



24 Stoic Spiritual Exercises

How to become a better human
being, day after day

By Massimo Pigliucci

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Cover: Epictetus (left) and Marcus Aurelius (right), images from Wikipedia

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Introduction

Stoicism is a practical philosophy of life, and while I enjoy writing about its history and theory, it is the practice that has had a significant impact in my life. I assume it is the same for most readers too.

That's why in this booklet I collect a number of passages from the ancient Stoics where they explicitly advise certain practices or exercises. (Thanks to my friend Greg Lopez for helping curating the collection, on the occasion of one of our jointly hosted Stoic Camps). The first list is distilled from Epictetus' Enchiridion (the aptly titled "Manual"), while the second list is derived from Marcus' Meditations (again aptly, a diary that the emperor wrote for his own personal use).

The idea here is to step back for a moment from decidedly more modern "Stoic" exercises, which are actually derived from recent developments in psychology, such as Victor Frankl's logotherapy, or cognitive behavioral therapy. There is, of course, nothing wrong with attempting to update both Stoic theory (as I've done elsewhere) and practice. But it is also, I think, good to keep in mind what the ancients actually said and not mix it so thoroughly with modern perspectives that the two become indistinguishable.

Specifically, as we shall see, ancient Stoic techniques were decidedly leaning on the cognitive/verbal side of things, not so much on the visualization approach promoted by modern CBT. This isn't intrinsically bad or good. It just is,

and some people will likely respond better to cognitive approaches (myself included, it seems), while others will do well with visualization exercises. Nothing crucial hinges on this, except, again, the need to have present in one's mind what counts as an ancient Stoic vs a modern Stoic exercise, for the sake of historical clarity, if nothing else.

The way I decided to organize the entries below is simply in order of appearance in the Enchiridion or the Meditations. For each entry I give the original passage followed by a brief description or comment.

I hope this modest effort will be both enjoyable and especially useful.

-Massimo Pigliucci

Epictetus, the sage from Hierapolis



1-Examine your impressions

So make a practice at once of saying to every strong impression: ‘An impression is all you are, not the source of the impression.’ Then test and assess it with your criteria, but one primarily: ask, ‘Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?’ And if it’s not one of the things that you control, be ready with the reaction, ‘Then it’s none of my concern.’ (Enchiridion I.5)

Here Epictetus exhorts us to practice what is arguably the most fundamental of his doctrines: constantly examine our “impressions,” that is our initial reactions to events, people, and what we are being told, step back to make room for rational deliberation, avoid rash emotional reactions, and ask whether whatever is being thrown at us is under our control (in which case we should act on it), or it isn’t (in which case we should regard it as not of our concern).

2-Remind yourself of the impermanence of things

In the case of particular things that delight you, or benefit you, or to which you have grown attached, remind yourself of what they are. Start with things of little value. If it is china you like, for instance, say, 'I am fond of a piece of china.' When it breaks, then you won't be as disconcerted. When giving your wife or child a kiss, repeat to yourself, 'I am kissing a mortal.' Then you won't be so distraught if they are taken from you. (Enchiridion III)

Yes, yes, this is one of the (superficially) harshest passages in Epictetus. Not the part about the china, but the one about the wife or child. But I think Anthony Long (among others) is right about how this (in)famous quote ought to be interpreted. First off, remind yourself of the historical context: Epictetus was writing at a time when even emperors (like Marcus himself) lost most of their children and other loved ones at what we would consider a tender or premature age, to disease, or war. While most of us in the West are currently lucky in that respect, the point remains: life is ephemeral, and people we deeply care about may be snatched from us suddenly and without warning. Moreover, what Epictetus is counseling here is not an inhuman indifference toward our beloved ones, but quite the opposite: to constantly remind ourselves of just how precious they are precisely because they may soon be gone. Anyone who has lost a person close to them ought to know exactly what this means. We should go through life just like

the Roman generals went through their official celebratory triumphs in the eternal city: with somebody (in their case, a slave) who constantly whispers in our ears “memento homo” (remember, you are (only) a man).

