

# Pragmatic Wisdom Vol. 7 (Excerpt)

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Stoic Lessons on Money and Things

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A Fine Idea

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## Chapter One

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# 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

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# On Wealth

Once one's feet are stuck on the path to wealth, the scantest few manage to pry themselves from it

**T**he ties that bind us to bad habits are no less restrictive for being attractive at first glance. The one whose arms are bound by golden chains is no freer than the one in iron shackles.

I am talking about the seductive charms of money, and they have led more from the path of wisdom than any siren song did sailors to their deaths.

“Surely” you say, “I am entitled to take care of myself and to ensure that I have enough to live on.” If ever a paving stone belonged on the path to hell, dear reader, it would be this intention.

I grant you that it is suitable and even beneficial that you provide for yourself, and do not need to rely upon the charity of strangers. When you are paid for your toil, you learn the value of work and equally the value of leisure.

Both work and leisure are gifts, and both deserve our deepest contemplation.

But once one's feet are stuck on the path to wealth, the scantest few manage to pry themselves from it. For if a little money is good, more money must be better. But you already know from my earlier letter, that a desire that can never be satisfied is not a true desire.

Plug your ears, then, to the siren song of wealth, but leave open your mind to the alms of philosophy. A true understanding of what it means to live a good life will help you avoid this false temptation.

I was pleased to discover that we have more modern-day Stoics among us than many realize, and it seems that some lessons have made their way safely down the ages.

Though they do not call themselves Stoics, the FIRE movement contains kindred spirits. I refer to "Financial Independence Retire Early," of which we have several different schools of thought. They differ in the sense of how much money the practitioner saves, how much they spend, and what they do with their time.

For our purposes, the operative word for all students is this: Independence. Each works towards passing the test of being in control of their time, and of not relying on others for their contentment or fortune.

However financial independence is defined by each, the FIRE adherent knows that attachment to things impedes progress. You need few possessions to acquire that most valuable thing: Self-possession. Do not spend your time earning money but spend your money to earn yourself time.

Also, who is to say that you would not learn more from dealing with adversity, i.e. by being poor, than you would by never having to deal with want?

To give your mind leisure, do not accumulate things, whether because you cannot afford them, or you have trained yourself not to acquire them. The less you have, the less you worry about. No one will try to take your possessions if you do not have any. Nor will you spend any time worrying about maintaining them.

When your possessions number more than you can hold in your hand, you must worry about how you will carry them about or keep them safe. Here is our old friend Thoreau saying it as he does best:

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail.

Now, dear reader, let me caution you as you make your own calculation of how much your independence is worth.

Whatever number you have set for yourself as being enough to allow you to start to live purposefully, it is very likely too high. People today live lives of luxury unimaginable to those of just a few generations back, never mind those stretching back thousands of years.

Lest you think I exaggerate to make my point, let me describe for you a result the Swiss bank UBS found when they surveyed the most successful savers. Across every wealth group, from the mere millionaires to the mega-rich, UBS discovered what we

already know: that standard of living expectations increase in line with wealth.

- Those with \$1 million felt they would be satisfied with \$5 million.
- Those with \$5 million thought they could make do with \$10 million.
- And those few to have amassed \$10 million felt that their way of life would be secure with \$25 million.

Like the rabbit leading on the greyhounds, the benchmark moves without the chaser noticing. For it is never the amount as such that makes you feel secure, but the feeling of accumulating more.

Just as a dinner guest shows their appreciation in advance by bringing their host a small gift, I have an offering for you:

To be content with little is difficult; to be content with much, impossible.

This wisdom comes to us from the pen of Austrian author, Countess Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach. She was born of a Baron, lived in a castle, and was surrounded by libraries of books.

The Countess knew of riches both material and immaterial. It is to our benefit that she placed greater weight on the latter.

Be well.

## Chapter Three

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# On Deprivation

You do not need what you think you need to be happy, because all you need is within you

Another New Year's Day, which means another spate of New Year's resolutions. We promise ourselves that we will change in the new year. The tight waistband of our favorite jeans, the low step count on our Fitbit, the exercise equipment collecting dust in the corner, all that will be different now.

If you were here, dear reader, I would happily listen to your recommendation. Should we be resolute in our retiring ways, or join the crowd in making resolutions? When everyone around us declares their good intentions, what misers are we to withhold our contribution to a more hopeful future?

If all eyes around us turn towards the sky, only a few can keep their gaze on the ground. We are social animals, and to go against the herd is to go against our very humanity.

I know that you are up to the test I will put to you now. Do not be about the setting of annual resolutions, if these be expressed

in the form of a goal you wish to achieve. Goals are but wishful thinking.

Better orient yourself along the right path, and follow a system designed to move you in the direction of your choosing. You will arrive in places beyond what you could have imagined using mere goals.

