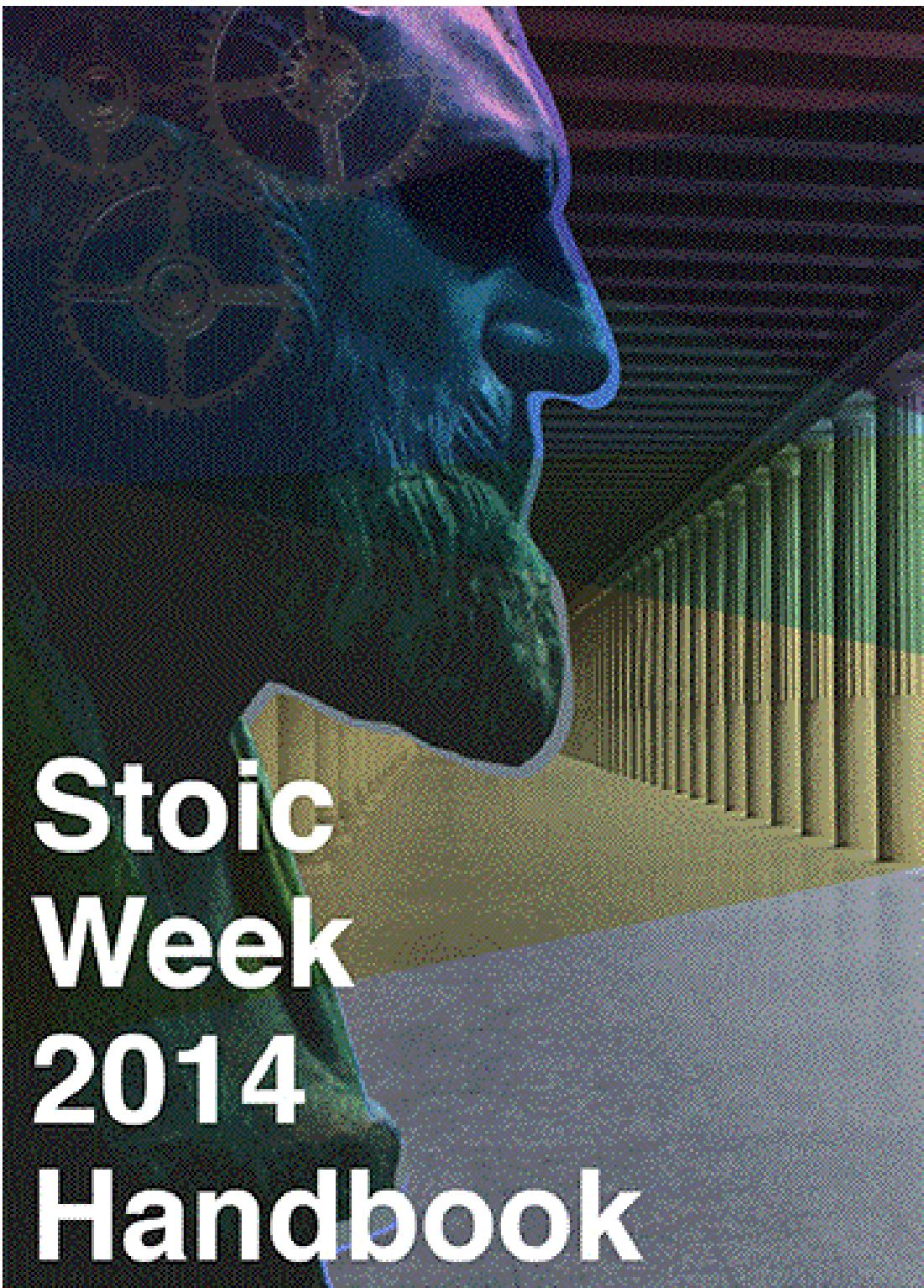


# The Stoic Week 2014 Handbook

## Live Like a Stoic for a Week

Last Revision: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2014



**Stoic  
Week  
2014  
Handbook**

# [Contents](#)

## [Introduction](#)

### [Who Were the Stoics?](#)

### [Central Stoic Ideas](#)

### [Stoic Maxims & Affirmations](#)

### [Stoic Week: Your Daily Routine](#)

### [The Stoic Self-Monitoring Record](#)

1. [Monday: What is in our Power?](#)
2. [Tuesday: Stoic Mindfulness](#)
3. [Wednesday: Self-Discipline & Stoic Simplicity](#)
4. [Thursday: Virtue and Relationships with Others](#)
5. [Friday: Action & The Stoic Reserve Clause](#)
6. [Saturday: Preparation for Adversity](#)
7. [Sunday: The View from Above](#)

## [After Stoic Week](#)

## [Appendices](#)

1. [Meet the Team](#)
2. [Further Reading](#)

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## **Terms of use**

The contents of this handbook are not intended as a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist. This experiment is not suitable for anyone who is suffering from psychosis, personality disorder, clinical depression, PTSD, or other severe mental health problems. Undertaking this trial shall be taken to be an acknowledgement by the participant that they are aware of and accept responsibility in relation to the foregoing.

## Introduction

Welcome to this opportunity to take part in a unique experiment: to follow the two millennia old Stoic Philosophy as a Way of Life in the modern day! This handbook stems from a project bringing together academics and psychotherapists who want to explore the potential benefits of ancient Stoicism. In 2013, Stoic Week proved popular and was followed by over 2,400 people and we are now repeating the experiment the light of the feedback we gained from it and from our follow-up Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training (SMRT) elearning course, in which over 500 participants followed Stoic practices for four weeks.

In this handbook, you will find advice on how to adapt and follow Stoic principles, with a combination of general theory and more specific, step-by-step guidance on certain Stoic exercises. These materials have been prepared by experts in the field and give you an unusual, and free, chance for personal development.

### **Q: How do I know that living like a Stoic will benefit me?**

A: You don't. Indeed, one of the reasons we are conducting the experiment is to find out whether, and how, Stoic practices can help us to live better lives. Having said that, in 2013, the findings showed that on average Life Satisfaction increased by 14%, optimism by 18% and joy by 12%. Anger decreased by 13% and negativity by 12%. The Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training (SMRT) course appeared to show that when we extended this from one week to four weeks, Life Satisfaction increased by 27%, and negative emotions decreased by 23%.

The benefit for you may also be educational, in understanding what Stoicism is about; it may be psychological, helping you become more resilient and possibly even happier; it may be moral, you may find that the week helps you develop certain desirable ethical qualities. You may even find that Stoicism as a philosophy just isn't for you, which might in itself be a valuable thing to learn. However, most of the people who have participated in Stoic Week and related events have reported finding the experience very enjoyable and personally beneficial.

### **Q: What's the basic idea?**

A: This is what you need to do:

1. Complete the online questionnaires at the beginning and end of Stoic Week.
2. Follow the daily schedule, consisting of a passage for reflection and Stoic meditation morning and evening. At lunchtime, or at another time that is good for you, consider the Stoic exercise for that day.

The morning and evening meditation practices will provide you with a daily routine or structure to help you reflect on what happens each day. Guidelines for the Stoic meditations are offered in this booklet, but there are also guided audio exercises if you wish to use them. You can download these either from the Stoicism Today blog site or from the Modern Stoicism elearning site.

### [MP3 Audio Recordings on Stoicism Today](#)

### [MP3 Audio Recordings on Modern Stoicism](#)

You'll begin by learning to keep a record of your thoughts, actions, and feelings, and to start observing them in a more detached and "philosophical" way. One of the main practical themes that runs through Stoicism, and therefore this Handbook, is the strategy of distinguishing between things under your control and things that are not. The Stoics believed this takes training to do well but that it's the key to self-discipline and overcoming emotional disturbance. This requires continual attention to your own thoughts and judgements, which we can describe it as a kind of 'mindfulness' practice. You'll then build upon this foundation by exploring different Stoic concepts and techniques each day, through the course of the week.

### **Q: I'm worried I may not have time to do everything. How can I give myself the best chance of making the most of it?**

A: It will probably be helpful for you to think of this as a definite, short-term commitment—similar perhaps to the effort you would put in to rehearsing the week before appearing in a play, or an exam, or training for a sporting event. Ideally, this might take about 15 minutes in the morning and evening, and the same at lunchtime, although you might want to spend more or less. If you can only spare five or ten minutes, that's fine. This is similar to the commitment required for most research studies on psychological self-help or skills training.

