

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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Channeling Marcus: Hypomnemata Today

Ian Campbell is a Stoic living in Hong Kong, and has recently completed the one year Marcus Aurelius School programme. As part of the fourth term, students are required to engage in the practice of hypomnemata, or writing notes to one's self, as Marcus Aurelius himself did when writing the contents of the book which later became known as "The Meditations". The practice is intended to bring the fundamental Stoic dogmas before your mind, giving them through the activity of writing a personal shape, vividness and force which carries through to daily living.

The hypomnemata below reflect the author's own weaknesses: worrying and the British tendency to complain! But hopefully they are sufficiently general to inspire some readers to try the practice for themselves, and to reap the ensuing benefits in their Stoic living [I.C].

Notes to myself

I. Occupy your mind only with the present, and with it think the thoughts of philosophy.

Consistently ask yourself, in this moment what judgments am I bringing to bear? Ensure that you remain factual and do not add to impressions with your own opinions and passions, applying the adjectives of good and evil only to your own soul whilst treating all else as morally indifferent.

Ask too, what do I desire right now? Am I agitated because I am seeking the universe to bend to my will, or do I desire the strength and wisdom to handle what fate brings. What am I seeking to escape? Flee only from your own moral evil, and ensure that you accept all else that comes your way as the will of God and as nothing to worry about or fear.

Finally, train your mind to scrutinise the action that you are undertaking. Focus entirely on the action, as if it were your last, ensuring that your duty is carried out to the fullest extent of your ability. And always act with the reserve clause, knowing that ultimately the outcome of each action is not within your control.

Order your mind in such a way and the promises of philosophy, freedom and tranquility, will be yours.

II. Remind yourself of your essential nature. You are above all else rational. All your thoughts ought to flow from this fact. And what is it to be rational? It is to consistently and deliberately bring to mind those thoughts which are not intuitive but which an intelligent mind can comprehend as true:

- The sphere of my control is limited to my mind, and all else is outside of my control and therefore none of my concern.
- All is change and the universe is moving constantly, and moreover that the essential nature of the universe is good.
- The inevitability of our death, and that each moment that passes is a prelude to death and brings us closer to the final event.
- Ownership is an illusion. Everything is on loan from nature and can be taken back at any time.
- Good and evil are not properties of the external world, but they lie in the judgment of our mind.
- Desire for externals is a form of self-torture, never satisfied, often futile and directed towards worthless things.
- Wealth, status, and even our health are of no importance relative to the development of our character.
- We have a fate, and we must live it one way or another, either resisting and complaining, or acquiescing in tranquility and the knowledge that everything that passes must be exactly as it occurs.
- Our rational mind is the only reliable guide to truth and goodness, and our feelings and emotions are not reliable vehicles for conveying the truth.
- That service to mankind brings greater happiness and peace of mind than satisfying our small, petty cravings.

Bring to mind these thoughts and you will live your life with a true perspective and a peaceful heart.

III. For a soul to be truly noble it must be simple, it must be coherent, and it must be independent.

- A simple mind is not cluttered with needless thoughts, racing from past to future and never ceasing to consume information, but is content with the present moment, and the essential dogmas of philosophy, knowing these are sufficient to be truly happy.
- A coherent mind is at ease with itself since it has rooted out all contradictions, only listens to the dictates of logic and reason, and guides a man's actions so that they too are perfectly consistent with virtue.
- An independent mind is unmoved by anything external, knowing the moral value of all things and resisting the urge to ascribe good and evil to the world around. It no longer fears or worries, nor does it seek the good either from other people or possessions, but can take the deepest pleasures in the quiet solitude, contemplating its own thoughts.

You must work tirelessly to be such a man, understanding such a soul is available at any moment you choose, through simply reminding yourself of how to live, but also that a more perfect state awaits you in your later years, should you put in a daily effort and should fate grant you this length of time.

IV. Remember that nature consists of two spheres; the inner sphere and the outer sphere.

The inner sphere is your soul, the realm of freedom, and consists of all that is under your control. Your judgments, your desires and aversions, and your impulse to action. These attributes of your soul are your only true concern, the residing place of good and evil, right and wrong, and your life's work is your continuous effort to improve and refine them, to recreate yourself as a wise man.

