

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

THE THREE PILLARS OF STOICISM

The Timeless Tapestry Of Stoic Wisdom

Develop Character In Accordance With The Stoic Ideal Through The Lives And Teachings Of Seneca, Epictetus, And Marcus Aurelius — Chapter One. About a 17-minute read.

During high school, many of us probably found world history difficult for one reason.

It is difficult to memorize the names, dates, places, and events that we did not witness personally and, therefore, attach little meaning to. However, my classmates and I were lucky to have a history teacher who brought the past to life by focusing on the stories behind the names, dates, and places. By vividly describing how people lived, why they did certain things, and especially how their thoughts and actions were shaped by their environment, these people came to life. The past became, for us, a rich repository from which we draw insights, understanding, and inspiration.

The lessons of history prove useful when the demands of modern living take their toll on us. This is true not only for those who are struggling and failing but also for those who are succeeding. Those among us who strive to achieve perfection in our careers, businesses, or vocations are often rewarded with fortune, fame, or power. Along the journey, problems arise, time is too short, and things do not go according to plan. And even when we attain the height of success, we become the target of others' jealousy, ill intent, or malicious gossip that tarnish our reputation. Sometimes the same drive and ambition that sustains our efforts to succeed become the cause of our stress and unhappiness. Failure and success become one, and neither provides the happiness we seek.

Somewhere in the recesses of the human heart, we have the sense that the solution to our problems lies within ourselves. We have inner strength, but when we give way to worry and distress, we lose track of that ability to face our problems with calm and discernment. The confusion of the moment distracts us from thinking and deciding rationally. So how could we avoid the moment of noise and confusion? Would it not be wonderful if we could readily unlock that wellspring of wisdom that resides within us?

This book aims to help us do just that – renew ourselves with fresh insights from the past. We focus on the lives and teachings of the three most beloved Stoic philosophers in history – the paradoxical Seneca, Epictetus the slave, and Marcus Aurelius, the emperor. Chapter 1 lays down the beginnings of Stoicism. Then each philosopher is featured in chronological order every two chapters after that. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss Seneca, Chapters 4 and 5 deal with Epictetus, and Chapters 6 and 7 speak of Marcus Aurelius. The first chapter of each set is a brief biography of the philosopher. Two elements are highlighted here: the unique circumstances of his life that led to his philosophical development and the events in his life that demonstrate how he practiced his Stoicism. The next chapter presents a discussion of the themes most associated with his teachings, embodied in selections from his writings. Stories of relevant contemporary people and situations are selected to illustrate the themes, enabling the readers to link the past to the present better.

This book is designed to both inform and delight. The author, yours truly, nurtures a fondness for ancient history. I formally studied Roman philosophy in tandem with Roman law and its influence on contemporary legal theory. Personally, I hold a deep and abiding fascination for the Stoic philosophers and their teachings. I applied them in my various careers as a college professor, engineer, stockbroker, financial analyst, and writer. In dealing with my subordinates on the job, my students in class, and my children at home, I always sought to impart a sense of self-control, forethought, and deliberate conduct reflective of the wisdom I found in the ancient teachings.

This book is intended to be a companion to the thoughtful reader who wants to understand, appreciate, and live Stoicism. It seeks to convey the lessons of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius in such a way that they become real to you, the reader, speaking to you in

the context of your daily activities. Hopefully, as you move through these pages, you may be delighted, moved, and struck by flashes of inspiration, that in the end, you may find the Stoic philosopher that lies within you.

Are you ready to take a journey through the ages? Then let's begin.

The Timeless Tapestry Of Stoic Wisdom

*"I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into."**

— Benjamin Franklin

The son of a candlemaker and grandson of a blacksmith, he was born into poverty on January 17, 1706, as the fifteenth child of a brood of seventeen. He only had two years of schooling in his whole life. But he grew up with the resolve to live a life of virtue and moral rectitude. He always observed the Thirteen Virtues – temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. He taught himself through rigorous self-study and became a printer, scientist, inventor, musician, author, and statesman. He learned to speak French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin.* Moreover, Benjamin Franklin became a founding father of the greatest country in the world, the United States of America.

Franklin is an example of the vast possibilities that a life dedicated to attaining virtue may lead to, not only for oneself but also for others and humanity in general. Because of his strict adherence to a life of virtue and strict self-discipline, many have wondered whether he was an avowed Stoic or at least consciously and openly lived by the tenets of Stoicism. Franklin lived in the America of the 1700s. Stoicism began as a philosophy at the time of ancient Greece. Is there a connection between them? We will try to resolve this question at the end of this chapter. But first, let us get to know more about Stoicism.