#### **Q. How can I make use of modern technology whilst living like a Stoic?**

Here are some ideas:

- Record a video diary of your experiences of living like a Stoic
- Blog about your experiences.
- Record your experiences on Facebook.
- Tweet about your experiences, or post Stoic adages on Twitter as you go along (#stoicweek).
- Each day summarise what you have learnt as a tweet.
- Use your phone to set reminders to start your Stoic practices.
- Make use of the online forums on [modernstoicism.com](http://modernstoicism.com) or on the [Facebook group](#).

Which of these appeal to you? How many other ways can you use technology to help you live like a Stoic? If you are doing the experiment with other people, it might help to discuss your experiences regularly. Perhaps you could have a 10 minute Stoic coffee each day where you touch base with others and discuss how you are doing.

#### **Q: How will I know whether it has helped or not?**

A: You will fill in questionnaires before and after the week which will help you to see objective measures of change and also allow you to reflect on the experience. Your doing so will also help us to evaluate the benefits and limitations of Stoic practices. In Stoic terms, you could even say that participation in the experiment can be seen as contributing to living a good life.

#### **Who Were the Stoics?**

Stoicism is an ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy. It was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 301 BC. The name comes from the painted porch or Stoa where he lectured to his students. Stoicism later became very popular in ancient Rome, where it continued to flourish after the disappearance of the original Greek school. Less than one per cent of the original writings of Stoicism now survive, however. The most significant ancient sources we have today are:

1. The many letters, essays and dialogues of the Roman statesman Seneca, who was a committed Stoic, and also advisor to the emperor Nero.
2. Four lengthy collections of *Discourses* and one concise *Handbook* of sayings compiled from the lectures of a Greek ex-slave called Epictetus by his student Arrian – Epictetus is the only Stoic teacher whose work survives in any significant quantity.
3. The private Stoic notebook or diary, the *Meditations*, of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was strongly influenced by Epictetus.

Much of the material in this handbook is drawn from the works of these three Roman Stoics, particularly Epictetus, whose short *Handbook* offers clear advice to someone who wants to live a Stoic life. In a sense, the handbook you're currently reading is intended as a modern version of the ancient handbook of Epictetus, although we strongly encourage you to read the original as well as other classical texts, and modern commentaries, so that you can deepen your understanding of Stoic philosophy and practices.

## Central Stoic Ideas

What is Stoicism? How might it help us to live better, happier lives today? Some of you will be drawn to this experiment because you already know a little bit about Stoicism and want to put it into practice for yourselves. Others may know very little about Stoicism and are simply curious to learn more. The ancient philosophical system of Stoicism was well-known for being both large and complex, addressing a wide range of topics. So it will be impossible to introduce it all, but here are three central ideas that are at the heart of Stoic ethical philosophy.

### 1. Value

The Stoics argued that the most important thing in life and the only thing with real value is ‘virtue’ or ‘excellence of character’. The core virtues for the Stoics were wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice. But Stoic virtue needs to be understood quite broadly, in terms of ethical principles as well as having a good character and good attitudes toward other people. Virtue is not just a matter of what’s going on in your head but also of what’s going in your family and social relations, your intentions, your actions, and your pattern of life as a whole.

The central Stoic claim is that virtue is ultimately the only thing that really matters; it is the only thing that is *truly* good and it is the only thing that can bring us well-being or happiness. Cultivating virtue, in terms of understanding, character and our relationships, ought to be our top priority, above all other things, if we want to live a good, happy life.

The Stoics also believe that, as human beings, we are naturally inclined to recognise the overriding value of virtue, and that we have an inbuilt instinct to want to benefit others and to express this desire in social involvement and in coming to see the bond between ourselves and all human beings.

Conversely all those external things that people often pursue – a good job, money, success, fame, and so on – cannot guarantee us happiness, the Stoics claim. They could well be *parts* of a happy life but, on their own, they will never deliver genuine fulfilment, unless we also have the virtues.

However this stress on the role of virtue does not mean that those things that people normally think of as good are not important – things such as health, having good friends, and financial means. It is just that our happiness depends ultimately on developing virtue rather than on having the opportunity to acquire these external things, which is always partly in the hands of fate.

### 2. Emotions

In the popular imagination a Stoic is someone who denies or represses their emotions in a potentially unhealthy way. This is a widespread misconception. The central Stoic claim is that our emotions are ultimately the product of judgements we make. It is because we think external events are what ‘really matters’ that we feel anger or fear. As we get a better understanding of what really matters, and what is ‘up to us’, then these unhealthy or irrational emotions will be replaced by healthy, rational ones. In short: as we develop ethically and as we see the absolute value of virtue, our emotional life will change for the better.

In the same way that faulty judgements lead to irrational emotions or misguided desires, so too will wise judgements lead to well-grounded desires and emotions. For example, the Stoics claimed there were three broad categories of good desires and emotions, which are part of a happy life and which naturally follow as a consequence of developing virtuous attitudes:

1. *Joy or delight*, in the experience of what is truly good, as opposed to empty or irrational pleasures.
2. *Caution or discretion*, directed at the prospect of what is truly bad, as opposed to irrational fear.
3. *Wishing or willing* what is truly good, including the well-being of others and ourselves, as opposed to irrational craving for things that are not ‘up to us’ like health, wealth, or reputation.

So the Stoic Sage is not a cold fish. In fact, the ancient Stoics repeatedly said their goal was not to be as unfeeling as someone with a heart of stone or iron but rather to develop the natural affection we have for those close to us, in

accordance with virtue, ultimately extending our ethical concern to humankind in general, by developing an attitude of philanthropy.

*No school has more goodness and gentleness; none has more love for human beings, nor more attention to the common good [than Stoicism]. The goal which it assigns to us is to be useful, to help others, and to take care, not only of ourselves, but of everyone in general and of each one in particular. (Seneca, On Clemency, 3.3)*

The Stoics also acknowledge the existence of certain *reflex-like* aspects of emotion, physiological reactions, such as blushing, stammering, or being startled. These typically remain involuntary and beyond our direct control, although we can choose how we respond to them and whether we allow ourselves to dwell on or escalate our first impressions and initial reactions into full-blown “passions” of an excessive or unhealthy sort. It’s one thing to be startled or taken by surprise, and another to continue needlessly dwelling on and worrying about unimportant things.

### 3. Nature & the Community of Humankind

One of the most famous ancient Stoic slogans is that we ought to live in harmony with Nature. What did they mean by this? The Stoics thought of Nature in at least three key ways.

The Stoics think that leading a life with virtue as your goal is the natural way for a human being to live. The Stoics encourage us to see that if we create a wholeness and coherence of moral character in ourselves, we are matching the coherence and unity that they see in the world as a whole.

The Stoics also encourage us to see ourselves as integral parts of nature. Today, many human beings are aware that they need to think more about the impact of human actions on the natural environment and to see themselves within the context of nature and the Stoic world-view can help us develop this attitude.

For the Stoics, our life-cycle, birth and death, are integral parts of our life in nature, and realising this can help us accept these events, including our own death and that of others.

As noted already, virtue is not just a matter of your state of mind but of how you relate to other people. The Stoics believe that most species of animals, and especially the human species, are naturally sociable in character. We naturally form attachments and we naturally live in communities. From this natural affection stems the Stoic ideal of the ‘community of humankind’. As Marcus Aurelius writes:

*We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature: and anger or rejection is opposition. (Meditations, 2.1)*

### Taking Part

If you are going to follow Stoic Week then you need to be open to these three central ideas. You don’t need to accept them uncritically, but you do at least need to be prepared to explore them further and consider whether they seem to you actually true as well as potentially beneficial to you in how you lead your life.

Our aim in this project is not to try to convince you of the truth of these claims but simply to see if they are helpful for you in the way you lead your life. If these three central ideas seem completely absurd to you then it may be that Stoic Week is not the right experiment for you.

## Stoic Maxims & Affirmations

The Stoics appear to have repeated certain key phrases or maxims to themselves in order to memorise them and have them constantly “ready-to-hand”, especially in the face of a crisis. Epictetus tells his students to repeat various statements to themselves mentally. Some of these are of a general nature, whereas others are things Stoics were told to say in response to specific emotional challenges. For instance, “You are just an impression and not at all the thing you claim to represent” and “This is nothing to me”, in response to troubling thoughts, or “It seemed right to him” when someone acts in a way that might be upsetting or objectionable.

