STOIC WEEK HANDBOOK -2017-

Live Like a Stoic for a Week
October 16th

The Stoic Week 2017 Handbook

Self-Renewal: A Journey into Stoicism

> At every hour, give your full concentration... 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 see how few things you need to be able to live a smoothly flowing life. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.5

Learn Modern Stoicism

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Contents

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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. By undertaking this trial the participant acknowledges 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. You will be using this *Handbook* as your guide and following ancient Stoic Philosophy as an aid to living in the modern world.

The *Handbook* was developed by Modern Stoicism, a multi-disciplinary team of academic philosophers, classicists, professional psychologists and cognitive therapists. The group was formed in 2012 to help others apply Stoic concepts and practices to the challenges of modern living. It includes several authors known for their writing and research on Stoicism. (You can find out more about us on the Modern Stoicism 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 lasts four weeks and runs once or twice each year.

In 2016, Stoic Week proved extremely popular, with over 3,400 people participating. You can read the Stoic Week 2016 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. It combines general theory with 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.

Download Audio Files and Self-Monitoring Record

To participate, you'll also need to download the audio recordings available via this link: MP3 Audio Recordings for Stoic Week

You'll also need a copy of the self-monitoring record sheet available via this link: Self-Monitoring Record Sheet for Stoic Week

This Year's Theme: Self-Renewal

This year’s theme is self-renewal – a journey into Stoicism. The *Handbook* has been designed to enable you to take a fresh look at your life and reflect on what changes you could make to bring yourself closer to your own ideals and aspirations. The midday exercises set out possible steps in this process: taking stock of your life, starting on the process of change, clarifying your values, thinking about your local and global relationships, reflecting on the world as a whole, and pulling all this together to prepare for problems you will face in the future.

The *Handbook* also offers a step-by-step journey into Stoicism, and refers to several of its core distinctive ideas: that happiness in life depends on virtue, that our life constitutes an ongoing process of

ethical development, that all human beings are our brothers and sisters, that we are an integral part of Nature, and that Nature forms a providential whole. Our hope is that thinking about these Stoic ideas can offer a pathway towards renewing and transforming yourself into what you really want and aspire to be. Of course, this week can only be a start – both in self-renewal and in learning about Stoicism. However, people have found it very helpful in previous years and so we hope you will too. The *Handbook* as a whole contains suggestions about how to take this process forward after Stoic Week.

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 2016 our research findings showed that, on average, life satisfaction increased by 15%, flourishing by 10%, positive emotions by 10%, and negative emotions decreased by 14%. (These figures are identical to those reported by participants in 2015.) 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%.

Learning about Stoicism might help you in different ways. The benefit for you could be educational or philosophical, if it helps you to understand what Stoicism means. It may be psychological, helping you to become more emotionally 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, which consists 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. However, some people may find it easier just to read the whole handbook through before beginning Stoic Week 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 and what happened to you each day. 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 via the link at the start of this chapter.

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 between what is and isn't under your control requires continual attention to your own thoughts and judgements. We can describe this as a kind of ‘mindfulness’ practice. You'll build upon this foundation by exploring different Stoic concepts and techniques each day throughout the course of the week.

Q: What if I'm worried I won't have time to do everything?

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 preparing for an exam or training for a sporting event. Typically participants take just over 10 minutes to do the required reading and exercises in the morning and evening, and 15 minutes at midday. However, you might want to spend more or less time than this on the exercises. Some people have told us they can only spare five or ten minutes, which is absolutely fine. Data from previous participants in Stoic Week showed the average amount of time they actually 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 it 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 ten-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. Most people with internet access work through the handbook on our main website. Stoic

Week is currently hosted on a platform called *Teachable*. You can download the Teachable app for iOS and use this to access our course on iPhones or iPad. (Android support will be coming eventually.) **NB**: Some features for the app are still pending, such as the ability to access Comments for discussion areas.

We also 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.

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. Nevertheless, individuals do sometimes experience technical problems or have other issues with which they may need some assistance. 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: At the beginning and end of the week you will fill in questionnaires, 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 we have 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 thoughts survive 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 include passages from all three thinkers, and sometimes also from other ancient authors who wrote about Stoic ethics. These texts are used for the morning and evening reflections. A number of the passages are from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, which present Stoic ideas in an especially powerful and personal form. Some people think that Marcus wrote *The Meditations* as morning and evening reflections so they may be particularly helpful for encouraging your reflections.

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 learned about and find helpful.

