

THE BIG IDEAS

Stoicism 101

The #1 thing to know.

Want Tranquility?

Know your path. Walk it.

Q: Latest/Greatest?

A: I don't care.

Get Knocked Down?

Get back up.

2 Essential Tasks in Life

Here they are.

The Art of Acquiescence

+ Amor fati.

The Daily Stoic

366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living

BY RYAN HOLIDAY & STEPHEN HANSELMAN · PORTFOLIO © 2016 · 416 PAGES

“The private diaries of one of Rome’s great emperors, the personal letters of one of Rome’s best playwrights and wisest power brokers, the lectures of a former slave and exile, turned influential teacher. Against all the odds and the passing of some two millennia, these incredible documents survive.

What do they say? Could these ancient and obscure pages really contain anything relevant to modern life? The answer, as it turns out, is yes. They contain some of the greatest wisdom in the history of the world.

Together these documents constitute the bedrock of what is known as Stoicism, an ancient philosophy that was once one of the most popular civic disciplines in the West, practiced by the rich and the impoverished, the powerful and the struggling alike in the pursuit of the Good Life. But over the centuries, knowledge of this way of thinking, once essential to so many, slowly faded from view. ...

Our goal with this book is to restore Stoicism to its rightful place as a tool in the pursuit of self-mastery, perseverance, and wisdom: something one uses to live a great life, rather than some esoteric field of academic inquiry.”

~ Ryan Holiday & Stephen Hanselman from *The Daily Stoic*

“Of all the people only those are at leisure who make time for philosophy, only they truly live. Not satisfied to merely keep good watch over their own days, they annex every age to their own. All the harvest of the past is added to their store. Only an ingrate would fail to see that these great architects of venerable thoughts were born for us and have designed a way of life for us.”

~ Seneca

This book combines two of my favorite things: Stoicism + Ryan Holiday’s wisdom.

This is the third book of Ryan’s we’ve covered. Check out the Notes (+ [Interviews](#)) on [The Obstacle Is the Way](#) + [The Ego Is the Enemy](#) for more.

We also have [a dozen Notes on Stoic classics](#) including Aurelius’s [Meditations](#), Seneca’s [Letters from a Stoic](#) + [On the Shortness of Life](#), and Epictetus’s [Enchiridion](#) + [Discourses](#).

Stoicism was the most influential philosophy of the Roman world and has continued to influence many of history’s greatest minds—including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#). Stoicism was also one of the primary inspirations for [Albert Ellis](#) as he developed the foundation of what is now cognitive behavioral therapy.

As Ryan says: It’s time to bring it back as a powerful tool “*in the pursuit of self-mastery, perseverance, and wisdom.*”

I rarely say this, but I think this is a must read. Why? Well, any serious student of optimizing needs to be familiar with what the Stoic sages said. And, this is literally the perfect introduction as Ryan pulls wisdom from Seneca + Epictetus + Aurelius (+ some other less known Stoics) and then helps us apply the wisdom to our modern lives. (Get book [here](#). More at [DailyStoic.com](#).)

To put it in perspective, I told Alexandra that this might be my favorite book I’ve ever read. That’s how much I loved it. :)

The book is packed with Big Ideas. 366 of them to be precise. I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight on!

STOICISM 101: THE #1 THING TO KNOW

"If there's a central message of Stoic thought, it's this: impulses of all kinds are going to come, and your work is to control them, like bringing a dog to heel. Put more simply: think before you act. Ask: Who is in control here? What principles are guiding me?"

~ Ryan Holiday

"The single most important practice in Stoic philosophy is differentiating between what we can change and what we can't. What we have influence over and what we do not. A flight is delayed because of weather—no amount of yelling at an airline representative will end a storm. No amount of wishing will make you taller or shorter or born in a different country. No matter how hard you try, you can't *make* someone like you. And on top of that, time spent hurling yourself at these immovable objects is time not spent on the things we *can* change.

The recovery community practices something called the Serenity Prayer: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' Addicts cannot change the abuse suffered in childhood. They cannot undo the choices they have made or the hurt they have caused. But they can change the future—through the power they have in the present moment. As Epictetus said, they can control the choices they make right now.