The Stoic literature is full of brief “Laconic” phrases, memorable sayings that are eminently quotable but also helped Stoics to commit key philosophical ideas to memory as a way of coping with adverse circumstances. When someone complained to Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, that these philosophical sayings were too condensed, he replied that they were supposed to be concise and that if he could he’d abbreviate the sound of the syllables as well!

*Having these thoughts always at hand, and engrossing yourself in them when you are by yourself, and making them ready for use, you will never need any one to comfort and strengthen you.*  
*(Epictetus, Discourses, 3.24).*

### Example Self-Statements

Here are some examples of typical Stoic sayings, derived from the classical literature. In some cases they’ve been modified very slightly to make them more suitable for use as affirmations. When you repeat them, try to contemplate their meaning or, if you prefer, imagine that you’re rehearsing what it would be like to really accept them and believe in these principles completely.

### From the Handbook of Epictetus

- “Some things are under my control and other things are not.”
- “People are upset not by things but by their judgements about things.”
- “You are just an appearance and not at all the thing you claim to represent.”  
(Response to a troubling impression.)
- “You are nothing to me.”  
(Response to things not under your control.)
- “Virtue is the only true good.”
- “What is beyond my control is indifferent to me.”
- “If you want any good, get it from within yourself.”
- “Don’t demand that things go as you will, but will that they happen as they do, and your life will go smoothly.”
- “Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to the will.”
- “Never say of anything ‘I have lost it’ but ‘I have returned it.’”
- “It seemed right to them.” (Response to someone whose actions seem disagreeable to you.)
- “Everything has two handles, and can be picked up and carried either wisely or foolishly.”
- “Whoever yields properly to Fate, is deemed wise among men, and knows the laws of heaven.” (Quoted from Euripides)

These two famous sayings were also associated with Epictetus’ brand of Stoicism:

- “Remember thou must die.”
- “Endure and renounce” or “bear and forbear”, having the virtues of courage and self-discipline.

Some more suggestions from the Stoic community:

- “Remember too on every occasion which leads thee to the present difficulty to apply this principle: not that this is a misfortune, but that to bear it nobly is good fortune.” (Meditations, 4.49)
- “The thing that matters the most is not what you bear but how you bear it.” (Seneca, On Providence)
- “Begin at once to live, and count each separate day as a separate life.” (Seneca)
- “If I knew that it was fated for me to be sick, I would even wish for it; for the foot also, if it had intelligence, would volunteer to get muddy.” (Chrysippus)

#### **Audio Download: Stoic Attitudes Meditation**

You may also want to listen to the MP3 audio recording we created called the Stoic Attitudes Meditation. This contains a contemplative exercise consisting of a scripted series of philosophical affirmations, closely-based on the Stoic literature. You can download this along with the other exercises via the links in the *Introduction* to this Handbook.

## Stoic Week: Your Daily Routine

Each day in Stoic Week has its own central theme. These will build upon one another as the week progresses. This will make the whole week the beginning of a journey into Stoicism. Take some time out at lunchtime each day, or any time that suits you, to reflect on the day's theme and think about how it might shape the various activities in which you are engaged.

There are also morning and evening meditations to practise, which you should try, if possible, to practise at the beginning and end of each day. Let's now explore these two practices in more detail.

### Early-Morning Meditation

When you wake up each morning, take a few moments to compose yourself and then patiently rehearse the day ahead, planning how you can make yourself a better person, while also accepting that some things lie beyond your control.

1. Marcus Aurelius talks about walking on your own to a quiet place at daybreak and meditating upon the stars and the rising Sun, preparing for the day ahead. You can also do this at home, sitting on the end of your bed, or standing in front of the mirror in your bathroom, and still think of the sun rising against a backdrop of stars.
2. Pick a specific philosophical principle that you want to rehearse and repeat it to yourself a few times before imagining how you could put it into practice during the rest of the day. You might choose the key general Stoic theme: 'Some things are under our control whereas others are not', and to think about giving more importance to being a good person and acting well and treating things you cannot control as ultimately much less important.
3. Alternatively, you might pick a specific virtue that you want to cultivate and prepare yourself mentally for your day ahead, in broad outline, imagining how you would act if you showed more wisdom, justice, courage, or moderation.
4. Practise this meditation for about 5-10 minutes, picking out key events or specific challenges that might arise.

Once you've got into the habit of doing this, try imagining greater challenges in the day ahead such as some of your plans not going as you hope and dealing with difficult people. As you consider a possible difficulty, think about how you could tackle it with a Stoic principle or virtue.

*Say to yourself at daybreak: I shall come across the meddling busy-body, the ungrateful, the overbearing, the treacherous, the envious, and the antisocial. All this has befallen them because they cannot tell good from evil. (Meditations, 2.1)*

### Late-Evening Meditation

Epictetus and Seneca both allude to the use within Stoicism of a form of contemplative, philosophical self-analysis, practised regularly, each evening, which was borrowed from Pythagoreanism. For example, Epictetus quoted the following passage from the Golden Verses of Pythagoras to his students:

*"Allow not sleep to close your wearied eyes,  
Until you have reckoned up each daytime deed:  
'Where did I go wrong? What did I do? And what duty's left undone?'  
From first to last review your acts and then  
Reprove yourself for wretched [or cowardly] acts, but rejoice in those done well." (Discourses 3.10.2–3)*

For our purposes, at night, before going to sleep, take 5-10 minutes to review the events of your day, picturing them in your mind if possible. It's best if you can do this before actually getting into bed, where you might begin to feel drowsy rather than thinking clearly. You may find it helpful to write notes on your reflections and self-analysis in a journal, documenting your 'journey' as you learn to apply Stoic practices in daily life. Try to remember the order in which you

encountered different people throughout the day, the tasks you engaged in, what you said and did, and so on. Ask yourself the following questions (or questions similar to these):

1. What did you do badly? Did you allow yourself to be ruled by fears or desire of an excessive or irrational kind? Did you act badly or allow yourself to indulge in irrational thoughts?
2. What did you do well? Did you make progress by strengthening your grasp of the virtues?
3. What did you omit? Did you overlook any opportunities to exercise virtue or strength of character?
4. Consider how anything done badly or neglected could be done differently in the future - do this by criticising your specific actions rather than yourself as a person in general.
5. Praise yourself for anything done well.

In doing this, as Seneca put it, you are adopting the role of a friend and wise advisor toward yourself, rather than a harsh or punitive critic.

We can probably assume that a Stoic whose self-analysis and review of the preceding day leads him to conclude he has erred in his judgement, acted badly, or failed to follow his principles, would seek to learn from this and act differently the following day. Waking up the next day, you'll probably find it natural to base your morning meditation, in part, on your reflections before going to sleep the previous night. These meditations can combine to form a 'learning cycle', as you plan how to live and act more wisely, put this into practice during the day, and then reflect on the outcome afterwards, which leads to the same cycle the following day.

The advice from modern psychotherapy would be that you'll need to be cautious to avoid reflection turning into morbid 'rumination'. Don't dwell too long on things or go around in circles. Rather, try to keep a practical focus and arrive at clear decisions if possible; if not, then set your thoughts aside to return to them in the morning. There are many hidden aspects to this exercise, which will become clearer as you progress in your studies of Stoicism. For example, bearing in mind that the past is beyond your ability to control, you might want to use this review to adopt an attitude of provisional acceptance of your own failings, forgiving yourself while resolving to behave differently in the future. Hence, as Seneca emphasises, when describing his use of the same evening routine, we should not be afraid of contemplating our mistakes because as Stoics we can say: "Beware of doing that again - and this time I pardon you."

#### **Audio Download: Morning and Evening Meditations**

Audio exercises for Stoic Week 2014, including the morning and evening meditation, can be found via the links in the *Introduction* chapter of this Handbook.

## The Stoic Self-Monitoring Record

You may find it helpful, if you so choose, to make use of a self-monitoring record. This will help you keep a record of things you'd like to stop, such as dwelling on negative thoughts and things you might later regret. If you feel you've not got time to do this, don't worry it's *optional*, but if you are able to make the time, we're sure you'll find it contributes significantly to the benefits you derive from Stoic Week.

The self-monitoring record is based on methods used in cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). However, although the ancient Stoics didn't actually fill out a form like this, we can find similar self-monitoring practices recommended in their writings. The record we suggest you keep is just a simple sheet of paper with several columns marked on it as below. You can make your own version or you can find a version we have created in the appendices.

