

THE BIG IDEAS

Do You Like Yourself?

Say "Yes!"! :)

A Disposition to Good

Create it!

Focus

Everywhere & nowhere.

Hello, God!

She's inside you!

Your Ideal State

What's your purpose?

The Troubled Ones

Don't feel it. :)

Philosophy's Power

'tis big!

A Path to Salvation

Don't feel it. :)

On Death

Rehearse it.

The Play of Life

Good vs. long.

Pleasures

... and punishments.

Harshness

Properly employed.

Dare Ya!

Just do it!!!

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

~ Seneca

Letters from a Stoic

BY SENECA · PENGUIN CLASSICS © 1969 · 256 PAGES

"A good character is the only guarantee of everlasting, carefree happiness."

~ Seneca from *Letters from a Stoic*

Stoicism is one of my favorite philosophies. What we know of this classic Hellenistic philosophy is based on the texts created by its three primary sages: [Marcus Aurelius](#), [Epictetus](#), and Seneca.

In this Note, we're gonna take a quick look at Seneca: a statesman, Stoic philosopher, contemporary of Jesus, and tutor to the Roman Emperor Nero (who must not have liked Seneca's Stoic principles too much because he eventually had him killed... either that or there may have been some political issues going on, eh? :).

Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic* is packed full of Big Ideas I think you'll enjoy! First, let's take a quick look at his life and philosophy then we'll jump in.

Life

The reliability of the details of Seneca's early life are shaky at best, but he was believed to be born in Cordoba, then the most prominent city in Spain (Hispania), at about the same time as Jesus (between 4 and 1 BCE). Seneca was a statesman and a philosopher and is widely known for his skilled essays and, in fact, is recognized by many as the founder of the Essay. In 49 CE, Seneca became the tutor to the 12-year old boy who would become the emperor Nero. For eight years, he acted as Nero's unofficial chief minister before Nero compelled him to commit suicide after the discovery of a plot that may have elevated him to the throne as emperor.

QUICK INTRO TO STOICISM

The modern word "stoic" is derived from the calm demeanor of the stoic philosopher. The philosophy itself, however, was named "stoicism" because its founder, Zeno (344-262 BCE), taught in a well-known *stoa*: a colonnade or porch.

Stoicism is one of three prominent philosophies of the Hellenistic era (the other two: Cynicism and Epicureanism). The philosophy was founded by Zeno about 300 BCE. (To put it in perspective, Plato founded the Academy in 385 BCE.) Although relatively obscure today, Stoicism was the dominant philosophy of the Western world for several centuries. It lost its prominence when the emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century.

DO YOU LIKE YOURSELF?

"What difference does it make, after all, what your position in life is if you dislike it yourself?"

That's hilarious. And so true, eh?

Isn't it amazing how we can spend so much of our time doing everything we can to please everyone around us and, at the end of the day, not even like ourselves. Eek!

"For men in a state of freedom had thatch for their shelter, while slavery dwells beneath marble and gold."

~ Seneca

"Away with the world's opinion of you—it's always unsettled and divided."

~ Seneca

"See what daily exercise does for one."

~ Seneca

"Straightforwardness and simplicity are in keeping with goodness."

~ Seneca

So, Rule #1: Like who you are, what you do, etc. In short: Like yourself. :)

And, a *really* powerful mantra from Louise (founder of Hay House) Hay's *You Can Heal Your Life* ([see Notes](#)) that I say many times a day when looking into the mirror: *"I love and accept myself completely. I love and accept myself completely. I love and accept myself completely..."*

Might sound a little wacky the first few times you say it but if you believe Louise (I definitely do), your opinion of yourself was most powerfully shaped when you were a child looking into the eyes of a parent or teacher. To re-program yourself most positively, therefore, it's important to look yourself in the eye as you say your mantras (ideally, out loud).

(Give it a try. You'll feel great. I promise. :)

CREATING A DISPOSITION TO GOOD

"You have to persevere and fortify your pertinacity until the will to good becomes a disposition to good."

First: Let's define "pertinacity."

It means: *"Holding firmly to an opinion or a course of action"* as in: *"He worked with a pertinacious resistance to interruptions."*

So, we need to work with a stubbornness and strong discipline until our will power to do the right thing leads to a DISPOSITION of doing the right thing. Make sense? I love that.

Seneca also says: **"How much better to pursue a straight course and eventually reach that destination where the things that are pleasant and the things that are honorable finally become, for you, the same."**

(THAT'S AMAZING!!) And, this is a good time to remember Aristotle's wisdom that: *"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."*

FOCUS

"To be everywhere is to be nowhere."

Love the fact that was said by a guy who lived 2,000 years ago.

(Apparently, multi-tasking and over-working have been around for awhile. :)

There are obviously a lot of ways we can look at this: from the frenzied pace we tend to live—running from one activity to another—to the constant juggling of projects in a never-ending loop of trying to do way more than possible and/or necessary.

So, I'll ask: Are *you* being "everywhere" and therefore "nowhere"?

