



STOIC WEEK

2016/HANDBOOK

The Stoic Week 2016 Handbook

Stoicism & Love

No school has more goodness and gentleness; none has more love for human beings, nor more attention to the common good. 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)

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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 to Stoic Week

Welcome to this year's Stoic Week! Stoic Week is an annual online event in which people from all over the world attempt to live like a Stoic for seven days. This is your opportunity to take part in a unique experiment: following ancient Stoic Philosophy as an aid to living in the modern world, using this handbook as your guide. The handbook was developed by our “Stoicism Today” group, which was formed in 2012. We are a multi-disciplinary team of academic philosophers, classicists, professional psychologists and cognitive therapists, with a special interest in applying Stoic concepts and practices to the challenges of modern living. The group includes several authors known for their writing and research on Stoicism. (You can find out more about us on the [Stoicism Today](#) website.) For those of you interested, there is also a longer and more intensive version of Stoic Week called [Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training \(SMRT\)](#), designed by Donald Robertson, which runs every year, lasting four weeks.

In 2015, Stoic Week proved extremely popular, with over 3,200 people participating. You can read the [Stoic Week 2015 Report](#) online. Each year we receive a huge amount of online feedback from participants, which we use to revise and improve the handbook.

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 completely free-of-charge opportunity for personal development.

This Year's Theme: Stoicism and Love

The theme for this year's Stoic Week is *Stoicism and Love*. Many people mistakenly believe that Stoicism is unemotional. However, as we'll see, the Stoics made a point of listing positive and *healthy* emotions experienced by what they would call the ‘ideal wise man’. In particular, *love* plays a fundamental role in Stoic Ethics: for example, Marcus Aurelius said that his goal was to be free from irrational passions, and yet full of love.

Frequently-Asked Questions

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

A: You *can't* know for certain until you try. Indeed, one of the reasons we're conducting the experiment is to find out whether, and how, Stoic practices can help us to live better lives.

Having said that, in previous years, our participants have consistently reported benefits. For example, in 2015 our research findings showed that, on average, life satisfaction increased by 15%, flourishing by 10%, positive emotions by 10%, and there was a 14%

reduction in negative emotions. Data collected from the SMRT course showed that when we extended the exercises to four weeks, life satisfaction increased by 27%, and negative emotions decreased by 23%.

The benefit for you may be educational or philosophical, if it helps you to understand what Stoicism means. It may be psychological, helping you to become more resilient and possibly even happier. It may be moral, and you may find that the week helps you develop certain ethical qualities. Some people may, of course, find that Stoicism just isn't for them, which might in itself be a valuable discovery. However, from the questionnaire data we've collected and previous participants' testimonies we can see that most people who participated in Stoic Week and related events found their experiences very enjoyable and beneficial.

Q: What's the basic idea?

A: You need to do the following:

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 meditations for the morning and evening. At lunchtime, or another time more suitable for you, consider the Stoic exercise for that day.

You should read each chapter in advance of the corresponding day. You might choose to read Monday's chapter, for example, first thing on Monday morning, or beforehand on Sunday evening. Some people may find it easier just to read the whole handbook through before beginning Stoic Week, though, and use the summary in each chapter as a daily reminder.

You'll find a convenient summary of your daily routine at the end of this introductory section of the handbook, and additional summaries in each daily section to help you remember what you're supposed to be doing. The morning and evening meditation practices will also provide you with a simple daily routine or structure to help you to reflect on what you've done each day and what happened to you. Instructions 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 from the page below:

[MP3 Audio Recordings for Stoic Week](#)

You'll begin by learning to record your thoughts, actions, and feelings, and to start observing them in a more detached and "philosophical" way. One of the main strategies that runs through both Stoicism and this handbook is that of distinguishing between things that are under your control and things that are not. The Stoics believed that this takes training to do well but that it's the key to self-discipline and overcoming emotional disturbances. Maintaining this distinction requires continual attention to your own thoughts and judgements, which we can describe as a kind of 'mindfulness' practice. You'll then

build upon this foundation by exploring different Stoic concepts and techniques each day throughout the course of the week.

Q: I'm worried I may not have time to do everything, so 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 into 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 midday, although you might want to spend more or less time on the exercises. Some people have told us they can only spare five or ten minutes, which is absolutely fine. However, data from previous participants in Stoic Week showed the average amount of time they spent on the course was precisely 36 minutes per day. (This is very 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 for Stoic Week?

Here are some ideas:

- **Video.** Record a video diary of your experiences of living like a Stoic and publish on [YouTube](#) or another video-sharing site
- **Blogging.** Blog about your experiences on your own site, or send them to our WordPress blog: [Stoicism Today](#)
- **Twitter.** Tweet about your experiences, or post Stoic adages on Twitter as you go along, using [#stoicweek](#)
- **Facebook.** Discuss ideas or raise questions on our [Facebook Stoicism group](#) to share your ideas and experiences
- **Google+.** You may also want to share your thoughts on our [Google+ community](#) page
- **Mobile.** Use your phone to set reminders to start your Stoic practices
- **Other Social Media.** Although, we don't currently use other social networks like Instagram and Snapchat, there's nothing to stop you from doing so as part of Stoic Week.

There are also Stoic groups on [LinkedIn](#) and [Reddit](#), which you may find useful

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 break each day where you touch base with others to discuss how you are doing.

Q: Can I take part offline or by using my mobile device?

A: Absolutely. We provide ebook versions of the Stoic Week handbook, which can be used

offline on mobile phones, tablets, and e-readers. This can be very useful if you're travelling and won't always have internet access. There are three ebook file formats provided: MOBI for Amazon Kindle devices, EPUB for use on all other e-readers and Android and Apple iOS devices, and PDF files, which can be printed or read on virtually any device. We recommend using the MOBI or EPUB formats for reading on electronic devices and the PDF format for printing. (You can also open all three formats on your computer, if you have the appropriate software installed.) We also recommend that at the start of Stoic Week you begin by downloading all of the available offline formats, just in case you need them. You could also print a hard-copy from the PDF file, which is generally the best format to use for this purpose. Most people with internet access work through the handbook on our main website.

Q: What if I have problems?

A: We're here to provide help and support. Just email the course administrator via admin@modernstoicism.com or use the contact form on the main website. Many hundreds of people have successfully used all of these resources, readings, and exercises since Stoic Week began in 2012 so we know they're definitely usable, although individuals do sometimes inevitably experience technical problems or have other issues that they need help with. Your first lesson in Stoicism may be that, rather than give up when you run into an obstacle, there's usually a way forward if you're willing to persevere and seek help from the right people.

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 toward living a good life.

What is Stoicism?

Stoicism is a school of ancient Greek philosophy in the Socratic tradition. It was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium around 301 BC. The name comes from the painted porch (*stoa poikile*) where Zeno lectured his students. Stoicism later became very popular in ancient Rome, where it continued to flourish long after the disappearance of the original Greek school. Less than one percent of the Stoics' original writings now survive, however. The most important ancient sources that survive today are:

1. The many *Letters, Essays* and *Dialogues* of the Roman statesman Seneca, who was advisor to the emperor Nero.
2. The *Handbook* and four surviving books of Epictetus' *Discourses* compiled from his lectures by a student called Arrian. Epictetus, a Greek ex-slave, is the only Stoic *teacher* whose thought survives in book form.
3. *The Meditations*, a private Stoic notebook or diary of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, who was strongly influenced by Epictetus.