This process is about taking a step back from things, and gaining what therapists call 'psychological distance' from your initial, upsetting thoughts and feelings. Become a detached observer of yourself for a while. Write things down as soon as possible, as doing so will help you view things in this detached way, observing events and describing them in an objective manner.

### **1. Date/Time**

Note the date and time of the event, when you started to feel angry or afraid, for example, and briefly describe the actual situation you were facing, e.g., perhaps someone criticised your work, or maybe someone offered you some junk food while you were trying to lead a healthy life.

### **2. Feelings**

What emotions or desires did you actually experience (the Stoics use the technical term 'passions' for both). Remember, we're only really interested in feelings that might be considered irrational in the sense of being misguided and negative. So, following on from our examples above, you might write down that you felt excessively anxious or angry about being criticised, or that you felt a strong craving to eat junk food, which you found hard to resist. Remember that you're also trying to catch these feelings early, so try to note 'early-warning signs', which are often sensations such as trembling when afraid, although sometimes they might be thoughts such as telling yourself 'just one won't hurt' when you're tempted to eat something unhealthy.

### **3. Thoughts**

What related thoughts went through your mind? Stoic psychology held that our emotions and desires fundamentally depend upon our thoughts, particularly our value-judgements. Be forewarned that most people find it difficult at first to identify the specific thoughts that are responsible for their feelings. You'll probably need to work on this, but with practice, and study, it should become easier. Were you telling yourself that something external is very good (desirable) or bad (upsetting)? For example, someone who feels anxious and angry about being criticised might come to realise that they're thinking 'I must be respected at work' and placing great importance or intrinsic value on other people's opinions of them, instead of wanting to do their job well for its own sake.

### **4. Control**

As we'll see, this is the central question that Stoics use to evaluate their impressions: 'Is it up to me?'. They meant 'Is this - the thing that my feelings are about - under my direct control?' Again, don't worry too much about this for your first day or so, because as you learn more about Stoicism you'll get better at posing this question. For example, you might observe that other people's opinions of you, and whether or not they criticise you, is ultimately beyond your direct control – all you can control in this situation is your current response to their words and perhaps your plans for how to act the future. Even your past failings are no longer within your power to change – you can't rewrite the past.

This distinction between what is up to us and what is not is crucial for Stoics, as you'll see, because they urge us to accept those things in life we cannot possibly change, while seeking to change the things we can, to bring them more into line with wisdom and our ethical principles. Just write a few words here summing up your analysis of the situation, in terms of which aspects you do or do not control. Alternatively, rate how much control you have over the aspects of the situation that upset you, on a rough subjective scale from 0-100%. We'll need to explore this question more carefully in the following parts of the course, however.

## 5. Actions

In this situation, how far did what you actually did match your ethical principles? Did you act in a way which matches your understanding of virtue, that is wisely, justly, courageously, temperately or did you act in a way that was marked by foolishness, unfairness, cowardice and self-indulgence? Think about how you treated other people and not just how your actions affected you, since that is an essential part of virtue. You might want to rate how consistent your actions were with your core values, or definition of "virtue", on a rough percentage scale, from 0-100%.

# 1. Monday: What is in our Power?

## Morning Text for Reflection:

*Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control. Under our control are conception [the way we define things], intention [the voluntary impulse to act], desire [to get something], aversion [the desire to avoid something], and, in a word, everything that is our own doing; not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, position [or office] in society, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing. (Epictetus, Handbook 1)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

## Today's Lunchtime Exercise: What is in our Power?

We begin our first day by reflecting on a central idea in Stoicism that can be found in the opening lines of an ancient guidebook to the Stoic life, the *Handbook* of Epictetus (see above). If you've started using the Stoic self-monitoring record sheet from the previous chapter then you might like to use one of the situations you've written about there. Now you're going to explore this idea of 'what is in our power' further by using the following questions to help you evaluate a specific situation, and practising the skills you're going to be using regularly over the next few days. Starting now, begin training yourself to grasp firmly what's under your direct control and what isn't in any situation, particularly those things that arouse strong desires or upsetting emotions. Take a few minutes to write down your answers to the following questions, in relation to the example you've picked.

1. What's the situation?
2. How much control do you have over the situation as a whole (0–100%)?
3. Why isn't it 100%? What aspects don't you have direct control over?
4. Why isn't it 0%? What aspects do you have direct control over?
5. What would happen if you made a conscious effort to adopt a more Stoic attitude towards this situation by accepting things beyond your control, and taking full responsibility for things under your control?

Having a Stoic attitude means accepting that things outside your control are outside your control. It also means taking full responsibility for those things under your control, and viewing these as what's ultimately most important in any situation.

For the Stoics, only our own voluntary actions are ultimately 'up to us' or under our direct control. It's true we can influence external events, and we normally take this for granted. However, we only do so by means of voluntary actions, the outcome of which can always potentially be thwarted by factors outside of our direct control.

Take a few minutes also to imagine the short-term consequences of adopting a Stoic attitude towards the things under your control and not under your control in a challenging situation.

- What would happen over the following minutes?
- What would happen over the medium term, during the following days and weeks?
- Finally, what would the long-term consequences be of adopting this attitude, over the years to come, and throughout the rest of your life?

Practise contemplating this question frequently throughout the day: 'What aspects of this situation are up to me?' Learn to do it more quickly and, in particular, in response to situations where you're faced with a challenge such as handling difficult desires or emotions. You'll probably start to notice that this simple way of appraising situations has deeper implications for your attitude toward events.

## Evening Text for Reflection:

*Let us go to our sleep with joy and gladness; let us say ‘I have lived; the course which Fortune set for me is finished.’ And if God is pleased to add another day, we should welcome it with glad hearts. That man is happiest, and is secure in his own possession of himself, who can await the morrow without apprehension. When a man has said: ‘I have lived!’, every morning he arises he receives a bonus.*  
*(Seneca, Letters 12.9)*

### **Discussion**

Visit the Stoic Week discussion forum to share your thoughts about today's instructions, the exercises, and the texts quoted for your reflection and contemplation. You'll benefit from engaging with others doing Stoic Week and reading their posts.

Please find the discussion topic for today's chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What things are typically under your direct control in the sort of situations you find difficult? What things are not? What would happen if you remained more aware of this distinction, accepted that certain things are not entirely up to you, and focused more of your attention on your own choices? Think about both the short and long-term consequences of this practice.

[Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## 2. Tuesday: Stoic Mindfulness

### Morning Text for Reflection:

*You must train yourself only to think the kind of thoughts about which, if someone suddenly asked you, ‘what are you thinking about now?’, you would at once answer frankly, “this” or “that”. So from your reply it would immediately be clear that all your thoughts are straightforward and kind and express the character of a social being who has no concern with images of pleasure, or self-indulgence in general, or any kind of rivalry, malice or suspicion, or anything else you would blush to admit you were thinking about. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 3.4)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: The Practice of Stoic Mindfulness

We've already suggested that you can help develop a Stoic approach by self-monitoring. Another way of putting this is that you should adopt an attitude of 'Stoic mindfulness'. The term 'mindfulness' is used in modern psychology to describe self-awareness practices, which are often based on Buddhism. However, but there a similar focus on training in self-attention is to be found in the writings of the ancient Stoics.

Epictetus says that we should train ourselves to avoid rashness, errors in our judgements and being 'carried away' by our thoughts and feelings. For Stoics, the key error of judgement that we make, as we've seen, lies in treating external things as if they were intrinsically good or bad, and forgetting that virtue is the only true good. We've already looked at this aspect of Stoicism when we talked about the practice of evaluating whether our judgements refer to things under our control or not. Epictetus says the key to retaining our grip on objective reality and not being swept away by irrational desire or emotions is that before we even begin to challenge our thoughts, we must learn to step back from them temporarily. For example, at the start of the *Handbook*, Epictetus tells his Stoic students to respond to each troubling thought or 'impression' by saying: "You are just an impression and not at all the thing you claim to represent."

This isn't a familiar concept to most people. To understand what Epictetus may have meant, it helps to compare it to a psychological strategy commonly employed in modern cognitive therapy called 'psychological distancing' or 'cognitive distancing'. (So this is a modern interpretation and not something you'll find explicitly stated in most books on Stoicism.) In cognitive therapy, which was originally inspired by Stoicism, it's understood that before we can learn to challenge negative patterns of thinking, we have to first spot them, and place our thoughts in question – they have to be 'up for debate'. The first step in responding to troubling desires and emotions, in Stoicism, is therefore to gain psychological distance from them by reminding ourselves that the impressions they're based upon are just impressions, just thoughts, and not the reality they claim to represent. It's important to understand that this kind of "distance" isn't about running away from, or suppressing, upsetting thoughts and feelings. On the contrary, it's about accepting their presence, and being willing to face them, albeit from a more detached perspective.

