

Pragmatic Wisdom Vol. 3 (Excerpt)

Stoic Lessons on Living and Dying

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A Fine Idea

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Chapter One

Why Do Anything? An Introduction to the Stoic Lessons

Dear friends. Join me on a journey to discover what it means to live a good life. Our inspiration in this quest is Seneca's Moral Letters to Lucilius, revisited and revised for our modern times. The search for what it means to live a good life was not new in Seneca's day, and it will not be old when we are all long gone.

Although these are not Seneca's letters, they honor both his wisdom and his instructions for new students. That is, we should grapple with deep thoughts and make our understanding of the truth personal.

Because no one has a monopoly on the truth, we can each contribute to the puzzle. **The reason to do anything is to answer a question that has not been answered, or at a minimum to answer it for yourself.**

In answering life's deepest questions, would it not be foolish for us to pass by the foundational stones laid by the great thinkers

who labored before us? Seneca himself in search of inspiration says in his Letter 2:

I am wont to cross over even into the enemy's camp, — not as a deserter, but as a scout.

Let us all be avid scouts of the great thinkers, seeking out their every camp with the mindset of anthropologists unearthing meaning from among the ruins. Although Seneca's words have been mined by many for centuries, each generation keeps turning up gemstones.

Thus, with this series of Pragmatic Wisdom for Busy People, let us polish old stones to show them in a new light, and in washing off the mud and debris, reveal what fresh reflections may appear.

Be well.

PS — You can read each of the volumes independently, as it suits your time and your interests. Dedicated readers will find, however, that their understanding of each volume will increase upon reading further volumes. The sincere student may therefore wish to have the full set of Stoic letters: Pragmatic Wisdom for the Sincere Student.

Chapter Two

On the Quest for Immortality

What drives the quest for immortality? At its root, it is an excess of greed and fear

Greetings dear reader!

Your studies do you credit, and your progress will pay you dividends. For the sooner you find answers to the questions that vex you, the longer you will live in an enlightened state.

An hour spent in quiet contemplation is better than a hundred spent in confusion and so imagine the rewards for ordering your mind.

You should desire an ordered mind because you have an excellent chance at a long life. Ponder for a moment the amazing increase in life expectancy in just the last century and a half.

- In 1870, global life expectancy was a mere 29 years.
- By 2019, it had leaped to 73 years.

You would think humankind would cry out with joy at this almost tripling in our lifespan. We hear not cries of joy but lamentation.

We lament that if some have already lived to 120, why can't we all? If we can eradicate disease, if we can manipulate the very DNA that makes us what we are, can we not eliminate aging itself?

And perhaps boldest of all, if we can digitize every moment of every day, can we not simulate in our computers worlds indistinguishable from reality, and so achieve immortality, at least in code?

What drives the quest for immortality? At its root, it is an excess of greed and fear. Greed for more of what tastes sweet, for unending pleasure and consumption.

Can anything be more ill-considered? You may eat delicacy upon delicacy until your stomach groans, true. Even children soon learn gluttony comes with a price.

Radical life extensionist Ray Kurzweil himself concedes that a corporeal immortal would suffer existential ennui, running out of not only things to do but ultimately even new ideas.

Not least, achieving immortality would mean the end of humankind. If none die, none may be born. For even though we add just one per century, in an eternity an infinity would come to be. Thus, to allow eternal life means to end new life. What could be more arrogant and selfish?

All that have come before you have yielded their spot on the stage. What possible claim could we have to deny a place to all who would come after us?

“Not at all,” the critics claim. “We will create all worlds digitally, all that ever were, and all that will ever be. There is space for everyone and everything.” In ones and zeros, they aim to “live” forever, never growing bored or running out of new things to consume.

But nothing gains in value by being added up infinitely. As the last King of Lydia, and after conquering the Greeks, King Croesus’s gold hoard was the greatest in the world, but even this was insignificant compared to what the mythical King Midas could create with a touch. Who came more to regret his lust for gold?

The value of luxury lies in scarcity; what all can possess infinitely, none will value highly in possessing.

Does the solution lie in finding some limit? Not infinity, say, but a thousand years? This would never satisfy those who fear death. Because what they fear is fear of missing out. But can anything be more foolish?

Whether your life is fifty years, one hundred, or a thousand, it shrinks in insignificance on the scale of the universe. What is a million years compared to the billions our cosmos has spun without us, and will spin on to come?