3-Reserve clause

Whenever planning an action, mentally rehearse what the plan entails. If you are heading out to bathe, picture to yourself the typical scene at the bathhouse - people splashing, pushing, yelling and pinching your clothes. You will complete the act with more composure if you say at the outset, 'I want a bath, but at the same time I want to keep my will aligned with nature.' Do it with every act. That way if something occurs to spoil your bath, you will have ready the thought, 'Well, this was not my only intention, I also meant to keep my will in line with nature - which is impossible if I go all to pieces whenever anything bad happens.' (Enchiridion IV)

Since the only thing truly under our control are our intentions and behaviors, the outcome of anything we try to do depends at the least in part on external circumstances. Which means we should approach doing anything with the Stoic reserve clause, fate permitting.

4-How can I use virtue here and now?

For every challenge, remember the resources you have within you to cope with it. Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you will grow to be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate. (Enchiridion X)

This passage is one of the most empowering of Stoic writings. Epictetus, the former slave, lame because of a once broken leg, tells us to use every occasion, every challenge, as a way to exercise our virtue, to become a better human being by constant practice.

5-Pause and take a deep breadth

Remember, it is not enough to be hit or insulted to be harmed, you must believe that you are being harmed. If someone succeeds in provoking you, realize that your mind is complicit in the provocation. Which is why it is essential that we not respond impulsively to impressions; take a moment before reacting, and you will find it is easier to maintain control. (Enchiridion XX)

Here is the crucial step that allows us to more rationally examine our impressions: we need to resist the impulse to react immediately, instinctively, to situations. Instead, pause, take a deep breadth, and then consider the issue as dispassionately (in the sense of equanimity, not lack of care) as possible.

6-Other-ize

We can familiarize ourselves with the will of nature by calling to mind our common experiences. When a friend breaks a glass, we are quick to say, 'Oh, bad luck.' It's only reasonable, then, that when a glass of your own breaks, you accept it in the same patient spirit. Moving on to graver things: when somebody's wife or child dies, to a man we all routinely say, 'Well, that's part of life.' But if one of our own family is involved, then right away it's 'Poor, poor me!' We would do better to remember how we react when a similar loss afflicts others. (Enchiridion XXVI)

This is a fascinating one, as we are reminded of just how differently we regard the same event if it concerns us or other people. Naturally, it is far easier to maintain equanimity (which, again, is not to be confused with emotional impassivity!) when little inconveniences, or even disasters, happen to others than to ourselves. But why, really?

7-Speak little and well

Let silence be your goal for the most part; say only what is necessary, and be brief about it. On the rare occasions when you're called upon to speak, then speak, but never about banalities like gladiators, horses, sports, food and drink - commonplace stuff. Above all don't gossip about people, praising, blaming or comparing them. (Enchiridion XXXIII.2)

I must admit that this is a hard one for me to practice, probably due to my ego and the professional habits of a teacher who is far too often in professorial mode. Still, I've tried to remember this counsel and take it to heart, and it is serving me increasingly well.

8-Choose your company well

Avoid fraternizing with non-philosophers. If you must, though, be careful not to sink to their level; because, you know, if a companion is dirty, his friends cannot help but get a little dirty too, no matter how clean they started out. (Enchiridion XXXIII.6)

I laugh every time I read this. To modern ears it sounds insufferably elitist, but it really isn't (remember, it comes from an ex-slave who was making a living teaching in the open air). Also, keep in mind that "philosophers" here doesn't mean professionals, but rather people who are interested in following virtue. More generally, this is simply the sound advice that our life is short, and temptation and waste are always lurking, so we need to pay attention to whom we spend our time with and doing what.

9-Respond to insults with humor

If you learn that someone is speaking ill of you, don't try to defend yourself against the rumors; respond instead with, 'Yes, and he doesn't know the half of it, because he could have said more.' (Enchiridion XXXIII.9)

This is a lovely example of profound wisdom accompanied by Epictetus' distinctive brand of humor: instead of getting offended by someone's insults (remember, they are not "up to you") respond with self deprecation. You will feel better, and your vilifier will be embarrassed.

