

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Spiritual Exercises

Let's practice.

### Your Inner Citadel

Let's build it.

### Your Daimōn

Befriend it.

### Amor Fati

You loving what is?

### Obstacles

Turn them upside down.

### Carpe Areté

Seize the good day!

### Notes to Each of Us

Let's practice.

# The Inner Citadel

## The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

BY PIERRE HADOT · HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS © 2001 · 368 PAGES

Soon, you will have forgotten everything.

Soon, everybody will have forgotten you.

~ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

“Marcus Aurelius was wrong. Eighteen centuries—almost two millennia—have passed, and the *Meditations* are still alive. Nor have their pages been reserved to a few aristocrats of the intellect, like Shaftesbury, Frederick II, or Goethe: on the contrary, for centuries they have brought reasons to live to innumerable unknown people, who have been able to read them in the multiple translations of the *Meditations* which have been made in every corner of the earth; and they still do so today.

The *Meditations* are an inexhaustible source of wisdom; an ‘eternal Gospel,’ in Renan’s words. ...

My intention, which is to offer the modern reader an introduction to the readings of the *Meditations*, will thus perhaps not be without usefulness. I will try to discover what Marcus wanted to accomplish by writing them, to specify the literary genre to which they belong, and, especially, to define their relationships with the philosophical system which inspired them. Finally, without trying to produce a biography of the emperor, I will try to determine how much of him is visible in his work.”

~ Pierre Hadot from *The Inner Citadel*

Marcus Aurelius. Over 1,800 years ago the Emperor-Philosopher wrote notes to himself, reminding himself of the Stoic virtues he aspired to embody. Those notes were never intended for a public audience. Today we know them as his *Meditations*.

Pierre Hadot was one of the most influential historians of ancient philosophy. In this book, he gives us an incredible look at Marcus Aurelius and the core disciplines of Stoicism he was reminding himself of as he strived to live like a Philosopher during his day-to-day duties as the Emperor. If you want to learn more about Marcus Aurelius, this is the book to read. (Get a [copy](#).)

You can feel Hadot’s incredible intellectual rigor and equally incredible passion for engaged philosophy. It’s inspiring. We’ll be covering a couple other books of his soon.

I picked this up on the recommendation of Ryan Holiday. It was one of the recommendations he made in *The Daily Stoic*. We’ll be working our way through the others.

This is not an easy read. To put it in perspective, I often have fun seeing if I can read a (~200-page) book by lunch then hammer out the PDF + MP3 in the afternoon. This book took me days to read. (Hah.)

I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

*“All the happiness you are seeking by such long, roundabout ways: you can have it all right now ... I mean, if you leave all of the past behind you, if you abandon the future to providence, and if you arrange the present in accordance with piety and justice.”*

~ Marcus Aurelius

## PRACTICING OUR SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

*"Most people are not alive, because they do not live in the present, but are always outside of themselves, alienated, and dragged backwards and forwards by the past and by the present. They do not know that the present is the only point at which they are truly themselves and free. The present is the only point which, thanks to our action and our consciousness, gives us access to the totality of the world."*

~ Pierre Hadot

"Such writing exercises thus lead necessarily to incessant repetitions, and this is what radically differentiates the *Meditations* from every other work. Dogmas are not mathematical rules, learned once and for all and then mechanically applied. Rather, they must somehow become achievements of awareness, intuitions, emotions, and moral experiences which have the intensity of a mystical experience or a vision. This spiritual and affective spirituality is, however, quick to dissipate. In order to reawaken it, it is not enough to reread what has already been written. Written pages are already dead, and the *Meditations* were not made to be reread. What counts is the reformulation: the act of writing or talking to oneself, right now, in the very moment when one needs to write. It is also the act of composing with the greatest care possible: to search for that version which, at a given moment, will produce the greatest effect, in the moment before it fades away, almost instantaneously, almost as soon as it is written. Characters traced onto some medium do not fix anything: everything is in the act of writing. Thus, we witness a succession of new attempts at composition, repetitions of the same formulas, and endless variations on the same themes: the themes of Epictetus.

The goal is to reactualize, rekindle, and ceaselessly reawaken an inner state which is in constant danger of being numbed or extinguished. The task—ever-renewed—is to bring back to order an inner discourse which becomes dispersed and diluted in the futility of routine.