Definition Of Stoicism

The Oxford English dictionary defined Stoicism as:

*“An ancient Greek school of philosophy founded at Athens by Zeno of Citium.” (Oxford Lexico)**

The philosophy centered on virtue as the highest good and knowledge as the source of virtue. Generally accepted as the four virtues of Stoicism are courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom. Wisdom resulted from living in harmony with divine Reason that governs nature. Pain, pleasure, and the changing circumstances of fortune are inconsequential to a virtuous life.

More than the dictionary definition, Stoicism is a living philosophy.* It goes beyond the simple description that appears to apply to so many other inanimate objects but an organic thing that grows, transforms, and bears fruit. According to the people who live by Stoic philosophy, these individuals fashion their lifestyles through considerations independent of their economic or social status. The true spirit of Stoicism is the result of millennia of philosophical development. Tracing this development from its earliest beginnings would provide a clearer perspective of its continued relevance into the future.

Pre-Stoic Background

The first seeds of all philosophy, Stoicism included, may be traced to Heraclitus (535-475 BCE). A nobleman of Ephesus, he is credited as being the first to articulate the idea of logos, a crucial Stoic concept that combines reason and judgment. Legend has it that he was born to ascend the throne but abdicated to pursue his study of philosophy instead. Among those who admired his teachings were Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, until Goethe, and even modern quantum physicists found relevance in his works.*

Unfortunately, Heraclitus' original writings were lost to the ages, and only fragments referencing him were found in others' writings. From these sources, historians credited Heraclitus as the originator of the concept of Logos as the rational divine intelligence. He is

the father of cosmology, where an orderly universe fundamentally comprises fire as its basic element. He envisioned the world as a coherent system of opposites such that where a change creates an imbalance, a corresponding change occurs to restore the balance. Heraclitus taught that for people to be happy, they should live harmoniously according to the universal principle of Logos or Reason. It is this emphasis on Logos that forms the theoretical foundation from which Stoicism will emerge.*

The next philosopher noted after Heraclitus is Socrates (469-399 BCE), who taught about searching for wisdom leading to right conduct. The son of a stonemason and a midwife, Socrates was born of humble origins. However, according to early accounts, an early Oracle of Delphi indicated to him that there was no wiser man in Greece than himself. Socrates found this incredible, and in trying to prove (or disprove) it, he went about questioning the learned elite in Athens to find one who was wiser than him. The series of questions became tests of logic and led to discovering layers of beliefs about a topic.

Based on Socrates' teachings, Plato (428/427 – 348/347 BCE) founded the Academy. This was not a formal school or college but rather an informal gathering of intellectuals who engaged in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and other subjects of interest in their discourses. It was founded on the belief that knowledge resulted from inner reflection and external observation and could be passed onto others through instruction.*

At about the same time as Plato, another popular disciple of Socrates was Antisthenes (446-366 BCE), the commoner. He founded the Cynic school of philosophy, which taught a set of ideas that lead to a more thoughtful and ultimately happier life. These teachings were rooted in an awareness of the contradictions and injustices of society. Moral virtue leads to happiness, and that teaching could convey what makes life virtuous.*

The Academy And The Cynic Schools

The philosophical teachings of Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Antisthenes were the foundations upon which early Stoicism found its roots. However, the founding of Stoicism itself as a school of thought can be directly traced to two philosophical schools, particularly

the Academy and the Cynic schools. Zeno of Citium, who eventually founded Stoicism, was a student of both these philosophical schools, therefore to understand Stoicism, it is important to understand its connection to Plato's Academy and Antisthenes's Cynicism. The direct line of descent in philosophical teachings proceeded from Antisthenes to Diogenes to Crates and finally to Zeno.

Compared to his master Antisthenes, Diogenes preached and practiced a more ascetic lifestyle. For example, he lived in a discarded bathtub, slept in discarded buildings, and begged for his food.* Practitioners of this lifestyle forsook all material possessions and were therefore called Cynics, which meant "dogs" in Greek.* Crates of Thebes, also known as the Good Genius, took over the school from Diogenes. Historical accounts say that he gave away his fortune to live an impoverished life in Athens' streets.* As the leader of the Cynic school, Crates became the direct teacher of Zeno. While Zeno was influenced by both the Academy and Cynicism, he eventually established his own philosophical school, Stoicism, which exists until today.

