

INTRODUCTION

The private diaries of one of Rome’s greatest emperors, the personal letters of one of Rome’s best playwrights and wisest power brokers, the lectures of a former slave and exile, turned influential teacher. Against all odds and the passing of some two millennia, these incredible documents survive.

What do they say? Could these ancient and obscure pages really contain anything relevant to modern life? The answer, it turns out, is yes. They contain some of the greatest wisdom in the history of the world.

Together these documents constitute the bedrock of what is known as Stoicism, an ancient philosophy that was once one of the most popular civic disciplines in the West, practiced by the rich and the impoverished, the powerful and the struggling alike in the pursuit of the Good Life. But over the centuries, knowledge of this way of thinking, once essential to so many, slowly faded from view.

Except to the most avid seekers of wisdom, Stoicism is either unknown or misunderstood. Indeed, it would be hard to find a word dealt a greater injustice at the hands of the English language than “Stoic.” To the average person, this vibrant, action-oriented, and paradigm-shifting way of living has become shorthand for “emotionlessness.” Given the fact that the mere mention of philosophy makes most nervous or bored, “Stoic philosophy” on the surface sounds like the last thing anyone would want to learn about, let alone urgently *need* in the course of daily life.

What a sad fate for a philosophy that even one of its occasional critics, Arthur Schopenhauer, would describe as “the highest point to which man can attain by the mere use of his faculty of reason.”

Our goal with this book is to restore Stoicism to its rightful place as a tool in the pursuit of self-mastery, perseverance, and wisdom: something one uses to live a great life, rather than some esoteric field of academic inquiry.

Certainly, many of history’s great minds not only understood Stoicism for what it truly is, they sought it out: George Washington, Walt Whitman, Frederick the Great, Eugène Delacroix, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, Matthew Arnold, Ambrose Bierce, Theodore Roosevelt, William Alexander Percy, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Each read, studied, quoted, or admired the Stoics.

The ancient Stoics themselves were no slouches. The names you encounter in this book—Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca—belonged to, respectively, a Roman emperor, a former slave who triumphed to become an influential lecturer and friend of the emperor Hadrian, and a famous playwright and political adviser. There were Stoics like Cato the Younger, who was an admired politician; Zeno was a prosperous merchant (as several Stoics were); Cleanthes was a former boxer and worked as a water carrier to put himself through school; Chrysippus, whose writings are now completely lost but tallied more than seven hundred books, trained as a long-distance runner; Posidonius served as an ambassador; Musonius Rufus was a teacher; and many others.

Today (especially since the recent publication of *The Obstacle Is the Way*), Stoicism has found a new and diverse audience, ranging from the coaching staffs of the New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks to rapper LL Cool J and broadcaster Michele Tafoya as well as many professional athletes, CEOs, hedge fund managers, artists, executives, and public men and women.

What have all these great men and women found within Stoicism that others missed?

A great deal. While academics often see Stoicism as an antiquated methodology of minor interest, it has been the *doers* of the world who found that it provides much needed strength and stamina for their challenging lives. When journalist and Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce advised a young writer that studying the Stoics would teach him “how to be a worthy guest at the table of the gods,” or when the painter Eugène Delacroix (famous for his painting *Liberty Leading the People*) called Stoicism his “consoling religion,” they were speaking from experience. So was the brave abolitionist and colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who led the first all-black regiment in the U.S. Civil War and produced one of the more memorable translations of Epictetus. The Southern planter and writer William Alexander Percy, who led the rescue efforts in the Great Flood of 1927, had a unique reference point when he said of Stoicism that “when all is lost, it stands fast.” As would the author and angel investor Tim Ferriss, when he referred to Stoicism as the ideal “personal operating system” (other high-powered executives like Jonathan Newhouse, CEO of Condé Nast International, have agreed).

But it’s for the field of battle that Stoicism seems to have been particularly well designed. In 1965, as Captain James Stockdale (future Medal of Honor recipient) parachuted from his shot-up plane over Vietnam into what would ultimately be a half decade of torture and imprisonment, whose name was on his lips? Epictetus. Just as Frederick the Great reportedly rode into battle with the works of the Stoics in his saddlebags, so too did marine and NATO commander General James “Mad Dog” Mattis, who carried the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius with him on deployments in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Again, these weren’t professors but practitioners, and as a practical philosophy they found Stoicism perfectly suited to their purposes.

FROM GREECE TO ROME TO TODAY

Stoicism was a school of philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early third century BC. Its name is derived from the Greek *stoa*, meaning porch, because that’s where Zeno first taught his students. The philosophy asserts that virtue (meaning, chiefly, the four cardinal virtues of self-control, courage, justice, and wisdom) is happiness, and it is our perceptions of things—rather than the things themselves—that cause most of our trouble. Stoicism teaches that we can’t control or rely on anything outside what Epictetus called our “reasoned choice”—our ability to use our reason to choose how we categorize, respond, and reorient ourselves to external events.