The same is true for us today. If we can focus on making clear what parts of our day are within our control and what parts are not, we will not only be happier, we will have a distinct advantage over other people who fail to realize they are fighting an unwinnable battle."

The book is a year-long guide of 366 daily meditations on Stoic wisdom.

That's from January 1st. Day 1.

The first thing we need to understand about Stoicism is THIS—the practice of seeing what's within our control and what is not. And then, of course, training ourselves to stay focused on what is within our control rather than getting caught up trying to control that which is outside of our control.

Guess what?

Ultimately, the only things within our control are the choices we are making right.this.moment.

Hence, the focal point of Stoicism is beautifully captured in the Serenity Prayer: "*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*"

How're you doing with that?

P.S. Here's the quote from Epictetus's [Discourses](#) that Ryan is reflecting on in the passage above: "*The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own.*"

P.P.S. Another cool facet of this book is the fact that Ryan's co-author, Stephen Hanselman, produced original translations of each of the 366 wisdom gems shared in the book.

WANT TRANQUILITY? BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. WALK YOUR PATH.

"In Seneca's essay on tranquility, he uses the Greek word, *euthymia*, which he defines as 'believing in yourself and trusting that you are on the right path, and not being in doubt by following the myriad footpaths of those wandering in every direction.' It is this state of mind, he says, that produces tranquility.

Clarity of vision allows us to have this belief. That's not to say we're always going to be 100 percent certain of everything, or that we even should be. Rather, it's that we can rest assured we're heading generally in the right direction—that we don't need to constantly compare ourselves with other people or change our mind every three seconds based on new information.

"The greatest portion of peace of mind is doing nothing wrong. Those who lack self-control live disoriented and disturbed lives."

~ Seneca

Instead, tranquility and peace are found in identifying *our* path and in sticking to it: staying the course—making adjustments here and there, naturally—but ignoring the distracting sirens who beckon us to turn toward the rocks."

We talked about *euthymia* in our Notes on [The Ego Is the Enemy](#).

Euthymia. <— Isn't that one of the most beautiful words?

We need to have enough self-awareness to say, "This is my path!" Then we need to have the courage to walk that path without constantly comparing ourselves to others and changing our minds about what's important every 3 seconds.

The result? Tranquility.

So... How's *your* clarity?

What are you here to do? Are you doing it?

P.S. Here's the passage from Seneca's *Moral Letters* (also called [Letters from a Stoic](#)):

"Tranquility can't be grasped except by those who have reached an unwavering and firm power of judgment—the rest constantly fall and rise in their decisions, wavering in a state of alternately rejecting and accepting things. What is the cause of this back and forth? It's because nothing is clear and they rely on the most uncertain guide—common opinion."

Note: The primary obstacle to your tranquility? Failing to step back from the "common opinion" of the world and, as Emerson would say, trusting yourself as your own taskmaster.

Unplug. Check in. Get clear. Do what you're here to do.

Q: WHAT'S THE LATEST/GREATEST? A: I DON'T CARE.

"One of the most powerful things you can do as a human being in our hyperconnected, 24/7 media world is say: 'I don't know.' Or, more provocatively: 'I don't care.' Most of society seems to have taken it as a commandment that one must know about every single current event, watch every episode of every critically acclaimed television series, follow the news religiously, and present themselves to others as an informed and worldly individual.

But where is the evidence that this is actually necessary? Is the obligation enforced by the police? Or is it that you're afraid of seeming silly at a dinner party? Yes, you owe it to your country and your family to know generally about events that may directly affect them, but that's about all.

How much more time, energy, and pure brainpower would you have available if you drastically cut your media consumption? How much more rested and present would you feel if you were no longer excited and outraged by every scandal, breaking story, and potential crisis (many of which never come to pass anyway)?"

This is one of my favorite passages ever.

"Our ambition should not be to win, then, but to play with our full effort."

~ Ryan Holiday

If you're on top of every single thing going on in the world—every TV show, every breaking story, etc., infinite, etc.—guess what you are GUARANTEED to be out of touch with: Your own path.

The "common opinion" you have chosen to immerse yourself in will rob you of the tranquility you so desperately desire. Combine that with the sheer terror of the media we're exposed to and it's not a winning formula.