In the Stoic Week Handbook we have included quotations from all three thinkers, especially Marcus Aurelius, who himself expresses Stoic ideas in a distinctively brief and eloquent form, which many people find very powerful. We think that Marcus wrote his *Meditations* as morning or evening reflections to help provide philosophical support for himself in an intensely busy and demanding life as emperor and general. (In the 17th century, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, wrote his own Stoic journal closely based on *The Meditations* and Epictetus' *Discourses*, available in print today as *The Philosophical Regimen*.)

Stoic Week gives *you* a chance to follow a similar routine to Marcus each day. You might like to write down your own morning and evening meditations and keep them in a notebook, or share them with other people through social networks. You can base your personal meditations on the topics suggested or use other Stoic ideas that you have learnt about and find helpful.

Some people choose to read Marcus' *Meditations* during Stoic Week, although this is optional. There are recent translations in paperback and e-book formats from Oxford World's Classics and Penguin. Another translation of Books 1-6 of *The Meditations* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2013) provides a full introduction and commentary by Prof. Christopher Gill, one of the founders of Stoic Week. We hope that the Stoic Week *Handbook* provides as much help and support to you as Marcus found by writing his *Meditations*.

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 curious to learn more. The ancient Stoic philosophical system was well known for being vast and complex, addressing a wide range of topics under the headings of ethics, logic, and physics. It will be impossible to introduce it all but here are three central ideas at the heart of Stoic ethics:

1. Virtue

The Stoics argued that the most important thing in life and the only thing with real value is 'virtue', by which they meant excellence of character. The core virtues for the Stoics were:

- Wisdom, especially moral or practical wisdom
- Justice, encompassing both kindness and fairness, or wisdom applied to our relationships
- Courage or "fortitude", i.e., mastery over our fears
- Moderation or "temperance", i.e., mastery of our desires

Wisdom is the most important virtue to Stoics and, all other virtues are seen as a form of practical wisdom. The virtues of courage and moderation are the forms of Stoic self-control required to live consistently with wisdom and justice, especially when beset by challenges from without and unruly desires and emotions from within. Epictetus' famous slogan "endure and renounce" appears to refer to these two virtues of self-mastery.

However, 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 on in your family and social relations, your intentions, your actions, and your pattern of life as a whole. From another perspective, Stoic virtue refers to the perfection of our own nature, like an acorn growing into an oak tree. We have the capacity for wisdom, and virtue consists in fulfilling that potential within ourselves. Virtue ultimately entails living in accord with our own nature as rational beings, but also in harmony with the rest of mankind and in agreement with Nature as a whole. In practice, that means facing difficult people and physical hardships with good grace, patience, and equanimity.

The central Stoic claim was 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 and fulfilment. Cultivating virtue ought to be our top priority, above all other things, if we want to live a good life. The Stoics used the word *eudaimonia* to describe someone who lives the best type of life. It's usually translated as "happiness". However, it doesn't refer to a happy feeling but rather something more rounded and complete. Some people think that "flourishing" or "fulfilment" are better translations. You can also think of *eudaimonia* as meaning "happiness" in the archaic sense, the opposite of being in a "hapless" or wretched condition.

The Stoics also believed that we are naturally inclined to recognise the overriding value of virtue, and that we are born with an instinctive wish to benefit others and to express this in social involvement. From this natural basis we may come to see the bond between ourselves and all human beings. Conversely, the Stoics claimed that all those external things that people often pursue – a good job, money, success, fame, etc. – cannot guarantee us happiness. 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. The Stoics refer to everything “external” to our own character as “indifferent”, in terms of attaining the good life. This term causes some confusion but you could simply think of it as meaning “not worth getting upset about”. Some morally “indifferent” things are to be “preferred” or “rejected”. That is, they’re *lightly* sought or avoided with the reservation that the outcome is never absolutely under our control. Hence, the Stoics said it is rational and indeed wise for us to prefer having these things in life within reason. It is just that personal fulfilment 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, like a robot or Mister Spock from Star Trek. However, this is definitely a *misconception*, albeit a very widespread one. The central Stoic claim was that our emotions are ultimately the product of the judgements that 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 value-judgements lead to unhealthy emotions and desires, so too will wise judgements lead to rational and *healthy* ones. For example, the Stoics claimed there were three broad categories of good desires and emotions that are part of a happy and fulfilled 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 more vacuous or destructive pleasures.
2. *Caution or discretion* directed against the prospect of what is truly harmful to us, like folly and vice, as opposed to the fear of external things in life.
3. *Wishing or willing* what is truly good, such as (gently) desiring the well-being of ourselves and others, as opposed to irrational craving for things that are not entirely ‘up to us’ like health, wealth, or reputation.

As we’ve seen, Marcus Aurelius actually described the goal of Stoicism as becoming someone “free from passions and yet full of love”, by which he primarily means

overcoming *unhealthy* desires and emotions. So the Stoic Sage is *not* simply an emotionless, 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. Rather, it was to develop the natural affection we have for those close to us in accordance with virtue, or if you prefer: to love ourselves and others, with wisdom. This ultimately means extending our ethical concern to humankind in general by developing an attitude of philanthropy.

It is a man's especial privilege to love even those who stumble. And this love follows as soon as you reflect that they are akin to you and that they do wrong involuntarily and through ignorance, and that within a little while both they and you will be dead; and this above all, that the man has done you no harm; for he has not made your "ruling faculty" worse than it was before. (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7.22)

The Stoics also acknowledged 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

The founders of Stoicism said that the central doctrine of their philosophy – the goal of life – could be summed up as "living in agreement with Nature". What did they mean by this? Well, we know that they thought it was synonymous with "living in accord with virtue". As you learned earlier, the Stoics thought of Nature in at least three key ways:

1. Our true *inner* nature, which they believed to consist in our capacity for reason
2. The nature of *society* and our relationship with the rest of mankind
3. The nature of our external environment as a whole the *universe* around us

The Stoics believed that leading a life with virtue as your goal is the natural way for a human being to live. They 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. By contrast, the foolish and vicious person is perpetually divided from his own true nature, in conflict with other people, and alienated from the world around him.

By contrast, the Stoics also encourage us to see ourselves as *integral* parts of nature and part of a greater whole. 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. The Stoic worldview can help us develop this attitude. For the Stoics, our life-cycle from birth to death is but one infinitesimal part of life in nature, and realising this can help us accept every event, including our own death and

that of others, with equanimity. Taking a broader and more objective perspective on life was part of what the Stoics meant by studying Nature (“physics”), but it is also something that can help transform our personality in a moral and therapeutic sense.

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)

If you are going to follow Stoic Week then you should attempt to be open toward Stoicism and these three central ideas about value, emotions, and nature. 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 key ideas seem completely absurd to you then it may be that Stoic Week is not the right experiment for you.