One famous quotation from Epictetus puts this so well that it is still taught to clients in cognitive therapy today:

*It is not the things themselves that disturb people but their judgements about those things.  
(Handbook, 5).*

For example, he goes on to say that if death were *inherently* upsetting then everyone would feel the same way about it but some individuals, Socrates being the most famous example, view their own demise differently, and are unperturbed by its approach.

Epictetus repeatedly advised his students that remembering this fundamental Stoic principle could help them to avoid being carried away by their troubling emotions and desires. We should be alert for the *early-warning signs* of problematic emotions and desires, which are often habitual and barely conscious. When we spot these subtle initial signs, often certain

bodily sensations or internal feelings, we should quickly try to identify the initial impressions and underlying value-judgements that are causing them. In other words, for Stoics, excessive or unhealthy desires and troubling emotions are taken as a signal that faulty value-judgements may well be at play.

For instance, the modern cognitive model of anxiety, which is derived from Stoic psychology, says that anxiety is caused by a thought or judgement along the lines of ‘Something bad is going to happen and I won’t be able to cope with it.’ Distancing would consist in saying ‘I notice I’m having the thought “something bad is going to happen” and that’s upsetting me’, rather than being swept along by the impression that something bad is going to happen and allowing your fear to escalate unnecessarily.

One of the simplest ways of responding to troubling impressions, when you spot their early-warning signs, is simply to *postpone* doing anything in response to them. Modern researchers have found that this can reduce the frequency, intensity and duration of worry episodes by about fifty per cent on average. Epictetus gave very similar advice to his Stoic students, nearly two thousand years ago. He says when we spot initial troubling impressions, especially if they seem overwhelming, we should gain time and respite, by reminding ourselves that these are just thoughts and waiting a while, until we’ve genuinely calmed down, before thinking about them any further, or deciding what action to take. In modern anger management, this is sometimes called the ‘taking a time-out’ strategy. The Stoics likewise talked of withholding our ‘assent’, or agreement, from upsetting initial impressions.

You have already started monitoring your thoughts, actions, and feelings, and distinguishing between things under your control and things not. From this point onward during Stoic Week, try to catch the incipient signs of strong desires or upsetting emotions. Pause to give yourself thinking space and gain psychological distance from your initial impressions. If your feelings are particularly strong or difficult to deal with, postpone thinking about them any further until you’ve had a chance to calm down, which may be during your evening meditation practice. Then, try asking yourself the following three questions:

1. First and foremost, ask yourself whether the things that are upsetting you are under your control or not and if they’re not under your control, accept this fact, and remind yourself that external things are ‘indifferent’ with regard to your own flourishing and virtue.
2. Ask yourself what someone perfectly wise and virtuous person would do when faced with the same problem or situation. This is the ‘Stoic Sage’, whom the Stoics treated as an ideal for imitation. Who would you pick as a wise role model?
3. Ask yourself what strengths or resources nature has given you to master the situation, e.g., do you have the capacity for patience and endurance? How might using those potential virtues help you deal with this problem more wisely?

#### **Evening Text for Reflection:**

*One type of person, whenever he does someone else a good turn, is quick in calculating the favour done to him. Another is not so quick to do this; but in himself he thinks about the other person as owing him something and is conscious of what he has done. A third is in a sense not even conscious of what he has done, but is like a vine which has produced grapes and looks for nothing more once it has produced its own fruit, like a horse which has run a race, a dog which has followed the scent, or a bee which has made its honey. A person who has done something good does not make a big fuss about it, but goes on to the next action, as a vine goes on to produce grapes again in season. So you should be one of those who do this without in a sense being aware of doing so. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.6)*

#### **Discussion**

Visit the Stoic Week discussion forum to share your thoughts about today’s instructions, the exercises, and the texts quoted for your reflection and contemplation. You’ll benefit from engaging with others doing Stoic Week and reading their posts.

Please find the discussion topic for today's chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What is the relationship between your thoughts and your emotions, particularly your value-judgements and feelings of anger or distress? Can greater self-awareness alone change the interaction between thoughts and feelings, or their consequences? What does Epictetus mean when he advises his students to say to their troubling impressions "You are just an impression...", and why might training ourselves to do this be important?

[Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

### 3. Wednesday: Self-Discipline & Stoic Simplicity

#### Morning Text for Reflection:

*It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in sufficiently generous measure to allow the accomplishment of the very greatest things if the whole of it is well invested. But when it is squandered in luxury and carelessness, when it is devoted to no good end, forced at last by the ultimate necessity we perceive that it has passed away before we were aware that it was passing. So it is -the life we receive is not short, but we make it so, nor do we have any lack of it, but are wasteful of it. Just as great and princely wealth is scattered in a moment when it comes into the hands of a bad owner, while wealth however limited, if it is entrusted to a good guardian, increases by use, so life is amply long for the one who orders it properly. (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life, 1)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

#### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: Stoic Simplicity

For the Stoics, one major challenge we face in life is excessive desire for wealth, or ‘more stuff’. In training themselves to overcome this, they would adopt a simple life, periodically undergoing voluntary deprivation and hardship. Some Stoics apparently trained themselves to embrace voluntary hardship, like their predecessors the Cynics, whose philosophy influenced Zeno, founder of Stoicism. That meant consuming very plain food and drink, wearing simple clothes and sleeping on a rough straw mat. Seneca, for example, recommends practising voluntary hardship for a few days each month, whereas for the Cynics it was their entire lifestyle.

Don’t worry, we’re not going to ask you to live like a Cynic – unless you really want to, of course! It’s enough just to practise self-discipline by starting with small steps. Anyone who tries to follow a healthy diet or engage in more exercise, for example, will require self-discipline. You might just want to ‘renounce’ coffee or snacks for the rest of the week, or ‘endure’ doing stretches or sit-ups each morning, pushing yourself a bit further than normal, but in a way you judge reasonable and healthy.

That might seem like rather bland advice. There’s a crucial Stoic twist, however. For the Stoics, physical health is one of the things that are naturally ‘preferred’, that is, something that human beings are naturally disposed to want to develop. But Stoics didn’t exercise just to look good on the beach. As well as wanting to become healthy, they also thought that the value of a simple and healthy lifestyle was that it helped us to develop an ethically good life, by exercising the qualities of self-control or temperance.

We need to be aware, however, that whether we actually have good health is not ‘up to us’ and cannot be guaranteed. You could put the difference like this: Health is not ‘up to us’, but ‘looking after our health’ is. Likewise, it is ‘up to us’ whether we act with self-control or not, at least as regards our intention to endure some things and renounce others.

So this is a different sort of exercise, but an important one, and one that you’ll find fits well with the self-monitoring exercises you’re doing each day. Set goals for yourself in terms of your own conduct – that define the type of person you want to be. Challenge yourself to do this by making some appropriate changes in your daily routine: simple changes, which will require self-control on your part, such as eating and drinking more healthily. The Stoic Musonius Rufus, who was Epictetus’ teacher, described the purpose of food as follows:

*I maintain that its purpose should be to produce health and strength, that one should eat for that purpose only, and that one should eat with moderation, and without any haste or greed.*

You might find Musonius' advice about eating simple food with mindfulness helpful in setting up your goals for a simpler life. We know that in the USA this is Thanksgiving Week, and that following this advice may not be easy, but we are offering Stoic advice for the medium and long term and not just for this week!

It's up to you exactly what changes you make but do so with self-awareness and practical wisdom. Focus on doing these things for the sake of developing greater self-awareness and strength of character, but view any other 'external' benefits as just a kind of added bonus.

#### **Evening Text for Reflection:**

*What should a philosopher say in the face of each of the hardships of life? 'It is for this that I've been training myself; it was for this that I was practising'. God says to you, 'Give me proof of whether you've competed in accordance with the rules, whether you've followed the proper diet, carried out the proper exercises, and have obeyed your trainer'. And then when the time comes for you to act, will you quail? Now is the time when you have to suffer an illness – let it happen as it must; to endure thirst – endure it with the right attitude; to endure hunger – endure it with the right attitude. Isn't that within your power? (Epictetus, Discourses, 3.10)*

#### **Discussion**

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Please find the discussion topic for today's chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What might the benefits of training in self-control? What would be healthy things to practice either enduring or renouncing? What difference does it make if we shift our focus on to the goal of exercising "virtues" such as self-discipline and endurance, rather than focusing on external benefits, such as weight-loss, that we may or may not achieve in the future?

[Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## 4. Thursday: Virtue and Relationships with Others

### Morning Text for Reflection:

*Early in the morning, when you are finding it hard to wake up, hold this thought in your mind: 'I am getting up to do the work of a human being. Do I still resent it, if I am going out to do what I was born for and for which I was brought into the world? Or was I framed for this, to lie under the bedclothes and keep myself warm?' 'But this is more pleasant'. So were you born for pleasure: in general were you born for feeling or for affection? Don't you see the plants, the little sparrows, the ants, the spiders, the bees doing their own work, and playing their part in making up an ordered world. And then are you unwilling to do the work of a human being? Won't you run to do what is in line with your nature? (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.1)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: Philanthropy

So far we have focused mainly on the individual. Today we move on to think more about our relationships with other people. The Stoics place great importance on ‘natural affection’ or the kind of loving attitude that they believed we instinctively feel toward our own offspring, sexual partners, and other members of our family. The Stoics were also early advocates of the idea of cosmopolitanism, or the community of humankind – we are all members of the same human family and brothers and sisters to each other. Although some people mistakenly believe the Stoics were *unemotional*, like Mr. Spock from Star Trek, they actually rejected this interpretation themselves and *denied* that they were advocating being insensitive, like someone having a heart of iron or stone.

Instead of eliminating emotions entirely, the Stoics wanted to *transform* our natural sense of affection, in the light of reason and virtue. Marcus Aurelius, for instance, describes the Stoic ideal as being “full of love, and yet free from [irrational] passions”. The love he’s referring to is “natural affection” or, to in terms of their theology, the kind of love Stoics believed Zeus, the father of mankind, would have for his children. Stoics therefore sought to emulate this ideal of friendship, affection, and love, in the form of a kind of *philanthropic* attitude toward the rest of humanity.

The Stoic view of love has several implications:

1. To love others is to wish them to flourish and for Stoics that means ultimately to attain virtue, rather than gaining health, wealth, or reputation – so our love for others is a wish for them to become virtuous and enlightened. This is why Zeno and his followers, like Socrates, dedicated their lives to teaching philosophy to others and helping them to develop the virtues.
2. We should want to benefit and love other people, while accepting that it is ultimately ‘not up to us’ whether they *reciprocate* this attitude. (Hence, the Stoics foreshadow Christians in loving even their enemies, wishing them to become friends and live harmoniously in the world, if this is possible.) Epictetus encouraged his students to do all they could to develop good relations with others and to regard this as a central part of their ethical life, even though he acknowledged that they could not control how other people responded.
3. Stoics should, as Epictetussays, love others as though they could be taken from us at any moment, that is, without any trace of clinging attachment. We have to accept that whether or not they die, or whether or not we die first, is not ultimately not up to us. Epictetus, notoriously, advises his students to kiss their loved ones goodnight while telling themselves silently that they – or we – may die at any moment. However, this still means that we should behave affectionately toward others and doing everything within our power to improve their lives.
4. As well as expressing affection to people immediately around us, we should also aspire to expand our sense of natural affection to encompass the rest of humanity, an ideal which is sometimes called Stoic ‘cosmopolitanism’ or love of humankind. So when we find ourselves in situations involving strangers we should not regard them as beyond the range of our concern but as people we should want to benefit like members of our own family.

Hierocles, a Stoic from the second-century AD, offered advice about how we could develop this attitude of natural affection toward the rest of humankind. He suggested we should think of ourselves as living in a series of concentric circles, and that we should try to ‘draw the circles somehow toward the centre’. He explained that, ‘The right point will be reached if, through our own initiative, we reduce the distance of the relationship with each person.’ He also suggests using verbal techniques such as calling one’s cousins ‘brother’, and one’s uncles and aunts ‘father’ or ‘mother’. Think of the way members of religious orders call each other “brother” or “sister”, or how these terms are used by some people to describe their close friends.

The following contemplative visualisation or meditation technique is loosely based on Hierocles’ comments about enlarging our sense of affection towards others:

1. Close your eyes, take a few moments to relax, and focus your attention on the things you’re about to visualise.
2. Picture a circle of light surrounding your body and take a few moments to imagine it symbolises a growing sense of affection toward your own true nature as a rational animal, capable of wisdom and virtue.
3. Now imagine that circle is expanding to encompass members of your family, or others who are very close to you, towards whom you now project an attitude of family affection, as if they were somehow parts of your own body.
4. Next, imagine that circle expanding to encompass people you encounter in daily life, perhaps colleagues you work alongside, and project natural affection toward them, as if they were members of your own family.
5. Again, let the circle expand further to include everyone in the country where you live, imagining that your affection is spreading out toward them also, insofar as they are rational animals akin to you.
6. Imagine the circle now growing to envelop the entire world and the whole human race as one, allowing this philosophical and philanthropic attitude of affection to encompass every other member of the human race.

Try to think of other people, as Marcus puts it, as if we were all limbs or organs of a single organism, extending the sense of oneness you have with your own body, to encompass others, and allowing yourself to feel less separate or alienated from them.

#### **Evening Text for Reflection:**

Here is the first quote:

*The second area of study is concerned with appropriate action; for I shouldn’t be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my natural and acquired relationships, as one who honours the gods, as a son, as a brother, as a father, as a citizen. (Epictetus, Discourses, 3.2).*

Consider this one also:

*If what philosophers say about the kinship of God and man is true, then the only logical step is to do as Socrates did, never replying to the question of where he was from with, ‘I am Athenian’ or ‘I am a Corinthian’, but always ‘I am a citizen of the universe.’ (Epictetus, Discourses, 1.9)*

#### **Discussion**

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Please find the discussion topic for today’s chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What does Marcus mean by being full of love, or natural affection, and yet free from (irrational or unhealthy) passions? To what extent does love or natural affection seem to play a role in Stoic philosophy? How does it compare to the idea of love for others in Christianity, compassion in Buddhism, or brotherly-love in other philosophical or religious traditions?

[Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## 5. Friday: Action & the Stoic Reserve Clause

### Morning Text for Reflection:

*Try to persuade them; and act even against their will, whenever the principle of justice leads you to do so. But if someone uses force to resist you, change your approach to accepting it and not being hurt, and use the setback to express another virtue. Remember too that your motive was formed with reservation and that you were not aiming at the impossible. At what then? A motive formed with reservation. But you have achieved this; what we proposed to ourselves is actually happening.*  
*(Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 6.50)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: Stoic Action & The Stoic Reserve Clause

On the first day of Stoic Week, we stressed the fundamental importance in Stoicism of knowing what is and what is not in our power. Today we are going to think about how we can build this into our actions and how we approach events more generally.

As regards, the things that are under our control, the Stoics think we should act as well as possible on each occasion, and what they meant by this is trying to exhibit the virtues that are appropriate for that situation, such as courage, temperance, wisdom, and self-control. The Stoics also think that we should try to express these virtues in our relationships with other people, both those we come into direct contact with and humanity more generally.

The Stoics also emphasise that some things are not 'up to us' or within our control and that we need to accept these things without having negative and unconstructive emotions. Epictetus expressed this, one of the most fundamental concepts of Stoicism, as follows:

*Seek not for events to happen as you wish but rather wish for events to happen as they do and your life will go smoothly. (Epictetus, Handbook, 8)*

This doesn't mean passively resigning yourself to events, however. It's important to emphasise that Stoic acceptance primarily means recognising that some things are outside of your control, and that if those events have actually happened, this must be acknowledged and accepted. However, you still try to do your best in responding to these events, for that is something which is under your control. Put another way: Stoic serenity comes from 'accepting reality' or 'accepting the facts' – but not giving up! It is about establishing a sense of purpose within the events of your life.

The famous *Serenity Prayer* used by Alcoholics Anonymous provides a very memorable summary of the Stoic doctrine:

*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.*

For example, there's no point worrying about the past or the distant future, although of course we can learn from the past and prepare for the future. What's beyond remedy is beyond regret. Stoics focus on acting with virtue in the here and now, insofar as that is within their sphere of control, from moment to moment. Practise the attitude of Stoic acceptance, therefore, during your morning and evening meditation, by reminding yourself to accept the fact that it's too late to change the past, and that the future may always turn out against your plans.

