

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

STOIC PHILOSOPHY IN A NUTSHELL

What Is Stoicism?

How Stoicism Leads To A Fulfilling Life — Chapter One. About a 9-minute read.

As many as 1 in 5 American adults experience mental illness every year, of which anxiety and depression are the most prevalent forms*.

Suppose we are not part of that 1 in 5, we will undoubtedly have moments in our life when things will simply not go our way no matter what we do. Or our self-confidence slumps, and we suddenly find all our inadequacies on full display. Or our job or family life creates a whirlpool of stress.

The point is that even the most successful and stable among us can still find themselves confronted with the nagging feeling that they should be doing more, making better decisions, being a better person and wanting more out of their lives.

Most of us don't know what to want, and if we do, we want the wrong things. We squander our chance for true happiness by becoming emotionally and psychologically attached to the trinkets, baubles, and distractions of modern life. Or we become attached to things like power and money only to find our lives vacuous, devoid of meaning, and still somehow just as stressful.

It turns out that the philosophy of Stoicism has some compelling answers to these problems. For example, the Stoics tell us that we will forever remain stuck if we keep staking our well-being and happiness on things outside of our control. But if we adopt a different attitude, if we learn a new way to be in the world and with ourselves, we will soon discover a newfound insight and harmony.

Helping you achieve that insight and inner harmony is what this book sets out to do as we unveil the secrets of what this ancient philosophy has to offer our modern lives.

When I was in graduate school in 2010, I took a philosophy course on Stoicism and quickly found my life transformed. That class impacted me greatly. I attended it as if, one would say, a religious service.

The impact hit almost immediately on the first day when the gregarious, bearded, and hilarious Professor Hook took over the podium at the front of the room and illuminated the following quote on the overhead:

*"I have to die. If it is now, well then I die now; if later, then now I will take my lunch, since the hour for lunch has arrived – and dying I will tend to later."**

This quote and much of my subsequent experience reading the Stoics blew me away. It is a quote containing much of what there is to love about them. They are often witty, sharp, fearless, life-affirming, and highly practical – quite the opposite of our conventional understanding of a stoic individual.

From then on, Stoicism has been a guiding light in my life. I take it with me wherever I go. And that is how it operates. It's an emotional Swiss Army knife that you keep in your pocket at all times. A blade or tool for every occasion. Once you get the hang of the tenets and techniques of Stoicism, which are not particularly difficult to understand or practice, it becomes a versatile tool employable anywhere. Stoic techniques will become automatic with time, allowing you to respond to the pleasures, pains, awkwardnesses, and good fortunes of life in a reasonable, good-humoured, and resilient way.

Stoicism helps me put all of the pieces of my life together, and in writing this book, I want to show you how it can help you fit all of the things in your life together too. Reading the Stoics and following their recommendations can make you more fearless, wise, controlled, life-affirming, and more practical as well. Here are just a few of the other things you will learn on your journey through this book:



- A philosophy of life that will help you distill and organize your life so that you desire only the things that have genuine value and meaning.
- The difference between having preferences and having desires. How desiring the wrong things can lead to a disequilibrium in our lives.
- How to become unattached to material possessions and comforts by taking a stance of indifference towards them.
- How to find happiness in your life even when things are not going as planned and your preferred choices are unavailable to you.

This book is not an in-depth study of every facet of Stoicism. Nor will you find a detailed analysis of the individual stoic texts and philosophers. The intention is to give you an overview of all the crucial topics in Stoic philosophy, history, and practice and to show you why it is supremely suited to our modern lives.

There are two primary focuses of this text, and each has equal weight. The first is that you properly understand what Stoicism is. Although it is not a complicated philosophy to understand, it is easy to misunderstand. The second focus is to show you how to practice Stoicism in your everyday life. To this end, you will find countless practical tips and situations from daily life to illustrate Stoic principles.

By the end of this book, it is my sincerest hope that you will consider yourself a student of Stoicism, that you will continue to explore and learn about this philosophy. Becoming a devotee of its practices and teachings, implementing them in your life will show you that the Stoic way is a genuinely practical method of achieving happiness and harmony in a busy, modern life.

Mike White

Stoa Poikile

On the north side of the Agora – the central marketplace of ancient Athens – there was a columned arcade called the Stoa Poikile (painted stoa). It was called that because of the famous paintings decorating the back wall, and it was here that a visitor to 3rd century

Athens would have seen, among many other goings-on, a tall, thin man with listeners crowding around him.

This is Zeno: founder of one of the most influential schools of thought in all of antiquity. Its name, Stoicism, coming from the painted building in which Zeno first taught, represents a school of thought that maintains a strong following even today, two thousand years after its founding.

But what could have spurred a young merchant from what is today Cyprus to create such an influential philosophy of life?

Zeno of Kition (b. 334 B.C.E.) was a merchant sailing with valuable cargo when he shipwrecked in the Aegean Sea. Seeing that all his cargo was lost, Zeno made his way to Athens. There he started a new life.

Zeno would make his way through many of Athens' philosophical schools at the time, including the Epicureans and the Cynics. Eventually, he would become a teacher himself and would famously state of his doomed voyage: "I made a prosperous voyage when I suffered shipwreck."*

I want you to think about Zeno's words.

No doubt Zeno was distraught when his ship went down, but with perspective, he came to understand that moment as a fortunate one. He considered himself prosperous, even though he had lost everything. It also nicely illustrates our first two practical stoic principles:

1. Recognizing that you can control some things and other things you cannot.
2. You should try to make the best of whatever situation you find yourself in.