Stoic Week: Your Daily Routine

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

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

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 to prepare 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, 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 in order to prepare yourself mentally for your day ahead. For example, imagine in broad outline 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 gotten 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 or 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)

Evening Meditation

Epictetus and Seneca both allude to a form of philosophical self-analysis that was practised regularly, each evening, by Stoics. The contemplative exercise they describe was actually 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 (or similar) questions:

1. What did you do badly? Did you allow yourself to be ruled by fears or desires 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? Praise yourself and reinforce what you want to repeat.
3. What could you do differently? Did you omit any opportunities to exercise virtue or strength of character? How could you have handled things better?

As Seneca puts it, by asking yourself these questions, you are adopting the role of a friend and wise advisor toward yourself, rather than a harsh or punitive critic. Criticise your specific actions rather than yourself as a person in general and focus on ways in which you can improve.

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. When you wake up the next day you’ll find it natural to base your morning meditation on your reflections before going to sleep the previous night. These meditations 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, leading to the same cycle the following day.

Modern research-based psychotherapy advises 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 you are not able, then set your thoughts aside and 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 change, 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, 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 to make use of a self-monitoring record. This will help you keep a record of behaviours you'd like to stop, such as dwelling on negative thoughts and actions you might later regret. If you feel you've not got time to do this, don't worry, it's *optional*. However, keeping a record is one of the things that previous participants in Stoic Week told us they found particularly helpful to do.

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 in their writings. For example, Epictetus advised his students to keep a tally of days which elapsed without them succumbing to anger. 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 download the one we have created from the website.

This process is not just about record-keeping. It's about pausing, taking a step back from things, and gaining what therapists call 'psychological distance' from your initial upsetting thoughts and feelings. It will help you to become a detached observer of yourself for a while. Write things down as soon as possible. Doing so will help you to view your thoughts in this detached way, observing events and describing them in an objective manner.

1. Date/Time/Event

Note the date and time of the event, when you started to feel angry or afraid, for example. 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 interested in feelings that might be considered irrational in the sense of being misguided and negative. 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, or 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 are ultimately beyond your direct control. All you can control in this situation is your response to their words and perhaps your plans for how to act in the future. Even your previous 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. They urge us to serenely accept those things in life we cannot change while taking full responsibility for bringing our own voluntary actions into line with our moral 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%. However, we'll need to explore this question more carefully in the following parts of the course.

5. Actions

In this situation, how far did your actions actually match your ethical principles? Did you act in a way which matches your understanding of virtue that was wise, just, courageous, and temperate 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%.

Theme: Stoicism and Love

Men have come into being for one another; so either educate them or put up with them. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.59

Each year, Stoic Week will have a different overarching theme. This year the theme is “Stoicism and Love”.

People often assume that Stoicism is rather unemotional and it may come as a surprise to them to realise that natural affection (*philostorgia*) for others was the basis of Stoic Ethics. You can think of this as related to other concepts such as love, and especially friendship. Marcus described the ideal Stoic as “free from [unhealthy, irrational] passion and yet full of love” (*Meditations*, 1.9). Musonius Rufus said that a Stoic philosopher ideally ‘displays love for his fellow human beings, as well as goodness, justice, kindness and concern for his neighbour’ (*Lectures*, 14). Living in harmony and friendship with other people appears to be part of what the Stoics meant by “living in agreement with nature”, although compared to our present reality this may be something of a distant utopian ideal.

The cardinal virtue that relates most directly to our interaction with other people is “justice”. For Stoics, justice is a form of social or moral wisdom. It consists of two main elements:

1. Kindness or benevolence toward others
2. Treating others fairly and impartially

Seneca explained that for a Stoic the virtue called ‘justice’ requires him to ‘count his friend as dear as himself, to think that an enemy can be turned into a friend, to rouse love in the former and temper hatred in the latter’ (*Letters*, 95). Although this was a moral and philosophical ideal, the Stoics also developed practical detailed psychological guidance to help us progress toward it. For example, Marcus Aurelius wrote down a list consisting of ten pieces of advice he gave himself about dealing with difficult people, with kindness, fairness, and natural affection, in accord with Stoic teachings (*Meditations*, 11.18):

1. Remember the fundamental kinship between yourself and the rest of mankind, and think of yourself as having come into being for the sake of each other, as members of the global community of mankind. (We call this Stoic “cosmopolitanism”.)
2. Think of the character of the other person as they are in other areas of life, such as eating meals, going to sleep, etc. Bear in mind the harm their own behaviour does to them.
3. If what they’re doing is right, you’ve no reason to complain but if it’s not right, they don’t really understand what they’re doing. (Notice that most people are shocked if they’re accused of doing wrong.)
4. Remember that you’re not perfect yourself, and sometimes do the wrong thing, or upset people. Or if you don’t do so often, you at least have the potential to do so in certain situations.

5. You can never be absolutely certain what they're doing is wrong anyway. People's real motives are often hidden from you, and not what they seem.
6. When you're angry with others, remind yourself that all things are transient, and especially that both of you are mortal and will soon be gone and ultimately forgotten anyway.
7. Prevent yourself from thinking of things other people do or say as insults by realising that, fundamentally, you have been done no harm. Your moral character cannot be damaged by other people's actions.
8. Know that our own anger and frustration harm us more than they harm the person they're directed toward.
9. Teach yourself that genuine kindness toward others can be a powerful force and that, as long as it's sincere, with patient perseverance even stubborn people can be won over. Speak to people carefully and without any trace of sarcasm or hostility and they will often respond.
10. Most importantly, bear in mind that it's naive to expect everyone in the world to be perfect, and that most people are bound to do foolish and vicious things from time to time. The wise man knows this and prepares for it in advance, accepting difficult encounters with other people as an inevitable part of life.

Marcus also repeats similar advice to himself in *Meditations* 9.42. He's clearly approaching the issue of interpersonal conflict very systematically, and drawing on Stoic teachings in doing so. If you prefer something simpler, by contrast, Epictetus gave his students the very laconic advice to tell themselves "It seemed right to them", when dealing with difficult people.

Stoics should treat others with affectionate kindness, which means wishing that they would become wise and virtuous. However, we must do so while simultaneously accepting that the behaviour of other people is beyond our direct control. Stoic love and friendship are therefore not demanding of *reciprocation*. The Stoic is kind and affectionate because it's virtuous not because he hopes to gain something by being nice to other people. Indeed, the ability to treat others with friendship, even when they don't do the same in return, is something we generally praise and admire in other people.

Come on, let us see now if thou canst love disinterestedly. "Thanks my good kinsman (brother, sister, friend), for giving me so generous a part, that I can love though not beloved." – Shaftesbury, *The Philosophical Regimen*, p. 108

Keep returning to this advice throughout your week of Stoic practices. We will touch on the theme of "Stoicism and love" in various places, particularly in the chapter on *Relationships*.