You may find it helpful to read some of these Stoic writings as a whole during the week, or at least dip into them. For instance, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Epictetus' *Handbook* and *Discourses*, and Seneca's *Letters*, provide sources of helpful additional reading. All of these are available in up-to-date translations with introductions and notes, published by Oxford University Press, The World's Classics, or Penguin, for instance. We offer more suggestions for further reading at the end of the *Handbook*.

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. However, 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. All other virtues are seen as forms of practical wisdom. You could say that virtue is wisdom applied to our actions. The virtues of courage and moderation are required to live consistently with wisdom and justice, especially when beset by challenges from outside and unruly desires and emotions from within. Epictetus' famous slogan "endure and renounce" appears to refer to these two virtues of self-mastery.

Stoic virtue implies 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. 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.

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 fulfillment. 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 "fulfillment" 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. In terms of attaining the good life, the Stoics refer to everything "external" to our own character as "indifferent". 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 matter' that we feel anger or fear. As we get a better understanding of what really matters, and what is 'up to us', these unhealthy or irrational emotions will be replaced by healthy, rational ones. In short: as we develop ethically and as we begin to 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, wise judgements also 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. These 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 fearing external things.
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.

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, trembling, feeling nauseous, turning pale, or being startled. These typically remain involuntary and beyond our direct control. However, 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 stated 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 and 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.

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 wrote:

> 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 to be true and beneficial in terms of how you live your life.

Our aim in this project is not to convince you of the truth of these claims but merely to see if they can help you lead a better and more satisfying life. If the ideas we're presenting seem completely absurd to you, it may simply be that Stoicism is not for you. You'll only find out by taking time to reflect on these ideas for yourself, though.

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. This has the potential to make the whole exercise 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.

Daily Discussions

There are discussion areas for each day of the week in the online version of the course. If you're reading the e-book version of the *Handbook* you can either access these by going to the main course page and clicking on the corresponding day of the week, or you can share your thoughts on social media for discussion. We recommend using the Facebook group below and marking your posts #stoicweek.

Stoicism (Stoic Philosophy) Facebook Group

Just post your reflections or any questions about the content of the chapter for the day or the corresponding exercises. If you get stuck, you can ask other participants for help here as well.

There are also morning and evening meditations, which you should try to practise at the beginning and end of every 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 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 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, before going to sleep at night, 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 from 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’ or worry. 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 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 shortcomings, forgiving yourself while resolving to behave differently in the future. 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 meditations, can be found via the links at the start 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 or actions you may later regret. If you feel you don't have 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.

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. Write down your observations 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. Keeping these written notes can actually be therapeutic in itself because self-awareness of this kind often leads to subtle improvements in negative feelings.

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 holds 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.

As you'll see, this distinction between what is up to us and what is not is crucial for Stoics. 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? Were your actions wise, just, courageous, and temperate or were they 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%.

Download Self-Monitoring Record You can download a PDF of an example self-monitoring record via the link at the start of this *Handbook*.

Monday: Taking Stock

Life as a Project and Role Models

Morning Text for Reflection

> People look for retreats for themselves, in the country, by the coast, or in the hills. But this is altogether un-philosophical, 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 Monday without resentment at the activities to which you return. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.3

Today's Midday Exercise:
Taking Stock of your Life as a Whole

Stoicism encourages us to live a more reflective life, as Marcus encourages himself to do in the text for this morning. In the morning and evening meditations, you are invited to prepare for the day ahead and examine how well you have acted during the past day. During this lunchtime, spend a few minutes on a more challenging task, thinking about your life as a whole – your main projects and activities, your relationships, your private hopes and fears.

First of all, spread these things out gradually in your mind, giving yourself time to think about each one and also about how they fit together and make up a whole life. Which of these factors is causing you any anxiety and which gives you a sense of satisfaction or joy as you think about it? Do not be too quick to pass judgement on yourself or other people; just let your mind play over them calmly and frankly.

Now, try to sum up what you think is most important and worthwhile in a human life, what you would like your life or any life to have at its core. What are the things that, above all, make for happiness or misery?

Then, gradually again, put these two together – your life as it is at present and your ideals and aspirations for your life – and think how closely these fit. Are there some features in your life that make you feel uncomfortable, that you would rather not have there? Are there other aspects you would like to develop and make more central in your life? Are you content with yourself as you are at present and just want to maintain this state?

It does not matter whether or not you can answer all these big questions at once – just bringing the questions into your mind is an important start. In the midday exercises throughout this week we will

make a series of suggestions about how you can follow up this start in a Stoic way. For the moment, just let the questions rest in your mind as you get back to your normal afternoon activities.

