

THE STOIC HANDBOOK

the E-Book

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by Erik Wiegardt – with Seneca,
Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius



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THE IMAGE on the cover of this handbook is of the phoenix, a mythological bird of both Asian and Occidental cultures. To the early Stoics of antiquity, the phoenix represented rebirth of the world after periodic conflagrations, *ekpyrosis*. This particular image is the symbol and motto (*revere honor*) of the Stoic Council. The Council Phoenix ® was created by Erik Wiegardt.

Introduction

The Stoic Philosopher

Everyone can be a philosopher. Everyone. We all have that ability. We were born with it. Human beings are rational, thinking, reasoning creatures, and Nature has made us that way. As Nature created the giraffe to reach higher and the cheetah to run faster and the bull elephant to be stronger, so did it create the human being to be wiser. Potentially.

Only most of us can't be bothered. We use just as much of our reasoning ability as we have to and no more. Year after year, we struggle to feed ourselves and our family, pay the mortgage, keep the car running, wear nice clothes, and, if there's any time or money left over, we spend it on countless distractions and mindless diversions that contemporary society is only too happy to offer. And as we get older, we don't gain in wisdom, we only gain in weight.

It's always been like this – for most people. We accept this priceless gift of higher intelligence as our birthright, which it is, then we spend this inheritance on grabbing and grasping at far more than we really need. At the end of the day, when the weary mind is ready to rest we let it drift away by watching yet another episode of our favorite TV show or cheering on a millionaire athlete to score another goal. Acquiring what we need to live on this planet is not difficult, but we have made it so, and our awesome intelligence is obsessed with a life of consumption and endless busy-ness.

That's normal. At least it's normal in that it's common. Still, there have always been a few who make the effort to rise above the common herd because they are so amazed by our reasoning faculty and the promise of wisdom that they choose to develop a noble mind rather than wallow in the mud of accumulation. They choose to live closer to the gods than to the beasts in the barnyard. These people we call philosophers, lovers of wisdom.

But, as soon as we decide to pursue wisdom, that's when the difficulty really begins. Everyone can be a philosopher. Everyone can be wise. But how is it done? What is the best way to achieve humanity's highest goal? Unfortunately, finding the path, let alone walking upon it, is not that easy. It should be, but, like so much in our contemporary world, the pursuit of wisdom has become unnecessarily complex. If we study philosophy at the university we're at the mercy of the professionals, the academics, and it's been 2000 years since they cared anything about our goal. If we study wisdom with the theologians, another problem arises. Faith. Sooner or later, religions deliberately turn their backs on the pursuit of truth and the exercise of reason and require the mind to believe in faith. That's why religions are called faiths – Jewish faith, Christian faith, Muslim faith, et cetera.

So what do we do, and why should we be bothered? Hardly anyone else gives a damn, so why should we? What does wisdom promise that makes it so great, and who wants to be a philosopher anyway? It sounds boring and hard.

The Promise

Hitchhiking through the Carolinas in the Deep South in 1964, I couldn't help but notice the sharecropper's shacks lining old country roads for miles and miles through tobacco and cotton fields. The shacks were occupied by dirt poor people working like slaves, a hundred years after abolition, from sunup to sundown, earning a wage that was barely enough to stay alive. There were no luxuries here. Children were barefoot by necessity, and shoes were worn only for Sunday school, if they were worn at all. Everywhere one looked there was depression and gloom. *Almost* everywhere.

Every couple of miles there was a sharecropper shack that was different. It was built the same, probably by the same builder, but it didn't look the same as the shack on either side of it. The unpainted, cracked, and dirty clapboard siding was painted with whitewash, not regular paint, mind you. That would be too expensive. This was cheap, white paint mixed with water so that a gallon might paint one whole side of the house. There would be flour sacks dyed a bright color and cut for curtains instead of faded newspaper or nothing at all. The front yard would be picked up and raked, and flowers would grow in flower beds by the front door. And to one side, or peeking around back, there were always vegetables growing in a weeded garden.

This is what philosophy promises. It doesn't matter so much about your race or place in society as it does the responsibility you take for building and maintaining a noble character. You take what you have been given and do the best you can. Even if you were born in a sharecropper's shack, you can make it a happy and lovely home. You were born with the ability and the choice to become great, to become great with wisdom, and regardless of all else that befalls you there is always one thing that is in your power – the nobility of your character.

Seneca, the great Roman Stoic, said that only a fool would go to buy a horse and carefully examine the saddle and riding tackle but ignore the horse. It's the same for you. The circumstances surrounding your birth and place in this world are your saddle and riding gear. The nobility of your character, that which is inside of you, is what really matters. This is what philosophy promises, what Stoic philosophy teaches, and what *The Stoic Handbook* is all about.

The Stoic Tradition

Stoicism is a living philosophy. What that means is that Stoic philosophy is more than just great thoughts organized into a complete and coherent vision of reality. It is first and foremost a philosophy to live by, a practical application of ancient wisdom, a way of life and a guide to the choices one makes in this life. And from its beginnings, it was the only philosophy addressed to all human beings – regardless of gender, race, or social class. Even women and slaves were welcome to follow this path, to be treated as sisters and brothers, a notion considered laughable by other philosophers who, along with Aristotle, classified them somewhere above brute beasts and below free men.

Stoicism is alive. The reason it is still alive after more than 2300 years is because it is universally adaptable and available to people of every color, class, and culture. And something else: it evolves. As the human race learns and grows, so does our philosophy. It evolves because of the strength and conviction of the Stoics themselves. Stoics have a tradition of independent thought, and we like it that way. We of the Stoic school do not follow a tyrant, as Seneca said.

This is not to say that we have an eclectic hodgepodge of assorted ideas collected here and there. It is not. Its inner core of orthodoxy moves very slowly, glacially, expanding and refining with the ages. Its foundation is secure, because it is built upon the power of a single idea:

The goal of life is to live in agreement with nature.

That is our motto: live in agreement with nature, live according to nature, live in harmony with nature. Zeno of Citium, the founder of our school, coined the phrase and concept, but he wasn't working alone. He was following a path already begun by two of the greatest thinkers in the western world, Heraclitus and Socrates. Zeno is the Father of the Stoic school, and Heraclitus and Socrates can rightly be called its Grandfathers. But before we take a look at this great history, let's address some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

* * * *

FAQs

The following are frequently asked questions I have been asked or have asked myself.

Q. What is Stoicism?

A. Stoicism is a wisdom philosophy. What that means is that it's a philosophy about how to live life and live it well. Our philosophy was founded in Athens, Greece, about 2300 years ago by a man named Zeno. After studying with the Cynics for several years, he studied at Plato's Academy, then started his own school at the central market in Athens. Zeno started his school by standing on a porch in the market and talking to anyone who happened by. In time, he had a regular group of men standing and talking philosophy there with him. The porch became his school. The word for porch in Greek is *stoa*, and the men who met there to talk philosophy soon became known as the men of the porch, or Stoics.