10-Don't speak too much about yourself

In your conversation, don't dwell at excessive length on your own deeds or adventures. Just because you enjoy recounting your exploits doesn't mean that others derive the same pleasure from hearing about them. (Enchiridion XXXIII.14)

I have to own up to failing at this often enough (see “ego” and “professorial mode” above), but I'm trying. And boy, does that make for a much better social experience!

11-Speak without judging

Someone bathes in haste; don't say he bathes badly, but in haste. Someone drinks a lot of wine; don't say he drinks badly, but a lot. Until you know their reasons, how do you know that their actions are vicious? This will save you from perceiving one thing clearly, but then assenting to something different. (Enchiridion XLV)

Still working on this one too, but, again, this is so true, and so typically Stoic. The idea is to distinguish between matters of fact – to which we can assent, if we find them justified by observation – and judgments – from which we generally speaking ought to abstain, since we usually don't have sufficient information. Just imagine how much better the world would be if we all refrained from hasty judgments and looked at human affairs more matter of factly.

Marcus Aurelius, the emperor-philosopher



12-Morning meditation on others

Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I, who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him. For we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn. (Meditations II.1, see also X.13)

This is a famous passage, displaying Marcus' somewhat pessimistic view of humanity right up front. Nonetheless, the message is powerful, and can be adopted also by people with a more cheerful disposition (or at the least a sense of humor about the reality of things).

13-Keep at-hand principles

As physicians have always their instruments and knives ready for cases that suddenly require their skill, so do you have principles ready for the understanding of things divine and human, and for doing everything, even the smallest, with a recollection of the bond that unites the divine and human to each other. (Meditations III.13, see also end of IV.3, V. 16 and VII.2)

Here is advice to do precisely what I am attempting to do with this collection: create an easily accessible tool that reminds me, whenever needed, of what is really important and how to think about it. (Keep in mind that “divine” can just as well be interpreted as “natural” in Stoic parlance.)

14-Why am I doing this?

Let no act be done without a purpose, nor otherwise than according to the perfect principles of art.
(Meditations IV.2, see also VIII.2)

We are purposeful animals, and yet much of what we do seems to be not particularly well thought out. The Stoic advice is to consider carefully what we are doing and why. Life is short, make the best (i.e., the most virtuous) of it.

15-Renunciation

The more of these things a man deprives himself of, or of other things like them, or even when he is deprived of any of them, the more patiently he endures the loss, just in the same degree he is a better man. (Meditations V.15)

Marcus here is talking about “indifferents,” that is things that may be preferred or dispreferred, but are not an intrinsic component of virtue – like wealth, material possessions, reputation, and the like. The suggestion is to train oneself to do without them, at the least from time to time, to both remind us that they are not crucial for eudaimonia, as well as to better appreciate them when we do have them.

16-Decomposition exercise

When we have meat before us and such eatables, we receive the impression that this is the dead body of a fish, and this is the dead body of a bird or of a pig; and again, that this Falernian is only a little grape juice, and this purple robe some sheep's wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish; or, in the matter of sexual intercourse, that it is merely an internal attrition and the spasmodic expulsion of semen: such then are these impressions, and they reach the things themselves and penetrate them, and so we see the things as they truly are. Just in the same way ought we to act all through life, and where there are things that appear most worthy of our approbation, we ought to lay them bare and look at their worthlessness and strip them of all the words by which they are exalted. For outward show is a wonderful perverter of reason, and when you are most sure that you are employed about things worth your pains, it is then that it cheats you most. (Meditations VI.13, see also III.11, VIII.11, XI.2, XI.16 and XII.10)

This one is another famous excerpt from Marcus, where he prods himself to look at the basic constituents of things and actions, appreciating anew that they are material things to which all too often we attribute more importance than they do in fact have. To put things in context, the bit about sexual intercourse probably should not be interpreted as prudish (Marcus did, after all, have 13 children!), but rather as a check against lust for lust's sake.

17-Acknowledging others' virtues

When you wish to delight yourself, think of the virtues of those who live with you; for instance, the activity of one, the modesty of another, the liberality of a third, and some other good quality of a fourth. For nothing delights so much as the examples of the virtues when they are exhibited in the morals of those who live with us and present themselves in abundance, as far as is possible. Hence we must keep them before us. (Meditations VI.48, though also see all of book I)

This is one version of the common Stoic idea of reminding oneself of role models, because virtue cannot be learned just by way of theory, it requires examples and practice.