Zeno Of Citium (334-262 BCE)

The ancient Greek philosopher Zeno of Citium is acknowledged to be the founder of Stoicism. He was born a citizen of Citium, Cyprus, in the year 335 BC. His father, Mnaseas, was a prosperous merchant whose ships plied the Mediterranean and Aegean routes. There is no account of Zeno's early life; what little was written about him began when he was thirty.

The Stoicism envisioned by Zeno is applied to everyday life, comprised of three areas of study: (1) ethics, the study of how we should live our lives; (2) physics, now known as the natural sciences, metaphysics, and theology; and (3) logic (logos), or the study of how to reason about the world. Physics and Logos are the areas of study that nurture Ethics. The interrelationship of the three topoi could be illustrated in this manner: Ethics are the fruits of the tree of Stoicism, Physics is the soil that provides nutrition to the tree, and Logos is the fence that defines the boundaries of the garden of Stoicism.*

Zeno's life as a philosopher began after he barely survived a shipwreck on a voyage between Phoenicia and Piraeus in Greece.* In some writings, Zeno's account of this shipwreck was taken figuratively to mean that Zeno's life was meaningless before coming to Athens.* From his shipwreck until the time of his death, Zeno lived in Athens. In his study of logic, he found the mental focus and discipline he lacked as a merchant. He devoted himself to his studies and to eventually practicing what he learned. Among his teachings, he argued that virtue, and not pleasure, constituted the only good and that the key principle of the universe is embodied in the natural law rather than "the random swerving of atoms."*

There are several other noteworthy early Stoic philosophers, including Chrysippus (279-206 BCE), Posidonius (135-51 BCE), Cicero (106-43 BCE), and Gaius Musonius Rufus (30-101 CE). Each of these famous philosophers carried forward the fundamental Stoic philosophy of Zeno of Citium. Of the four, scholars believe that Musonius most significantly contributed to the development of Stoicism.

Gaius Musonius Rufus (30-101 CE)

Gaius Musonius Rufus is regarded as one of the four great Stoic philosophers of the Roman empire, with Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Musonius' teaching mirrors that of Zeno insofar as he commits to virtue, rather than pleasure, being the source of all good. Austere personal habits bring one closer to a life of virtue. These habits include a simple vegetarian diet, minimal garments, footwear, denouncing an expensive lifestyle, and embracing a sturdy life. Unfortunately, none of Musonius' own writings have survived until today, if ever there were any. Others preserved his teachings in the form of 32 apothegms (concise sayings or maxims) and 21 long discourses. It is believed that Musonius conducted his lectures in Greek because most of the writings were in Greek, with just one, a testimonial by Aulus Gellius, written in Latin.*

Many of Musonius' teachings* were ahead of their time, and several of them reflect surprisingly contemporary thinking, not socially acceptable a little over a century ago. Musonius believed that women were entitled to receive the same philosophical education as men and supported it with the following arguments. First, the gods endowed women with

the same power of reason as men. Second, women possess the same senses as men—i.e., sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, by which they can observe their environment. Third, both sexes share similar body parts—head, arms, torso, legs. Fourth, like men, women desire virtue and are naturally drawn to it, taking pleasure in nobility and justice and repulsion in their opposites. A woman, therefore, could manage an estate, supervise a household staff, and exercise self-control. She will become a good and like-minded life partner to her husband, and protector, teacher, and model to her children.

In many ways, Musonius's teachings shunned modern-day liberality and embraced conservative values. Consistent with Stoicism, Musonius opposed luxurious living. He associated the life of the rich with licentious sex, condemning all recreational sexual acts as contrary to a virtuous marital life, contrary to what is good. Adultery was unlawful and illegitimate, and homosexuality was against nature since the only legitimate sex acts aim to procreate within the marriage.

Musonius envisioned what makes a happy marriage. "[W]hen each spouse competes to surpass the other in giving complete care, the partnership is beautiful and admirable. But when a spouse considers only his or her own interests and neglects the other's needs and concerns, their union is destroyed..."^{*} Furthermore, "Marriage is the way for a person to create a family to provide the well-being of the city...[A]nyone who deprives people of marriage destroys the family, city, and the entire human race."^{*}

The Three Pillars Of Stoicism

Musonius's teachings are consistent with the core of Stoicism, the school that the three pillars of Stoicism – Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius – expounded on. The following is a glimpse of the three, by way of introduction:

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE) was also known as Seneca the Younger.^{*} Seneca's focus was on moral philosophy and ethical matters. He strongly emphasizes the shortness of life, endurance, and tranquility.^{*} He is known for the following words of wisdom:

*“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”**

*“Begin at once to live, and count each separate day as a separate life.”**

*“If you want to escape the things that harass you, what you need is not to be in a different place but to be a different person.”**

Epictetus (55 – 135 CE) * was born a slave but rose to become one of history's renowned philosophical sages. His body of work highlights freedom and the dichotomy of control – that is, an understanding of what is and is not within our control. * Epictetus wrote:

*“Freedom is the only worthy goal in life. It is won by disregarding things that lie beyond our control.”**

*“Circumstances don't make the man; they only reveal him to himself.”**

*“People are not disturbed by things but by the views they take of them.”**

Finally, Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180 CE) *, Emperor of Rome. He typically emphasized that a virtuous life is one lived according to nature, which is a part of the Whole. Right exists in being consistent with the universe; wrong takes place by going against it. * He is known for the following nuggets of wisdom.

*“The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.”**

*“Do every act of your life as though it were the very last act of your life.”**

*“Live out your life in truth and justice, tolerant of those who are neither true nor just.”**

The following chapters will discuss more on these men and their teachings. For now, let us test our wits and understanding with the following exercise from Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.

Action Steps

A distinct advantage to students of Stoic principles is their ready applicability to daily living. Enthusiasts devise many exercises in the Stoic tradition that are easy to do and provide fresh perspectives about themselves. The Daily Stoic* provides us with some useful exercises to assimilate the Stoic viewpoint. Here are five that you may find challenging and quite beneficial.

1. **The Dichotomy of Control** – One of the more important Stoic lessons is to discern those matters that are within our control and those that are beyond it. Let's say an unfavorable event takes place, such as being late for an important appointment or not receiving the hoped-for promotion. The typical reaction is anger at oneself or another person. Assume a moment of quiet and analyze: "Is this something that was within my control or entirely out of my control? If it was, what can I do the next time when something like this happens to avoid the same outcome?" On the other hand, if it is beyond your control, no amount of cursing at the traffic or one's employer can change the outcome. Learn to accept things beyond your control with calm and resolve.
2. **Journaling** – A common practice among the three philosophers involves writing down their thoughts about life and the day's events. These musings comprise a self-examination of one's deeds and utterances during the day – some call this an examination of conscience. This is something you can do to gain insight into yourself, your motivations, and your thoughts. Journaling at the end of the day is more fruitful if you hide or ignore nothing from yourself. You will gain a clearer perspective of yourself and how you may achieve greater peace and happiness in your life. And, you will get to sleep more soundly, having made peace with yourself!
3. **Practice Misfortune** – This appears like a strange exercise. It involves adopting practices that you would do during times of misfortune, even if you are in the midst of the most fortunate moments in your life! This means that even if you might be wealthy, you should practice living a life of poverty. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds. In 2009, the UK's Prince William spent one night sleeping on London's streets, emulating the life of the homeless.* Rather than just trying to imagine the situation, the actual experience is the key to this exercise. The purpose is to overcome your fear of the unknown consequences of misfortune by living through the experience and conquering the fear.

4. **Turn the Obstacle Upside Down** – Also called training one's perceptions, this exercise involves turning something bad into a source of good. People say that the Chinese word for crisis refers to a juncture where "danger" and "opportunity" meet, a turning point. This approximates how a Stoic looks at life. There is no good or bad, only the perception of it. You may have lost the promotion, but someone else had the good fortune to receive it. There is some good in everything bad.
5. **Take the View from Above** – This is not new to many of us; it involves taking the bird's eye view. The practice is also called "looking at the big picture." It involves looking outside ourselves, assuming ourselves to be "small" compared to humanity's broader view. For example, a garden party you may have planned towards the end of a long, hot summer may be ruined by an unexpected heavy fall of rain. Your first tendency is to curse the misfortune that rain should fall after three months of clear skies. However, taking the big picture may reveal that the rain is a blessing for the farmlands that suffered from the drought or communities lacking water supply. You then realize that your personal misfortune is small compared to the larger good.

Moving On

After learning about Stoicism, is it possible to decide whether Benjamin Franklin was a Stoic or not? After a broad search, there does not appear to be any outright admission, written or otherwise, that Franklin identifies as a Stoic. However, there is sufficient evidence to say that he practiced the tenets of Stoicism. His Plan for Attaining Moral Perfection appears to be inspired by this ancient philosophy.*

The time-tested principles and practices of the Stoics that helped to build the nation remain relevant even after more than two thousand years ago. Three men made this possible. In the next chapter, we learn about the first of them, Seneca the Younger.