Stoicism became the preeminent philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome and flourished for nearly 500 years. It reemerged as a popular philosophy in the Renaissance when people returned to reason rather than faith to find answers about how to live. Today our philosophy and those who live by it are alive and well all over the world. See: www.newstoa.com

Q. Is it true that Stoics repress their emotions and feelings?

A. No. This is an old misunderstanding. Emotions and feelings are normal and natural, and sometimes they're even essential to our survival. There are times when being afraid and running away is the wisest course of action.

Where the misunderstanding comes from is the Stoic belief that emotions are based upon a judgment. All of us, including Stoics, have emotional reactions to events that can cause anger, grief, and fear, but after the initial *instinctive* reaction, it is our judgment about the event that either inflames or cools the emotion. As Shakespeare said in Hamlet, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Shakespeare was a student of Stoic philosophy, by the way, and he often used Stoic themes in his plays.

We believe it is our *judgment* that makes something either good or bad, not the thing in itself. If we are unhappy, then it was some judgement that inflamed the emotions and made us unhappy. Happiness is everyone's desire, and Stoicism is all about increasing your happiness and living well.

Q. What things do Stoics consider good and bad?

A. Only virtue is always good, and only the lack of virtue is always bad. We do not believe there is any evil in Nature, only in the behavior of human beings, and that comes about when people deliberately choose what is harmful to themselves.

You see, we don't believe anyone can harm you, only that you can harm yourself when you choose not to live according to Nature. But we don't condemn others for lacking virtue, because they are already punishing themselves by their behavior.

No one can hurt me, because I alone am responsible for the nobility of my character—and that is the Stoic's highest ideal, the noble character. Rich men and women are a dime a dozen, but a noble character is rare and the greatest of all. Stoicism teaches you how to build a noble character.

Q. The Stoic motto, “live according to Nature,” sounds good, but what does that mean exactly?

A. Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, was the first to use that phrase, “live according to Nature,” and what it means exactly is that Stoics look to Nature as their guide to life. We believe that Nature teaches us everything we need to know about how to live well in this world. That is why Stoic physics is so important. In antiquity, physics was known as natural philosophy, and by studying nature we come to know ourselves and what makes us happy and successful and wise.

Later, another great Stoic, Panaetius, expanded the original motto to include not just nature in general, but also the nature of the individual. Each one of us has a unique personality, including different talents and capacities we can develop to achieve our highest ideal. So, living according to Nature also means to live in accordance with one's own nature.

Epictetus, a Roman Stoic teacher, said, “If you have assumed any character beyond your strength, you have both demeaned yourself in that, and neglected one which you might have filled with success.” The wise live according to both human nature in general and one's individual nature in particular.

Q. Are Stoics allowed to enjoy such pleasures as good food, wine, art, music, making love, et cetera?

A. Yes, of course. We are pantheists. The Stoic God is in ALL things. We value our reason above all, because that is our special gift from Nature, but our creator is also in the eyes and ears and nose and taste buds and kinesthetic sense – as well as in the mind.

Q. Do Stoics believe in God?

A. Yes, we do, but we do not all believe in God in the same way. All Stoics are pantheists, because Nature is our god, literally, but you can be an atheist or a deist or an agnostic and still be a Stoic in good standing. The key to what kind of Stoic you are depends on whether you believe that the intelligence and processes of Nature are conscious or unconscious. Is Nature conscious or unconscious? Human beings were created by Nature and have consciousness. Are we the only ones, or is our creator also conscious?

The early Stoics believed that Nature was both providential and conscious. These were the deists, but when Stoicism was adopted in ancient Rome there were a few who believed that Nature was unconscious. These were the first Stoic atheists. Today we have Stoics who are deists, atheists, and agnostics. Such diversity is perfectly acceptable. The Stoic community has a large tent, and we are tolerant of disagreement within it.

Q. Do Stoics believe in life after death?

A. We do not believe in any one certain answer to this question. If you're looking for certainty, there are two ways you can go about it. The first and most reliable way is for you to die, then you will know for sure. The second way, one that you may consider less drastic, is to join a religious group that promises eternal life. Unfortunately, this is a promise that they cannot prove. If you have faith in a religion, such as the Christians or Muslims, then they will tell you what to believe about life after death. However, if you demand evidence, reason, or proof, then there is none.

We can neither empirically prove nor disprove life in any form beyond the grave. No one can. Religions that tell you otherwise are asking you to have faith in myths, legends, and wishful thinking. Our philosophy never requires such faith. Stoics are more comfortable with disagreement than with

faith, and we have always disagreed about this matter. Mostly we're agnostics. However, we all do agree on one thing: if you live according to Nature in this life, then it's highly unlikely you'll have anything to worry about in the next – if there is one.

Q. What is the Stoic attitude about homosexuality and racial and gender issues?

A. This is one of my favorite questions because of our tradition and teachings as a philosophy. Homosexuality was never an issue in ancient Greece when Stoicism was founded, and it isn't today, but with regard to racial and gender issues, only the Stoics were truly enlightened. Other philosophies were often contemptuous and disparaging, but there has never been any doubt with us: we are all equal.

One little known fact is that Stoics were the first to condemn rape. At a time when rape was far more common than it is even today, the excuse for such behavior was, “The God of love, Eros, made me do it. I was driven to this passion by Eros and powerless to resist.” Stoics said that excuse was nonsense. Rape was wrong. You DO have the power to resist. No god can compel you to behave badly, and **no one** has the right to violate another person's body. No excuses. Period. And, of course, we still believe that way today.

Getting back to the matter of equality, the key here is reason. In antiquity, our greatest scientist, Posidonius, traveled widely and studied many different peoples and cultures and confirmed what Stoics have always believed: human beings are the same everywhere, and the thing that unites us all, no matter how differently we may appear, is our greatest faculty, our ability to reason.

Q. Why does the world need a Stoic community, such as the cybercity, New Stoa?

A. Well, first of all, human beings are social animals. That is our nature. We are happier and more productive when we have family and friends to care for and who care for us and give us a context for our lives. It's always been this way, and it probably always will.

Today most of us live in cities, and the urban environment has become one of isolation and alienation. Our ancient need to belong has been compromised for many if not all of us, and this is a considerable loss. We have been members of a tribe or a community for as long as we have been a separate species, and probably longer – millions of years anyway. It's in our very bones and DNA.

The Stoic community brings us back to the social animal that we truly are, so that we can live in the world as it is and still have a community that supports us and shares our values. New Stoa is the Stoic community today, and, although we live in many countries all over the world, we are still a community of neighbors, family, and friends.

Q. Can just anyone be a Stoic? I mean, what do you have to do to be a Stoic today?

A. Yes, you can be a Stoic, and I think you should. Start by introducing yourself to the Stoic community. Email cyberstoic@aol.com today.

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The Stoic Tradition

That which contains us is endowed with reason.

