

Athenaeum Paper
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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, and fellow presenter:

Imagine yourself in the year 300 BCE. You are a wealthy merchant, sailor and trader from Phoenicia (current day Lebanon) on your way to Athens, a trip of about 750 miles. You've got a ship full of goods, spices, metal, wood, carved ivory, textiles, animal hides, and glassware. You've made this trip before and it seems almost routine, until a terrible storm wrecks your ship with all your earthly possessions. You wash up on shore with the clothes on your back and nothing more. Your ship and all its belongings are at the bottom of the sea. And in 300 BCE, there was no marine insurance.

If you are Zeno of Citium, you wash up on shore, you eke out a living as a beggar in the streets. One day, you wander into what amounts to a book store in ancient Athens, and discover the writings of Socrates and other philosophers. Through an improbable series of events, you are able to insert yourself into the good graces of a wealthy benefactor and philosopher Crates of Thebes. Under the protection of Crates, Zeno became so obsessed with the study of philosophy, that he gave up his profession as a merchant, and made a career change to developing and teaching the philosophy we know today as Stoicism.

He later said that he said his shipwreck was "the most prosperous voyage" because it opened the door to the study of stoicism. Stoicism comes from the Greek word Stoa, which is the porch with columns where people stood if they wanted to teach philosophy to anyone who would listen. For the ancient Greeks, philosophy was not an academic pursuit, but rather self-help advice on how to live a better and more fulfilling life. Getting a dose of philosophy was like taking a prescription from a doctor.

In case you have not heard, the philosophy of stoicism is experiencing a bit of a renaissance these days. With dozens of podcast channels dedicated to Stoicism and dozens of books on the New York Times bestsellers list, we know that stoicism is making a comeback in this modern age.

But still, Stoicism is about 2000 years old. How did these toga-wearing stoic philosophers from 2 millennia ago become so popular today?

Well, as it turns out, as wildly different our lives are from those who lived in ancient Rome, it appears that all people, across time and distance are pretty much the same. We have not really changed that much. We all still have all the qualities, good and bad, that make us human. Stoic quotes regarding love, death, honesty, ego, and judgment resonate today as much as they did 2000 years ago. Here is an example:

“If it is not right do not do it, if it is not true, don’t say it.” Emphasizing Ethical behavior and integrity

Here’s another,

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

In other words, actions speak louder than words. Exemplify your virtue through action, not rhetoric.

When I read Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations (the modern translation of course), it seemed like I was getting a high-5 from 2000 years ago.

Consider this passage:

“Don’t be irritated at people’s smell or bad breath. What’s the point? With that mouth, with those armpits, they’re going to produce that odor. —But they have a brain! Can’t they figure it out? Can’t they recognize the problem? So you have a brain as well. Good for you. Then use your logic to awaken his. Show him. Make him realize it. If he’ll listen, then you’ll have solved the problem. Without anger.”

There were hundreds or thousands of stoic philosophers through the centuries, but perhaps the greatest contribution to stoic philosophy comes from Marcus Aurelius, the emperor of Rome from 161 to 180 AD. During the period he was emperor, he was the most powerful man on earth. His authority was absolutely unchecked, he had the power of life and death with the wave of his hand. Unchecked access to luxury, food, sex, drink, and any excess you can think of. It was sort of expected. And they say the absolute power corrupts absolutely, but with Marcus Aurelius, that seems to be the rare exception.

Although his power legally was unchecked, he was held in line by his stoic philosophy, and was guided by the stoic teachings infused in him as a boy and young man.

Even though he was the most powerful man on earth, he still was a human and he struggled with daily life, even struggling to get out of bed in the morning (more on that later). He lived through a lot of turmoil including a pandemic, extreme social unrest, and he survived an insurrection and a coup attempt. (Some things never change).

During a time of great trial in his life like simultaneous wars on different fronts, the Antonine Plague, and the death of 12 of 13 children, Marcus Aurelius wrote in his journal lessons on how to be a better man and how to live an ethical life. His writings were his own personal journal, later to become the most influential book on philosophy ever written.

As meaningful as his written words were, were never meant to be read by anyone else, in fact historians believe he would have been mortified if he knew his personal diary would be made public. He only wrote for himself.