Monday: Life

Life as a Project and Role Models



Morning Text for Reflection

From Maximus [I have learnt the importance of these things]: to be master of oneself and not carried this way and that; to be cheerful under all circumstances, including illness; a character with a harmonious blend of gentleness and dignity; readiness to tackle the task in hand without complaint; the confidence everyone had that whatever he said he meant and whatever he did was not done with bad intent; never to be astonished or panic-stricken, and never to be hurried or to hang back or be at a loss or downcast or cringing or on the other hand angry or suspicious; to be ready to help or forgive, and to be truthful; to give the impression of someone whose character is naturally upright rather than having undergone correction; the fact that no-one could have thought that Maximus looked down on him, or could have presumed to suppose that he was better than Maximus; and to have great personal charm. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.14

Today's Midday Exercise: Writing your own *Meditations*

We begin our first day by thinking about two Stoic themes that are central to the first book of Marcus Aurelius' philosophical journal, *The Meditations*. One is the idea that our whole life should be seen as an ongoing project or journey of ethical self-development. The other is that, on this journey, we can improve our own development by reflecting on the good qualities and ways of life of the people who mean most to us.

The word “philosophy” literally means “love of wisdom”. The Stoics can be viewed as taking this quite literally. Wisdom is the central virtue of Stoicism and the Stoics love virtue, in themselves and others, above all else. In the morning text quoted above, Marcus thinks about what he learnt about wisdom and virtue from Maximus, an older family friend who was a leading politician with deep philosophical interests. He focuses on Maximus’ integrity of character, his emotional balance, his genuineness and ease in dealing with other people – all qualities valued by Stoicism whose basis will become clear in the coming week.

An important feature of Stoic theory lies behind *Book 1* of Marcus’ *Meditations*. It is the idea that human life, if lived properly, is an ongoing project or journey directed towards the best possible human condition: that of wisdom. There are two strands to this journey: one is individual and the other social. At an individual level we can learn to move from an instinctive desire for such things as self-preservation, health, and property, towards wanting to live in the best possible way. For the Stoics, this means living according to the virtues of wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage. The culmination of this strand is recognising that virtue is the only thing that is fundamentally of value and the only real basis for happiness and fulfilment. The second strand concerns our relations to other people. The Stoics thought that human beings and other animals are instinctively drawn to care for others of their kind; most obviously to love and care for their children. However, as human beings develop we deepen and extend this instinct of care, forming lasting family and community commitments and coming to recognise that all human beings are our “brothers” and “sisters”, since they are, like us, rational creatures capable of ethical development.

The Stoics also thought that these two strands of development go hand in hand and support each other. All individuals are capable of developing in this way, regardless of their inborn characters and social background. However, this progress does not just happen automatically. You need to work at it, otherwise it can go very wrong. Marcus uses his regular note-taking and reflection (*The Meditations*) to help this process of development, which he often describes as his real ‘job’ or ‘work’ as a human being (for instance, in tomorrow’s morning text for reflection). In *Book 1* he thinks about his whole life from early childhood until his late 50s as a cycle of development and reflects on the ethical qualities whose value he has learnt to recognise, as well as the way that his relationships with other people have helped him to do this.

We have written this handbook in a way that is designed to mirror Marcus’ reflective practice and to encourage you to try to do the same as Marcus did, forming your own notes and reflections based on the themes explored each day this week. Take a few minutes to think about the qualities you have come to value in the course of your life, however young or old you are. Have you changed your ideas about what is most important in the course of your life, as your situation has changed? Do you think your ideas have deepened on this topic over time or not? You might like to make some notes on this or draw some pictures suggesting the qualities you find most significant. If you want to do

this collaboratively you could use the online discussion forums or Facebook page.

Think too about the people who have helped you appreciate the importance of these qualities. They might be family members, close friends or partners, work associates, or people you do not know directly but whom you respect and admire. You might like to make notes or pictures on this, and also to chart links between specific individuals and the qualities you have come to value. This affection for others and deep admiration for the signs of wisdom and virtue they exhibit can be viewed as one aspect of what it means for Stoics to love wisely.

You might like to contemplate the virtues of others at one sitting or space it through the day while you are doing other things. Like most of the exercises we suggest, it can be useful to come back to it as the week progresses and see how your thinking has developed on these topics.

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

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by imagining how you might act more like your role models in life and share similar virtues in the face of the events you're about to face.
2. *Midday*. Practice writing your own philosophical journal like Marcus Aurelius. Focus on writing down the virtues you admire in others and which you aspire to embody in your own life. Use writing as an opportunity to clarify the qualities you admire and think of it as an opportunity to contemplate them more deeply than normal.
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today: what you may have done badly, what you did well, and what you could do differently in the future. Imagine being your own Stoic life-coach and try to counsel yourself with wisdom and affection.

Remember, you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record throughout the day. In particular, today, you may want to focus on developing greater self-awareness of your

thoughts, actions, and feelings, and to notice how they relate to the goals you set yourself in your morning meditation. Also see the following brief section on *Stoic Maxims and Affirmations*.

Stoic Maxims & Affirmations

You may find this additional piece of advice helpful: 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 told 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. When someone acted in a way that might be upsetting or objectionable, Epictetus told his students to say, “It seemed right to him”.

Hence, 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. Indeed, 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)

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.

Examples based on 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.”
- “Indifference to indifferent things.”
- “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 you must die.”
- “Endure and renounce” or “bear and forbear”, having the virtues of courage and self-discipline.

Audio Download: Stoic Attitudes Meditation

You may also want to listen to the MP3 audio recording we created called the “Stoic Attitudes Meditation”. This recording 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.

Tuesday: Control

What is in our Control



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

Today's Midday Exercise:

What is in our Control and Wishing with Reservation

Today and tomorrow we focus on themes that are important for the meditative practices we are recommending in this handbook. These themes have parallels in some modern psychotherapeutic methods but they also have a firm basis in Stoic writings and practices. The themes for today and tomorrow are expressed with special force in Marcus' *Meditations*, 1.7, which was ultimately based on the writings of Epictetus. Marcus was greatly influenced by Epictetus and these themes form the basis of his own meditative approach.

Today we think about two important, linked Stoic themes: distinguishing between what is and is not in our power and wishing 'with reservation'. Both of these themes follow from the ideas about human development outlined yesterday. Stoics believe that all of us can and should work at taking forward our own ethical development by learning how to act virtuously and by broadening and deepening our relationships with other people. This is something that is 'up to us' or 'within our power' as rational beings. However, there are many things we cannot determine by our own actions, such as whether we become rich or famous, whether we get ill, or whether close family members die.

Stoics believe that what is 'up to us' or 'within our power' is of ultimate importance in our lives rather than the things that we cannot control. Although they recognise that it is natural for us to prefer being healthy or well-off, for example, Stoics regard these things as being of fundamentally less value than virtue. They also believe that recognising the distinction between what is and is not within our power is crucial for leading a good human life and one that is free from 'passions' or negative and destructive emotions.

For this reason, when we form wishes about things that are not wholly within our power we should wish 'with reservation' or with a 'reserve clause', a caveat such as 'if nothing prevents it'. Otherwise, our plans and wishes are not based on the realities of human life and may lead to frustration and disillusionment.