Heraclitus

Heraclitus (c.535-c.475 BCE)

He was a nobleman of Ephesus. Some say he was a hereditary king who set aside his crown to study philosophy. He was undoubtedly a sage, a mystic genius, and the first cosmologist of our philosophy. Heraclitus has fascinated thinkers from Socrates to Goethe and from Aristotle to contemporary quantum physicists. He is the greatest of the Ionian sages, a Founding Father of Western Civilization, a creator of philosophy, and a diviner of the fundamental essence of the cosmos. He is also known as the Obscure One, a reputation acquired in his own time, for a vague and riddling style that some believe he deliberately adopted to elude even the most erudite scholars.

Unfortunately, what he wrote, in its original form, has been lost in antiquity. All that remains are fragmentary references from many sources, some reliable, some unreliable, from Plato to Medieval monastic scholars. From these fragments we discover remarkable parallels between the observations of Heraclitus and modern physicists 2500 years later. God, he called the Logos, Reason, Intelligence, a Whole made up of the sum total of all opposites, constantly in motion, birthing, living, dying, and being born again. In all of these attributes of Nature, Heraclitus would include a rational consciousness and providence.

Shortly after the death of Heraclitus, another extraordinary man was born, a sculptor by trade, a man who described himself as resembling a frog, but who had been told by the Oracle at Delphi that he was the wisest of all the Greeks. That man, of course, was Socrates.

Socrates (469-399 BCE) and the lines of descent

Socrates was frankly puzzled over the Oracle's judgment, and so he set out to the marketplace of Athens to discover what it meant, how it could be that he was the wisest of the Greeks. What he found was that while others professed wisdom without being aware of their ignorance, he, at least, was aware that he knew nothing. With this knowledge came the conviction that he must search for wisdom about right conduct, the right way to live, that he might lead the citizens of Athens in their moral and intellectual development.

Socrates came to be viewed as a pest and a troublemaker by the city elders. He was sentenced to death by poisoning, drinking hemlock, and became the first martyr of philosophy. Of his disciples who were with him to the end, two went on to establish their own schools of philosophy based upon two profoundly different interpretations of his teachings. Plato, the aristocrat, admired Socrates the thinker and established an academy just outside the city for the sons of wealth and ease to ponder the meaning of wisdom. Antisthenes, a poor and common man, admired Socrates the man of principle who lived and died by what he believed. And from him the school of the Cynics was born. Zeno, the Father of Stoic philosophy, was for a time a student in both schools.

THE GREEK STOA

Nearly a century after the death of Socrates, a young merchant from Citium, a city we know as Larnaca on the island of Cyprus, was going about his father's business with a shipload of purple dye

when his boat was caught in a storm near Athens. While he put in for repairs, and with time on his hands, he stopped in a book shop and picked up a book on the life of Socrates. Impressed by what he read, he asked the bookseller if there were any fellows like this Socrates still living in Athens. At that moment, as fate would have it, Crates the Cynic happened by and the bookseller said, "Follow that man." And Zeno did.

Zeno (c.333-262 BCE), the Founder

Crates, the Good Genius, as he was known in Athens, was one of the most popular teachers and personalities of his day. Unlike his teacher, the intense and provocative Diogenes, Crates was said to live each day as if he were on holiday. He was the third in line of descent from Socrates. This is the lineage: the writings of Socrates' oldest student and follower, Antisthenes, inspired the zealous Diogenes, who later denied his teacher's influence and claimed he learned everything he knew about philosophy from a mouse. Diogenes preached an ascetic lifestyle, and he practiced what he preached. He himself lived in a discarded bathtub, going about the Athenian markets with a lighted lantern in broad daylight searching for an honest man. He soon found a few, and he and his followers were convinced they were the true disciples of Socrates. It was a living ethical school whose practitioners became known as Cynics, the Greek word for *dogs*, because they forsook all material possessions and lived in the streets in their single-minded pursuit of virtue. Crates, who took over this school of ragged nonconformists from Diogenes, was Zeno's first teacher in philosophy. And for a time, Zeno was one of them.

Zeno never returned to the family business. He lived in Athens for the rest of his life, supporting himself by underwriting and insuring ships that came and went across the Mediterranean, an early version of Lloyds of London. He remained with Crates and the Cynics for some years, then became impatient with their limited focus and lack of decorum, and he moved on. He studied with the Megarians, in their day the greatest logicians in the world, then he studied at Plato's Academy. Plato was dead, of course, and Polemo was head of the Academy when he was there.

About 300 BCE, Zeno finished his studies and went to the central market in Athens to discuss his philosophy with anyone who happened by. He stood on a porch known as the Stoa Poikile, the painted porch, a long colonnade facing the market. It was called the painted porch because of the murals painted along the back wall depicting real and mythological scenes from Athenian history, including the Battle at Marathon. It was here that he first began teaching a system of philosophy that was to dominate intellectual thought for more than five hundred years. The power of his discourse attracted a daily following of young men who came to the Stoa Poikile to discuss philosophy with him. This following of students became known in Athens as the Men of the Stoa, or Stoics. Zeno taught a unified system of thought in three parts: natural philosophy (what we now call physics), logic, and ethics. He integrated an understanding of man's relationship to the universe (physics) that followed from a careful and accurate method of reasoning and rhetoric (logic) to further establish principles of conduct for one's life (ethics).

Cleanthus (331-232 BCE) and Chrysippus (c.280-c.206 BCE)

Zeno had one student who had acquired some renown as an athlete, a boxer, but who was otherwise entirely without inheritance or financial assistance. It was said that when Cleanthes studied with Zeno he was so poor he couldn't afford paper and had to save his notes on clam shells and ox bones. He studied with Zeno by day and carried water as a common laborer by night. Unlike the aristocratic students at the Academy, the Stoa, true to its founder's Cynic roots, never turned a student away. Cleanthes went on to become the second Head of the Stoic school after Zeno and also became a poet of some merit. His *Hymn To Zeus* is still commonly included in anthologies of world literature.

Cleanthes' successor, Chrysippus, reformulated and expanded the teachings of the founder, drawing up what would become the orthodoxy of Stoicism. It was said that without Chrysippus there would have been no Stoa, so far-reaching and profound was his influence both in his day and beyond. It was also said that if the gods performed logic then they must use Chrysippus' methods. He was a man whose voluminous writings and intellectual brilliance intimidated everyone but Cleanthes himself, which was the more remarkable because Cleanthes was never considered an original or exceptional thinker. Chrysippus admitted that around Cleanthes he was often at a loss for words.

Panaetius (c.185-c.110 BCE) and Posidonius (c.135-c.55 BCE)

When the old and distinguished Scipio family of Rome befriended the sixth Head of the Stoic school in Athens, Stoicism began a new life in the heart of the Empire. Scipio Africanus, as you may recall, was the general who saved the city of Rome from the conquest of Hannibal. It was his family that introduced Panaetius and Stoic philosophy to the Romans. Panaetius had just the right philosophy for the worldly and practical Romans, one that emphasized ethics and right conduct for an active life. The Stoicism of Panaetius only made passing reference to physics and almost none at all to the study of logic. He was an innovator. The rigidity of the single ideal of the imaginary sage became more centered on the individual.