As he wrote the *Meditations*, Marcus was thus practicing Stoic spiritual exercises. He was using writing as a technique or procedure in order to influence himself, and to transform his inner discourse by meditating on the Stoic dogmas and rules of life. This was an exercise of writing day by day, ever-renewed, always taken up again and always needing to be taken up again, since the true philosopher is he who is conscious of not yet having attained wisdom."

Have you ever noticed that your spiritual inspiration tends to rise and fall? Me, too.

Good news. We're not alone.

Stoic philosophers knew that spiritual insight was a fragile thing—something that must be "ceaselessly reawakened" if one has a shot at living nobly.

Writing down the core tenets of his Stoic philosophy was the reason Marcus created his *Meditations*. As Hadot tells us, he was practicing Stoic spiritual exercises. Hence, Marcus's deliberate repetition of certain themes—approaching the same ideas again and again from different angles to firmly solidify the wisdom in his mind and life.

(Creating these Notes, btw, is a spiritual practice for me as well. I hope they are for you as well!)

A couple other interesting things to note:

[Epictetus](#) was Marcus's primary Stoic teacher. Although he never studied with him personally (Epictetus died shortly after Marcus was born), Marcus had access to notes from Epictetus's lectures. I find it fascinating that the Emperor-Philosopher learned his wisdom from the Philosopher-Slave (recall that Epictetus was a former slave turned leading philosopher).

There are three core disciplines of Stoicism that Marcus was reflecting on incessantly: The Discipline of Assent, The Discipline of Desire, and The Discipline of Action. Hadot walks us through each of these. Ryan Holiday organizes his books by these three disciplines as well—although he describes them as the disciplines of Perception + Action + Will.

[Check out our Notes](#) on Ryan's *The Obstacle Is the Way* for more.

P.S. The whole process of rekindling our spiritual connection and motivation reminds me of [EntreLeadership](#) in which Dave Ramsey quotes Zig Ziglar who used to say: "People say motivation doesn't last, well neither does bathing, that is why we recommend both daily."

*"Only the present is within our power, simply because the only thing that we live is the present moment. Becoming aware of the present means becoming aware of our freedom."*

~ Pierre Hadot

## WELCOME TO YOUR INNER CITADEL

"In order to understand what Marcus Aurelius means when he says that things cannot touch the soul and are outside of us, we must bear in mind that ... when he speaks about 'us' and about the soul, he is thinking of that superior or guiding part of the soul. ... It alone is free, because it alone can give or refuse its assent to that inner discourse which enunciates what the object is which is represented by a given *phantasia*. This borderline which objects cannot cross, this inviolable stronghold of freedom, is the limit of what I shall refer to as the 'inner citadel.' Things cannot penetrate into this citadel. ...

When the guiding principle thus discovers that it is free in its judgments, that it can give whatever value it pleases to the events which happen to it, and that nothing can force it to commit moral evil, then it experiences a feeling of absolute security. From now on, it feels, nothing can invade or disturb it. It is like a cliff against which the crashing surf breaks constantly, while it remains standing unmovably as the waves come, bubbling, to die at its feet."

How'd you like to have a sense of absolute security?

An inner citadel that cannot be conquered by outside forces?

You can have it.

Just follow the guiding principle of Stoicism. (+ Cognitive behavioral therapy + Mindfulness + ...)

Rule #1, per Epictetus: *"What troubles people is not things, but their judgments about things."*

For a Stoic, the only thing that matters is to live with virtue. Period. They tell us that our true freedom exists in knowing that we always have the ability to choose our response to any given situation. NOTHING outside of us can force us to commit "moral evil."

Recall, of course, that this is what Viktor Frankl told us in [Man's Search for Meaning](#). He framed it this way: *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

I love the way Michael Jordan's mindfulness coach, George Mumford echoes this wisdom in [The Mindful Athlete](#). Here's the description of the inner citadel that George builds within his elite athletes: *"Think about the eye of a hurricane, or the calm still center in the middle of a cyclone. No matter how intense the storm or what's swept up in its gale-force winds, that calm, blue center is always there. This is the metaphor I like to use when talking about the space between stimulus and response. We all have this quiet center within us. Mindfulness reconnects us to this center space, where we fully experience the present moment and have access to the transcendent wisdom that's often associated with conscious flow. In his book Man's Search for Meaning, neurologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl famously described it this way: 'Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'"*

Stimulus. Response.