Epictetus expresses the distinction between what is and is not in our power very clearly in this passage:

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, social role or status, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. – Epictetus, *Handbook*, 1

He also points out that if we focus our wishes and desires on things that are not wholly within our power, such as health, wealth and social status, this will lead to disappointment and negative emotions (*Handbook*, 2). This distinction is important for Marcus too, as is clear in these two passages:

Try out how the life of a good person suits you – someone who is pleased with what is allocated from the whole, and satisfied with his own just actions and kind disposition. – *Meditations*, 4.25

Love the expertise which you have learned and take support from this. Pass the remainder of your life as one who has entrusted all he has, in a full-hearted way, to the gods... – *Meditations*, 4.31

On the one hand, Marcus advises himself to focus on the project of ethical development, which is within his power: trying to lead the life of a good person (someone who does 'just actions and has a kind disposition') and gradually coming to love the 'expertise' or 'skill' of

living in this way. On the other hand, Marcus also urges himself to accept that his actions and life are part of a much wider pattern of events, of which he controls a very small part. He is part of a much larger 'whole', an interconnected series of events (or Fate), which can also be attributed to 'the gods'. (We will discuss Marcus' thinking on nature or 'the whole' on Sunday.) This is a contrast that runs through much of *The Meditations* and helps him to face many harsh realities in his life – above all the looming prospect of his own death.

This does *not* mean passively resigning yourself to events. Stoic acceptance entails recognising that some things are outside your control, and that if those events have actually happened this must be acknowledged and accepted. You still try to do your best in *responding* to these events because 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 also about maintaining a sense of purpose regarding the aspects of your life that you can actually determine.

The famous 'Serenity Prayer' used by Alcoholics Anonymous gives a 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.

That is why the Stoics suggest we form our plans and wishes with a 'reserve clause' in mind. In a nutshell, it's a matter of qualifying every intention by saying, 'I will do such and such, *if nothing prevents me*'. This marks the distinction between what is and is not in our power and helps us to recognise that it is only what is within our power that is genuinely important. (This is very helpful advice on journeys of all kinds, where lots of things are outside our power!)

Take a few minutes to think in a specific way about what this distinction would mean in your life. You could begin by making two lists: one of things in your current life and situation that you can control by your own actions and aspirations and one of things that you cannot control. You could then examine the contents of the two lists and think about which of these two lists is more important and valuable. How far do your lists match the Stoic distinction between things that are and are not within our power? (As summarised by Epictetus, for instance, in *Handbook* 1, quoted above.) How far does it match the Stoic distinction between virtuous actions and 'externals' or 'indifferents'? (Such as health, wealth and social status.)

During your morning meditation you can practise incorporating the 'reserve clause', saying to yourself: 'I will do x or y... if nothing prevents it' or 'if this fits in with the larger pattern of events or Fate'. Imagine all the things that could go wrong and adopt an attitude of detached acceptance towards them, remembering that the only thing that really matters is that you do your best and try to act in a way that helps you develop the virtues.

Evening 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

Today's Summary

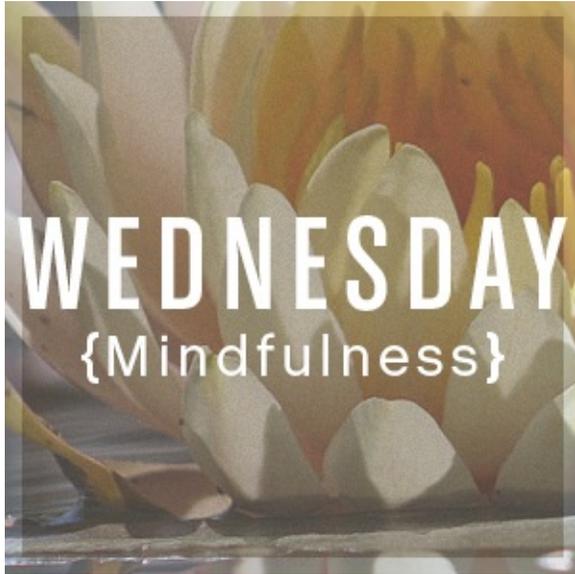
Here's a reminder of your daily routine with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by imagining how you might respond to any setbacks or challenges with Stoic wisdom, distinguishing between what is "up to you" and what isn't, and pursuing external goals with the "reserve clause" described above.
2. *Midday*. Analyse some specific situations in more detail by listing the aspects "up to you" and those not. Contemplate what it would mean to pursue your other goals this week, or in life more generally, by really taking the Stoic "reserve clause" to heart: saying to yourself "I will do xyz", and adding, for instance, "Fate permitting".
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today: what you may have done badly, what you did well, and what you could do differently in the future. Think about the extent to which you successfully bore in mind the distinction between what was under your control and what wasn't. (Notice that the actions you're reviewing from the day, now it is over, are no longer "up to you" because they're in your past.)

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus today on any disturbing or negative emotions you may have experienced, no matter how slight, and evaluate to what extent they're associated with thoughts about things not entirely under your control. Especially notice your value-judgements about external things being good or bad.

Wednesday: Mindfulness

Stoic Mindfulness and Examining your Impressions



Morning Text for Reflection

People look for retreats for themselves, in the country, by the coast, or in the hills; and you too are especially inclined to feel this desire. But this is altogether unphilosophical, when it is possible for you to retreat into yourself at any time you want. There is nowhere that a person can find a more peaceful and trouble-free retreat than in his own mind, especially if he has within himself the kind of thoughts that let him dip into them and so at once gain complete ease of mind; and by ease of mind, I mean nothing but having one's own mind in good order. So constantly give yourself this retreat and renew yourself. You should have to hand concise and fundamental principles, which will be enough, as soon as you encounter them, to cleanse you from all distress and send you back without resentment at the activities to which you return.
– Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 1.3.1-3

Today's Midday Exercise:

Stoic Mindfulness and Examining your Impressions

We've already suggested that you can help develop a Stoic approach by self-monitoring. Another way of putting this is to use the idea of 'Stoic mindfulness'. Mindfulness in modern psychotherapy is derived from Buddhist meditation. However, there is a comparable focus in ancient Stoicism on living in the here and now and paying close attention to our thoughts and feelings. Today's morning text for reflection gives a very powerful expression of Stoic mindfulness, as Marcus reminds himself of the value of putting his mind in good

order and renewing himself in preparation for the challenges of his life.

As with yesterday's theme, Epictetus gives a very clear statement of what is involved in Stoic mindfulness, and one that influenced Marcus' thinking too.

Practise, then, from the very beginning to say to every rough impression, 'You're an impression and not at all what you appear to be.' Then examine it and test it by the standards that you have, and first and foremost by this one, whether the impression relates to those things which are within our power or those which aren't up to us; and if it relates to those things which aren't within our power, be ready to reply, 'That's nothing to me'. – Epictetus, *Handbook*, 1.5

He says that we should train ourselves to avoid errors in our judgements and being 'carried away' by our thoughts and feelings. For Stoics, the key error of judgement lies in treating external things (such as health and money) 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 reflecting on whether our judgements refer to things within our power 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. That is what he means by 'examining your impressions'. 'Impression' is a very general term in Stoicism covering all thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Epictetus stresses that we should 'examine' all these before accepting them as valid and as matching objective reality.