How can you slow down and experience the Power of Now?

Another thought comes to mind: Ken Wilber, the modern Integral Philosopher ([see Notes](#)), talks about the fact that we have what he calls *"multiple lines of development"* in our lives—from the spiritual line of development to the intellectual, creative, physical, social, family, moral, etc.

Obviously, we want to push all of our lines forward but Wilber likes to say, *"Don't be a metaphysical glutton."*

Don't try to develop ALL your lines at once.

Slow down, pick a line or two to work on and FOCUS.

In other words, **"To be everywhere is to be nowhere."**

*"Everything hangs on
one's thinking."*

~ Seneca

HELLO, GOD!

"God is near you, is with you, is inside you."

Quit looking outside yourself for God.

* points to you *

God's in *there!* :)

YOUR IDEAL STATE

"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."

Marcus Aurelius, another Stoic Philosopher (and Roman Emperor a hundred years after Nero), said something very similar in his classic Meditations (see Notes): *"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."*

While Abraham Maslow says: *"Musicians must make music, artists must paint, poets must write if they are to be ultimately at peace with themselves. What human beings can be, they must be. They must be true to their own nature. This need we may call self-actualization... It refers to man's desire for self-fulfilment, namely to the tendency for him to become actually in what he is potentially: to become everything one is capable of becoming."*

And Martin Seligman, the leader of the Positive Psychology movement and author of Authentic Happiness (see Notes), tells us that we'll live a happy life when we discover and consistently use our "signature strengths."

(If you haven't taken his strengths assessment test yet, I HIGHLY recommend you join the nearly 1 million people who have at AuthenticHappiness.com.)

So, for what were YOU made? For what purpose were you born?

Do you know?

If so, are you living it?

If not, is your *primary* purpose to FIGURE OUT your purpose? (Please say, "Yes!" :)

We ALL have a purpose, a dharma, a call-it-what-you-want-but-we're-here-to-fulfill-it! So, let's get on that!

THE TROUBLED ONES

"The worse a person is the less he feels it."

That's classic. And so TRUE! (You may have noticed. :)

Just remember this thought from Seneca the next time you're dealing with someone who's struggling.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S POWER

"Philosophy's power to blunt all the blows of circumstance is beyond belief."

"The philosopher: he alone knows how to live for himself. He is the one, in fact, who knows the fundamental thing: how to live."

"Philosophy" and "Philosophers" have such a bad rap these days.

*"What's the good of dragging
up sufferings which are
over, of being unhappy now
just because you were
then."*

~ Seneca

*"A man is as unhappy as
he has convinced himself
he is."*

~ Seneca

*"There is nothing the wise
man does reluctantly."*

~ Seneca

"Philosophy takes as her aim the state of happiness□ she shows us what are real and what are only apparent evils. She strips men's minds of empty thinking, bestows a greatness that is solid and administers a check to greatness where it is puffed up and all an empty show; she sees that we are left no doubt about the difference between what is great and what is bloated."

~ Seneca

"The wise man then followed a simple way of life—which is hardly surprising when you consider how even in this modern age he seeks to be as little encumbered as he possibly can."

~ Seneca

"There is about wisdom a nobility and magnificence in the fact that she doesn't just fall to a person's lot, that each man owes her to his own efforts, that one doesn't go to anyone other than oneself to find her."

~ Seneca

Somehow, it got away from its Greek roots and has become, for the most part, a topic reserved for (ahem) boring, crusty old (and dead) white guys.

Me thinks the classic Greeks and the Romans would have been disappointed.

Did you know the word "philosopher" literally means "lover of wisdom"—where wisdom means "knowledge of life"?!

Therefore, a "philosopher" is someone who is IN LOVE with learning how to live. NOT a Professor at a University droning on about pedantic stuff that has no recognizable practical application.

(I confess that I must still be getting over my "B" in my Classic Western Philosophy class at UCLA, but isn't it remarkable how boring they can make Philosophy?!? And, even more frightening, how far from practical... :)

But, alas, back to Seneca.

You ask, what is the purpose of Philosophy? He answers: "Shall I tell you what philosophy holds out to humanity? Counsel... You are called in to help the unhappy."

And how much of your time should you invest in studying Philosophy? Seneca advises: "When some state or other offered Alexander a part of its territory and half of all its property he told them that 'he hadn't come to Asia with the intention of accepting whatever they cared to give him, but of letting them keep whatever he chose to leave them.' Philosophy, likewise, tells all other occupations: 'It's not my intention to accept whatever time is leftover from you; you shall have, instead, what I reject.' Give your whole mind to her."

So, let's give all of our minds and hearts to the pursuit of wisdom and remember Philosophy's power to blunt the blows of circumstance! :)

A PATH TO SALVATION

"A consciousness of wrongdoing is the first step to salvation... you have to catch yourself doing it before you can correct it."

Obvious but often overlooked truth: To change a behavior, first we need to catch ourselves doing it!