18-Take another's perspective

When a man has done you wrong, immediately consider with what opinion about good or evil he has done wrong. For when you have seen this, you will pity him, and will neither wonder nor be angry. For either you yourself think the same thing to be good that he does or another thing of the same kind. It is your duty then to pardon him. But if you do not think such things to be good or evil, you will more readily be well disposed to him who is in error. (Meditations VII.26, see also IX.34)

A wonderful exercise in humility, reminding us to step in another person's shoes to at the least attempt to see things from their perspective, before passing judgment.

19-View from above

You can rid yourself of many useless things among those that disturb you, for they lie entirely in your imagination; and you will then gain for yourself ample space by comprehending the whole universe in your mind, and by contemplating the eternity of time, and observing the rapid change of every part of everything, how short is the time from birth to dissolution, and the illimitable time before birth as well as the equally boundless time after dissolution. (Meditations IX.32, see also VII.48 and XII.24 – third exercise)

A classic Stoic exercise: seeing things from a distance helps us put them in the proper (cosmic) perspective.

20-How did they (not) sin?

I *f any man has done wrong, the harm is his own. But perhaps he has not done wrong. (Meditations IX.38)*

Short, profound, and rather self-explanatory.

21-Keep change and death in mind

A *cquire the contemplative way of seeing how all things change into one another, and constantly attend to it, and exercise yourself about this part of philosophy. For nothing is so much adapted to produce magnanimity. ... Consider in what condition both in body and soul a man should be when he is overtaken by death; and consider the shortness of life, the boundless abyss of time past and future, the feebleness of all matter. (Meditations X.11 and XII.7, see also X.18, X.19 and X.29)*

Change and death are inevitable, that is why we need to focus on what we do here and now, *hic et nunc*.

22-When offended...

When you are offended at any man's fault, immediately turn to yourself and reflect in what manner you yourself have erred: for example, in thinking that money is a good thing or pleasure, or a bit of reputation, and the like. (Meditations X.30, see also IX.42)

A handy reminder of how silly it is to get offended at someone else's behavior or words.

23-Rebutting thoughts

There are four principal aberrations of the superior faculty against which you should be constantly on your guard, and when you have detected them, you should wipe them out and say on each occasion thus: this thought is not necessary; this tends to destroy social union; this which you are going to say comes not from the real thoughts – for you should consider it among the most absurd of things for a man not to speak from his real thoughts. But the fourth is when you shall reproach yourself for anything, for this is an evidence of the diviner part within you being overpowered and yielding to the less honorable and to the perishable part, the body, and to its gross pleasures. (Meditations XI.19)

Stoicism is often acknowledged as the forerunner of some of the most efficacious modern therapies, such as Victor Frankl's logotherapy and Albert Ellis' rational emotive behavior therapy. This passage could easily have been written by a modern counselor, inviting you to challenge your own thoughts, to argue with yourself, until you see things more clearly and begin to act accordingly.

24-Morning meditation on the cosmos

The Pythagoreans bid us in the morning look to the heavens that we may be reminded of those bodies that continually do the same things and in the same manner perform their work, and also be reminded of their purity and nudity. For there is no veil over a star. (Meditations XI.27)

Lastly, an exercise that is a combination of physical and spiritual: at the least from time to time, get your butt off the bed before dawn, head out to a spot where you can see the Sun rise, and think about your place in the universe.

About the Author



Massimo Pigliucci is an author, blogger, podcaster, as well as the K.D. Irani Professor of Philosophy at the City College of New York. His academic work is in evolutionary biology, philosophy of science, the nature of pseudoscience, and practical philosophy. Massimo publishes regular columns in *Skeptical Inquirer* and in *Philosophy Now*. His books include *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life* (Basic Books) and *Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk* (University of Chicago Press). Massimo's latest book is *The Quest for Character: What the Story of Socrates and Alcibiades Teaches Us about Our Search for Good Leaders* (Basic Books). More by Massimo at [the School for a New Stoicism](#).



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