That is why the Stoics suggest that we form our plans and wishes with a 'reserve clause' in mind. As we saw earlier, some people mistakenly assume that Stoics will be passive doormats, because they emphasise acceptance of external things. This is puzzling because history teaches us quite the opposite: famous Stoics, such as Cato of Utica and Marcus Aurelius, were often very brave, determined, and active in politics and public affairs. Under the Roman empire, in fact, Stoics were

often regarded as political trouble-makers rather than passive doormats – because of their insistence on sticking to moral principles.

The ‘reserve clause’ allowed Stoics to reconcile action in the external world with an attitude of acceptance toward events. Put simply, it’s a matter of qualifying every intention by saying, ‘I will do such-and-such, if nothing prevents me’. So from now on during your morning meditation, you can practise incorporating the ‘reserve clause’, saying to yourself: ‘I will do xyz, fate permitting’ or ‘if nothing prevents me’ (or words to that effect). Imagine all the things that could go wrong, and rehearse an attitude of detached acceptance toward them, as if the only thing that really matters is that you do your best and intend to act wisely and virtuously. Do what you must; let happen what may.

#### **Evening Text for Reflection:**

*Every habit and faculty is formed or strengthened by the corresponding act – walking makes you walk better, running makes you a better runner. If you want to be literate, read, if you want to be a painter, paint. Go a month without reading, occupied with something else, and you’ll see what the result is. And if you’re laid up a mere ten days, when you get up and try to talk any distance, you’ll find your legs barely able to support you.*

*So if you like doing something, do it regularly; if you don’t like doing something, make a habit of doing something different. The same goes for the affairs of the mind... So if you don’t want to be hot-tempered, don’t feed your temper, or multiply incidents of anger. Suppress the first impulse to be angry, then begin to count the days on which you don’t get angry. ‘I used to be angry every day, then only every other day, then every third...’ If you resist it a whole month, offer God a sacrifice, because the vice begins to weaken from day one, until it is wiped out altogether. ‘I didn’t lose my temper this day, or the next, and not for two, then three months in succession.’ If you can say that, you are now in excellent health, believe me. (Epictetus, Discourses, 2.18)*

#### **Discussion**

Visit the Stoic Week discussion forum to share your thoughts about today’s instructions, the exercises, and the texts quoted for your reflection and contemplation. You’ll benefit from engaging with others doing Stoic Week and reading their posts.

Please find the discussion topic for today’s chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What do the Stoics mean by action “with a reserve clause”? How is it possible to pursue certain external outcomes in life, without being upset if you fail to achieve them? Can the Stoics actually succeed in reconciling just and courageous actions with emotional equanimity in this way?

#### [Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## 6. Saturday: Preparation for Adversity

### Morning Text for Reflection:

*Be like the headland on which the waves break constantly, which still stands firm while the foaming waters are put to rest around it. ‘It is my bad luck that this has happened to me! On the contrary, say, ‘It is my good luck that, although this has happened to me, I can bear it without getting upset, neither crushed by the present nor afraid of the future.’ (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 4.49)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: Preparation for Adversity

As we pointed out in the chapter on central Stoic ideas, the Stoics believe that as we develop ethically so our emotional life will change accordingly. And gradually we will come to have what they called the ‘good emotions’, *positive* emotions such as joy and wishing others well, rather than negative and misguided emotions such as anger and fear.

However, the Stoics recognise that getting to this point requires a good deal of training and reflection, and one of the exercises they propose for this is the premeditation of future adversity. In thinking about this, we need to remember that the Stoics did not think that many of the things people worry about are actually ‘bad’ things, but just things we would naturally prefer not to happen.

There are many references in the surviving Stoic literature to the strategy of anticipating future catastrophes and preparing to face them in advance by patiently imagining them, as if they were happening already. Typical examples include bereavement, poverty, exile, illness, and, perhaps most importantly of all for the Stoics, one’s own death.

By repeatedly picturing future catastrophes (as most people regard them) as if they were already happening, the Stoic aimed to reduce anxiety about them. Exposure therapy in today’s CBT aims to reduce the anxiety attached to specific situations in a similar way. The Stoics also advocated rehearsing a correct moral view of such events, and regarding them as ‘matters of indifference’, as regards what is fundamental to one’s happiness or well-being. Picturing even their own death in this way, repeatedly, day after day, allowed them to develop a philosophical attitude in the face of adversity, when it actually *happened*. We know from modern psychological research that the best way to overcome anxiety is actually to expose yourself to the feared situation in reality, repeatedly and for sufficiently prolonged periods. However, we also know that simply picturing the same event in the mind, repeatedly and for long enough, often works almost as well.

To begin with, you should not do this with anything that seems like it might lead you to bite off more than you can chew. Don’t imagine things that are deeply personal or traumatic until you’re definitely ready to do so without feeling overwhelmed. Begin by working on small things that upset you. Don’t let yourself worry about them, just try to picture the worst-case scenario patiently, and wait for your emotions to abate naturally. Remind yourself of the Stoic principles you’ve learned. In particular, the maxim that people are upset not by external events but by their own judgements about them, particularly value-judgements that place too much importance on things that are not under your direct control.

Try to spend at least 20–30 minutes doing this each day. You might find it helpful to keep a record of your experiences as follows:

1. **Situation.** What is the upsetting situation that you’re imagining?
2. **Emotions.** How does it make you feel when you picture it as if it’s happening right now? How strong is the feeling (0–100%)?
3. **Duration.** How long (in minutes) did you manage to sit with it and patiently expose yourself to the event in your imagination?
4. **Consequence.** How strong was the upsetting feeling at the end (0–100%)? What else did you feel or experience by the end?

- 5. Analysis.** Has your perspective changed on the upsetting event? Is it really as awful as you imagined? How could you potentially cope if it did happen? What's under your control in this situation and what isn't?

If your anxiety level hasn't reduced to at least half its peak level then you might need to pick an easier subject, or else spend more time on this exercise to get its full benefit. Use the natural wearing off of upsetting feelings as an opportunity to re-evaluate the situation in a more rational and detached manner, i.e., from a more philosophical perspective. What do you think a Stoic like Seneca, Epictetus, or Marcus Aurelius would make of the same situation? How might you view it differently if you had developed fully mastered the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage and self-control? Take time to note down what you can learn from this experience.

#### **Evening Text for Reflection:**

*At every hour give your full concentration, as a Roman and a man, to carrying out the task in hand with a scrupulous and unaffected dignity and affectionate concern for others and freedom and justice, and give yourself space from other concerns. You will give yourself this if you carry out each act as if it were the last of your life, freed from all randomness and passionate deviation from the rule of reason and from pretence and self-love and dissatisfaction with what has been allotted to you. You see how few things you need to master to be able to live a smoothly flowing life: the gods will ask no more from someone who maintains these principles. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2.5)*

#### **Discussion**

Visit the Stoic Week discussion forum to share your thoughts about today's instructions, the exercises, and the texts quoted for your reflection and contemplation. You'll benefit from engaging with others doing Stoic Week and reading their posts.

Please find the discussion topic for today's chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

How can you picture future adversity in a way that helps you to *overcome* unnecessary distress? What sort of challenges are worth training yourself to face? What's the most important aspect of the Stoic practice of premeditating future events? What would be the long-term consequences of mastering this technique?

[Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## 7. Sunday: The View from Above

### Morning Text for Reflection:

*The works of the gods are full of providence, and the works of fortune are not separate from nature or the interweaving and intertwining of the things governed by providence. Everything flows from there. Further factors are necessity and the benefit of the whole universe, of which you are a part. What is brought by the nature of the whole and what maintains that nature is good for each part of nature. Just as the changes in the elements maintain the universe so too do the changes in the compounds. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2.3)*

*Practise the Early Morning Meditation*

### Today's Lunchtime Exercise: The View from Above

On our final day we turn to think about our place within Nature as a whole:

*A fine reflection from Plato. One who would converse about human beings should look on all things earthly as though from some point far above, upon herds, armies, and agriculture, marriages and divorces, births and deaths, the clamour of law courts, deserted wastes, alien peoples of every kind, festivals, lamentations, and markets, this inter-mixture of everything and ordered combination of opposites. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7.48)*

The 'View from Above' exercise we've designed is a guided visualization that is aimed at instilling a sense of the 'bigger picture', and of understanding your role in the wider community of humankind. You can practise a visualisation of the 'View from Above' by downloading the audio recording we made, via the links in the *Introduction* chapter of this Handbook. The feedback data we gathered showed this tends to be one of the most popular exercises.

