

Stoicism 101: A Beginner's Guide for Entrepreneurs

Author: Ryan Holiday

For those of us who live our lives in the real world, there is one branch of philosophy created just for us: [Stoicism](#).

It doesn't concern itself with complicated theories about the world, but with helping us overcome destructive emotions and act on what can be acted upon. Just like an entrepreneur, it's built for action, not endless debate.

When laid out in front of you, it should be instantly clear what it means. If you have to study it to understand it, someone is probably trying to pull something over on you.

Popular with the educated elite of the Greco-Roman Empire, and with thinkers like Montaigne, John Stuart Mill and Tom Wolfe, Stoicism has just a few central teachings. It sets out to remind us of how unpredictable the world can be. How brief our moment of life is. How to be steadfast, and strong, and in control of yourself. And finally, that the source of our dissatisfaction lies in our impulsive dependency on our reflexive senses rather than logic.

If this were your average introduction to philosophy, we would have to talk about how Stoicism was started (*stoa* means porch, where the early followers used to hold meetings) and when it began. I happen to think that the history of a philosophy is less interesting than its proponents and applications. So, for a change, let's spend our time on the latter.

Stoicism had three principle leaders. [Marcus Aurelius](#), the emperor of the Roman Empire, the most powerful man on earth, sat down each day to write himself notes about restraint, compassion and humility. [Epictetus](#) endured the horrors of slavery to found his own School where he taught many of Rome's greatest minds. [Seneca](#), when Nero turned on him and demanded his suicide, could think only of comforting his wife and friends.

Stoicism differs from most existing schools in one important sense: its purpose is practical application. It is not an intellectual enterprise. It's a tool that we can use to become better entrepreneurs, better friends and better people.

Stoic writing isn't about beating up on yourself or pointing out the negative. It's a meditative technique that transforms negative emotions into a sense of calm and perspective.

It's easy to gloss over the fact that Marcus Aurelius was the Roman Emperor without truly absorbing the gravity of that position. Emperors were Deities, ordinary men with direct access to unlimited wealth and

adulation. Before you jump to the conclusion that the Stoics were dour and sad men, ask yourself, if you were a dictator, what would your diary look like? How quickly could it start to resemble [Kayne West's blog](#)?

Stoic writing is much closer Yoga session or a pre-game warm up than to a book of philosophy a university professor might write. It's preparation for the philosophic life – an action – where the right state of mind is the most critical part.

Stoics practiced what are known as “spiritual exercises” and drew upon them for strength (Note from Tim: I dislike the word “spiritual” for [reasons I've mentioned before](#), but scholar Pierre Hadot explains it's appropriateness [here](#)).

Let's look at three of the most important such exercises.

Practice Misfortune

“It is in times of security that the spirit should be preparing itself for difficult times; while fortune is bestowing favors on it is then is the time for it to be strengthened against her rebuffs.”

-Seneca

Seneca, who enjoyed great wealth as the adviser of Nero, suggested that we ought to set aside a certain number of days each month to practice poverty. Take a little food, wear your worst clothes, get away from the comfort of your home and bed. Put yourself face to face with want, he said, you'll ask yourself “Is this what I used to dread?”

It's important to remember that this is an exercise and not a rhetorical device. He doesn't mean “think about” misfortune, he means *live* it. Comfort is the worst kind of slavery because you're always afraid that something or someone will take it away. But if you can not just anticipate but *practice* misfortune, then chance loses its ability to disrupt your life.

Montaigne was fond of an ancient drinking game where the members took turns holding up a painting of a corpse inside a coffin and cheered “Drink and be merry for when you're dead you will look like this.”

Emotions like anxiety and fear have their roots in uncertainty and rarely in experience. Anyone who has made a big bet on themselves knows how much energy both states can consume. The solution is to do something about that ignorance. Make yourself familiar with the things, the worst-case scenarios, that you're afraid of.

Practice what you fear, whether a simulation in your mind or in real-life.

Then you, your company, and your employees will have little left to keep you from thinking and acting big.

The downside is almost always reversible or transient.

Train Perception to Avoid Good and Bad

“Choose not to be harmed and you won’t feel harmed. Don’t feel harmed and you haven’t been.”

-Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics had an exercise called Turning the Obstacle Upside Down. What they meant to do was make it impossible to not practice the art of philosophy. Because if you can properly turn a problem upside down, every “bad” becomes a new source of good.

Suppose for a second that you are trying to help someone and they respond by being surly or unwilling to cooperate. Instead of making your life more difficult, the exercise says, they’re actually directing you towards new virtues; for example, patience or understanding. Or, the death of someone close to you; a chance to show fortitude. Marcus Aurelius described it like this: “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”

It should sound familiar because it is the same thinking behind Obama’s “teachable moments.” Right before the election, Joe Klein asked Obama how he’d made his decision to respond to the Reverend Wright scandal. He [said something](#) like ‘when the story broke I realized the best thing to do wasn’t damage control, it was to speak to Americans like adults.’ And what he ended up doing was turning a negative situation into the perfect platform for his landmark speech about race.

The common refrain about entrepreneurs is that they take advantage of, even create, opportunities. To the Stoic, everything is opportunity. The Reverend Wright scandal, a frustrating case where your help goes unappreciated, the death of a loved one, none of those are “opportunities” in the normal sense of the word. In fact, they are the opposite. They are obstacles. What a Stoic does is turn every obstacle into an opportunity.

There is no good or bad to the practicing Stoic. There is only perception. You control perception. You can choose to extrapolate past your first impression (‘X happened.’ → ‘X happened and now my life is over.’). If you tie your first response to dispassion, you’ll find that everything is simply an opportunity.

Remember—It’s All Ephemeral

“Alexander the Great and his mule driver both died and the same thing happened to both.”

-Marcus Aurelius

I understand that entrepreneurs need to dream big and have unshakable faith in themselves in order to do great things. But if recent Valleywag headlines are any example ([Cisco Exec Makes Death Threat Over](#)

[\\$4,000 Bike](#)), the inhabitants of start-up land can probably benefit from some practice of humility and self control. Not that bad tempers and ego are new problems.

Alexander the Great conquered the known world and had cities named in his honor. This is common knowledge.

Stoics would also point out that, once while drunk, Alexander got into a fight with his dearest friend, Cleitus, and accidentally killed him. Afterward, he was so despondent that he couldn't eat or drink for three days. Sophists were called from all over Greece to see what they could do about his grief, to no avail.

Is this the mark of a successful life? From a personal standpoint, it matters little if your name is emblazoned on a map if you lose perspective and hurt those around you.

The exercise Marcus Aurelius suggests to remedy this is simple and effective:

“Run down the list of those who felt intense anger at something: the most famous, the most unfortunate, the most hated, the most whatever: Where is all that now? Smoke, dust, legend...or not even a legend. Think of all the examples. And how trivial the things we want so passionately are.”

It's important to note that “passion” here isn't the modern usage we're familiar with. From [Wikipedia](#):

One must therefore strive to be free of the passions, bearing in mind that the ancient meaning of 'passion' was “anguish” or “suffering”, that is, “passively” reacting to external events — somewhat different from the modern use of the word. A distinction was made between pathos (plural pathe) which is normally translated as “passion”, propathos or instinctive reaction (e.g. turning pale and trembling when confronted by physical danger) and eupathos, which is the mark of the Stoic sage (sophos). The eupatheia are feelings resulting from correct judgment in the same way as the passions result from incorrect judgment.

The idea was to be free of suffering through apatheia or peace of mind (literally, ‘without passion’), where peace of mind was understood in the ancient sense — being objective or having “clear judgment” and the maintenance of equanimity in the face of life's highs and lows.

For those interested in browsing the Greek words used in Stoic writing that are often mistranslated or misconstrued in English, here is a [glossary of common terms](#).

Returning to the point of the exercise, it's simple: remember how small you are.

For that matter, remember how small most everything is.

Remember that achievements can be ephemeral, and that your possession of them is for just an instant. Learn from Alexander's mistake. Be humble and honest and aware. That is something you can have every single day of your life. You'll never have to fear someone taking it from you or, worse still, it taking over you.