Since his writings were his personal musings, it never had a proper title. The title of *Meditations* was later assigned by publishers who copied his work. It follows no real outline, and does not drive to a conclusion. It was a book of short sayings, observations and mental techniques meant to help one live a more contented and ethical life based on the concept of Stoic virtue.

Stoicism is based on the idea that we don't control what happens to us, we only control how we respond. And everything that happens, big or small, things that we want and things that we don't want, things that are good and things that are bad, all gives us the opportunity to respond with one of the 4 stoic virtues of **Wisdom, Courage, Justice and Temperance**. These are the bedrock ideas that Stoicism is built around.

The stoics believed that these 4 virtues could be studied separately, but they are often applied as a single unit. The better you could practice these 4 virtues, the better your life will be. Let's talk about each one in turn.

Wisdom – Critical to stoic thought is understanding the difference between what we can influence, and what is beyond our control. Those familiar with the Christian serenity prayer, would know exactly what this stoic virtue is all about.

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

Reinhold Niebuhr He wrote this prayer in the 1930's and it was later adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous temperance movement. But the stoics have been saying this for the past 2000 years. The stoics did not put this discernment into a prayer, but they believed deeply in following the message. Figuring out what is good and what is bad and what is indifferent, what is important and what not important. That is true stoic wisdom.

It also means not getting too attached to externalities like wealth, status and position. Those things can come and go. You are not guaranteed to keep any of that stuff.

Yes, it means formal education, but more importantly it means being able to deal with complexity in a logical, informed and calm manner. Stoic wisdom might also mean you might not be good at something, it means being humble enough to admit that you don't already know something, and calling on the expertise of others to help accomplish a common goal is perfectly acceptable.

Courage – It's impossible to live a good life if you are afraid of challenges, Courage is the virtue you lead with. It is not the absence of fear, it is the decision to move forthrightly in the face of fear. Not just physical bravery, but also strength of mind. Bravery is to speak up in the face of difficulty. If you are afraid to move, if you don't ever put yourself out there, if you don't ever stand up and defend what you think, then you'll never know the feeling of

true courage. Stoics face up to face daily challenges without procrastination and with clarity and integrity.

Justice – In the stoic sense, this goes beyond just what is legal and what is not legal. It means understanding the fundamental difference between right and wrong. It means good conduct for yourself, and treating people with respect and integrity in all your dealings. It means treating other people fairly, even when you yourself were cheated by others. It means doing good even when you see others get away with being bad. Most importantly it means doing the right thing. Marcus Aurelius said “Do the right thing, the rest does not matter.”

Temperance – Knowing when to stop. It means having the sense of how much ‘enough’ is. Doing the right things in the right balance. Nothing in excess. Yes of course that refers to food and drink, but also to business and work. Stoics admonish not become a slave to your passion even if that passion pays your bills .

Today in our modern lifestyle we can pretty much satisfy any desire with ease. Temperance is not about abstaining from all earthly pleasures, which is just another extreme, but rather deciding not to be driven by the animalistic pursuit of pleasure at the expense of long-term happiness.

Remember that everything you say ‘yes’ to, means saying ‘no’ to something else. When you spend a lot of time on the road or at the office, you are saying no to those at home who don’t want you to be gone so much. Or conversely, if you spend too much time on the golf course and not tending to your business, then that can be bad too. Temperance reminds us that even the other virtues can be bad if done to excess. After all, excess bravery could lead to recklessness and an overzealous sense of justice could lead to cruelty.

So here we have the 4 virtues advocated by the stoics on how to live a better life.

Wisdom: Knowing the right thing

Courage: Doing the right thing

Justice: Treat people fairly while doing the right thing

Temperance: Knowing when to stop – knowing when enough is enough

While there are a number great stoic philosophers, I’m going to pick out a few lessons from Marcus Aurelius Meditations that resonated especially with me.

Some Key Takeaway Lessons from Meditations

1. Focus on what you can control.

1. The very heart of stoic wisdom is to figure out what is up to us, what is not up to us. We don’t control what happens to us, we control only how we respond. We control our thoughts, actions, opinions, things we say and do

are within our control. A stoic says “I focus on what is up to me, and I let other people focus on what is not up to me”.