I've been practicing removing certain things from my consciousness/thoughts/words/behaviors. Stuff like criticism (of others and myself), gossip, complaining, comparing, impatience, holding my breath, getting frustrated and other stuff that isn't in line with my Highest Self.

Now, I've pretty much always *known* these things needed to go, but it wasn't until I made it a *practice* to *systematically* remove them (and remind myself of the fact in my daily morning journaling) that I really had the CONSCIOUSNESS of wrongdoing.

Once I started writing down what I call "My NO's!" every morning, I started SEEING all the times I'd start criticizing or gossiping or getting impatient or whatever. It is this ability to CATCH ourselves doing it that gives us the power to correct it.

So... what about you?!?

What "wrongdoing" do YOU need to start catching yourself doing so you can correct it?

(And what're you waiting for?!? Get on that!! :)

ON DEATH

"You want to live—but do you know how to live? You are scared of dying—and, tell me, is the kind of life you lead really any different from being dead?"

Wow. That puts it in perspective.

"We should live as if we were in public view, and think, too, as if someone could peer into the inmost recesses of our hearts—which someone can!"

~ Seneca

"Rehearse death. To say this is to tell a person to rehearse his freedom. A person who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. He is above, or at any rate, beyond the reach of, all political powers."

~ Seneca

"Just where death is expecting you is something we cannot know; so, for your part, expect him everywhere."

~ Seneca

"Death: There's nothing bad about it at all except the thing that comes before it—the fear of it."

~ Seneca

Seneca dedicates quite a bit of energy to discussing death and the importance of honoring the fact that we're ALL gonna die (sorry to break that to you :) so we might as well get clear on it (and in his words "rehearse" it!) so we can fully LIVE!

THE PLAY OF LIFE

"As it is with a play, so it is with life—what matters is not how long the acting lasts, but how good it is."

Ah! How great is *that*?!

Do you go to a play for how LONG it is going to last or HOW GOOD IT IS?!?

Same with our lives!!! Let's quit worrying just how *long* it's gonna be and focus on how *well* we play our part, shall we?!? :)

And remember: "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."

PLEASURES AND PUNISHMENTS

"So called pleasures, when they go beyond a certain limit, are but punishments."

Deeply influenced by the classic Greek philosophers like Aristotle, the Stoics were/are all about self-control, self-mastery and virtuous living.

Reminds me of Aristotle's "Virtuous Mean" from *The Nicomachean Ethics*:

"For both excessive and insufficient exercise destroy one's strength, and both eating and drinking too much or too little destroy health, whereas the right quantity produces, increases or preserves it. So it is the same with temperance, courage and the other virtues... This much then, is clear: in all our conduct it is the mean that is to be commended."

Aristotle establishes the fact that virtue lies between the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. And Seneca reminds us here that "so-called pleasures," when they go past a certain point, become punishments.

Powerful stuff.

Spotlight's back on you: What PLEASURES in your life are you taking so far that they've become PUNISHMENTS? It could be drinking a bit too much, watching a bit too much TV (that would be just past any, btw... just kidding... mostlee :), eating too much, spending too much time online, whatever.

What is it for you? And how can you get back to the virtuous mean?

[And remember this the next time you go out hitting the bars: "Drunkenness is nothing but a self-induced state of insanity."]

HARSHNESS PROPERLY EMPLOYED

"Be harsh with yourself at times."

Again, Stoics were pretty bad-ass peeps.

They weren't messing around with living virtuously! And, in this case, we've got Seneca reminding us that, AT TIMES, we need to be harsh with ourselves.

This does NOT mean, of course, that we need to go around like that albino monk from *The da Vinci Code* mutilating ourselves (ew). But it DOES mean that, at times, we need to give ourselves a Zen stick to the head and wake up from the bad habits that are dragging us down.

*"Life is never incomplete if it is an honorable one. At whatever point you leave life, if you leave it in the right way, it is whole."
"Refuse to let the thought of death bother you: nothing is grim when we have escaped that fear."*

~ Seneca

As with the virtuous mean chat above, there's a virtuous mean here. TOO MUCH harshness is destructive—we'll develop a sense of self-loathing that's a weakness. Aristotle would consider it a vice of excess. TOO LITTLE harshness on the other hand, and we run the risk of being a self-contented (and usually self-righteous) ass. That would be a vice of deficiency.

The virtuous mean rests right there in the middle path—where we're *appropriately* correcting our weaknesses WITHOUT self-criticism per se, just a nice firm look in the eye and a smile as we embody more and more of our ideals while burning out, as [Rumi](#) would say, the dross that clouds the silver.

Rumi: *"This discipline and rough treatment are a furnace to extract the silver from the dross. This testing purifies the gold by boiling the scum away."*

DARE YA!

"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult."

Wow. Well, that pretty much solves it.

What dream of yours have you created a big ol' story around? You know, the one that says your dream is too hard to bring to life. That it's *Impossible!* Riiiiiiiiight.

REMEMBER! **"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult."**

So, what is it for you?

Dare ya to do it. :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



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.

**If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...**

[Meditations](#)

[Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#)

[The Enchiridion](#)