To truly avoid missing out, you would have to master not only immortality for all time yet to come but travel backward in history to sample the eternity already swallowed by time.

So, no limit can satisfy, and without limits, we destroy the value of life. The inevitable conclusion is to give up the fantasy of immortality.

By striving for what you cannot have, and would not want if you could have it, you destroy your peace of mind today.

An ordered mind knows the value of life is precisely that it is limited.

Be well.

Chapter Three

On Aging

There is no greater pleasure than being able to look back on a life of proper thoughts and actions

Everywhere I look I see signs of my own obsolescence. I cleaned out my office this week and was struck dumb by the extent to which tools I once cherished have been left to gather dust.

My HP LaserJet printer that faithfully produced thousands of pages lies beached in a corner, its power cord and printer cable laying akimbo to snare the unwary. Now my pages pass through the air wirelessly to a monster shared printer of such complexity that the architects of the moon launch must look on in wonder.

I have uncovered not less than three once miraculous devices for storing and playing my music, each compacter than the last, and concentrating more goodness into more tininess: From my first pink iPod mini to an iPod shuffle, to the iPod Nano.

Am I surprised that the next stage in development has been to shrink the iPod into invisibility, which is to say it too has become

obsolete? The airwaves now carry what needed a battery, a white wire, and two earbuds to convey.

And I fairly weep to consider the fate of my most cherished guides to wisdom and universal truths: Books and printed matter.

Where once I was surrounded by reassuringly weighty volumes and binders of yellowing paper, I now see a welter of cables powering a veritable graveyard of successive e-readers.

I can mark their progress by a similar shrinking in size, though I stopped counting the generations at ten. At this rate, the population explosion we need to fear is not humankind's, but that of chips and lithium-ion batteries.

Kindle is a word that all fellow seekers of knowledge should cherish, but I admit it arouses in me now only a sense of loss. For what we have surely gained in convenience and access we have traded for competence.

The dog-eared volume, cracked spine, and underlined passages that were once the mark of the serious scholar have all given way to impermanent effervescence.

What good does it do to dip into all the libraries of the world if we do no more than browse idly for minutes before crashing on to the next electronic distraction?

I could go on chronicling the electronic wreckage, from laptops and mobile phones to rows of castaway monitors staring back at me with blank screens, but it is enough to say I am reminded that each day I am one day closer to death.

In my own case, I am not melancholy, for a purposeful life is not wasted, no matter how brief it may be.

There is no greater pleasure than being able to look back on a life of proper thoughts and actions. When you are young, everything lies before you, and you are overwhelmed by potential. What great things you are capable of, there are no limits to what you can do!

How comforting to be at the pinnacle looking back on what you have accomplished, though your journey is soon done, than to have the climb ahead of you.

And how wonderful it is to finally put an end to appetite and ambition. No more will you be goaded onwards and upwards, a donkey laboring under the stick; you now enjoy the well-deserved rest of the already done.

“Wait,” you cry, “doesn’t this mean you are starting to hear the stealthy footsteps that harbinger your own death?” Death does not take us in order of our age but plucks from across our ranks.

We are each of us replaced by the next generation and not only should we not resist but rejoice. I am as happy for another day as any, but I do not need it to feel fulfilled.

I bring this letter to a close.

“You do not mean,” you say “to leave me hanging without a nugget of wisdom?”

Have no fear, dear reader, I bring a small offering, which packs a punch above its weight. For what is more weighty than the following words that this letter conveys:

The man who does something under orders is not unhappy; he is unhappy who does something against his will. Let us therefore set our minds in

order that we may desire whatever is demanded
of us by circumstances.

Indeed. There is no binding that can hold a person who is free
in his mind.

“These are Seneca’s words,” you note, “and how is it that you
put them to use for your own purposes here?”

I will quote Seneca and any other without end to remind us the
truth belongs to us all, and not to the one who utters it.

The best ideas cannot be owned by one, only discovered and
rediscovered by us all.

Be well.

Chapter Four

On Exercise Routines

Your body is a machine that deserves tending to be sure, but are you the engineer or merely a mechanic?

It is normal to want to be fit. A sound body is a worthy goal, but your aim must be to master the body and not to become its servant.