The aging Panaetius' most distinguished pupil was the wealthy young aristocrat, Posidonius of Rhodes. Posidonius has been called the most scientific of the Stoics, because he spent much of his life traveling, observing, recording, and calculating natural phenomena all around the Mediterranean. His observations led him to emphasize the Stoic doctrine of the interdependence of all parts of the whole. He also concluded from his studies that many animals had a lot more intelligence than had been previously suspected and that humans were more like these animals than we had ever realized. Nevertheless, he decided, our intelligence was more closely akin to the rational intelligence of nature, and that our reasoning faculty was our special link to the Logos.

THE ROMAN STOA

He [Cato the Younger] had one of the greatest reputations for honesty and incorruptibility of any man in ancient times, and his Stoicism put him above the graft and bribery of his day.

Columbia Encyclopedia, 5th edition, 1993

When we think of the Roman Empire, we all too often remember debauchery and brutality and murderous intrigue while forgetting that this was at the same time one of the greatest and most enduring empires the world has ever known. The cult of Hedonism and the emperors who hated philosophy is the Rome that Hollywood celebrates, and without a classical education there's little else that most of us know or remember. But there was another Rome, the real city, that knew greatness and honor, and Stoicism, more than any other philosophy, can be credited with promoting its highest ideals.

Frequently, Stoic teachers lived on the estates of the wealthy and powerful, retained as moral advisers on matters of state and as counselors and comrades in times of calamity and bereavement. Often the wealthy and powerful were leading Stoics themselves. Cato the Younger, described above, was a devout and pious follower of the Stoa. Cicero was a lifelong student of Stoic philosophy and one of our primary sources for Stoic thought from antiquity. And, because they were so conspicuously exceptional, a number of leading Stoics became, like Socrates of Athens, martyrs to their ideals and way of life. Barea Soranus, governor of Asia minor, was executed for treason for insisting on justice for all in his administration. Thraesaeus Paetus, Senator, was executed for refusing to celebrate when Nero murdered his mother Agrippina and for attracting followers who lived simply and honestly in the midst

of treachery and excess. Helvidius Priscus, Magistrate of Rome, was executed by Vespasian for openly promoting equality and democracy.

It could be fairly said that this was both the best and the worst time for the ancient Stoa. Best in that Stoicism was the leading philosophy of the western world, and worst when the emperor was corrupt and corrupting—an all too common occurrence.

Seneca (c.3 BCE-65), statesman

Seneca was the precocious son of a noble Spanish family whose influence, in addition to his exceptional skill as an orator, gave him access to the inner circle of Roman power at an early age. He was also a serious student of philosophy and a prolific writer even while accumulating one of the greatest fortunes in the ancient world. When he was questioned about how he could be a Stoic and attract such great wealth, he simply replied that a wise man used money while a fool was used by it.

So renowned was he for wisdom and statesmanship that Nero's mother Agrippina asked him to be a tutor to her troublesome child. Sadly, the exhortations of even such a man as Seneca were largely ignored, and Nero became the coward and fool the world still knows him to be. At the end of their relationship, Seneca was accused of treason based on false charges brought against him by politicians who were envious of his reputation, charges that Nero was always ready to hear and believe. Out of deference to his old teacher, however, Seneca, now retired and in feeble health, was allowed the honor of killing himself rather than being killed outright by the emperor's soldiers.

Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic* and his many other literary efforts are among the most researched and best remembered writings of antiquity. There will always be those who question his commitment to Stoic principles because of his ability to prosper at a time of such brutality and widespread corruption, but anyone who has read Tacitus' account of his death knows he died a Stoic. And that's the final and ultimate test for us all.

Epictetus (60-120), slave

Next, we descend from the pinnacle of power to the underbelly of Roman society where we find Epictetus, the crippled slave of a slave. Epictetus' master, one of Nero's freed slaves, in a fit of temper deliberately broke his legs so severely that he remained a cripple for the rest of his life. Despite these difficult circumstances, he was allowed to study with Musonius Rufus, one of the most popular and highly regarded Stoic teachers in Rome. Epictetus became a convert. Eventually he was given his freedom, and as a freed man became a teacher of philosophy in the heart of the empire.

About the year 92, the emperor Domitian, who disliked philosophy, banished all philosophers from Rome. Epictetus moved to Nicopolis on the eastern shore of the Adriatic where he opened another school, living and teaching in exile for the rest of his life. It was here that he made his greatest contribution to the Stoa. One of his devoted pupils, Arrian, who later became a historian and administrator of some renown, published eight volumes of lecture notes, four of which have survived and are collected into one volume known as *The Discourses of Epictetus*.

These discourses are more notable for their oratorical power than for their intellectual insight. Epictetus' style was that of a teacher and a preacher with a fervor Arrian claimed was irresistible. His recurrent theme of freedom, certainly one he knew deeply, emphasized that the body may be enslaved, it may be broken, but the mind was forever free. The gods themselves could not restrain it. This was man's power, his alone, and the only power truly within his control. The circumstances of his death are unknown.

Marcus Aurelius (121-180), Emperor

The last ten years of Marcus Aurelius' life were spent almost continually with his armies driving

back the barbarians on the Danube frontier. This was an emperor who genuinely disliked warfare and the sight of blood, who even decreed that the gladiators back in Rome should fight only with blunt swords, but who also lived and died by his duty, mortally spent in combat. This was a great Stoic, humane and noble, meticulously just, the first ruler to wear the philosopher's beard.

It is truly an honor to know the intimate thoughts of such a man. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, written alone in these last ten years of his life, are clearly the notes of a man writing thoughts that fortified him through each day. No one knows how they were preserved. The first the world heard of them was from an obscure Medieval scholar who mentions them more than 700 years after the emperor's death. The basic themes of these meditations, repeated many times and many ways, are that we should not be deceived by the things others value, that we should cooperate with the divine flow of destiny, and we should always perform our duty to family, friends, and country with honor and charity for all.

They were the words of one of the last and greatest of the Roman Stoics. After his death, the empire was battered by a hundred years of plague, civil wars, and barbarian conquest. It was a time when people needed and wanted a savior to rescue them from almost constant grief and fear. Christianity offered that promise, a savior who they claimed was God, one who promised he would return soon to rescue his chosen people, and one who would destroy the wicked and create a safe haven, a heaven in which his followers would dwell forever. All they needed to do was believe, and all these things would come to pass, even in their lifetime. It was a powerful message, and the people yearned for it to be true, and the Stoics went to work for the Christians.

THE NEW STOA

In the beginning, the sudden rise in fortunes of the Christian cult presented a new opportunity and responsibility to explain what their beliefs were all about. Most of the early, articulate leaders of the faith were well schooled in the classics in which Stoicism was, more often than not, the central focus of their education. It was not uncommon for the early Christian writers, called apologists, to flesh out their stories and beliefs in Jesus as the son of God with Stoic cosmology and ethics.