Science proves this, btw. Do you know the single best predictor of someone's fear and anxiety? It's how much time they spend watching TV talk shows.

In [The Upside of Stress](#) Kelly McGonigal also tells us that people who watched more than 6 hours of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing had more PTSD symptoms than people who were actually there and experienced the event first-hand. (Think about that for a second.)

"We must give up many things to which we are addicted, considering them to be good. Otherwise, courage will vanish, which should continually test itself. Greatness of soul will be lost, which can't stand out unless it disdains as petty what the mob regards as most desirable."

~ Seneca

We simply *did not* evolve to consume so much stimulation. Our limbic system can't effectively differentiate between a stress "over there" and something happening "right here, right now!"

As Alberto Villoldo puts it in [One Spirit Medicine](#), we evolved to respond to a single lion threatening our lives, not to the whole jungle rising up against us. He tells us we are exposed to more stimuli in ONE WEEK than our ancient ancestors were exposed to in their entire *lifetimes*.

One way to deal with the onslaught of information?

Practice: "I don't know." Or, even more fun: "I don't care."

Let's pause for a moment to actually answer this question: "*How much more time, energy, and pure brainpower would you have available if you drastically cut your media consumption?*"

Track how you spend your time for a week and do the math.

How much time can you reclaim?

Will you?

P.S. Here's the brilliant passage from Epictetus's [Enchiridion](#): "*If you wish to improve, be content to appear clueless or stupid in extraneous matters—don't wish to seem knowledgeable. And if some regard you as important, distrust yourself.*"

WHAT KIND OF BOXER ARE YOU?

"The Stoics loved to use boxing and wrestling metaphors the way we use baseball and football analogies today. This is probably because the sport of *pankration*—literally, 'all strength,' but a purer form of mixed martial arts than one sees today in the UFC—was integral to boyhood and manhood in Greece and Rome. (In fact, recent analysis has found instances of 'cauliflower ear,' a common grappling injury, on Greek statues.) The Stoics refer to fighting because it's what they knew.

Seneca writes that unbruised prosperity is weak and easy to defeat in the ring, but a 'man who has been at constant feud with misfortunes acquires a skin calloused by suffering.' This man, he says, fights all the way to the ground and never gives up.

That's what Epictetus means too. What kind of boxer are you if you leave because you get hit? That's the nature of the sport! Is that going to stop you from continuing?"

Let's start with the passage from Epictetus's [Discourses](#) that Ryan's reflecting on: "*But what is philosophy? Doesn't it simply mean preparing ourselves for what may come? Don't you understand that really amounts to saying that if I would so prepare myself to endure, then let anything happen that will? Otherwise, it would be like the boxer exiting the ring because he took some punches. Actually, you can leave the ring without consequence, but what advantage would come from abandoning the pursuit of wisdom? So, what should each of us say to every trial we face? This is what I've trained for, for this my discipline!*"

Imagine a boxer taking a couple punches and then simply walking out of the ring.

That would be a little odd, eh?

Well, do YOU do that?

The moment things get tough as you pursue your grand vision of awesome, do you walk out of the ring and into Twitter/Facebook/Instagram/email/online news/your favorite TV show/insert-your-chosen-way-of-avoiding-the-challenges-of-life-here?

We need to LEAN into our challenges. KNOWING (as we discuss all the time!) that our infinite potential exists just on the other side of this current challenge (and right on the other side of the next one and the one after that).

"Having an end in mind is no guarantee that you'll reach it—no Stoic would tolerate that assumption—but not having an end in mind is a guarantee you won't."

~ Ryan Holiday

"Don't you deserve to flourish? Wouldn't you like to be great of soul, filled with confidence, and invincible to external events? ... Then practice your philosophy."

~ Ryan Holiday

In a book called *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)* that traces the historical roots of modern CBT to ancient Stoicism (that Ryan recommended and that we'll be covering soon), Donald Robertson tells us that, back in the day, philosophers were *warriors* of the mind. Now, they're mere *librarians* of the mind.

These days, it's all intellectual theory. Cataloging and "logic chopping" as the Stoics would call it. No practice.