The outer sphere is the Cosmos, all other people, animals, plants, the Earth, sun, moon, everything that is beyond your control. It belongs to God and to destiny, fully shaped and determined from the inception of the universe according to rational laws, and accordingly it is dependable, worthy of trust, and good.

And how must your soul relate to the outer sphere? By restricting itself to its proper realm, namely those things that are within its power, and not to usurp the place of God by trying to do his work and refashion the world according to our own desires. The fundamental attitude must be one of grateful acceptance, of our lives and the events which unfold in front of our eyes, all the time making ourselves worthy of the divinity from which we sprang.

V. Call to mind your vices and passions, and see what judgments underpin them:

- Worry: a lack of trust in providence's guiding hand, a false attribution of value to health and prosperity, and a failure to discipline your mind to remain focused on the present moment, the only place in which choice can be exercised and virtue can grow.
- Anger: false expectations as to what a man consists of, and indeed of what the human race collectively consists, and to forget that the selfishness of others must necessarily exist. To react with anger is to neglect your reason and its power to explain to workings of nature, and to give in to the passions and to become no more than an animal lashing out in frustration.
- Laziness: Neglect of the fact that time is short, to waste it is a rejection of the gift of life granted to us by nature, and that each moment with passes in sloth or idle waste is a moment of the limited portion granted to you which has passed for ever.
- Complaining: not appreciating what providence has given you, overstating the importance of externals, instead resisting your destiny, forgetting that good and evil lie only in your will and not the petty grievances brought about by daily living.

By analysing and knowing your weaknesses and impieties you can begin to work to expel them from your mind and to gain your freedom from the grip of externals, growing day by day in the exercise of reason and the understanding of nature.

VI. What is it to be wise?

- To not stray beyond the facts, what you know for certain, when describing objects and events, and when making judgments about them.
- To drop your insatiable appetite and relentless fear.
- To realise that the service of mankind is true liberation, and to act accordingly.

To accomplish wisdom one more thing is needed. Attention. Attention to impressions and the world around us, attention to the judgments our mind thrusts upon us by automatic thoughts, and attention to the will, its desires, and pulling like a dog on a lead to go this way and that, whilst you seek to redirect it back to the straight path of nature.

VII. The source of all of your consternation is false expectation, failing to see the true nature of all things. You want a baby that does not cry, a boss that does not complain, dogs which don't bark and a body that does not grow old and die. You want a perpetual guarantee of financial security. This is the definition of insanity.

Worse still, you neglect what you do have, not just those gifts on loan from nature such as your family and your job, but those which cannot be taken away, namely your reason and your character. In your weakest moments you would happily trade these in for riches or longevity, but without them goodness, happiness and tranquility are impossible.

VIII. Reason informs you of what life *actually* is: a series of moments, each one to be willed, each one to be lived, each one an opportunity for virtue.

IX. When you complain about a person, you are complaining about mankind in general. For you belong to a population, with genetic and cultural variation, and certain types of personality and consequently behaviour must necessarily exist. To wish it otherwise is to wish mankind never existed, or existed in some form so as to be unrecognisable, and to wish this is to implicitly wish you also never existed. Therefore, when you encounter frustrations, remember that the person, and the event, which gave rise to it, had to exist.

X. It is all very well to have grand thoughts and make strong proclamations to yourself and to others, but goodness lies not in the general, or the abstract, but in the particular. Every action, no matter how brief or routine, if carried out well, in a state of concentration, guided by reason, and understanding the nature of your deed, can strengthen your character. And each action, if performed sloppily, or with complaint, can diminish it.

XI. Imagine yourself standing on the edge of the Cosmos, looking through galaxy upon galaxy, and seeing the tiny speck of the Earth. How ridiculous our every day worries appear, the grasping and pushing and shoving, over the most meager of crumbs. Even entire continents are nothing when considered from the vantage of the immensity of space, and yet men will bomb, shoot and torture one another for a patch of land. See yourself down there. A car cut you up. Somebody was rude at work. Your wife is complaining and your children won't sleep. In this moment you are sick. In this one you face death. How paltry your concerns are. Use your reason to put them into perspective and simply let them go.

In contrast see that how, even from this distance, the rational man of noble character and disciplined will has a majesty to rival the brightest stars, and is at home amidst the deepest grandeur of the universe.

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