Eventually, much of Stoic doctrine was absorbed into Western intellectual history with the help of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, St. Jerome, John Cassian, St. Augustine, Peter Abelard, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart, to name a few. There was no common agreement about which of its themes were correct, incorrect, or irrelevant. Even today, Christian writers disagree on many things. But whether they agreed or disagreed, Stoicism was permanently impressed into the traditions laid down by the Christian thinkers of the early Middle Ages to be taken up again and again, studied, argued, accepted, and rejected through the later Middle Ages.

By the time of the Renaissance, Stoic philosophy became even more central to Western thought. The heroic ideal of the Shakespearean tragedy is a Stoic. Queen Elizabeth I was an admirer of Stoicism and personally translated the *Discourses of Epictetus* into Elizabethan English. The ethics of the Stoa predominated and inspired Renaissance philosophers and essayists in their creation of the new humanism of that era.

There are more books and scholarly articles written on Stoic philosophy today than there has been in any other time in its history. The academic community breathed new life and meaning into the Stoa, and a new age began. Right now, Stoics are alive and well and organized as never before. We are living as world citizens at New Stoa, a cybercity on the Internet. This is the original and oldest Stoic community, founded as a website on the Internet in 1996.

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The Roman Stoics

The following excerpts are from the three Roman Stoics for which we have complete works. The writings of the Greek Stoics of the earlier Hellenistic Period have all been lost and are only known by fragments of many references to them. Piecing together the thoughts of the Greek Stoics is the work of scholars and has been a goldmine of academic effort in the past century. With the work of the Romans, all written in Latin, there can be little doubt as to what they said and meant.

Seneca (c.3 BCE-65)

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, aka Seneca the Younger, was a statesman, a Stoic philosopher, and a man of letters. He became chief minister of the Roman Empire for several years while Nero was too preoccupied with hedonistic debauchery to be bothered. Seneca's administration was reputed to be one of the soundest periods of imperial government in its history. In a fit of jealousy, Seneca was later commanded by Nero to commit suicide. The following passages have been selected from Seneca's Letters From A Stoic to provide a sampling of his philosophy and style. They are based upon R.M. Gummere's 1917 translation and have been edited by Erik Wiegardt to reflect a more contemporary punctuation and prose.

Letter V, 5: The first thing which philosophy promises is fellowship with all humanity. In other words, belonging and community. We part company with this promise if we are unlike other men. We must see to it that the means by which we wish to draw admiration be not absurd and odious. Our motto, as you know, is "Live according to Nature," but it is quite contrary to nature to torture the body, to hate refinement, to be dirty on purpose, to eat food that is not only plain, but disgusting. Just as it is a sign of luxury to seek out dainties, so it is madness to avoid that which is customary and can be purchased at a reasonable price. Philosophy calls for plain living, not for penance, and we may be plain and neat at the same time. I approve of moderation, and our life should observe a happy medium between the ways of a sage and the ways of the world at large.

Letter XVI, 3: Philosophy is not a popular entertainment; it is not devised for show. It is not a matter of words, but of facts. It is not pursued in order that the day may yield some amusement before it is spent, or that our leisure may be relieved of a tedium that irks us. It builds and shapes the soul; it orders our life, guides our conduct, shows us what we should do and what we should leave undone; it sits at the helm and directs our course as we waver amid uncertainties. Without it, no one can live fearlessly or in peace of mind. Countless things that happen every hour call for advice; and such advice is to be sought in philosophy.

Letter XXVII, 3: A noble character alone affords everlasting peace and joy. Even if some unpleasantness does arise, it is but a drifting cloud floating in a sunny sky.

Letter XXXIII, 11: Truth will never be discovered if we are content with discoveries that have already been made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that is a shortcut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Those who have made

these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And, there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover.

Letter XLI, 9: Praise that quality in mankind which can neither be given nor snatched away, that which is the greatness of our kind. Do you ask what this is? It is our soul, and the perfection of reason in that soul. For we are a reasoning animal. Therefore, our highest good is attained if we have fulfilled the good for which we were born. And what is it that reason demands of us? The easiest thing in the world – that we live in accordance with our natures. But this is turned into a hard task by the general madness of the world that pushes each of us into vice.

Letter XLVIII, 8-9: Do you really want to know what philosophy offers humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty harasses another; a third is annoyed by his neighbor's wealth or by his own....Humanity is stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; humanities' hopes and resources depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their unhappiness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth. Tell them what Nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that it has laid down, how pleasant and easy life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexing it is for those who have put their trust in opinions rather than in Nature.

Letter LIII, 8: Why will no one confess his faults? Because he is still in their grasp. Only one who is awake can remember a dream, and similarly a confession of error is proof of a sound mind. Let us, therefore, rouse ourselves, that we may be able to correct our mistakes. Philosophy, however, is the only power that can stir us, the only power that can shake off our deep slumber.

Letter LV, 1: I have just returned from a ride in my litter, and I am as weary as if I had walked the distance instead of being seated....Nature gave us legs to do our own walking and eyes to do our own seeing. Our luxuries have condemned us to weakness, and we have ceased to be able to do that which we have long declined to do.

Letter LV, 8: The place where you live contributes little to your tranquillity; it is the mind which must make everything agreeable to itself. I have seen men despondent in a bright and beautiful villa, and I have seen men exhausting themselves with business in the midst of a solitude.

Letter LXVIII, 13: Everything depends on opinion – ambition, luxury, greed – all are based on opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer. A man is as wretched as he has convinced himself that he is.

Ibid., 21: Do you think that you are doing nothing if you preserve your good nature in your illness? You will be showing that a disease can be overcome, or at any rate endured. There is, I assure you, a place for courage even upon a bed of sickness. It is not only combat that proves the soul alert and unconquered by fear; we can display bravery even when lying in a bed.

XC, 15: The things that are truly necessary require no great effort for their acquisition; it is only the luxuries that call for so much labor.

Ibid., 18: Nature was not unkind to humanity.... It is we who have made everything difficult for ourselves through our disdain for what is easy. Houses, shelter, creature comforts, food, and all that has

now become the source of vast trouble, were once ready at hand, free to all, and obtainable for little effort. It is we who have made all those things valuable, we who have made them admired, we who have caused them to be sought for by numerous and complicated ways. Nature makes no great demands. It is luxury that has turned its back upon Nature. Each day we compound our desire for luxuries, and in all ages these desires have been gathering strength and promoting our vices.

Ibid., 28: The path of wisdom leads to a state of happiness. In this direction it guides and opens the way for us. It shows us what things are truly bad and what things are seemingly bad, and with this understanding it strips our minds of vain illusion. It bestows upon us a greatness which is real and substantial, even as it reveals the inflated and showy but filled with emptiness.

Letter XCII, 3: What is the happy life? It is peace of mind and lasting tranquillity. This will be yours if you possess greatness of soul. It will be yours if you possess the steadfastness that resolutely clings to a good judgment just reached. How do you reach this condition? By gaining a complete view of truth, by maintaining order, measure, fitness, and a will that is inoffensive and kindly, that is intent upon reason and never departs therefrom, that commands at the same time love and admiration. In short, to give you the principle in brief compass, the wise man's soul ought to be such as would be proper for a god.

