, and shoes. Once, she bought a pair of slacks she absolutely could not avoid buying, only to discover that she already had that exact piece of clothing in her closet that she purchased only a month ago. Cecile's credit cards are often maxed out, and she could barely pay their minimum monthly charge. Yet she continues to apply for new credit cards for future sales campaigns.

Eliza is in her final year in college, and she is due to submit her thesis at the end of the school year. That requirement was assigned to the graduating class on the first day of school to prepare for it. But Eliza thought that there was enough time to put it off because she wanted to attend the socials scheduled for the senior class. By the time she sat down to do it, half the school year was over. Still, she only attended to it half-heartedly. Finally, two months before the deadline, the professor announced that a preliminary report on their thesis should be submitted. No extensions were allowed.

Do any of the previous situations feel familiar? Many of us would recognize ourselves in one or more of these stories. Like the rest of us, people like Jimmy, Cecile, and Eliza found themselves lost and without a sense of direction at particular points in their lives. We are negatively affected by what people say about us, like Jimmy. We cannot take control of some of our impulses, like Cecile. And like Eliza, we lack the time and attention for the important things.

We all see ourselves in Jimmy, Cecile, and Eliza. We need to discover in ourselves confidence, control, and direction. We need to learn to become Stoics.

What Is Stoicism About?

Stoicism is a philosophy that teaches that virtue is the highest good, and knowledge is the source of virtue. It focuses on self-knowledge and the virtuous way of life as the means to attaining happiness. It is built on the mastery of certain practices that will enable a person to exercise discipline over their thoughts and activities. It emphasizes simplicity, control over the emotions, discernment of what is within a person's power to influence (and what is not), and acting in harmony with reason to attain moral perfection. Stoicism holds that virtue is the only real good in life, and happiness is attained by living in agreement with nature. The virtuous life is devoid of passion, which is disquieting and contrary to reason. Still, the proper emotional response is desirable when it is conditioned by duty and rational understanding.

Simply describing Stoicism does not make it easier to comprehend. So, let's illustrate how Stoicism's tenets should work with Jimmy, Cecile, and Eliza.

Jimmy is unhappy because he is hurt and embarrassed by what he thinks his classmates say about him. Notice, it is not even what they actually say, but what he thinks they say. He feels shame at not living up to what he thinks are their expectations. To this, the great Stoic philosopher Seneca teaches:

To achieve the good life, what we need to do is to conform to what is virtuous and not to what others think. [The Stoic sage] pays no attention to what others consider shameful or miserable. He does not walk with the crowd.²

— Seneca

Furthermore, concerning what he thinks his peers say about him, Epictetus writes:

Another person will not hurt you without your cooperation. You are hurt the moment you believe yourself to be... People are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.³

— Epictetus

Based on these teachings, Jimmy would be happier if: (1) he acted according to what he knows to be right and paid no heed to what others say, and (2) realized that the oppression he felt existed only in his mind.

Cecile is a shopaholic who craves things that she may not even need. As a result, she is trapped in a habit that will eventually lead her to true poverty and deprivation — and, certainly, utter unhappiness. Stoicism will help her realize that giving up the non-essentials accords her a greater resilience to face a future without such frivolities.

*Reserve a few days in which we may prepare ourselves for real poverty by means of fancied poverty. There is all the more reason for doing this, because we have been steeped in luxury and regard all duties as hard and onerous.*⁴

— Seneca

Effectively, Seneca is reaching out across the millennia to teach Cecile an enduring lesson. We tend to regard the comforts of prosperity as good and the constraints of austerity as evil when it is the opposite that is true. Becoming accustomed to a frugal lifestyle frees us from the fear of poverty as well as unnecessary debt.