What these two points mean is that you don't bemoan your fate or overdo your success. You play the hand you are dealt with as well as you can – as virtuously as you can – and you try not to let it prohibit your happiness. These sound like simple rules, but we shall see that they have a good deal more depth.

Stoicism is full of practical yet straightforward rules like these; rules that are stunningly obvious, prudent, and adaptable. Yet, they take practice because they go against the grain of what our conventions are.

What I have just described to you is a far cry from what we might think of when we hear the word stoic. Usually, we associate that word with someone who is reserved and dispassionate, someone void of emotion, caring little for others or the world.

But Stoicism (with a capital 'S') is quite different. Not only is it far more complex than the everyday use of the word implies, but it's also a far more positive and life-affirming way to live your life. And that is indeed the goal Stoicism shoots for:

- A balanced and flourishing life, absent of emotional pain, and free of improper judgments and desires.
- The elimination of unhelpful actions.

The Essence Of Stoic Philosophy

When Zeno first arrived in Athens, he seems to have already had some idea he was interested in philosophy. His ancient biographer, writing in the 3rd century CE, tells us that Zeno was in a bookshop one day. He asks the bookseller where he can find a man like Socrates to teach him philosophy.

At that moment, Crates of Thebes just happened to be walking by, so the bookseller turned to Zeno and told him that Crates is the man to teach him philosophy.

Crates would be the first of many philosophical mentors to Zeno before he amalgamated everything he had learned and arrived at the original edition of Stoic Philosophy. With Stoicism, Zeno began a long conversation through time, with various individuals grappling with the ideas he first presented.

The essence of what Zeno, and later Roman thinkers like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, taught is based on several core ideas. Some of these ideas were more prevalent in one era

than in another, for even in the ancient world, Stoicism had a long and rich history spanning some 600 years, from 3rd century Athens to the height of the Roman Empire.

Allowing for some variations, the core Stoic ideas included the following:

- We are rational beings capable of both contemplation and action.
- The way to become a Stoic, and the ultimate goal of doing it, is to live our lives in accordance with nature.
- Acting virtuously is key to living in accordance with nature.
- The Stoic virtues are Wisdom, Courage, Moderation, and Justice.
- The only thing we can ultimately control is the shape of our character and not the external world.

There are many practical means by which we can achieve these things. Later Stoics, notably the Roman Philosopher Epictetus, would codify teachings and give detailed instructions on applying and attaining these teachings, something we will discuss in Chapter 3.

The Ultimate Goal Of Stoicism

The Stoics were ingenious philosophers, astute psychologists, highly practical advisors on the nature and art of living. To this day, they offer us real and valuable solutions to everyday problems:

- How to overcome our irrational biases and live a life of virtue.
- How to think about money, fame, hardship, or death in the best possible way.
- How to deal with the problems of desire, status, fear, emotion.

Stoicism offers practical solutions to much that plagues and torments us humans. But Stoicism isn't just a philosophy anymore. Stretching its influence into the 21st century, Stoicism inspired and laid the groundwork for modern Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), a popular type of psychological therapy widely used in today's psychiatric clinics and

generally touted as a practical way to learn healthy coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms mean to teach us how to have what those ancient Greeks would have called *eudaemonia*, which literally translated means "a flourishing life."

Action Steps

Stoicism is an effective way to pursue a life of lasting happiness. Wealth, health, success, and the praise of others are common goals, and not necessarily bad ones, say the Stoics. How we reach those goals is one of the great mysteries of life and a mystery the Stoics helped uncover.

Take a few moments and grab your journal, a notebook, or a blank sheet of paper. Think about summarizing your own goals in life in a few sentences. Write down the things you truly desire in life.

Many of us are doing quite well with these things. You could have a good job, a decent salary, friends, and family who care for you. You could get along well with co-workers and superiors alike. And yet, you can still feel something is missing or holding you back.

Now, look at your list while you remind yourself that there will always be room for complaint, no matter how successful or wealthy you become.

After completing your list and reflecting on it for a moment, make another list beneath it. Which of those things is truly going to bring you lasting happiness?

Do you long for status, wealth, personal gain? Experience tells us that those things in and of themselves don't make us happy, although material comfort can significantly contribute to our psychological well-being*. The Stoics, however, claim that such things are beyond our ability to control directly. This makes them poor candidates of conditions for our happiness.

So what should you think about when making goals? The Stoics claim that we should not shy away from making goals that would increase our status, wealth, position in life. Stoicism is often mischaracterized as a philosophy that keeps its adherents away from the world. But

this is not true at all. Stoicism wants us to foster good relations amongst our friends, neighbors, and colleagues. It wants us to care about justice and injustice. But it doesn't want us to become so invested in such things that they become conditions for our happiness. It wants us to distance and separate ourselves from these things and asks us to be ready to live without them.

What things on your list could you not live without? Consider whether those things are appropriate to attach your happiness to. Are they things like family, community, and fairness? Or are they things that are attached to unhealthy emotions or desires and drives for success, money, and power?

The essence of Stoic philosophy is that it teaches us how to value and nurture our relationships and maintain optimism while keeping our eyes on the real potential for difficulty and failure. Stoicism can help us gratefully enjoy the material wealth we possess while not desiring more than we need or allowing such things to drive us.

References

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
2. Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.32.
3. Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 7.1.
4. Guillen-Royo, M., Velazco, J. & Camfield, L. (2013) Basic Needs and Wealth as Independent Determinants of Happiness: An Illustration from Thailand. *Social Indicators Research* (110), 517–536.