Epictetus (60-120 CE)

The original discourses were class notes written by Arrian, a devoted pupil of Epictetus, the great Stoic teacher and former slave. Arrian went on to become a distinguished statesman during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, but it is for these class notes that he will always be remembered. The following passages have been selected to give you both the essence of Epictetus's lectures and the manner in which he presented them. They are based upon George Long's 1904 translation and have been edited by Erik Wiegardt to reflect a more contemporary punctuation and prose.

Book I

Chapter 1

Of all the human faculties, you will find only one which is capable of both contemplating itself and of approving or disapproving of itself. Does grammar possess the contemplating power? No...when you write something to your friend grammar will tell you what words you should write, but whether you should write or not grammar will not tell you. And so it is with music as to musical sounds, but whether you should sing at the present time and play on the lute, or do neither, music will not tell you. What faculty then will tell you? That which contemplates both itself and all other things. And what is this faculty? The rational faculty; for this is the only faculty that we have received [from Nature] which examines itself...and all other faculties.

As was then fitting, that which is best of all and supreme over all is the only thing which the gods have placed in our power – so that we may make the right use of appearances. All other things they have not placed in our power.

But now, when it is in our power to look after one thing, and to attach ourselves to it, we prefer to look after many things, and to be bound to many things: to the body and to property, and to brother and to friend, and to child and to slave. Since then we are bound to many things, we are burdened by them and dragged down.

Chapter 6

God created non-rational animals to make use of appearances, but created us to understand the use of appearances. It is therefore enough for them to eat and drink, and to sleep and to copulate, and to do all the other things which they do. But for us, to whom Nature has also given the intellectual faculty, these things are not sufficient.

God has created man to be a spectator of God and of His works; and not only a spectator of them, but also an interpreter. For this reason it is shameful for man to begin and end where the non-rational animals do; but rather he ought to begin where they begin and end where Nature ends in us – in contemplation and understanding, and in a way of life conformable to Nature.

Chapter 12

Matters are brought before you which are equal to the reasoning power which you possess, but you turn away from this power at the very time when you ought to be the most open and discerning. Why do you not thank the gods for allowing you to be above the things which are not in your power, and only made you accountable for those which are in your power? As to your parents, the gods have left you free from responsibility; and the same is true with respect to your brothers, and your body, and possessions, and death and life. For what then have they made you responsible? For that which alone is in your power, the proper use of appearances. Why are you concerned about matters for which you are not responsible? This is only giving yourself a lot of trouble.

Chapter 28

What is the cause of agreeing to anything? The fact that it appears to be true. It is not possible to agree to that which appears to be false. Why? Because this is the very nature of the understanding: to incline to the true, to be dissatisfied with the false, and in matters of uncertainty to withhold agreement. What is the proof of this? [If it is now day] persuade yourself, if you can, that it is now night. It's impossible. Take away your belief that it is day. Impossible. Persuade yourself that the total number of stars are an even or an odd number. Impossible. When any man agrees to that which is false, be assured that he did not intend to agree to it as false, for every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth, as Plato says; but the falsity seemed to him to be true....Can a man think that a thing is useful to him and not choose it? He can not.

Book II

Chapter 2

Consider, you who are going into court, what you wish to maintain and what you wish to succeed in. For if you wish to maintain a will conformable to Nature, you have every security, every facility, you have no troubles. For if you wish to maintain what is in your own power and is naturally free, and if you are content with these, what else do you care for? For who is the master of such things? Who can take them away? If you choose to be modest and faithful, who shall not allow you to be so?

But if you wish to maintain externals also – your poor body, your little property, and your little reputation – I advise you to make from this moment all possible preparation, and then consider both the nature of your judge and your adversary. If it is necessary to embrace his knees, embrace his knees; if to weep, weep; if to groan, groan. For when you are a slave to externals, then be a slave and do not resist, and do not sometimes choose to be a slave, and sometimes choose not to be a slave. But with all your mind, be one or the other, either free or a slave, either instructed or uninstructed, either a noble

character or a mean one....

Remember, then, this general principle and you will need no other. If you desire externals, you must of necessity be subjected to the will of your master. And who is your master? Anyone who has power over the things which you seek or try or avoid.

Chapter 9

Everyone is improved and preserved by corresponding acts: the carpenter by acts of carpentry, the grammarian by the acts of good grammar. But if a man accustoms himself to write ungrammatically, of necessity his art will be corrupted and destroyed. Thus modest actions preserve the modest man, and immodest actions destroy him. Actions of fidelity preserve the faithful man, and the contrary actions destroy him. And on the other hand, contrary actions strengthen contrary characters: shamelessness strengthens the shameless man, faithlessness the faithless man, abusive words the abusive man, anger the man of an angry temper, and unequal receiving and giving make the greedy man more greedy. For this reason philosophers admonish us not to be satisfied with learning only, but also to add study and then practice.

Chapter 19

Show me a person who is sick and happy, in danger and happy, dying and happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy. Show that person to me for, by the gods, I wish to see a Stoic. If you cannot show me such a one, at least show me one who is forming, one who has shown a tendency to be a Stoic. Do me this favor. Do not begrudge an old man seeing a sight which I have not yet seen.

Book III

Chapter 1

What then makes a man beautiful? Is it that which in its kind makes both a dog and a horse beautiful? "It is," the student said. What then makes a dog beautiful? The possession of the excellence of a dog. And what makes a horse beautiful? The possession of the excellence of a horse. What then makes a man beautiful? Is it not the possession of the excellence of a man? And do you then, if you wish to be beautiful, young man, labor at this, the acquisition of human excellence. But what is this? Observe whom you yourself praise when you praise many persons without partiality. Do you praise the just or the unjust? "The just." Which do you praise, the moderate or the immoderate? "The moderate." And the temperate or the intemperate? "The temperate." Then, if you make yourself such a person, you will know that you make yourself beautiful. But so long as you neglect these things, you must be ugly, even though you contrive all you can to appear beautiful.

Chapter 11

Whoever thinks anything to be good except those things which depend on the will, let him envy, let him desire, let him flatter, let him be perturbed; whoever considers anything else to be evil, let him grieve, let him lament, let him weep, let him be unhappy. And yet, though we are severely punished, we can not resist.

Chapter 24

Let not another's disagreement with Nature be an evil to you: for you are not formed by Nature to be depressed with others nor to be unhappy with others, but to be happy with them. If a man is unhappy, remember that his unhappiness is his own fault; for God has made all men to be happy, to be free from disturbance. For this purpose, God has given some things to each person as his own and other things

not as his own.

Book IV

Chapter 1

What is it that makes a man free and his own master? For wealth does not do it, nor consulship, nor high office, nor royal power. Something else must be discovered. What is that makes us free to write with skill? Knowledge of the art of writing. What is it in playing a musical instrument? The art of playing that instrument. Therefore in life also it is the art of living.