Finally, Eliza demonstrates a tendency towards procrastination, a habit we all are guilty of at one time or another. Regarding this, a famous Roman Emperor and philosopher had something to say:

*Think of your many years of procrastination; how the gods have repeatedly granted you further periods of grace, of which you have taken no advantage. It is time now to realise the nature of the universe to which you belong, and of that controlling Power whose offspring you are; and to understand that your time has a limit set to it. Use it, then, to advance your enlightenment; or it will be gone, and never in your power again.*⁵

— Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius puts into sublime context the importance of making the greatest use of our time on this earth. "That controlling Power," short of being called God by this pagan emperor, gives deference to an Omnipotence that goes beyond reason or the cosmos. We are the offspring of this controlling Power who exist to fulfill our destinies within our

respective lifetimes. How inspiring an argument for us to lead a purposeful life and resist the temptation to procrastinate!

Living A Stoic Life Entails Embracing Its Values, Principles, And Wisdom

Most philosophical schools of thought simply revolve around that thought. Utilitarianism, nihilism, existentialism, Marxism, positivism, and so forth largely shape the way we think about things. Stoicism also deals with our thought process, but more than that, adherence to it requires that our actions and behavior conform to what can only be described as the Stoic discipline. The Stoic practices are a concrete manifestation of the philosophy's values, principles, and wisdom. To profess a belief in Stoicism is meaningless unless a person reflexively behaves, decides, and acts in a Stoic manner.

To be sure, Stoicism is not the only philosophy that is manifestly external. Most religions necessitate some outward demonstration of their beliefs. Christians are known for their acts of charity for others ("By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," John 13:35). Meditation is the central practice of Buddhism; praying five times a day, facing Mecca and fasting during Ramadan are indispensable to Islam. Such practices, more than mere traditions, are focal to the attainment of virtue in those philosophies. The same is true with Stoicism; unless the practices related to it are faithfully observed, one cannot call himself a true believer in Stoic philosophy.

Practicing Stoicism Benefits All

But what, exactly, are these Stoic practices? Later in this book, we will be introduced to journaling, negative visualization, anchoring, voluntary discomfort, framing, and toughness training. These are only some of the practices good Stoics undertake to assimilate the virtues of the philosophy truly. They put a person into the proper state of mind to grasp the essence of the principles adhered to.

For instance, the virtue of temperance is frequently interpreted as "moderation" in the everyday sense. Much like the surgeon general's warning on the labels of our alcoholic beverages — "Drink moderately." But temperance as a Stoic virtue refers more to self-control. The reining in of one's emotions and urges. It requires self-discipline not only concerning possibly harmful elements (like alcohol) but control of one's emotions and actions throughout the day. It refers to tempering one's happiness as much as one's anger. To develop temperance, Stoics resort to reflection at the start and end of the day, and visualization to anticipate adverse events where one may tend to lose control. Needless to say, this practice benefits not only the Stoic but also those who interact with him. People who control their actions and emotions will get along better with the people around them.

Answers To Questions We May All Ask

Do I Really Need Stoicism In My Life? Why?

Offhand, when asked this question, most people would say, "I have lived so-and-so decades without ever hearing of Stoicism. Why would I need it now?" Many people are encountering this word for the first time in their lives. But without knowing it, they have been practicing Stoic techniques or living according to its principles for most of their lives. Stoic philosophy has so permeated our history and culture through the centuries that many of its practices are inherently incorporated into everyday tasks.

What Stoicism Virtues Have I Been Practicing?

*Virtue is a habit of the mind, consistent with nature, and moderation and reason. [...] It has then four divisions — prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Prudence is the knowledge of things which are good, or bad, or neither good nor bad. [...] Justice is a habit of the mind which attributes its proper dignity to everything, preserving a due regard to the general welfare. ... Fortitude [i.e., courage] is a deliberate encountering of danger and enduring of labour. ... [And] temperance is the form and well-regulated dominion of reason over lust and other improper affections of the mind.*⁶

— Cicero

Cicero identifies the four Stoic virtues: *wisdom*, *justice*, *courage*, and *temperance*. We undertake many activities that are illustrative of these virtues, although we may not have recognized them as such at the time. In later chapters, we will go in-depth into them, but for now, let's just cite one example for each virtue.