2. What is beyond our control? The weather, world events, social media, your reputation, the price of oil, what other people say and do, traffic, you get the idea. To get bound up in things beyond our control is a recipe for suffering. Not everything is up to us, but some things are! What’s up to us? Our thoughts, our response, our actions our opinions, what we do about what happens to us is up to us.

2. Stoic philosophy has been around a long time.

I mentioned earlier that Zeno of Citium developed Stoic thought 300 years before, the birth of Jesus. Stoics articulated their ideas about the nature of the good life, the importance of self-improvement, and the practice of mindfulness for centuries. Even though Marcus Aurelius aimed his remarks at himself and his personal conduct, his philosophy has been and adopted to influence social and political thought.

Great figures throughout history have been inspired by “*Meditations*” like George Washington, Nelson Mandela, Eisenhower, Viktor Frankl, and Admiral James Stockdale, who was a prisoner in a Vietnamese prison camp for more than 7 years

3. **People will always do awful things, but we are only responsible our own virtue.** This is a tough one. We can choose to be good even when we are surrounded by wrong. When another harms us, we can react with kindness, advising them of their errors if possible but being okay with it if they ignore this advice. When someone cuts you off in traffic, or interrupts you at a meeting, It does **not** mean we are not allowed to be angry, it means that we should not let anger drive our decision making. Remember that we have our own faults, we are not perfect either. We were born to cooperate, and we must try to respond with indifference to any supposed harm done to us. Don’t let anger drive your decision making. Don’t be wielded around by ill-considered emotions.
4. **Some of the deepest lesson in Meditations relates to our mortality and the shortness of life. Momenti Mori is** Latin for “Remember that you will die”. We were all born with a fatal diagnosis. That is not meant as a downer, just the opposite, it means that time is short, we are not guaranteed another day, so get things done now while you can. As time passes, it is gone forever. MA said you can leave life right now and let that be a basis of what you do, say and think. Don’t convince yourself that you will get a second chance because you may not.

Nobody says they will never run a marathon, never write that book, never learn another language, Nobody ever says they will never reach out to an estranged

loved one. They all say they will do it tomorrow. But it seems like tomorrow never comes. Now is now, do it now.

5. **We were meant to cooperate.** Men were meant to cooperate. Marcus Aurelius thought that all men had a spark of the divine and could express that thought through reason. To be confrontational with fellow men was contrary to nature as we were meant to cooperate. He likened getting along with his fellow men like an upper and lower jaw, or our upper and lower eyelids. They were meant to work together, to be contrary to each other is against nature.
6. **Don't seek revenge.** It's not worth it. MA said the evil that men do only harms you if you do evil in return. Don't be surprised by the wicked deeds of others, and don't think that you can do evil just because you see others do it and get away with it.
7. **Own the morning.** One of the most relatable passages in MA meditations is his passage about getting up in the morning. He says its comfortable and warm here. And he does not want to get up. But then he asks, is that what you were born for, to lie under she sheets? No, Look at the bees, ants, and birds. They all work hard at what they were made to do. You should too. If MA were here today he would say, "Win the morning by getting up early, make your bed, don't get stuck on your phone, and not getting bogged down by bad news first thing. Go for a walk, exercise, do deep work, journal. Just do something intentional before you go to work for the day.
8. **What good is fame and adulation?** The stoics were big on not getting too big for your britches. There is a famous stoic saying of "Accept it without arrogance, let it go with indifference". In other words, don't let the applause go to your head. Soon it will be over, people will forget about you, and soon and you will be dead. What really matters according to the stoics is the knowledge that you acted with virtue. Seeking or relishing too long in external validation is a fools errand. Better to find meaning from within.
9. **Nothing is made better by praise.** Beauty comes from the thing itself, not from what people are saying about it. Are diamonds more beautiful because they are praised? Is honey sweeter because it is praised? Being the recipient of applause does not change you. Don't let praise change you are. Don't swallow it whole.
10. **Stoics are concerned with the public good.** Stoics knew that their actions had an impact on others. Stoics aim to contribute positively to the community, not to just to sit at the perch of power for the sake of power. Stoics often get involved in public life because there is value in participating in the system even if the system is broken in some ways. But the point of power as the stoics see it, is to

do good for the public, not just for ourselves.