Evening Text for Reflection

> Never value as beneficial to yourself something which will force you one day to break your word, abandon your sense of shame, hate, suspect, or curse someone else, pretend, or desire something that needs the secrecy of walls or curtains. The one who has chosen to value above all his own mind and guardian-spirit and the worship of his mind's virtue does not make a drama of his life or complain and will not need either isolation or crowds of people; most of all, he will live neither pursuing nor avoiding things. He does not care in any way whether he will have his soul enclosed by his body for a longer or shorter time; even if he needs to leave right away, he goes away as readily as if he were performing any of the other actions that can be done in a decent and orderly way, exercising care for this alone throughout his life, that his mind should never be in a state which is alien to that of a rational and social being. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* 3.7

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. Look for ways to find peace within your own mind by learning to recall Stoic precepts that help restore your equanimity. You might want to refer to the brief section below on *Stoic Maxims and Affirmations*.

2. *Midday.* Practice writing down reflections on your life as a whole, what your core values are, and how consistent your current way of life is with your ideals.

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Reflect on the consequences of holding certain values in life, weighing up the pros and cons of your attitudes.

Remember, you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record throughout the day. Today, you may want to focus on developing greater self-awareness of your thoughts, actions, and feelings, and noticing how they relate to your ideals for your life as a whole.

Stoic Maxims & Affirmations

You may find this additional piece of advice helpful: the Stoics appear to have memorised key phrases or maxims in order to 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 might say "You are just an impression and not at all the thing you claim to represent" or "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 "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 anyone 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 at the start of the *Introduction* to this *Handbook*.

Tuesday: Change

Living in Accord with Your Values

Morning Text for Reflection

> Ethics has three branches. The first assigns to each thing its proper value and determines what it is worth … The second deals with motives, and the third with actions. So the objectives of ethics are, first, to enable you to judge the value of each thing; second, to enable you to have a well-adjusted and controlled motive towards them; and, third, to enable you to achieve harmony between your motive and your action so that you can be consistent in everything you do. – Seneca, *Letters*, 89.14

Today's Midday Exercise: What Aspects of Your Life Could be Changed?

Yesterday's midday exercise was about reflecting on your life as a whole and seeing how far your life matches your deepest ideals and aspirations. If you found these didn't match in some respects (and this is very likely), you will want to try to change your motives and actions to fit your values, which is what Seneca talks about in today's morning text for reflection. This midday exercise is designed to help this process along.

Ask yourself which aspects of your life you think you should change – your main projects and objectives, the way you behave towards other people, and how you think about yourself.

What is needed to bring about this change? Is it a change in your life-situation – and if so, is it something that can be changed, bearing in mind your earlier commitments (which you may still see as important)? Or is it a more internal change, relating to attitudes and ideals?

Ask yourself if you are really committed to change or if this is just a passing phase or mood. Without a firm commitment, there will be no change but with it possible courses of action will open up. Think more specifically about the very first step you would like to take, and also about the ultimate goal in this process.

In thinking about what this change should involve, you may find it useful to look again at yesterday's evening text for reflection and at the key Stoic ideas in the introduction to the *Handbook*. There will also be useful material in other midday exercises, including tomorrow's. But first, it is important to think about these questions in terms of your own life, and then you are likely to find the Stoic advice more useful.

Evening Text for Reflection

> Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation,

> desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever forms part of our activity. Not within our power are our body, possessions, reputation, social status, and, in a word, whatever does not form part of our activity… if you only regard that which is your own as being your own and that which isn't your own as belonging to others (as is indeed the case), no one will ever be able to force you to do things, no one will create obstacles for you, you'll find fault with no one, you'll criticise no one, you'll do nothing against your will, you'll have no enemy, and no one will ever harm you because no harm can affect you. – Epictetus, *Handbook*, 1.

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 consistently with your core values throughout the day.

2. *Midday.* Reflect on your life as a whole and what aspects you could potentially change. How would you make those changes? What would be the first few steps toward change?

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Contemplate which things are within your power, or directly under your control, which are not. What would be the consequences of placing more importance on the things under your direct control?

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus today on your actions and evaluate to what extent they're consistent with your core values or with Stoic virtues.

Wednesday: 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. Virtue is the only thing that is fundamentally good and the sole basis for genuine fulfillment in life, according to Stoicism. For Stoics, philosophy, meaning the love of wisdom, is also the love of virtue in ourselves and others. The core virtues are wisdom, justice, moderation, and courage. 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 and 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 toward virtue was a far better life than one directed toward other goals, such as gaining material wealth or power for their own sake. This means that the Stoic life is an ongoing journey toward virtue, which is how Marcus presents his own life in the first book of *The Meditations*. The morning text for today also shows how Marcus directed 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 you 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 our values, 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 your core values or 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 walk 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. Today, focus 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?