The first virtue is *wisdom*, which is also known as *phronêsis* or prudence. This refers to practical wisdom, or the ability to distinguish what is good, bad, or indifferent to human life. Wisdom guides us to make logical and sound decisions that work to the good of ourselves and others. A wise philosophy professor, Massimo Pigliucci of the City College of New York, noted that wisdom is always good because "by definition, it cannot be used to do bad. A wise person is the one that takes the right course of action, not just instrumentally, but morally. A wise villain, by contrast, is an oxymoron."⁷

The second virtue is *justice* or *dikaiosynê*, which refers to righteousness. Stoicism regards justice as our duty to others and society. It involves deciding on what is fair and giving each person his due. People who are not guided by a sense of justice and fairness tend to encounter a moral dilemma when dealing with different people. They tend to treat friends and favorites with goodwill and consideration while regarding opponents and strangers with indifference or even enmity. By themselves, the unjust make untrustworthy associates. But when such people are endowed with power, they can do much harm to the very fabric of society. Justice as a virtue simply means treating everyone you meet fairly, no matter your affiliation.

The third virtue is *courage* or *andreia*, also known as fortitude. Courage is not the absence of fear; rather, it is deciding to act according to what is right and true in a fearful situation. Courage is always accompanied by the other virtues, particularly wisdom and justice; otherwise, it would only redound to a vice. An example: drawing a weapon to protect the helpless is a courageous act. But drawing a weapon to advance one's unjust self-interest is a crime.

Finally, the fourth virtue is *temperance* or *sophrosyne*, otherwise known as self-moderation or self-discipline. Practicing temperance involves controlling our emotions and actions. We

discussed this somewhat earlier as meaning self-control. Still, more than this, temperance is the "moderation of the soul" concerning its desires and worldly pleasures to achieve harmony within. While control of strong negative emotions such as anger is often referenced, the virtue just as well applies to strong positive emotions such as exhilaration because even positive emotions, when unbridled, disrupt normality and harmony in our disposition.

What Stoic Quotes From The Great Philosophers Have Resonated Well With Me And Why?

Stoicism has a set of bedrock principles that appeal to different people personally, which is why it is a philosophy that is quite effective when put into practice. Surfing through the internet has revealed many popular Stoic sayings. Here we have four sayings that you may find enlightening, inspiring, perplexing, and even strikingly humorous but true.

We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say.
— Zeno of Citium

Choose to die well while you can; wait too long, and it might become impossible to do so.
— Gaius Musonius Rufus

Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.
— Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus

Throw me to the wolves and I will return leading the pack.
— Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Action Steps

That's why the philosophers warn us not to be satisfied with mere learning, but to add practice and then training. For as time passes we forget what we learned and end up doing the opposite, and hold opinions the opposite of what we should.
— Epictetus

Stoicism is a practical philosophy. To put into practice the lessons of this chapter, consider reflecting on two challenges at the start of the day.

1. Ask yourself: "What good shall I do this day?" It does not have to be something earth-shaking. Remember the janitor you pass by in the corridor at school or in the office? Of course, you don't! He's invisible. How about pausing for five seconds, better yet ten, and saying, "Mr. Rodriguez, how are you today? How's the family?" That is, assuming you know his name; if not, you could start with that.
2. Consider a possible dilemma you will likely face on that day: "What should I do in this situation, given the best person I can be?" Let's say a report is due on that day. Assuming you did everything within your power to accomplish it and still failed, what should you do? You might be tempted to make up all sorts of excuses to your boss to deflect the blame, even to an innocent colleague. But as a Stoic, you resolve to own up to your shortcomings. Admit the truth, inform your boss, and accept the consequences. See if you can come up with a compromise with them, like submitting it the next day, and be sure to do what you promise. Learn from the experience.

Admittedly, we do not typically ask ourselves these questions when we get up in the morning. But this is what practicing Stoics do when they reflect at the start of day.

Moving On

Living according to a philosophy is abiding by a code of moral values that guide us through life. Stoicism aptly provides intellectual and practical guidance for people who have no firm direction in life. It sets out the virtues as our goals and the practices by which we may attain them. In the following chapter, we shall begin to gain a better understanding of these practices.

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