To understand what Epictetus meant, it may help to compare it to a psychological strategy employed in modern therapy called 'cognitive distancing'. In cognitive therapy, which was originally inspired by Stoicism, it's assumed that before we can challenge negative patterns of thinking we have to spot them first and interrogate our own thoughts. In Stoicism, the first step in responding to troubling desires and emotions is to gain psychological distance from them by reminding ourselves that the impressions they're based upon are just impressions – only thoughts – and not to assume that they are what matches reality when we consider the situation more carefully.

One 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). The two passages from Marcus quoted below for the evening reflection convey the same point. Epictetus repeatedly advised his students that remembering this 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 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.

For example, 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, allowing your fear to escalate unnecessarily.

One of the simplest ways of responding to troubling thoughts when you spot their early-warning signs is 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 remind ourselves that these are just thoughts and wait a while before giving them any further attention, or deciding what action to take. In modern anger management this is sometimes called the 'taking a time-out' strategy. The Stoics talked about withholding our 'assent' or agreement from upsetting initial impressions.

You've already started monitoring your thoughts, actions, and feelings, and distinguishing between things under your control and not. From this point onward during Stoic Week, try to catch the early-warning signs of strong desires or upsetting emotions. Pause to give yourself thinking space and to 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. Then try asking yourself the following three questions:

1. Most importantly, ask yourself whether the things that are upsetting you are within your power or not. If they're not, accept this fact and remind yourself that such things are not fundamentally important in the way that virtue is.
2. Ask yourself what a perfectly wise and virtuous person would do when faced with the same problem or situation. The Stoics used the ideal of the 'wise person' or sage' in just this way. Think about someone you know personally or someone you know by reputation who comes closest to this ideal and take them as your model in your reflections.
3. Ask yourself what strengths or resources nature has given you to deal with the situation. For example, do you have the capacity for patience and endurance? How might using those capacities help you deal with this problem more wisely?

Evening Texts for Reflection

Get rid of the judgement and you have got rid of the idea. 'I have been harmed'; get rid of the idea, 'I have been harmed', and you have got rid of the harm itself. –
Meditations, 4.7

All turns on judgement, and that is up to you. So when you want to do this, get rid of

the judgement, and then, as though you had passed the headland, the sea will be calm and all will be still, and there won't be a wave in the bay. – *Meditations*, 12.22

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by imagining how you might respond to people and situations throughout the day with greater mindfulness and self-awareness.
2. *Midday*. Take 5-10 minutes to sit quietly and practice mindfulness. Observe your automatic thoughts and feelings with a detached scientific attitude, as if you were observing the stream of consciousness of another person. Throughout the day, try to maintain greater awareness of your thoughts and actions, and particularly to view any disturbing feelings, no matter how slight, with greater cognitive distance.
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today: when you were practising Stoic Mindfulness.

Remember, you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Today, use writing down your thoughts and feelings as a way to gain cognitive distance from them. Pausing and looking at a concise expression of your thoughts on paper can make it easier to view them objectively. Also, you may notice that knowing you are *going to review* events later in the evening meditation can help make you more mindful of how you respond to them throughout the day if you approach this in a careful and self-disciplined manner.

Thursday: Virtue

Virtue and Values-clarification



Morning Text for Reflection

If you find anything in human life better than justice, truthfulness, self-control, courage... turn to it with all your heart and enjoy the supreme good that you have found... but if you find all other things to be trivial and valueless in comparison with virtue give no room to anything else, since once you turn towards that and divert from your proper path, you will no longer be able without inner conflict to give the highest honour to that which is properly good. It is not right to set up as a rival to the rational and social good [virtue] anything alien its nature, such as the praise of the many or positions of power, wealth or enjoyment of pleasures. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 3.6

Today's Midday Exercise: Virtue and Values-clarification

In the earlier section on 'Central Stoic Ideas' we set out some key features of Stoic thinking on virtue. For Stoics, philosophy (the love of wisdom) is also the love of virtue in ourselves and others. The core virtues are wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage. Virtue is the only thing that is fundamentally good and the sole basis for genuine fulfillment in life. Other things that people pursue in search of happiness, such as health and property, are natural to desire. However, compared to virtue they are relatively unimportant, even 'matters of indifference'. Other ancient philosophers thought that virtue was an important element in a happy and complete life. The Stoics were exceptional,

though, in claiming that it was the *only* thing needed for the best possible life. In order to have a good *life*, in other words, it is only necessary to be a good *person*.

Why did the Stoics give the virtues such importance? Aren't other things also important, such as the welfare of our family, good health, and a measure of material prosperity? For them, the virtues are the qualities that enable us to live a fully human life. They are features of understanding and character, and ways of dealing with other people, which make us fully human; that is, rational and social beings in a complete sense. The four chief virtues, taken together, are intended to cover the main areas of human expertise or 'living well': rational understanding, proper treatment of others, management of emotions and desires. The Stoics saw the virtues as a complementary set, which were mutually supporting, so that you could not have one virtue without having the others too. They also recognised there were many subdivisions of the main four virtues and that they could be understood from a number of different perspectives.

The virtues are seen by them as forms of expertise in living. So if you have the virtues you will be good at doing everything else in life. (Including looking after your health, property, and the welfare of your family or friends.) If you lack them, you will not be good at doing any of these other things and will make mistakes in your handling of life. That is why the Stoics saw virtue as the only thing that is needed for happiness. When compared to virtue all other things are relatively unimportant and without fundamental value.

The Stoics acknowledged that achieving virtue in the full sense was extremely difficult. In that sense, the 'wise person' who has all the virtues remains very much an ideal. However, Stoics also believed that all human beings are in principle capable of achieving virtue and that this should be our overall goal in life. They also thought that a life centred on aspiration and progress towards virtue was a far better life than one directed at other goals, such as gaining material wealth or power for their own sake. This means that the Stoic life is an ongoing journey towards virtue, which is how Marcus presents his own life in the first book of *The Meditations*, as illustrated in Monday's Midday exercise. The morning text for today also shows the importance for Marcus of directing his life towards developing the virtues rather than towards gaining external things such as fame or wealth.

Let's suppose that you find this view of virtue attractive in general but want to know more about what it means for you personally and how you could live your life in this way. One way of reflecting on this is by a technique sometimes used in modern psychological therapy and counselling called 'values-clarification'. There are two main aspects of this method:

1. Reflecting on what our core values are, the qualities we genuinely think are most important for leading a good human life.
2. Asking ourselves whether our actions on a day-to-day basis actually match our ethical beliefs and, if not, how we can begin to change our actions to match our values.

Some modern psychotherapists think that psychological problems may stem from a

mismatch between our actions and what we value, and that bringing the two closer together is crucial for helping us to get free of these psychological problems. Stoics also think it is very important to reflect honestly on your core values: Epictetus' advice to 'examine your impressions' is partly about this. Stoics like Epictetus, Marcus, and Seneca also stress the vital importance of making sure that your day-to-day actions match your core ethical convictions. This may be part of what the founders of Stoicism meant by "living in agreement with nature", including our own rational and moral nature. Later Stoics certainly placed great importance on what today we tend to call "integrity".