Chapter 7

Show me the swords of the guards. See how big and sharp they are. What do these big and sharp swords do? They kill. And what does a fever do? The same. And a falling roof? The same. Then, would you have me wonder at these things and worship them, and go about as the slave of all of them? I hope these things will not happen, but as soon as I learn that everything which has come into existence must also go out of it, that the universe will neither stand still nor be impeded, then I no longer consider it any difference whether a fever shall do it, or a roof or a soldier. But if we must make a comparison between these things, I know that the soldier will do it with less trouble, and quicker. When I neither fear anything which a tyrant can do to me, nor desire anything which he can give, why do I still look on with wonder? Why am I still amazed? Why do I fear the guards?

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Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of things. Thus, death is nothing terrible...the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible. Epictetus, *Enchiridion* #5

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There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

Wm. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 259

Marcus Aurelius (121-180)

Marcus Aurelius was the last great emperor of ancient Rome, and he would likely be the first to attribute that greatness to his love of Stoic philosophy. Following his death, the empire went into a long decline from which it never recovered. These meditations were never meant for publication but were only written as thoughts to himself in a journal he kept near the end of his life. These lofty and soul-searching passages have spoken to open hearts and minds for many centuries. What follows is based upon George Long's 1904 translation and has been edited by Erik Wiegardt to reflect a more contemporary punctuation and prose.

Book 2.1: Begin the morning by saying to yourself: I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, the arrogant, deceitful, envious, and antisocial. All of these unpleasant qualities are the result of ignorance of what is good and bad. I cannot be angry with them. I have seen that the good is beautiful, and that the bad is ugly, and that the nature of those who do wrong is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but in that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity as myself. But, no one can fix on me what is ugly, and I can neither be injured by any of them nor hate them. We

are made for co-operation, like our two feet, our two hands, our two eyelids, or like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another is contrary to nature, and it is acting against one another to be annoyed and to turn away.

2.9: This you must always bear in mind: what is the nature of the whole, and what is my nature, and how this is related to that, and what kind of a part it is of what kind of a whole; and that there is no one who hinders me from always doing and saying the things which are according to the Nature of which I am a part.

2.17: Human life is but a point in time, and the substance of it is constantly changing, and the perceptions are dull, and the composition of the body is subject to putrefaction, and the soul is a whirl, and fortune is hard to divine, and fame is a thing devoid of judgment. And, in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a flowing stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and a vapour, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after fame comes oblivion. What then is that which is able to guide a man? One thing and only one, philosophy.

Book 3.10: Throw away everything but this: everyone lives only in this present time, which is an indivisible point, and all the rest of that life is either in the past or in the future. The time in which everyone lives is short, and the corner of the earth where one lives is small; and the longest posthumous fame is brief, and even this is only continued by a succession of poor human beings who will very soon die, and who don't even know themselves let alone one who died long ago.

Book 4.3: Why are you discontent? With the evil that men do? Remember that rational animals exist for one another, that to endure is a part of justice, and that men do wrong involuntarily. Consider how many already – after mutual enmity, suspicion, hatred, and fighting – have been stretched out dead and reduced to ashes and quiet at last.

4.7: Take away the complaint, "I have been harmed," and the harm is taken away.

4.40: Constantly regard the universe as one living being having one substance and one soul. Observe how all things have reference to one perception, the perception of this one living being, and how all things act with one movement, and how all things are the cooperating causes of all things which exist. Observe, too, the continuous spinning of the thread and the texture of the web.

4.43-4: Time is like a river made up of events in a violent stream. As soon as the event has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and it too is carried away. Everything which happens is as familiar and well known as the rose in spring and the fruit in summer; and the same is true for disease and death and calamity and treachery, and whatever else delights fools – or irritates them.

Book 5.6: One person who has done you a favor will openly claim credit for it. Another will secretly think of you as being in his debt. A third, hardly even knows what he has done. He is like a vine which has produced grapes and seeks for nothing more after it has produced its proper fruit. He is like the horse when it has run a race, a dog when it has tracked game, and a bee when it has made honey. The third man, when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act, just as a vine goes on to produce the grapes of a new season.

5.10: The phenomenon of existence is so veiled in obscurity that it can baffle even the best

philosophers. Even the Stoics themselves have difficulty and admit that all our opinions are subject to change; for where is the man who is infallible?

5.16: The habits of your thoughts will become the character of your mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts. Dye it, then, with thoughts such as these: wherever one lives, one can live well – even if he must live in a palace.

5.28: Are you angry with those who have smelly armpits? Are you angry with those who have bad breath? What good is your anger? One person has bad breath, another has smelly armpits – it is normal for such odors to come from such things.

5.33: Soon, very soon, you will be ashes or skeleton, and you will either be a famous name or you won't. But even a great name is only a sound and an echo. And the things which are much valued in life are empty and rotten and trifling, like little dogs biting one another, and little children quarrelling, then laughing, then moments later in tears.

Book 6.10: The universe is either chaos and randomness; or it is unity, order, and providence. If it is the former, why should I wish to remain in such confusion and disorder? And why should I wish for anything other than returning to the earth? And why am I disturbed, the dispersion of my elements will happen no matter what I do? But if the other supposition is true, then I venerate, and I am firm, and I trust in the god of Nature who governs.

6.21: If anyone is able to convince me and show me that I do not think or act correctly, I will gladly change. I seek the truth, and no one was ever injured by truth. Injury only comes to those who persist in error and ignorance.

Book 7.18: Is anyone afraid of change? Why? What can take place without change? What is more pleasing or more suitable to the universal nature? Can you take a bath unless the wood is set afire and undergoes a change? Can you be nourished unless the food undergoes a change? And can anything else that is useful be accomplished without change? Do you not see then that changes in yourself are just the same and equally necessary for the universal nature?

7.65: Take care not to feel towards the mean-spirited as they feel towards you.

Book 8.5: This is the chief thing: do not be disturbed. All things are in accordance with the nature of the universe, and in a little while you will be nobody and nowhere, like Hadrianus and Augustus. Next, focus steadily on your work and at the same time remember that it is your duty to be a good man. Do what Nature demands without turning aside. Speak as it seems to you most just, but with an even disposition and with modesty and without hypocrisy.

8.28: Pain is either an evil to the body... or to the soul; but it is in the power of the soul to maintain its own serenity and tranquillity, and not to think that pain is an evil. Every judgment and movement and desire and aversion is within where evil cannot ascend.

8.55: Wickedness does no harm at all to the universe in general; and the wickedness of one person does no harm to another in particular. It is only harmful to those who have it in their power to be released from it as soon as they choose to do so.

8.58: He who fears death either fears the loss of sensation or a different kind of sensation. But if you have no sensation, you will not feel any harm; and if you acquire another kind of sensation, you will be a different kind of living being, and you will not cease to live.

Book 10.4: When others are mistaken, instruct them kindly and show them the error. But if you are unable, blame yourself – or, don't even blame yourself.

