

## THE BIG IDEAS

### The Art of Living

Stoic-style.

### Stoic Virtue

Live the life we were designed to live.

### Hedonic Adaptation

Step off the bling treadmill.

### Negative Visualization

Is positive.

### Projective Visualization

Give it a try!

### Living in a Dream World

Let's appreciate the magic.

### Impermanence, Flux & Change

It's all around us. Let's embrace it.

### Be Truly Alive

Contemplate impermanence to do so.

### Most Important Choice

To choose our own thoughts.

*"A grand goal in living is the first component of a philosophy of life. This means that if you lack a grand goal in living, you lack a coherent philosophy of life."*

~ William B. Irvine

# A Guide to the Good Life

## The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

BY WILLIAM B. IRVINE · OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS © 2008 · 336 PAGES

"This book is written for those seeking a philosophy of life. In the pages that follow, I focus my attention on a philosophy that I have found useful and that I suspect many readers will also find useful. It is the philosophy of the ancient Stoics. The Stoic philosophy of life may be old, but it merits the attention of any modern individual who wishes to have a life that is both meaningful and fulfilling—who wishes, that is, to have a good life."

~ William B. Irvine from *A Guide to the Good Life*

Stoicism.

I love it.

Although pretty obscure today, Stoicism was once the primary philosophy of the Western world.

We'll cover some of the essential ideas of the Stoic philosophical approach in the Note.

First, a quick historical background: Stoicism was founded by Zeno in ~300 B.C.E. The primary Stoic philosophers were [Marcus Aurelius](#) (Roman emperor-philosopher), [Seneca](#) (tutor to Nero and the creator of the "essay") and [Epictetus](#) (former slave turned leading philosopher).

We have Notes on Aurelius' [Meditations](#), Seneca's [Letters from a Stoic](#), and Epictetus' [The Enchiridion](#)—three of my favorite old school classics that I hope you will check out!

William B. Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life* provides a fantastic, comprehensive look at the Stoic philosophy with a wonderful modern application.

As he says: "I wrote this book with the following question in mind: If the ancient Stoics had taken it upon themselves to write a guidebook for twenty-first-century individuals—a book that would tell us how to have a good life—what might that book have looked like? The pages that follow are my answer to this question."

Me likes!

This book is PACKED with Big Ideas.

Let's have some fun exploring a handful of my favorites, shall we?

## THE ART OF LIVING

"According to Epictetus, the primary concern of philosophy should be the art of living: Just as wood is the medium of the carpenter and bronze is the medium of the sculptor, your life is the medium on which you practice the art of living."

That is worth a nice re-read.

—> "Just as wood is the medium of the carpenter and bronze is the medium of the sculptor, your life is the medium on which you practice the art of living."

*"Although modern philosophers tend to spend their days debating esoteric topics, the primary goal of most ancient philosophers was to help ordinary people live better lives. Stoicism, as we shall see, was one of the most popular and successful of the ancient schools of philosophy."*

~ William B. Irvine

Amen.

Seneca puts it this way: *"The philosopher: he alone knows how to live for himself. He is the one, in fact, who knows the fundamental thing: how to live."*

And that passage reminds me of wisdom from the Buddha and David Reynolds.

In *The Dhammapada* ([see Notes](#)), Buddha tells us *"As irrigators lead water where they want, as archers make their arrows straight, as carpenters carve wood, the wise shape their minds."*

While in *Constructive Living* ([see Notes](#)), David Reynolds tells us: *"Our behavior is controllable in a way that our feelings are not. There is a very special satisfaction for the Artist of Living who works within life's limits to produce a fine self-portrait. The more control we develop over our actions, the more chance we have of producing a self we can be proud of."*

Here's to practicing the art of living!

## STOIC VIRTUE

*"For the Stoics, a person's virtue does not depend, for example, on her sexual history. Instead, it depends on her excellence as a human being—on how well she performs the function for which humans were designed. In the same way that a "virtuous" (or excellent) hammer is one that performs well the function for which it was designed—namely, to drive nails—a virtuous individual is one who performs well the function for which humans were designed. To be virtuous, then, is to live as we were designed to live; it is to live, as Zeno put it, in accordance with nature. The Stoics would add that if we do this, we will have a good life."*

Ah, the Stoic ideal of virtue.

It's all about living with what the Greeks (and guys like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) described as *areté*—which, as I've mentioned in several Notes, directly translates as "virtue" or "excellence" but has a deeper meaning close to "living at one's highest potential."

Or, as Irvine tells us, performing the function for which one was designed.

THAT is what living with virtue is all about.