Thursday: Love

Love, Friendship and Affection

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 recognised 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:
Reflecting on Your Relationships

Stoics think that ethical development has two main strands. One is coming to recognise that our happiness and fulfilment depend on us developing the virtues. The other is relating virtuously to other people, both our family and friends and also human beings in general. It is essential that these two strands work together and in conjunction. So, if things work well, your relationships to others will reflect your growing understanding of the virtues, and you will express this understanding in the way you treat other people. The text for evening reflection shows this kind of process at work.

But what if difficulties arise in your relationships? Suppose people are unreasonably antagonistic to you and create problems for you, how should you respond? With anger and reciprocal hostility? No. Like Marcus in this morning's text for reflection, you should use your developing understanding of virtue to stop yourself becoming hostile in turn. You should recognise, like him, that all human beings are our relatives because they all share the core human capacities for rationality and mutual care for each other. So, even if you cannot determine how other people act towards you, you can determine how you respond, and respond with tolerance, generosity and affectionate care for them.

During this midday exercise, reflect on your personal relationships and think about whether you should try to change your attitudes or actions towards other people.

Think about someone who is annoying you or hostile towards you. How do you respond? Do you feel his or her attitude is really harming you? Do you feel you have it within you to regard them as your brother or sister (despite the way they treat you) – and how might this alter the nature of the relationship?

Think about someone who is close to you, a partner, child, or intimate friend. Do you feel your relationship is helping each of you to develop the virtues (wisdom, courage, justice, moderation) or not? If not, or if only in a very limited way (perhaps the relationship has become rather stale), what can you do to improve things in this respect?

How far do your relationships reflect the fact that we are all, as the Stoics suppose, autonomous agents and that our happiness depends ultimately on ourselves. To what extent do you adhere to the belief that we can only be harmed by ourselves and not by others? Do your relationships, including very close ones, give people the freedom and scope to shape their own happiness, or do you try to manage this for them, thinking you are acting for the best?

Evening Text for Reflection

> 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

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, preparing to meet setbacks or obstruction from others with equanimity.

2. *Midday.* Take 5-10 minutes to sit quietly and reflect on your relationships and how you could potentially view things differently. What would be the consequences of doing so?

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Reflect on the good qualities you might be able to perceive in other people and consider what you can learn from them.

Remember you can use the Stoic Self-Monitoring Record. Focus today on recording and evaluating your responses toward other people, especially any problematic thoughts, actions, and feelings on your part.

Friday: Community

Relationships with Other People and Society

Morning Text for Reflection

> It is important to understand that nature creates in parents affection for their children; and parental affection is the source from which we trace the shared community of the human race … As it is obvious that it is natural to us to shrink from pain, so it is clear that we derive from nature itself the motive to love those to whom we have given birth. From this motive is developed the mutual concern which unites human beings as such. The fact of their common humanity means that one person should feel another to be his relative. – Cicero, *On Ends*, 3.62-3.

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

Stoics believe that caring for other people is instinctive for human beings, and is just as basic an instinct as self-preservation. If we develop properly, this primary instinct will gradually express itself in two main ways. We will come to form deep and lasting relationships with others in a specific context – close friendships, families, local communities, political associations and roles. We will also come to regard any given human being as our relative (brother or sister) or fellow-citizen, because they share with us the core human capacities for rationality and mutual concern.

The Stoics do not regard these two attitudes as alternatives or as incompatible with each other. On the contrary, forming a close relationship, with a lover or friend for example, involves recognising their shared humanity and autonomy. And we should treat strangers in need with a kindness we have come to know and express in our family life and friendship. Likewise, a Stoic would see no incompatibility between being strongly patriotic (even willing to die for your country) and being ready to welcome asylum seekers and refugees into your community.

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

> What benefits each of us is what is in line with our constitution and nature; my nature is rational and political. As Antoninus, 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. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* 6.44

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 reflect on the natural bonds of affection that exist between human beings and what this means for our sense of community.

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 with others.

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Reflect on the different roles you have in life and what responsibilities go with them. How can you better fulfill your responsibilities in different areas of life?

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

Saturday: Nature

Being Part of Nature and Caring for It

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:
The View from Above

A striking and important part of Stoic thought is their view that nature as a whole is significant for ethics, and that reflecting properly on nature can help us to become better people. Why do they hold this view and is it one we can share?

