

## **Stoicism Assembly**

We are beset by all sorts of external influences that, if we are not careful, can make us feel worse. One of the tragedies of our time is that we are given a seemingly overwhelming amount of information by a frenzied 24 hour news cycle, most of which we can do very little about. My own list of troubling matters would include: the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, Brexit, Climate Change, the quality of our national governance, the erosion of human rights around the world and the possibility of the re-election of Donald Trump. And those are just the ones that occurred to me in the moment. Doubtless there are others. And then there is the host of more immediate worries associated with my personal and professional circumstances. You will be the same as me. We all have our troubles, some of which we share with others, some of which we don't. How can we navigate a path through them all? Are there any rules that can guide us? Well, actually there are.

I want to recommend one of those ways to you this morning – and it has been around for a while. I recommend that you use the ancient Greek and Roman philosophy of Stoicism.

You might not have heard about it before, but it has an impressive history. Stoicism was a major philosophical force for over six hundred years - from 300BC to the third-century AD. It was a practical philosophy, designed to help you negotiate a path through a difficult and uncertain life. The problems of today are different to the problems of the ancient world, but both can be addressed by the same thought process. In recent years, it has been making something of a comeback, after having been suppressed for 1700 years.

Stoicism is a toolkit of problem-solving, but it also has something to tell you about how to live a happy and successful life; it can also make you feel less stressed.

The big idea at the heart of stoicism isn't something you have to believe in, it's a question. The question is what level of control do you have in any given situation. By asking this question, you may well have an antidote to any worries you might begin to feel. It applies to every situation, from the biggest global challenges to the most minor frustration.

The test is explained in a book of lectures by the Roman stoic Epictetus. Epictetus – whose handbook was published in 125AD – wrote:

‘Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing.’

He is telling us that we control what we say and what we do, our desires, our character and how we treat others. Everything else, including our bodies, the actions of others, our reputations and many things that happen to us, are out of our control.

That frees us. What you control is up to you; what you don't control, isn't. You are in charge of your feelings for someone else, but you can't control their feelings for you. You might want a particular job or university course, but someone else will make the decision whether you get it. You are not in control.

You might fall ill. No matter how much you want to be well, the illness will have to take its course.

So although you would be wise to act in ways that lead those who do have control be minded to like you or give you the job, you have no real say in the matter. And because you have no say, a Stoic would tell you that it is futile to worry about it. Do your best, smile and focus instead on what you have direct control over. Direct your emotional energy into matters

where that energy can have an effect. If you fret about things you can't control, you are wasting your effort and time and are making yourself suffer unnecessarily.

Since you are now focussed on becoming a rational being, managing your thoughts, speech and actions, you had better be sure that they are founded upon sound information. Stoicism tells us that our intelligence makes us special, but you cannot make good, intelligent decisions based on bad information. We need to make sure that we are acting on truthful sources and that we think rationally and carefully before reaching any judgement. Stoicism tells us to take our news from sources that are honest and unbiassed. Prefer the BBC to something you have seen on TikTok. Don't rush to judgement. Base your thinking on your own conclusions rather than someone else's. It is within your control to make sure that you act and think rationally, based on strong understanding.

Because you should focus on your own emotions and thoughts, a Stoic would feel it is wise to avoid being knocked off course by the emotions of others, which you do not control. Epictetus wrote that other people's views and troubles can be contagious. Don't sabotage yourself by unwittingly adopting negative, unproductive attitudes through the influence of others.

In the ancient world the threat posed by others came from angry mobs prone to rioting. In our world that role is taken by Twitter storms and internet pile-ons. Steer well clear. There is no place for reason and rationality in that context and others' opinions are not your concern. So, avoid.

As rational beings, Stoics aspire to live in a state of relaxed, calm attention. The Greek word for this mindset is ataraxia. Ataraxia is a robust tranquillity, free from distress and worry. If you feel it, you are at peace and poised and you radiate it out to the others around you. As you are not worried about matters out of your control, for example you would not allow yourself to feel frustration and anger at being caught in a traffic jam. If you were to feel those negative emotions, all you have achieved as you sit in the stationary traffic is to upset yourself. A Stoic would remain calm, detached and would focus on what they can control.

Your peaceful relationships with those around you are very much in your power. Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher wrote in his diary, "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." Then he told himself, "We were born to work together like feet, hands and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are unnatural."

In other words, people might occasionally be annoying or horrible. But you and they are both human: if you control and overcome your dislike of them, you might find they contain good along with the bad. Remember, you cannot control these people and their actions, you only have power over your reaction to them.

Stoics know that change is inevitable. Nothing stays the same, either good or bad. Troubles will come along, but they will also pass. If you approach the ups and downs of life with a peaceful mind, giving your focus to those things that are within your power, then you are best placed to deal with whatever life throws at you. As we put it in an earlier assembly: don't ask for easy; aim to get better at handling the hard stuff.

Marcus Aurelius wrote, “The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make of it”. And if you can’t do anything to change things, then roll with it – don’t give in to futile anxiety.

So this is a message from the ancient past that you can carry away with you today. Always ask yourself the key question: ‘Is this matter in my direct control?’ If it is – and that means it is something you say, do or think - you can direct your rational mind to engage with it. If it isn’t, then whilst you can do your best to achieve a happy outcome, you shouldn’t worry about it, as that worry is futile. This knowledge will give you an inner peace and freedom from stress.

The modern version of Stoic philosophy is called the serenity prayer: ‘God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’

Much earlier, Epictetus put it in a shorter form, “There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond our power or our will”.