Early Stoicism was much closer to a comprehensive philosophy like other ancient schools whose names might be vaguely familiar: Epicureanism, Cynicism, Platonism, Skepticism. Proponents spoke of diverse topics, including physics, logic, cosmology, and many others. One of the analogies favored by the Stoics to describe their philosophy was that of a fertile field. Logic was the protective fence, physics was the field, and the crop that all this produced was ethics—or *how to live*.

As Stoicism progressed, however, it focused primarily on two of these topics—logic and ethics. Making its way from Greece to Rome, Stoicism became much more practical to fit the active, pragmatic lives of the industrious Romans. As Marcus Aurelius would later observe, “I was blessed when I set my heart on philosophy that I didn’t fall into the sophist’s trap, nor remove myself to the writer’s desk, or chop logic, or busy myself with studying the heavens.”

Instead, he (and Epictetus and Seneca) focused on a series of questions not unlike the ones we continue to ask ourselves today: “What is the best way to live?” “What do I do about my anger?” “What are my obligations to my fellow human beings?” “I’m afraid to die; why is that?” “How can I deal with the difficult situations I face?” “How should I handle the success or power I hold?”

These weren’t abstract questions. In their writings—often private letters or diaries—and in their lectures, the Stoics struggled to come up with real, actionable answers. They ultimately framed their work around a series of exercises in three critical disciplines:

The Discipline of Perception (how we see and perceive the world around us)

The Discipline of Action (the decisions and actions we take—and to what end)

The Discipline of Will (how we deal with the things we cannot change, attain clear and convincing judgment, and come to a true *understanding* of our place in the world)

By controlling our perceptions, the Stoics tell us, we can find mental clarity. In directing our actions properly and justly, we’ll be effective. In utilizing and aligning our will, we will find the wisdom and perspective to deal with anything the world puts before us. It was their belief that by strengthening themselves and their fellow citizens in these disciplines, they could cultivate resilience, purpose, and even joy.

Born in the tumultuous ancient world, Stoicism took aim at the unpredictable nature of everyday life and offered a set of practical tools meant for daily use. Our modern world may seem radically different than the painted porch (Stoa Poikilê) of the Athenian Agora and the Forum and court of Rome. But the Stoics took great pains to remind themselves (see November 10th) that they weren’t facing things any different than their own forebears did, and that the future wouldn’t radically alter the nature and end of human existence. One day is as all days, as the Stoics liked to say. And it’s still true.

Which brings us to where we are right now.

A PHILOSOPHICAL BOOK FOR THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

Some of us are stressed. Others are overworked. Perhaps you’re struggling with the new responsibilities of parenthood. Or the chaos of a new venture. Or are you already successful and grappling with the duties of power or influence? Wrestling with an addiction? Deeply in love? Or moving from one flawed relationship to another? Are you approaching your golden years? Or enjoying the spoils of youth? Busy and active? Or bored out of your mind?

Whatever it is, whatever you’re going through, there is wisdom from the Stoics that can help. In fact, in many cases they have addressed it explicitly in terms that feel shockingly modern. That’s what we’re going to focus on in this book.

Drawing directly from the Stoic canon, we present a selection of original translations of the greatest passages from the three major figures of late Stoicism—Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius—along with a few assorted sayings from their Stoic predecessors (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Musonius, Hecato). Accompanying each quotation is our attempt to tell a story, provide context, ask a question, prompt an exercise, or explain the perspective of the Stoic who said it so that you may find deeper understanding of whatever answers you are seeking.

The works of the Stoics have always been fresh and current, regardless of the historical ebb and flow of their popularity. It was not our intention with this book to fix them or modernize them or freshen them up (there are many excellent translations out there). Instead, we sought to organize and present the vast collective wisdom of the Stoics into as digestible, accessible, and coherent a form as possible. One can

—and should—pick up the original works of the Stoics in whole form (see Suggestions for Further Reading in the back of this book). In the meantime, here, for the busy and active reader, we have attempted to produce a daily devotional that is as functional and to the point as the philosophers behind it. And in the Stoic tradition, we've added material to provoke and facilitate the asking of big questions.

Organized along the lines of the three disciplines (Perception, Action, and Will) and then further divided into important themes within those disciplines, you'll find that each month will stress a particular trait and each day will offer a new way to think or act. The areas of great interest to the Stoics all make an appearance here: virtue, mortality, emotions, self-awareness, fortitude, right action, problem solving, acceptance, mental clarity, pragmatism, unbiased thought, and duty.

The Stoics were pioneers of the morning and nightly rituals: preparation in the morning, reflection in the evening. We've written this book to be helpful with both. One meditation per day for every day of the year (including an extra day for leap years!). If you feel so inclined, pair it with a notebook to record and articulate your thoughts and reactions (see January 21st and 22nd and December 22nd), just as the Stoics often did.

The aim of this hands-on approach to philosophy is to help you live a better life. It is our hope that there is not a word in this book that can't or shouldn't, to paraphrase Seneca, be turned into works.

To that end, we offer this book.