Take the Marcus Aurelius passage for the morning meditation, which is one of many references to the idea that we form an integral part of nature as a providential whole. Why does Marcus think it is helpful to think about nature 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. This helps us realize that we are, in reality, a very small part of the natural universe and that we 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 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 are 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. So thinking about ourselves as part of nature helps us to understand our human nature and capacities.

Can we moderns share this view of nature and derive anything useful from it? Of course, the modern scientific worldview 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 also to see nature as ordered and providential. Also, 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, which also share this planet. So we have very powerful 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.

The ‘View from Above’ is a guided visualisation that is aimed at instilling a sense of the ‘bigger picture’, and of understanding your role within nature as a whole. You can practise a visualisation of the ‘View from Above’ by downloading the audio recording provided.

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 Nature as a whole and your place within things.

2. *Midday.* Take longer, 20-30 minutes to sit quietly and contemplate the View from Above, using the audio recording provided.

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Reflect on your relationship with the rest of Nature and how things depend on one another.

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?

Sunday: 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.’ This kind of event could have happened to anyone, but not everyone would have borne it without getting upset. – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.49

Today's Midday Exercise: Preparation for Adversity

This week has been designed to encourage you to reflect on what matters in your life and use your reflections as a means of self-renewal and self-transformation. We have outlined what the Stoics thought were the fundamental values in human life, and provided exercises which may help you to put their ideas into practice in your own daily life. On this final day of the week, we look at an aspect of Stoicism which many people have found especially helpful – building up resilience by preparing yourself for adversity.

In following this exercise, it is helpful to remember that many of the things that cause people fear are not regarded as ‘bad’ by the Stoics. The only thing that is really bad is loss of virtue, because virtue is the only true good and forms the basis of our happiness. Stoics also believe that if we understand what is truly good and bad, this will have a direct effect on our emotional life. We will replace irrational emotions or ‘passions’ with rational or positive emotions such as joy. Of course, changing our beliefs and emotions in this way is not going to happen overnight. It can only be the result of a long process of reflection and self-transformation. This week has hopefully provided a starting-point for that process.

The form of adversity that people fear most is death, both their own and that of those they love. In his Meditations, Marcus Aurelius often reflects on his own death. He reminds himself again and again that death is a natural process and not really a bad thing in itself. We can develop the virtue of courage by facing the inevitability of our own death. Death is also part of the cycle of nature. Our death, like our life, forms part of a providential pattern. The prospect of death does not take away our capacity to live life to the full now, in the present, and to express our human capacities for rationality and affectionate concern for our friends and family, for all humanity and for the world as a whole.

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 their 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 – one 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

> Glad and cheerful, let us say, as we go to our rest: 'I have finished living; I have run the course that fortune set for me'. If God gives us another day, let us receive it with joy. The happiest person, who owns himself more fully, is the one who waits for the next day without anxiety. Anyone who can say, 'I have had my life' rises with a bonus, receiving one more day. – 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 contemplating what it means to be more emotionally resilient throughout the day. How would you achieve this? What

would the consequences be?

2. *Midday.* Take time to listen to the Premeditation of Adversity recording and rehearse facing some events that feel emotionally challenging or difficult.

3. *Evening.* Read today's evening text. Reflect on what it means to be grateful for each day as if it were your last and to make the most of the opportunities life presents you with.

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.

After Stoic Week

What next? Have you enjoyed following Stoic Week? Have you found it helpful? If you have, 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 once.

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), both of whom also publish his essays.
- Seneca: Letters on Ethics (the complete letters), Chicago University Press (currently only hardback, paperback from November 2017).

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*, volumes 1 and 2, edited by Patrick Ussher, two collections of writings from different authors taken from the Stoicism Today blog. These are very good introductions to Stoicism because they approach 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)
- D. Robertson, The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy (London: Karnac, 2010)
- R. Pies, Everything Has Two Handles: The Stoic's Guide to the Art of Living (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2008)
- E. Buzare, Stoic Spiritual Exercises (Lulu, 2011)
- S. Lebell, Art of Living (HarperOne, 2007)
- P. Ussher, Ed., Stoicism Today: Selected Writings Vol 1 (2014)
- P. Ussher, Ed., Stoicism Today: Selected Writings Vol 2 (2015)
- R. Holiday and S. Hanselman, The Daily Stoic (Penguin, 2016)
- M. Pigliucci, How to be a Stoic (Basic Books, 2017)
- J. Evans, Philosophy for Life (Rider, 2013)

Introductions to Ancient Stoicism

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

Studies Exploring the Practical Side of Ancient Stoicism

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

Duckworth, 2009)

Books on Practical Aspects of Roman Stoicism

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

The End

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