Anyone who reads the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius is bound to notice a recurring theme that involves contemplating the vastness of the universe, of space and time, the multitude of stars, and also the smallness of life on Earth when viewed from above. The French scholar Pierre Hadot called the deliberate effort to mentally visualise human affairs from high overhead 'The View from Above', and he found references to it throughout ancient literature, particularly in Stoic writings.

In a sense, these passages invite us to think like an ancient natural philosopher and simply to contemplate the nature of the universe as a whole, in a detached manner. Compare this to the objective attitude of a modern scientist. The Stoics clearly believed that contemplating the whole universe in this way had profound implications for our ethical life. As Marcus put it, these meditations can purge us of our over-attachment to trivial things by expanding our minds beyond their habitual, narrow perspective. We're less upset about things when we literally picture them as occurring in a tiny corner of the cosmos: as a grain of sand in cosmic space, and the mere turn of a screw in terms of cosmic time.

Why should we picture things in this way? First of all, for the Stoics, it helps us realize that we are, in reality, parts of the natural universe and that we do, in fact, have a temporary existence within this larger whole. Also, it helps us to place the actions and relationships with which we are engaged in a wider, more cosmic, perspective. This does not mean that the Stoics do not think how we act and how we conduct our relationships is unimportant. On the contrary, they stress the absolute importance of trying to act in a virtuous way, having good relationships with others and forming an idea of the community of humankind. But they also believe that it would help us to live in this way if we think of ourselves as integral parts of a natural, cohesive whole.

As noted earlier, thinking of ourselves in this way may also help us to develop a more responsible attitude to the natural environment, and to try to put this into practice in our daily lives and in our contribution to public debate. We are integral parts of the natural world, and recognising this fact should help us want to try to repair the damage we have done as human beings towards the planet we inhabit.

## **Evening Text for Reflection:**

*I travel along nature's way until I fall down and take my rest, breathing out my last into the air, from which I draw my daily breath, and falling down to that earth from which my father drew his seed, my mother her blood and my nurse her milk, and from which for so many years I have taken my daily food and drink, the earth which carries my footsteps and which I have used to the full in so many ways. (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.4)*

## **Post-study Questionnaires**

NB: Please remember to visit the Modern Stoicism website and complete the post-study questionnaires. It's *extremely important* that we collect this data so that we can try to measure how helpful Stoic Week has been to the people who participated. ***Do it now, if you can!***

## **Discussion**

Visit the Stoic Week discussion forum to share your thoughts about today's instructions, the exercises, and the texts quoted for your reflection and contemplation. You'll benefit from engaging with others doing Stoic Week and reading their posts.

Please find the discussion topic for today's chapter and post your thoughts on the following questions:

What would happen if you trained yourself to patiently contemplate the vastness of time and space on a regular basis? How does this "cosmic perspective" change the way you feel about challenges you face in life? What can you learn from picturing your place within the totality of Nature in this way?

## [Stoic Week Discussion Forum](#)

*Practise the Late Evening Meditation*

## After Stoic Week

What next? Have you enjoyed following Stoic Week? Have you found it helpful? If you have then there is no need to stop at the end of this week! One of the reasons for adopting this format is that it gives you a ready-made template that you can continue to follow week after week.

In order to deepen and develop your Stoic practice the next step is to start exploring some of the ancient Stoic texts for yourself if you don't know them already.

1. Buy a copy of the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. Every day in a spare moment read at least one new section of the text. As many of these are very short you will probably read many more than just one.
2. Start reading the *Discourses* of Epictetus. Set aside some time every weekend to read two new chapters (most only a couple of pages long). There are 95 chapters in the *Discourses* so this will keep you going for much of the coming year.
3. After that do the same with the *Letters* of Seneca, one or two each weekend. There are 124 letters but many modern translations print only a selection. Two a week will occupy you for just over a year. If for whatever reason you would rather start with Seneca then do!

The following translations are recommended:

- Marcus Aurelius: Oxford World's Classics or Penguin Classics. Note also the edition in the Penguin Great Ideas series.
- Epictetus: Oxford World's Classics or Penguin Classics (only selections). There is also a selection in the Penguin Great Ideas series.
- Seneca: Penguin Classics (a selection) or Oxford World's Classics (a selection), who also publish his essays. Note also a selection of essays in the Penguin Great Ideas series.

## Appendices:

### Meet the Team

These are the main people involved in Stoic Week 2014 and in putting together this Handbook, and some of their relevant publications.

#### **Christopher Gill**

Emeritus Professor of Ancient Thought at Exeter University and author of *Marcus Aurelius: Meditations, Books 1-6* (2013).

#### **Patrick Ussher**

PhD classics student at Exeter University researching Stoicism and organising Stoic Week and editor of *Stoicism Today: Selected Writings, Vol. 1*.

#### **John Sellars**

Research fellow at King's College, University of London, and author of *Stoicism* (2006) and *The Art of Living* (2009).

#### **Tim LeBon**

Psychotherapist and author of *Wise Therapy* (2001) and *Achieve Your Potential with Positive Psychology* (2014).

#### **Gill Garratt**

Cognitive-behavioural therapist and author of *Introducing CBT for Work* (2012).

#### **Jules Evans**

Policy Director at the Centre for the History of Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London. Author of *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations* (2012).

#### **Donald Robertson**

Cognitive-behavioural psychotherapist in private practice. Author of *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy* (2010) and *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* (2013).

## [Further Reading](#)

Here are some further reading suggestions if you would like to learn more about ancient Stoicism, putting Stoicism into practice, or the connections between Stoicism and psychotherapy.

First of all, we should mention *Stoicism Today: Selected Writings: 1*, edited by Patrick Ussher, a collection of writings from different authors taken from the Stoicism Today blog. This is a very good introduction to Stoicism because it approaches the subject from many different perspectives, in short articles written by authors from different backgrounds. Some of the following books should also be on your personal reading list:

### **Putting Stoicism into Practice**

- W. B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- D. Robertson, *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* (London: Teach Yourself, 2013).
- T. Morris, *The Stoic Art of Living* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004)
- R. Pies, *Everything Has Two Handles: The Stoic's Guide to the Art of Living* (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2008)
- P. J. Vernezze, *Don't Worry, Be Stoic: Ancient Wisdom for Troubled Times* (Lanham: University of America Press, 2005)
- E. Buzare, *Stoic Spiritual Exercises* (Lulu, 2011)
- S. Lebell, *Art of Living* (HarperOne, 2007)
- P. Ussher, Ed., *Stoicism Today: Selected Writings* (2014).

### **Introductions to Ancient Stoicism**

- J. Sellars, *Stoicism* (Chesham: Acumen / Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)
- T. Brennan, *The Stoic Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005)
- B. Inwood, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to The Stoics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

### **Studies Exploring the Practical Side of Ancient Stoicism**

- M. C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)
- R. Sorabji, 'Is Stoic Philosophy Helpful as Psychotherapy?', in R. Sorabji, ed., *Aristotle and After* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 1997), 197-209.
- R. Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- J. Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 2009)

### **Books on Practical Aspects of Roman Stoicism**

- P. Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998)
- A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002)
- Reydam-Schils, G., *The Roman Stoics* (University of Chicago, 2005).
- J. Xenakis, *Epictetus: Philosopher-Therapist* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969)

### **Stoicism and Psychotherapy**

- D. Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (London: Karnac, 2010)
- A. Still & W. Dryden, *The Historical and Philosophical Context of Rational Psychotherapy: The Legacy of Epictetus* (London: Karnac, 2012)
- A. Still & W. Dryden, 'Ellis and Epictetus: Dialogue vs. Method in Psychotherapy', *Journal of Rational -Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 21 (2003), 37-55 (reprinted in Still & Dryden 2012).

- A. Still & W. Dryden, 'The Place of Rationality in Stoicism and REBT', Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy 17 (1999), 143-64 (reprinted in Still & Dryden 2012).
- S. A. Moore Brookshire, 'Utilizing Stoic Philosophy to Improve Cognitive Behavioral Therapy', NC Perspectives 1 (2007), 30-36.
- R. W. Montgomery, 'The Ancient Origins of Cognitive Therapy: The Reemergence of Stoicism', Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy 7 (1993), 5-19.

*The End*

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