Book 12.5: How can it be that Nature, after having arranged all things so well and benevolently for humanity, would have overlooked the fact that some of the very good among us, those who have had the most communion with the divine, and through altruistic acts and spiritual practices have been the most intimate with the divine, when once they are dead their life should be extinguished completely? But even if this were so, we can be assured that if it ought to have been otherwise, Nature would have done otherwise. For if it were just, it would also be possible, and if it were in accordance with Nature, then it would have been done.

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Stoicism in 5 Minutes

For many years the most difficult question I have had to answer is, “What is Stoicism?” More often than not the questioner specifically requests the five-minute version, sometimes the three-minute version. People don't understand that this is a lot like asking what is Buddhism? Could a Buddhist priest easily and adequately explain the history and principles of Buddhism in five minutes? Digging into my memory banks for a quick and easy way to explain what I know about Stoicism usually ends up being a disjointed mess. For those who ask for the three-minute version, I don't even bother to try. I tell them it isn't possible. I presume they're not really interested anyway, that they only asked the question to be polite, so I've just saved both of us a lot of trouble.

I've finally found a way to give a five-minute version of Stoic philosophy – all based upon a simple formula, including a graphic symbol to help me remember. The symbol is on the cover of this handbook appearing as a breastplate for the phoenix. It has four elements:

Stoicism in 5 Minutes

1. The Whole: A circle, representing the Whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, the One unifying all parts of reality, the Stoic deity as Nature. The Stoic God is the physical manifestation and processes of Nature. The universe is a living organism, and we are all creations of Nature. Each of us possesses a fragment of its intelligence and can rightly be called a son or daughter of God. The deist Stoic is a panentheist who believes Nature is a conscious and benevolent god, the Whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The atheist Stoic is a pantheist who believes that God is only a name that represents the unconscious processes of nature and is no more or less than the sum of all parts. The agnostic or skeptical Stoic is unwilling to commit to either point of view. That's OK. The Stoic today can be a deist, an atheist, or a skeptic and be welcome in our community.
2. The Polarities: A diagonal line representing the connection of opposites, the Polarities, aka the dynamic continuum, that is essential for physical existence to occur. The natural world exists on a dynamic continuum of opposites. The Polarities of hot/cold, black/white, sweet/sour, life/death, et cetera, often appear to human beings to be good or bad depending on our own preferences and beliefs, but both ends of the continuum are necessary for life to exist in this material world. There is no evil in Nature, it is only our view of things that make appearances seem good or bad. Only humans are capable of evil, because only we have the reasoning ability that allows us to choose to evolve or devolve ethically within a single lifetime.
3. The Treasures: Three triangles representing the three Treasures of Beauty, Truth, and Love given to us by Nature to make life worth living and encourage virtue. Nature created us so that we could be aware of and appreciate life's greatest treasures – no matter how they may appear or what form they may take according to one's time and place in history. We are *not* attracted to ugliness, falsehood, and hate – the opposite of the Treasures, the anti-treasures. From this we learn of the benevolence and the will of Nature. All creatures are instilled with a Primary Impulse at birth, care for itself above all things. In human beings, this self-love can evolve and grow to become altruism, love of others even at the sacrifice of one's own self. It is our innate attraction to the Treasures from birth and our innate repulsion to their opposites that shows us

the way to virtue and the art of living.

4. The Virtues: four lines of the square representing the four cardinal Virtues of Wisdom, Justice, Courage, and Decorum, the only good and the source of our noble character and happiness. It is from the Primary Impulse of self-**love** and our attraction to **beauty** and to the search for **truth** that we discover the highest good. The highest good is that which is always good. Only virtue as encompassed by *wisdom* qualifies as the highest good, because it is good in sickness and health, poverty and wealth, and in every other condition of human existence. Pleasure, power, and wealth cannot qualify as the highest good, because their exercise can result in unpleasantness, both for the self and for others. Once embraced, the virtues lead to nobility of character and a greatness of soul that can never be taken away.

Nature gave us one power: the power of **choice** in rightly judging and acting upon our impressions. This power is internal and cannot be taken from us; all else is external and can be taken away (Epictetus). Choices made by the will among the impressions received in the mind achieve excellence when choosing only that which is always in our best interest. That which is always in our best interest is that which is always good, the highest good, virtue. Excellent choice is a uniquely human art, the art of living, which leads to our greatest and only true possession, a noble character.

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The Ethical Paradox

affinity: A natural liking for or attraction to a person, place or thing

Paradoxically, self-love is the foundation and starting point for Stoic ethics. The self-love of an infant, love of family as a child, love of country as a patriot, even love of beauty and the pursuit of truth are all appropriate activities for which humans feel a *natural* liking for or attraction to. The Affinity Principle, or *oikeiosis* as it was called in antiquity, was an idea first discovered by early Stoics. We believe it is the primary impulse of *all* living creatures, including human beings. One could even extend this idea to all living *things*, not just creatures. Everything that lives strives with all its power to survive – from blue-green algae to the Nobel Prize-winning scientist.

In antiquity, such striving was first recognized in higher animals. The philosopher Diogenes Laertius said, “An animal's first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation.” Before him, it was Chrysippus, the third head of the Stoic school, who first said, “The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof (D.L. Bk. VII. 85).” This is the benevolence of Nature, the *beginning* of ethics for the Stoic and the *end* of the discussion for the Epicurean and hedonist. Unlike those who believe that pleasure is our ultimate good, we believe that our reasoning faculty expands this natural and Primary Impulse of self-love into stages of ethical evolution that achieve a higher good, both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Cicero, a careful student of Stoicism and a great resource for ancient Stoic thought, detailed five stages in this evolution (Fin iii 20-I), but I will only outline three:

1. Care for the self and its needs. The Primary Impulse.
2. Learned ability to make rational distinctions between those things which are in agreement with Nature and those which are not.
3. Choosing and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature.

As the rational mind develops, our self-love, or affinity for that which is dearest to us, *can* expand from the self to include first the mother, then the family, a romantic partner, the community, our children, and so on. Each stage retains the stage before it as one evolves ethically. However, despite the developing rational faculty, ethical evolution is *not* automatic. Many people do *not* gain in wisdom as they get older; they only gain in weight. **Without effort**, then, we get stuck in stage one or two; otherwise all people would become wise and virtuous. Obviously, they do not. It takes an act of choice and will to evolve from the primary impulse of infantile ego, stage one, to selecting and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature, stage three.

When the individual has acquired the mature capacity for reason and chooses to live conformably with Nature, s/he has evolved to an entirely new realization. When the final stage is achieved, the individual realizes life on a higher plane than all previous stages, and virtue is good for its own sake. Self-love has evolved through love of family, spouse, children, country, and finally a love for all humanity. This is where the Primary Impulse that Nature has given us ultimately leads: from self-love to lover of humanity, from egoist to altruist. This is the ethical paradox of our philosophy and the promise of evolution to a noble character in one lifetime. Everyone can be a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. Everyone. Stop procrastinating about *when* you are going to be one. Just be one. It is your birthright, and Nature has shown the way.

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