Your fitness tracker faithfully counts your steps for you, but do you not feel its electronic whip if you falter? Many are consumed by consuming daily their avocado toast, fruit smoothie, and lean protein.

Your body is a machine that deserves tending to be sure, but are you the engineer or merely a mechanic? Do not lean too far into the role of perfect tender, lest you neglect the values that are truly dear: The vessel is not the content, no matter how fine.

When people think of fitness, it is usually only physical fitness that springs to mind.

We all know people who have entered into a holy pact with themselves to maintain the temples of their bodies. From their

Spandex shorts and functional outerwear to their latest sports watch and space-age shoes, their commitment is apparent to all.

And though it is appropriate to preserve the body, we should reserve our worship for another less visible kind of fitness: That of the mind. Mental fitness is the proper goal for the philosopher.

Lacking a solid mental foundation, the hyper-athlete is no more than fast-twitch muscles under hormonal orders. What use is it to run a marathon a month if your direction is aimless?

I will tell you, dear reader, how to keep your body in shape, without encroaching on the time and space necessary for your mental athletics.

You will recognize the truth in what I say because you have heard me say it before: Follow systems rather than goals and leverage continuous improvement principles.

Your systems are simple daily habits that you inculcate and then let run routinely, without any exercise of willpower. Feel free to walk the length of the great wall but do it a few kilometers each day as part of your normal routine.

Stock your household with nourishing food and drink, not indulgences. What comfort can you take from “comfort” food, if it leaves you steadily less fit each time you pamper yourself? You should eat to live, not live to eat.

The dedicated athlete will need all manner of supplements to maintain performance: Protein shakes to build muscle torn down by stress, electrolytes to replace salts lost to sweat, and magnesium for cramps brought on by overuse.

In both exercise and eating, you gain the most by reducing. Short, focused sessions of intense activity (high-intensity interval training), together with eating less frequently (intermittent fasting).

Your body is a most wonderful machine, capable of self-repair the best auto mechanic could only dream of. But to do its work, the body needs stillness and rest.

“Am I to lounge about,” you ask, “doing nothing all day before heading to an early rest?”

Not at all, for strenuous effort is still required of the sincere student. Expend your effort, however, in being mentally strong and thinking deep thoughts.

Just as habits and routines are the keys to unlocking physical fitness, so too are they the tools for building mental strength. Establish and follow rituals in which you think, read, and write.

The more you bend your mind to following these habits, the more eagerly will your mind take to the tasks you put before it.

And because mindfulness does not require idleness, you can attend to your mental training while also going about the business of maintaining the physical machine. A meditative walk is good medicine for both the body and the soul.

I grant you now another boon, which is an insight from that most dedicated athlete of the mind and fellow Stoic, Marcus Aurelius. Let it serve as a reminder to us that all we need to successfully exercise the mind and body is within our grasp at all times:

If you work at what is before you, following right reason seriously, vigorously, calmly, without allowing anything else to distract you, expecting nothing, fearing nothing, but satisfied with your present activity according to nature, you will live happy.

I wish for you to live happily, so I will extend this thought a bit further. When you expect nothing and fear nothing, it means you already have all that you need.

There is nothing that you need to attain to be successful. You may give yourself no small comfort by remembering how much you have already attained, and how this puts you ahead of the vast multitude of people on the earth.

Be grateful for what you have but be more grateful for who you are.

Be well.

Chapter Five

On Senior Citizens

If we want a true test of our training, we must check our thoughts against the one fate we can be sure is destined to come our way

I was writing not long ago about coming to terms with my ongoing obsolescence.

I fear I have left obsolescence behind and entered the realm of the antique. One still expects some functionality from the out-of-date, but the ancient is beyond function.

I have not fallen so far, so you can place me somewhere between the going and the gone.

But I am not going to complain, my dear reader, for I am still here, and you are still here. Or as the modern-day musician and author Chad Sugg put it so memorably:

If you're reading this ... Congratulations, you're alive. If that's not something to smile about, then I don't know what is.

In my case, my essence remains, while most of my rough edges have been worn away.

With the clamoring of youth behind me, the cares of middle age put to rest, I am left with the companionship of an aged but well-ordered mind. It tells me that I have earned hard-won peace, and who am I to contradict myself?

Though I am careful not to take full credit for arranging my thoughts in this way, because the mere passage of time does a measure of the work for us all.