11. **“You don’t have to turn this into something”**. It is within your power to have no opinion about a thing. It does not have to upset you. Bad things happen, but you don’t have to dwell on them. Let’s say someone cuts you off in traffic. You COULD take the stance that he intentionally disrespected you, thinks you’re a chump, or that he hates you, or that this person is simply a jerk. That’s one take. Another take is that you could consider that he is simply in a hurry, he’s thinking about his own problems, perhaps late for a meeting, or didn’t mean it, or that perhaps, they were simply raised improperly. And remember that you are not a perfect driver either, and sometimes people are mad at you. Those good at stoic philosophy are able to pick and choose their emotions like from a menu. Stoics believe that emotions are like clouds in the sky or leaves on a stream, it’s okay to just let them drift by. It’s okay to select an emotion and live it and own it. Sometimes its justified to adopt a stance of righteous anger or deep sadness, Just do it intentionally.

12. **Tough on yourself – tolerant with others**. The stoics believed in self-discipline, but you must remember that we are talking about **SELF** discipline, means you impose these standards of virtue on yourself, you do NOT hold others to your same standard. Others make mistakes, others do not understand like you do, MA stressed that we were all made to work together, like as I mentioned earlier, the upper and lower jaw, or the upper and lower eyelids. We should strive to forgive others as easily as we forgive ourselves - even if they don’t live up to your expectations.

13. **Turn obstacles into an opportunity**. The impediment to action advances action, the obstacle becomes the way. We can practice virtue even in ugly situations. Let’s say you are a recent college graduate, and you have your first real career job, but your boss is a demanding jerk. The stoic response might be to use this as a chance to practice patience, perseverance and resilience.

Someone hurt you? Okay, it might not have been what you wanted, but now you have the opportunity to practice forgiveness, and you have the choice **not** to be filled with grievances or resentment or anger. Stoic wisdom means control our emotions, our emotions do not control us.

14. **Don’t keep score**. Help others but don’t be the guy who helps but then reminds the person he helped that he owes something. Be like the grape vine that just continually produces grapes, then move on to help someone else. Just as a horse runs without boasting, a bee makes honey without praise, when a man performs a good deed he simply helps and moves on, he should not call out others to come and see what a good deed he did.

15. **Deprive yourself.** It's okay to not accept all the comforts that modern life has to offer. From time to time you should test your resilience and remind yourself that you are capable of more than you think. Try skipping a meal, try parking at the outer reaches of Walmart and walking in, disconnect from social media especially while having a conversation with your son or your wife. The literature suggests taking a cold shower, but there is no way in hell I'm doing that. The point is to not to be too soft, too comfortable, too content.
16. **Amor Fati. Love your fate.** This can mean Soldier on, or Cowboy up. It can mean One day at a time, or just Put one foot in front of the other. It does not mean just passive resignation, but rather active embrace of the situation as it is part of your journey. It means accepting and embracing your life and making the most of it as it unfolds. Rigid expectations about how you want things to turn out will usually lead to disappointment. I've heard it said like this: If someday you'll look back on this day and laugh, then you might as well skip ahead and laugh about it now.
17. 2000 years ago, Marcus Aurelius said "Do not consider anything for your interest which makes you break your word, quit your self-respect or inclines you to any practice which will not bear the light or look the world in the face."

It sounds a lot like "Treat others as you want them to treat you" Marcus Aurelius reminded us that our greatest superpower as human beings is right reason and the ability to choose our thoughts and our response to external events.

I only discovered stoicism about a year ago. I listen to the podcasts, and read 3 different books about it. I have found that the rules for life as described by Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus have resonated with me at a personal level.

I tried to employ stoic principles in my physical rehabilitation after my back surgery almost a year ago. I'm still a novice and probably always will be, but I'm confident that my mental outlook and physical resilience has been enhanced by living and applying stoic principles. For what it's worth, I personally feel like I am better off for having been introduced to Stoicism and would encourage you to take a look for yourself.

- Sources: Marcus Aurelius "Meditations". Adapted for the Contemporary Reader by James Harris.
- "Right thing Right Now". Ryan Holiday Penguin Books
- "How to Think Like a Roman Emperor". Donald J Robinson McMillan Audio.