As a first move in this direction, here are two exercises that might help. First, use these questions to clarify your core values:

- What's ultimately the most important thing in life to you?
- What do you want your life to 'stand for' or 'be about'?
- What would you most like your life to be remembered for after you've died?
- What sort of thing do you most want to spend your time doing?
- What sort of person do you most want to be in your various relationships and roles in life? For example, as a parent, friend, at work or in life generally.
- You could also ask how far your own core values match what the ancient Stoics meant by 'virtue', especially character traits such as wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation.

Second, look at all your answers to the first set of questions and ask how far your real actions on a day-to-day basis match your core values. If they do not match completely (and it would be *surprising* if they did!) think about ways in which you could bring the two closer together. Think of one specific activity you could be doing (but aren't) that would help you develop towards expressing your core values or which would enable you to express them fully.

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

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead, planning ways in which you can act more in the service of your own core values and doing things that are consistent with your deepest priorities in life.
2. *Midday*. Take 5-10 minutes to sit quietly and reflect further on your core values by contemplating the "values-clarification" questions mentioned above. Try to develop a stronger sense of what's most important to you in life, not so much in terms of external goals or outcomes but in terms of the type of person you want to be, and your own character.
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today. How consistently you were able to act in the service of your core values? Could you do things differently tomorrow?

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus today on recording and evaluating specific situations and your actions or responses. How well did your actions match your core values? Did you respond with wisdom? Did you exhibit virtues like justice, discipline, courage? What virtues would help you respond better to similar situations in the future?

Friday: Relationships

Relationships with Other People and Society



Morning Text for Reflection

Say to yourself first thing in the morning: I shall meet with people who are meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable. They are subject to these faults because of their ignorance of what is good and bad. But I have recognized the nature of the good and seen that it is the right, and the nature of the bad and seen that it is the wrong, and the nature of the wrongdoer himself, and seen that he is related to me, not because he has the same blood or seed, but because he shares in the same mind and portion of divinity. So I cannot be harmed by any of them, as no one will involve me in what is wrong. Nor can I be angry with my relative or hate him. We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work against each other is contrary to nature; and resentment and rejection count as working against someone. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.1

Today's Midday Exercise: Relationships with Other People and Society

Stoics are today sometimes mistakenly seen as rather cold and detached from other people. This is a puzzling view, as Stoicism, more than any other ancient philosophy, stresses that human beings are naturally inclined to care for other people and to become involved in their communities. This is a key part of their ideas about human ethical development, as you've learned. Indeed, this was *not* a common criticism of Stoicism made in the ancient world. It's a modern misconception about them. For example,

Musonius Rufus said that Stoic Ethics teaches us that “a virtuous person displays love for his fellow human beings, as well as goodness, justice, kindness, and concern for his neighbour” (*Lecture 14*).

Stoics think that human beings, like other animals, instinctively feel affection and care for others of our kind, above all our children. They also think human beings are naturally capable of deepening and extending this natural affection in rational and sociable ways: for instance, by engaging in family life or deep friendships and by involvement in local or national communities. Another very distinctive idea – and an unusual one in ancient Greece and Rome – is that we should extend this attitude of care to all human beings as such, seeing them as our brothers and sisters and as fellow-citizens in a kind of world-community. We have this kinship and co-citizenship because we are all naturally social animals, capable of reason, and of developing towards virtue and wisdom.

Marcus’ *Meditations* are very rich in reflections about interpersonal and social relationships. They also have a lot to say about the positive or good emotions that form part of a human life centred on virtue, as opposed to the negative and destructive emotions or ‘passions’ based on ethical mistakes. (See the section on *Emotions* in the *Central Stoic Ideas* early in this handbook.) Here is one such passage:

Whenever you want to cheer yourself up, think of the good qualities of those who live with you: such as the energy of one, the decency of another, the generosity of another, and some other quality in someone else. There is nothing so cheering as the images of the virtues displayed in the characters of those who live with you, and grouped together as far as possible. So you should keep them ready at hand. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6.48

Book 1 of the *Meditations* conveys very powerfully Marcus’ affection for those who have shared his life and helped him understand the qualities that are really worthwhile in a human life. Thoughtful and affectionate care for others figures prominently in the qualities he picks out in the individuals he remembers in this way.

Marcus, like other Stoics, refers often to the ‘brotherhood of humankind’, ‘citizenship of the world’, and the idea that we are all part of a larger body of human beings or rational and social animals. He uses these ideas in two ways that are especially striking and may be helpful to us too.

He draws on these ideas in situations when other people are acting towards him in a hostile or negative manner in a way that might have provoked him to feel emotions such as anger or resentment. He reminds himself that their behaviour stems from mistakes about what really matters in life and that if they could be led to a better understanding they would not act in this way. As in today’s *Morning Reflection*, he reminds himself that these people, like everyone else, are essentially his brothers or sisters or parts of a single body of humankind, and that he cannot be angry with or hate those who are his own kin. Often he speaks of the good will or good intentions towards such people which result from his

thinking about them in this way.

Marcus also draws on these ideas in reflecting on his social and political role as Roman emperor. Like Seneca he uses the image of 'dual citizenship': 'As Antoninus [his Roman family name], my city and fatherland is Rome, as a human being, it is the universe. It is only what benefits these cities which is good for me' (*Meditations*, 6.44). For Marcus, this serves to put his imperial status in a broader, cosmic perspective and to provide a moral framework and 'reality-check'. Elsewhere, he reminds himself: 'Take care you are not turned into a Caesar, or stained with the purple; these things do happen' (*Meditations*, 6.30). By being 'turned into a Caesar', or 'stained with the purple' (the purple robe worn by emperors) he means being turned into a tyrant who abuses his power. He also presents his political ideal as being 'a state based on equality before the law, which is administered according to the principles of equality and freedom of speech and of a monarchy which values above all the liberty of its subjects' (*Meditations*, 1.14).

Marcus' adult life was intensely political. From the age of 17 he was first the chosen successor of the emperor and then emperor himself for nearly twenty years. Many of his predecessors and successors as emperor (including his own son, Commodus) became bloodthirsty tyrants, whereas Marcus was mostly seen by Romans of the time as a wise and benevolent ruler. *The Meditations* suggest that one of the things that helped him to act in this way was his belief that he was living his life as part of the community of humankind (rational and social animals) and trying to maintain the ethical aspirations that go along with this. Other Stoic thinkers refer to the idea of humanity's brotherhood as a way of setting higher than normal ethical standards in business dealings, such as buying and selling property.

The Circles of Hierocles

Here is an exercise that you might use to explore and develop a similarly philanthropic attitude. It is based not on Marcus, but on the advice of another Stoic of the second century AD, Hierocles.

Hierocles 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'.

The following visualisation or meditation technique is loosely based on Hierocles' comments:

1. Close your eyes and 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 that

it symbolises a growing sense of affection toward your own true nature as a rational animal, capable of wisdom (virtue), the chief good in life.

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. 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. 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 affection to encompass every other member of the human race.

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

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text and follow the example given in it. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by accepting that people may do or say things that frustrate you. Practise viewing that with indifference. All that matters is how you *respond* to such challenges, whether wisely or foolishly, justly or unjustly, with temperance and patience or with intemperance and frustration.
2. *Midday*. Take 5-10 minutes to sit quietly and practise the Circle of Hierocles exercise above. Think of yourself as reversing alienation and cultivating a sense of harmony or bond with others.
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today. How well did

you relate to other people, in particular?