If I am perfectly happy to no longer reach for the same heights, is it because I no longer feel the need? Or because they are beyond my grasp?

"But," you ask, "is it not a loss to see the steadily encroaching decline of your capabilities? To know that you will never again do more than before, but only less?"

It is the nature of all living things to decay and die, dear reader. I would rage as successfully against the wind as against the inevitable decline all people face.

Let me make a claim against Lucian, whose accounts I have not yet plundered, but whose satiric riches are available to all:

The world is fleeting; all things pass away; or is it we that pass and they that stay?

That which is inevitable I am wise not only to not fear but to actively embrace.

Things that are uncertain preoccupy our minds and occupy our time. Not so the things that are certain.

If we want a true test of our training, we must check our thoughts against the one fate we can be sure is destined to come our way.

It is our habit to prepare for many things that may not come to pass, for in this way we ready ourselves not to be bothered if they do. How much more valuable the preparation for our own deaths, which should come as a surprise to no one, though we may be taken off at short or no notice.

I take comfort that my lessons have taken root. I hear them in my thoughts when no one is listening, and I feel them in my soul, which no one can touch.

Here to help pay my debts I call upon the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln who reminded us:

It's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years.

I have lived, and I have no issue with either the number of my years or their nature.

And even if I was so unwise as to be ungrateful with my lot, I know that we need no more than a single day to put things right.

I am thinking of what English novelist Mary Ann Evans said, better known in her day under the name George Eliot:

It is never too late to be what you might have
been.

Be well.

Chapter Six

On Reaping What Has Been Sown

For all the time that we spend worrying about things that may never happen, how much do we contemplate the one thing we can be sure of?

We pack our elderly relatives off to old folks' homes and we tell ourselves we do it so that they may be well taken care of in their dotage. Or that the burden is beyond our capabilities.

Or often, with no sense of irony, that we have no time. I suppose this last is at least true, in the sense that not one of us possesses the ability to dole out extra time to ourselves let alone another.

Our end is sealed from the beginning, dear reader, for it is the fate of all humans to perish. Rather than face this fact head-on, some hide from all hints of aging as if turning a blind eye to age can prevent it from creeping up on us unbidden.

But death is stealthy and unstoppable, part sneak thief and part mighty army, carrying away both the careless and the well-protected with equal ease. Whether you cower down in terror or stand tall in defiance, the reaper's scythe cuts as cleanly.

The question is, then, not what future awaits us, but how we await it. For all the time that we spend worrying about things that may never happen, how much do we contemplate the one thing we can be sure of?

It is one thing to dream about winning a lottery, and quite another to know with certainty that your number will be called.

Some of us fill our days with as many activities as possible as if there was a prize for getting the most things done. The more we do, though, the more we feel like we are missing out on other things we could be doing.

The American poet Stephen Dobyns put it hauntingly so:

Each thing I do, I rush through so I can do
something else. In such a way do the days pass
— a blend of stock car racing and the never
ending building of a gothic cathedral. Through
the windows of my speeding car I see all that
I love falling away: books unread, jokes untold,
landscapes unvisited...

But if simply doing is not the path to joy, what is?

To contemplate an unavoidable outcome and order your mind accordingly, you must not only not look away but purposefully direct your gaze to the end.

Rather than sending off your aged parents to lonely exile, you are better served by inviting them into your life and spending your best hours with them. The benefit this will bring to them is great, but it is secondary to the benefit that accrues to your account.

Their wrinkled faces and spotted skin serve as a daily reminder of what fate holds in store for you, and that's if you are lucky. And because no outside diversion can long distract you, you are regularly encouraged to prepare yourself for the fate that awaits you.

I give you this advice freely, dear reader, and you need not subtract from my balance. Let me add to it with this contribution from Steve Jobs, whose words show he was a sincere student for the ultimate test:

No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it, and that is how it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.

Now pay heed to me a little further. Preparing for the inevitable does not mean that you seek to hasten its arrival.

Though your reward is lasting peace, and freedom from all that pains you here on mortal earth, still you should not be overly hasty in concluding your journey. The point of the practice is not to desire your end, but to end your desire for life without end.

By rambling on so, I fear you will desire this letter to end before your life force is fully drained from you.

Time is allotted to us in unequal measures, and we are unevenly prepared when our measure of time is up. Think about this so that you are ready for what comes whenever it comes.

Be well.