Tim: To illustrate a few real-world examples, here is an email from me to Ryan as we were working on this post:

Thanks, Ryan. Read it all and ran over all the material again. I think we're getting there. The piece should be uplifting and empowering without being defensive, so it will still take some working, but no worries. I'll be reading Epictetus tonight for more ideas. The part that bothers me is the entire "Remember you're small" bit, which doesn't jive with start-up founders. To do huge things, I really think you need to believe you can change the world and do so better than anyone else in some respect. It is possible, however, to simultaneously recognize that all is impermanent: the transient pains, bad PR, disloyal false friends, irrational exuberance, hitting #1 on the NY Times, whatever. I think it's about not dwelling on pain and not clinging to ephemeral happiness. Enjoy it to the fullest (this is where I disagree with some of the Stoic writings), but don't expect it to last forever, nor expect some single point in time to make your entire life complete forever.

Stoic writings are not arcane arguments for bespectacled professors—they are cognitive exercises proven to center practitioners. To humble them. To keep them free and appreciative.

Stoic principles are often practiced in rehabilitation clinics with alcoholics so that coping mechanisms don't drive them to drink. One wouldn't view their new perspective on life as pessimistic or limiting; we celebrate the fact that, for their first time in their lives, they are empowered and unburdened.

We're all addicts in some respect, and we can all experience that same freedom.

You can be a Stoic, and joke around and have a happy life surrounded by what's valuable to you.

In fact, that's the ultimate goal.

Stoicism is Ideal for the Entrepreneurial Life

The Stoics were writing honestly, often self-critically, about how they could become better people, be happier, and deal with the problems they faced. As an entrepreneur you can see how practicing misfortune makes you stronger in the face of adversity; how flipping an obstacle upside down turns problems into opportunities; and how remembering how small you are keeps your ego manageable and in perspective.

Ultimately, that's what Stoicism is about. It's not some systematic discussion of why or how the world exists. It is a series of reminders, tips and aids for living a good life.

Stoicism, as Marcus reminds himself, is not some grand Instructor but a balm, a soothing ointment to an injury wherever we might have one. Epictetus was right when he said that "life is hard, brutal, punishing, narrow, and confining, a deadly business."

We should take whatever help we can get, and it just happens that that help can come from ourselves.

To finish, I want to share some of my favorite Stoic reminders. Look at them as short, mental routines to run through often. Each is a quick reset to recalibrate yourself and be happy with the things that matter:

Marcus Aurelius

“So other people hurt me? That’s their problem. Their character and actions are not mine. What is done to me is ordained by nature and what I do by my own.”

“Today I escaped from anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions—not outside.”

“When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous and surly. They are like this because they can’t tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me.”

“Because your own strength is unequal to the task, do not assume that it is beyond the powers of man; but if anything is within the powers and province of man, believe that it is within your own compass also.”

Seneca

“‘What progress have I made? I am beginning to be my own friend.’ That is progress indeed. Such a people will never be alone and you may be sure he is a friend to all.”

“Show me a man who isn’t a slave; one who is a slave to sex, another to money, another to ambition; all are slaves to hope or fear. I could show you a man who has been a Consul who is a slave to his ‘little old woman’, a millionaire who is the slave of a little girl in domestic service. And there is no state of slavery more disgraceful than one which is self-imposed.”

“Count your years and you’ll be ashamed to be wanting and working for exactly the same things as you wanted when you were a boy. Of this make sure against your dying day – that your faults die before you do.”

“Nothing, to my way of thinking, is a better proof of a well ordered mind than a man’s ability to stop just where he is and pass some time in his own company.”

“Cling tooth and nail to the following rule: not to give in to adversity, never to trust prosperity and always take full note of fortune’s habit of behaving just as she pleases, treating her as if she were actually going to do everything that is in her power.”

Epictetus

“So-and-so’s son is dead

What happened?

His son is dead

Nothing else?

Not a thing.

So-and-so’s ship sank

What happened?

His ship sank.

So-and-so was carted off to prison.

What happened?

He was carted off to prison.

-But if we now add to this “He has had bad luck,” then each of us is adding this observation on his own account”