But, philosophy as the Stoics saw it was a battle. We need to approach it with the fierce intensity of a warrior. And, we need to know that all those times we've gotten knocked down (and back up!) are actually a **STRENGTH**, not a weakness.

Those callouses on your soul are **GOOD** things. They've toughened you up.

We want to be, as Ryan says, one who *"fights all the way to the ground and never gives up."*

(I get goosebumps as I type that. I'm reminded of the story I've shared a few times about the time an investor in my last business introduced me to his friends who were thinking about investing by simply saying: "I like Brian because he knows how to get knocked down and bloodied and then get back up off the mat. Tell us about your business." <— At that stage I was somewhat ashamed of my "failures" ("Hi, fixed mindset!") and yet getting up off the mat was what he saw as a key asset of our biz. I guess he liked entrepreneurial calluses.)

Angela Duckworth calls this [Grit](#). In her great book outlining the science of how to cultivate our grit via intense passion + intense persistence, she says: *"There's an old Japanese saying: 'Fall seven, rise eight.' If I were ever to get a tattoo, I'd get these four simple words indelibly inked."*

A warrior who gets knocked down. And gets back up.

When tough times come (of course, they will!), remember: **THIS IS WHAT WE TRAINED FOR!** Fight to the ground. Never give up.

YOU HAVE 2 ESSENTIAL TASKS IN LIFE. HERE THEY ARE.

"You have two essential tasks in life: to be a good person and to pursue the occupation that you love. Everything else is a waste of energy and a squandering of your potential.

How does one do that? OK, that's a tougher question. But the philosophy we see from the Stoics makes it simple enough: say no to distractions, to destructive emotions, to outside pressure. Ask yourself: **What is it that only I can do? What is the best use of my limited time on this planet? Try to do the right thing when the situation calls for it. Treat other people the way you would hope to be treated. And understand that every small choice and tiny matter is an opportunity to practice these larger principles.**

That's it. That's what goes into the most important skill of all: how to live."

Well that makes it simple, eh?

We have two essential tasks: 1. Be a good person. 2. Do work that you love.

Simple. But far from easy.

Reminds me of [Warren Bennis](#) who says that *"At bottom, becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It's precisely that simple, and it's also that difficult."* (<-- Precisely that simple. And precisely that difficult. Love that.)

A few questions to help us on the quest: *What is it that only you can do? What is the best use of your limited time on this planet? And... Are you treating people the way you'd like to be treated?*

Well, what do you say to those questions? (25 journal exercises like that in [Purpose 101](#), btw.)

"Strength is the ability to maintain a hold of oneself. It's being the person who never gets mad, who cannot be rattled, because they are in control of their passions—rather than controlled by their passions."

~ Ryan Holiday

THE ART OF ACQUIESCENCE + AMOR FATI

"What does Socrates say?
'Just as one person delights
in improving his farm, and
another his horse, so I
delight in attending to my own
improvement day by day.'"
~ Epictetus

"Something happened that we wish had not. Which of these is easiest to change: our opinion or the event that is past?"

The answer is obvious. Accept what happened and change your wish that it had not happened. Stoicism calls this the 'art of acquiescence'—to accept rather than fight every little thing.

And the most practiced Stoics take it a step further. Instead of simply *accepting* what happens, they urge us to actually *enjoy* what has happened—whatever it is. Nietzsche, many centuries later, coined the perfect expression to capture this idea: *amor fati* (a love of fate). It's not just accepting, it's *loving* everything that happens.

To wish for what has happened to happen is a clever way to avoid disappointment because nothing is contrary to your desires. But to actually feel gratitude for what happens? To love it? That's a recipe for happiness and joy."

Byron Katie channels her inner Stoic when she tells us we need to practice *Loving What Is*. She tells us to quit arguing with reality—but only because we lose every single time we do so.

We need to discipline ourselves (like a warrior!) to not only *accept* what is, but truly *LOVE* what is. The result? We're invincible. At that point, NOTHING can happen to us that we can't alchemize into something that fuels our optimization.

Let's learn to love our fate—joyfully accepting the things we can't change and courageously changing the things we can as we develop the wisdom to know the difference.

Here's to our Stoic optimization!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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