Here's how Jonathan Haidt puts it in his \*great\* book *The Happiness Hypothesis* ([see Notes](#)): *"What was his [Benjamin Franklin's] secret? Virtue. Not the sort of uptight, pleasure-hating Puritanism that some people now associate with that word, but a broader kind of virtue that goes back to ancient Greece. The Greek word areté meant excellence, virtue, or goodness, especially of a functional sort... Thus in saying that well being or happiness (eudaimonia) is "an activity of soul in conformity with excellence or virtue," Aristotle wasn't saying that happiness comes from giving to the poor and suppressing your sexuality. He was saying that a good life is one where you develop your strengths, realize your potential, and become what it is in your nature to become."*

*"What, then, must a person do to have what the Stoics would call a good life? Be virtuous!"*

~ William B. Irvine

It's all about closing the gap between what we are capable of and how we are actually showing up as we fully express ourselves and live in accordance with nature.

Here are some wisdom nuggets on that front from our Big Three Stoics:

Epictetus: *"But what is it that I wish? To understand Nature and to follow it."*

Aurelius: *"Everything - a horse, a vine - is created for some duty... For what task, then, were you yourself created? A man's true delight is to do the things he was made for."*

Seneca: *"If you shape your life according to nature, you will never be poor; if according to people's opinions, you will never be rich."*

And: *"Man's ideal state is realized when he has fulfilled the purpose for which he is born. And*

*what is it that reason demands of him? Something very easy—that he live in accordance with his own nature.”*

How’s *your* virtue?

And, are you living as you were designed to live?

Let’s rock it! :)

## HEDONIC ADAPTATION

“We humans are unhappy in large part because we are insatiable; after working hard to get what we want, we routinely lose interest in the object of our desire. Rather than feeling satisfied, we feel a bit bored, and in response to this boredom, we go on to form new, even grander desires. The psychologists Shane Frederick and George Loewenstein have studied this phenomenon and given it a name: hedonic adaptation. To illustrate the adaptation process, they point to studies of lottery winners. Winning a lottery typically allows someone to live the life of his dreams. It turns out, though, that after an initial period of exhilaration, lottery winners end up about as happy as they previously were. They start taking their new Ferrari and mansion for granted, the way they previously took their rusted-out pickup and cramped apartment for granted.”

Hedonic adaptation.

It’s the scientific description of what I like to call the “bling treadmill.”

We’re constantly going after the next “thing” that we think is going to make us happy—whether that’s the new car or new house or new spouse or whatever—forgetting the fact that happiness is an inside game!

## NEGATIVE VISUALIZATION

*“ Instead of spending our days enjoying our good fortune, we spend them forming and pursuing new, grander dreams for ourselves. As a result, we are never satisfied with our life. Negative visualization can help us avoid this fate.”*

~ William B. Irvine

“The Stoics thought they had an answer to this question. They recommended that we spend time imagining that we have lost the things we value—that our wife has left us, our car was stolen, or we lost our job. Doing this, the Stoics thought, will make us value our wife, our car, and our job more than we otherwise would. This technique—let us refer to it as negative visualization—was employed by the Stoics at least as far back as Chrysippus. It is, I think, the single most valuable technique in the Stoics’ psychological tool kit.”

Negative visualization.

Powerful.

Want to appreciate the wonderful things you have in your life?

Imagine losing them.

Let’s take a moment to do that now...

Who and what do you love most in your life?

...

Got it?

...

Now, imagine losing them. (Seriously, do it. It’s not fun but it is transformative.)

...

Now, APPRECIATE how amazing it is that you are blessed to have so many wonderful people and opportunities and things in your life!

## PROJECTIVE VISUALIZATION

“The negative visualization technique, by the way, can also be used in reverse: Besides imagining that the bad things that happened to others happen to us, we can imagine that the bad things that happen to us happened instead to others. In his Handbook, Epictetus advocates this sort of “projective visualization.” Suppose, he says, that our servant breaks a cup. We are likely to get angry and have our tranquility disrupted by the incident. One way to avert this anger is to think about how we would feel if the incident had happened to someone else instead. If we were at someone’s house and his servant broke a cup, we would be unlikely to get angry; indeed, we might try to calm our host by saying “It’s just a cup; these things happen.” Engaging in projective visualization, Epictetus believes, will make us appreciate the relative insignificance of the bad things that happen to us and will therefore prevent them from disrupting our tranquility.”

Love the projective visualization as well.

We tend to get all up in our stuff when we attach the word “my” to our losses. One way to soften the blow is to imagine your loss occurring to someone else in a “projective visualization.”

Try it.

It’s powerful stuff.

P.S. Here’s the complete passage from Epictetus’ *Handbook*: “We may learn the wish (will) of nature from the things in which we do not differ from one another; for instance, when your neighbor’s slave has broken his cup, or anything else, we are ready to say forthwith, that it [is] one of the things which happen. You must know then that when your cup also is broken, you ought to think as you did when your neighbor’s cup was broken. Transfer this reflection to greater things also. Is another man’s child or wife dead? There is no one who would not say, this is an event incident to man. But when a man’s own child or wife is dead, forthwith he calls out, Wo to me, how wretched I am. But we ought to remember how we feel when we hear that it has happened to others.”