... Space ...

Stepping into that space between stimulus and response is where it's at.

Practicing this discipline is like building a fortress. One disciplined choice at a time. Brick by brick. Disciplined action by disciplined action. Our inner citadel is built. Nothing outside of us can invade or disturb our well-being.

It's a never-ending project of a lifetime. Let's do it.

*"If our activity is animated by the perfectly pure intention of wishing only for good, it attains its goal at every instant, and has no need to wait for its achievement and result to come from the future."*

~ Pierre Hadot

## MEET YOUR DAIMŌN

"Although the self may thus raise itself to a transcendent level, it is very difficult for it to keep itself there. The figure of the *daimōn* allows Marcus Aurelius to express, in religious terms, the absolute value of moral intent and the love of moral good. No value is superior to virtue and the inner *daimōn*, and everything else, compared to the mysteries which honor the eminent dignity of the inner *daimōn*, is worthless petty-mindedness."

So, we all have the potential to build an inner citadel.

How do we go about doing that? Here's one very wise step: Team up with your *daimōn*.

Your inner *daimōn* is, essentially, the highest version of you—that part of you that is always there, watching what you're up to, shining the light in the direction of your optimal path.

(You know what I'm talking about, right?)

Let's get on VERY good terms with this *daimōn*!

Epictetus called it "the Other." He says: "When you go to see some important personage, remember that there is an Other, watching what happens from above, and that it is better to please this Other than that man."

In other words, when you're out in the world, be more focused on keeping a REALLY good relationship with your *daimōn* than with anything else.

Rick Hanson offers another helpful metaphor to help us live at our best. In [Buddha's Brain](#) he tells us: "If you think you might get triggered by the interaction and lose your way, help your prefrontal cortex to help you—an interesting circularity!—by sorting out your key points in advance, even writing them down. To keep your words and tone clean, imagine a video recording being made of your interaction: act so that you wouldn't wince if you saw it."

Guess who's holding the video camera? Your *daimōn*.

Let's make him/her/us proud!

Do your best. Let's build that inner citadel.

(And, of course, when you \*don't\* do your best, there's always THIS moment to get back on track. Follow the *daimōn*'s flashlight to the citadel!)

## AMOR FATI

*"At every instant, I encounter the event which has been reserved for me by Destiny; that is, in the last analysis, the unique, universal, and common Cause of all things. The discipline of desire will therefore consist in refusing to desire anything other than what is willed by the Nature of All."*

~ Pierre Hadot

"I have entitled this section '*amor fati*.' Marcus Aurelius, who wrote in Greek, obviously did not use these two Latin words; what is more, they are not, as far as I know, used by any Latin writer in antiquity. The phrase is Nietzsche's, and my intention in alluding to the love of Destiny of which Nietzsche speaks is to help us better understand, by means of analogies and constraints, the spiritual attitude which, in Marcus, corresponds to the discipline of desire. Nietzsche writes, for example:

My formula for what is great in mankind is *amor fati*: not to wish for anything other than that which is; whether behind, ahead, or for all eternity. Not just to put up with the inevitable—much less to hide it from oneself, for all idealism is lying to oneself in the face of the necessary—but to love it. ..."

*Amor fati*. This is the essence of The Discipline of Desire. We want to love what is. Whatever is thrown at us, we want to not only accept it, we want to LOVE it.

Easier said than done, of course. Which is why this is a "discipline." (And why Marcus constantly reminded himself of the need to practice!)

*"For the Stoics, arete is absolute value, based no longer on warrior nobility, but on the nobility of the soul represented by the purity of our intentions."*

~ Pierre Hadot

## TURNING OBSTACLES UPSIDE DOWN + THE PARADOX OF FIRE

"The paradox of fire, which grows stronger the more things are brought to it which could smother it, or at least present an obstacle to it, is the same as the paradox of good will. The latter is not content with one field of exercise, but assimilates all objects, including the most diverse goals, communicating its goodness and perfection to all the events to which it consents. Fire and the good will are thus utterly free with regard to the matter they use; their matter is indifferent to them, and the obstacles which are set in their way do nothing but feed them. In other words, nothing is an obstacle for them."