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus on your interaction with other people, or with society in general.

Saturday: Resilience

Resilience and 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

Today's Midday 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 call 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. We need to remember that the Stoics did not think that many of the things people worry about are *actually* 'bad' things. The only thing that is really bad is becoming a morally weak or vicious person. We naturally fear some situations such as risk to our life, but even this is not 'bad' in the full sense, just something we would naturally prefer not to happen. As Musonius Rufus put it, the Stoic philosophers try to learn "how to calmly

accept the things that happen which are not really bad but which seem to be” (*Lecture 18*). There are numerous references in the surviving Stoic writings to this strategy of anticipating future catastrophes and preparing to face them by imagining them in advance. Typical examples include bereavement, poverty, exile, illness, and, perhaps most importantly of all, one’s own death.

Marcus refers to death, especially the prospect of his own, very often in *The Meditations*, and some people have mistakenly thought he was morbidly obsessed with death. Marcus was probably in the last years of his life (he died at 59) when he was writing *The Meditations* and he may indeed have been aware of the imminence of his death, but he was also drawing on the well-established Stoic method of facing catastrophes by imagining them. He often reminds himself that the looming presence of death does not prevent him from continuing with the most important human ‘work’ of trying to make progress in virtue and wisdom. Indeed, the way you face your own death can become an integral part of this ‘work’. This passage is typical: ‘Strive to live only the life that is your own, that is to say, your present life; then you will be able to pass at least the time that is left to you until you die in calm and kindness, and as one who is at peace with the guardian-spirit [reason] that dwells within him’ (*Meditations*, 12.3). Today’s evening text for meditation expresses the same idea.

By repeatedly picturing future catastrophes – at least what are generally regarded as catastrophes – Stoics aimed to reduce anxiety about them, just as exposure therapy in CBT today aims to reduce the anxiety attached to specific situations. We know from modern psychological research that the best way to overcome anxiety is to expose yourself to the feared situation in reality, repeatedly, and for prolonged periods. However, psychologists have also established 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 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. (If you cannot spare this much time then it’s essential that you pick a much milder topic to work on, which generates a level of emotion low enough to naturally abate within *fewer* minutes.)

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 made more progress towards developing 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

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning.* Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by anticipating possible setbacks and allowing yourself to practise viewing them with detached indifference while patiently waiting for any disturbing feelings to abate naturally. (Again, do not do this with severely upsetting ideas. Pick a milder target for these practise exercises.)
2. *Midday.* Take longer, 20-30 minutes to sit quietly and contemplate facing possible setbacks in life like poverty, job loss, relationship break-ups, illness, etc. Use the procedure described above. (Do not pick ideas that you find *too* upsetting to cope

with; start with easier scenes.) The goal for Stoics in doing this is to be able to view such external things with “indifference” rather than being upset by them.

3. *Evening.* Read today’s evening text. Reflect on how things went today: in particular, contemplate how you responded to situations and whether you could have prepared better for them emotionally in advance.

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. In particular, today, focus on how you coped with situations that you rehearsed in advance, during your morning meditation, if possible.

Sunday: Nature

Nature and 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

Today's Midday Exercise: Nature and the View from Above

On our final day we think about our place within nature as a whole. Anyone who reads Marcus' *Meditations* is likely to be struck by his many references to the idea of seeing himself as part of a larger cosmic whole, governed by divine Providence, for instance in the morning text for reflection. Sometimes he also stresses the vastness of space and time and the smallness of human lives within this. He also sometimes urges himself to adopt a view from above or from a cosmic perspective.

Why does Marcus think it is helpful to think about nature as a whole in this way? Partly this is a way to 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 picture

them as occurring in a tiny corner of the cosmos: like a grain of sand in cosmic space and the mere turn of a screw in terms of cosmic time. This helps us realize that we are, in reality, very small parts of the natural universe and that we do, in fact, have a very temporary existence within this larger whole.

But there is also a more positive dimension in Stoic thought about this topic. The Stoics believed that the universe as a whole exhibited qualities which could provide exemplary moral norms for human beings trying to lead a good life. The qualities they attributed to the universe as a whole were order, structure and rationality on the one hand and providential care on the other. Order and structure were shown in the repeated patterns of nature, such as the regular movements of the planetary system, the alternation of day and night, the cycle of the seasons, and the growth and regeneration of living things. Providential care was shown in the fact that all species, including human beings, have the in-built natural capacity and instinctive desire to maintain their own existence and to propagate and care for others of their kind. In aiming to carry out the two strands of ethical development natural for human beings, Stoics think it is helpful to reflect on these features of nature as a whole and to think about yourself as part of a larger natural pattern.

Can we moderns share this view of nature and derive anything useful from it? Of course, the modern scientific world-view is very different from the Stoic one. On the other hand, at the very general (and by our standards non-scientific) level at which the Stoics thought about nature as a whole, it may still be possible for us too to see nature as ordered and providential. We moderns have reasons the Stoics did not have that make it rather urgent for us to think about ourselves as part of a larger natural whole. Since the 19th century, human beings have done great damage to the environment and the ecology of the planet, which we are now belatedly trying to repair. We have also put at risk the survival of many species of animals and plants with which we share this planet. We have very forceful reasons to want to recover a view of ourselves as parts of a larger whole and to try to enable nature to regain its proper character as ordered and providential. Reflecting on the Stoic view of humanity as part of a larger cosmic whole may help us to do this in addition to the reasons that the Stoics themselves had for taking this view.

Here is a passage from Marcus that expresses vividly the theme of adopting a view from above, from a cosmic standpoint. Marcus' main focus here is on standing back from your normal perspective and seeing the relative smallness and transience of human life. But elsewhere he also stresses the positive ethical dimension of viewing yourself as part of nature.

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 intermixture of everything and ordered combination of opposites. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7.48

The 'View from Above' is a guided visualization that is aimed at instilling a sense of the 'bigger picture' and of understanding your role within nature as a whole. You can download our audio recording of a 'View from Above' meditation exercise here:

[The View from Above MP3](#)

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

Today's Summary

Here's a reminder of your daily routine, with some tips on adapting it to today's theme.

1. *Morning*. Read today's morning text. Mentally prepare for your day ahead by contemplating the vastness of time and space and your place within it. You can do this by visualising the sunrise and thinking of the many stars and the expansiveness of the cosmos.
2. *Midday*. Take time to listen to the View from Above audio recording above or to contemplate the world from above in your own way in more detail. Think about the totality of space and time and the small and fleeting part of the universe that your life occupies.
3. *Evening*. Read today's evening text. Reflect on how things went today: in particular, consider to what extent your focus became narrow during the day or you remained in touch with a sense of a much broader perspective, and how that influenced the way you responded to events.

Remember, you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus today on how much your actions were consistent with a more expansive and more objective perspective on things of the kind described above. Did you place too much importance on trivial things, for example?

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. Obtain 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 Handbook* and then *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 to Lucilius, 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 follow 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.

Appendix: 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)
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The End

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