Try that one on next time your tranquility’s being disrupted! :)

## LIVING IN A DREAM WORLD

*“The easiest way for us to gain happiness is to learn how to want the things we already have.”*

~ William B. Irvine

“Alternatively, we can do some historical research to see how our ancestors lived. We will quickly discover that we are living in what to them would have been a dream world—that we tend to take for granted things that our ancestors had to live without, including antibiotics, air conditioning, toilet paper (!), cell phones, television, windows, eyeglasses, and fresh fruit in January. Upon coming to this realization, we can breathe a sigh of relief that we aren’t our ancestors, the way our descendants will presumably someday breathe a sigh of relief that they aren’t us!”

We live in a dream world where, as Louis CK tells us “Everything’s amazing and nobody’s happy.” (If you haven’t watched his YouTube clip on that, you need to stop everything and watch it now! Click here. :)

Next time you start complaining about the plumbing, think back to a time not-too-long-ago when we didn’t have toilet paper.

Air conditioning in the car not getting cool enough for you as fast as you’d like? Right. Remember that 100 years ago you would have been riding a horse.

Cell phone reception spotty? You do realize you’re talking into a piece of plastic and somehow, MAGICALLY, communicating to someone far, far away.

Internet slow? Remember you have access to more wisdom and entertainment (and nonsense) than ever imaginable!

It's easy to take things for granted. Let's remember we live in a DREAM WORLD!!

## IMPERMANENCE, FLUX & CHANGE

*"Modern individuals rarely see the need to adopt a philosophy of life. They instead tend to spend their days working hard to be able to afford the latest consumer gadget, in the resolute belief that if only they buy enough stuff, they will have a life that is both meaningful and maximally fulfilling."*

~ William B. Irvine

"I mentioned in the introduction that some of the things that attracted me to Buddhism could also be found in Stoicism. Like Buddhists, Stoics advise us to contemplate the world's impermanence. "All things human," Seneca reminds us, "are short-lived and perishable." Marcus likewise reminds us that the things we treasure are like the leaves on a tree, ready to drop when a breeze blows. He also argues that the "flux and change" of the world around us are not an accident but an essential part of our universe."

Change.

It's the one thing we can count on, eh?

Rather than fighting that fundamental fact of existence, the Stoics and Buddhists tell us to embrace it.

Buddha tells us: "All is change in the world, but the disciples of the Buddha are never shaken."

While Aurelius comes back to the theme of impermanence again and again in his [Meditations](#), advising us: "Time is a river, the resistless flow of all created things. One thing no sooner comes in sight than it is hurried past and another is borne along, only to be swept away in its turn."

And: "Reflect often upon the rapidity with which all existing things, or things coming into existence, sweep past us and are carried away."

Plus: "Even while a thing is in the act of coming into existence, some part of it has already ceased to be."

Back to you.

How are you resisting change?

And, how can you flow with the essential flux and change of the universe more today?!

## THE ONLY WAY TO BE TRULY ALIVE

"By contemplating the impermanence of everything in the world, we are forced to recognize that every time we do something could be the last time we do it, and this recognition can invest the things we do with a significance and intensity that would otherwise be absent. We will no longer sleepwalk through our life. Some people, I realize, will find it depressing or even morbid to contemplate impermanence. I am nevertheless convinced that the only way we can be truly alive is if we make it our business periodically to entertain such thoughts."

Impermanence. As we just discussed, the Stoics tell us we need to contemplate it if we want to be truly alive.

The most important "impermanent" thing we need to contemplate? Our own lives.

Seneca tells us: "Every day, therefore, should be regulated as if it were the one that brings up the rear, the one that rounds out and completes our lives."

Here's to making every moment our best—not knowing which moment will be our last!

## OUR MOST IMPORTANT CHOICE

"Our most important choice in life, according to Epictetus, is whether to concern ourselves with things external to us or things internal. Most people choose the former because they think harms and benefits come from outside themselves. According to Epictetus, though, a philosopher—by which he means someone who has an understanding of Stoic philosophy—will do just the

*"Rather than being passive individuals who were grimly resigned to being on the receiving end of the world's abuse and injustice, the Stoics were fully engaged in life and worked hard to make the world a better place."*

~ William B. Irvine

opposite. He will look "for all benefit and harm to come from himself." In particular, he will give up the rewards the external world has to offer in order to gain "tranquility, freedom, and calm."

Our most important choice: Will we concern ourselves with those things external to us or internal?

In other words, will we assume control of our own flourishing and develop mastery of our thoughts and perspective to create a joyful, meaningful life?

Epictetus puts it this way: "Of things some are in our power, and others are not... examine it by the rules which you possess, and by this first and chiefly, whether it relates to the things which are in our power or to the things which are not in our power: and if it relates to anything which is not in our power, be ready to say, that it does not concern you."

And: "The condition and characteristic of an uninstructed person is this: he never expects from himself profit (advantage) nor harm, but from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is this: he expects all advantage and all harm from himself."

Seneca puts it this way: "Everything hangs on one's thinking."

While Aurelius tells us: "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

And: "Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible."

Here's to embracing the wisdom of the Stoics and choosing wisely!

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](https://heroic.us).