I love that image of the fire. It CONSUMES obstacles and uses them as fuel. (Nassim Taleb uses a similar metaphor when he tells us that the wind fuels a fire but extinguishes a candle.)

Marcus calls this ability to use obstacles for fuel "turning the obstacle upside down." He says: *"That which impeded action thus becomes profitable to action, and that which blocked the road allows me to advance along the road."*

In other words, if you choose to do something and an obstacle presents itself, USE THAT obstacle to practice your most important goal: To live with virtue.

When living with virtue is your primary goal, NOTHING (literally) can prevent you from continuing to make progress toward your ultimate aim.

Reminds me of Vernon Howard's great line from [The Power of Your Supermind](#) where he tells us: *"If your grand purpose in life is to wake up, then whatever happens to you is good, for it can prod you into self-awakening."*

Got any obstacles? How can you turn them upside down?

## CARPE ARETÉ

"Thus, Marcus tries to perceive the process of dissolution already at work in the people and objects which surround him. He would certainly have approved of Princess Bibesco, who, in order to meditate upon death, had only to contemplate a bouquet of violets. Marcus recalls the imperial courts of the past—that of Augustus, for example—in order to realize that all these people who have, for an instant, come back to life in his memory are in fact long dead. This is no more a case of obsession with death or morbid complacency than when, in the film *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams, who plays a teacher of literature, makes his students carefully study a picture of the school's old boys. In order that his students appreciate the value of life, the teacher wants them to become aware that all the boys in the picture—apparently so alive—are now dead. He hopes they will thereby discover life's preciousness, as he instills in them Horace's saying *Carpe diem* ('Seize the day!'). The only difference in these two outlooks is that for Marcus the only value is not just life, but moral life."

This is a prevalent theme of the book and of Marcus's spiritual exercises.

Want to appreciate life? Contemplate death. Think about how quickly it all passes. Embrace the preciousness of life.

And, let's not just seize the day *Carpe diem* style. Let's live a moral day. *Carpe areté!*

P.S. On that note, how about Dan Millman's wisdom from [Everyday Enlightenment](#): *"Most of us have heard the saying 'Carpe Diem'—Seize the day. A valuable reminder to live fully, but not a realistic idea, since you cannot seize the day. You can seize only the moment—this moment.*

*The quality of your moments produces the quality of your life. So, as thoughts come and go and the waves of mind rush on, Carpe punctum—Seize this moment. It deserves your full attention, for it will not pass your way again."*

*"If we understand by 'eternity' not an infinite temporal duration, but a lack of temporality, then he who lives within the present lives eternally."*

~ Ludwig Wittgenstein

*"Your only joy, your only rest: let it be to pass from one action performed in the service of the community to another action performed for the service of the community, together with the remembrance of God."*

~ Marcus Aurelius

## NOTES TO EACH OF US

"In world literature one finds lots of preachers, lesson-givers, and censors, who moralize to others with complacency, irony, cynicism, or bitterness; but it is extremely rare to find a person training himself to live and to think like a human being.

In the morning, when you have trouble waking up, let the following thought be present to you: 'I'm getting up to the job of a human being.'

One must admit that there are few hesitations, fumbblings, or searchings in these exercises which follow a canvas that Stoic philosophy and Epictetus have drawn in advance with precision. The personal effort appears rather in the repetitions, the multiple variations developed around the same theme, and the stylistic effort as well, which always seeks for a striking, effective formula. Nevertheless, we feel a highly particular emotion when we enter, as it were, into the spiritual intimacy of a soul's secrets, and are thus directly associated with the efforts of a man who, fascinated by the only thing necessary—the absolute value of moral good—is trying to do what, in the last analysis, we are all trying to do: to live in complete consciousness and lucidity; to give each of our instants its fullest intensity; and to give meaning to our entire life. Marcus is talking to himself, but we get the impression that he is talking to each of us."

Those are the final words of the book in which Hadot is reflecting on why this book has such enduring value.

It's a VERY rare opportunity to read the personal notes of a powerful human being intensely committed to perfecting himself and striving to live as a philosopher in service to the world.

It's almost like he's writing to each of us, eh? Here's to engaging in our spiritual exercises as we optimize + actualize in service to the common good! :)

B

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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](http://heroic.us).

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