If you have a resolution, let it be this: You will learn to develop new habits, by taking a small thing and practicing it daily for two weeks. In that time, you will either adopt your new habit with relative ease or determine that it is not the one for you.

No need for self-doubt. There are many paths leading to good outcomes, and you will simply choose another. Not the goal, mind you, but merely the path along which you will walk.

What you will learn from learning to adopt habits is that habits are everything. And how wonderful that, despite being so foundational, habits are disarmingly easy to form.

Do you wish to be content with what you have? Practice going without and do so as often as you feel your resolve weakening.

For all those who think “But I need to travel in Business Class, or I will suffer most grievously on the flight” I say this:

- Put yourself happily in the back of the plane, one row from the restrooms.
- What are eight hours when you have a good book to distract you?
- Should I have lost a moment’s peace worrying about being a few meters further back in the same plane?

- Am I not especially ridiculous when I imagine the anguish of those who sit one cabin ahead of mine when *they* contemplate the luxuries being lavished on the lucky few in First Class?
- And even those elite are secretly irked by the thought that flying private is so much more civilized.

Better yet, make your vacation one in which you do not set foot in an airport. Let your feet do the work and take a walk to a nearby scenic viewpoint.

For nothing more than the trouble of walking out your door, you can attain peace of mind for no price. A walk in a forest salted with birds is better than any time spent in a concrete jungle, with only the outraged honks of taxis to serenade you.

The lesson you are reinforcing as a diligent student is that you do not need what you think you need to be happy because all you need is within you. When you deprive yourself of things, particularly of comforts, you weaken their power over you. And such is the power of comforts that it leads many to lives of discomfort for fear of losing them.

Not you. By going without, you learn not to fear privation. Besides learning the nature of which things are worth fearing and which are not, you learn not to take for granted that which you have.

After you have been cold and thinly dressed, wet and without an umbrella, hungry and without food, then truly do you become a connoisseur of a warm, dry room and simple food.

When you have trained yourself to be happy with the most basic of nature's offerings, then you have learned to live true to

yourself. Happiness never lies in external things, and if it takes our depriving ourselves of things to relearn this lesson, then better for us to cast off all possessions than be weighed down by the slightest of them.

My finger hovers over the send button. “Not without another installment payment on your account,” you say. I call on the fortune of the Buddha to help pay this week’s debt:

Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal  
with the intent of throwing it at someone else;  
you are the one who gets burned.

The wisdom here is apparent to everyone who has felt anger and been fortunate enough to have it fade away. Some spring repeatedly to anger at the slightest provocation. Anger is satisfying to give vent to because it drives out reason. You are no longer responsible for thought, you are spurred to violent action, be it words or deeds.

You do not wish to be someone who gives up their reason so readily, for this too is habit-forming.

Self-possession means more than not needing things. Self-possession means keeping a tight grip on your reason and not letting anyone or anything external hijack it from you.

Though you may safely cast all else aside, your mind is the one possession you do not make better by depriving yourself of it.

Be well.

## Chapter Four

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# On Things of Lasting Value

Not all appreciate that hard work and sacrifice are not just the price for rewards, but a necessary precondition for valuing them

“Not another sermon” you say. “I have heard you preach to others, but do you practice your own lessons? Are you so advanced that you have endless time to pass on your wisdom to those less learned?”

I do not pretend to point out the mote in my brother’s eye while ignoring the beam in my own. Consider that I am trying to describe a landscape that I see but dimly, and that by comparing notes with my fellow observers, we each gain a sharper view of its contours.

You are thus my sounding board for good sense. Though I may be just talking to myself, putting my thoughts into words still helps me understand the message.

I tell you one lesson that I must practice and practice, and hence I preach it to myself as often as to others: I shall seek an end to my wants before I come to my own end. As often as I banish wants, still they sprout anew like perennials each spring.

“What harm,” I muse, “in this small indulgence? I can afford it, and truly there may be no consequence for my weakness of the moment.”

But what a tiny bounty this small pleasure buys, when compared to the erosion of my foundation of self-possession and well-ordered thought! What an unfair trade to grab onto a momentary enjoyment and let go of long-term contentment.

For though the pleasure is fleeting, the memory of it remains. And the memory is not of the enjoyment but of my lapse, or as the saying goes: Act in haste, repent at leisure. With each slip, my footing grows less stable, until I am scarcely able to stand without support.

Contrast this with the memory of virtuous decisions resulting from clear thinking. Rather than death by a thousand cuts, each of these decisions can be safely savored in leisure. They represent a fortification of the soul and not an assault.

Standing firm is the only way to continue to stand firmly, and thus the only path to lasting value is to be true to your values.

There are more obstacles in our path than aids, dear reader, even though it appears that the opposite is true. Consider:

- We live in an age when virtually all knowledge is available at our fingertips, courtesy of Google. The instant a thought or question arises in your mind, you can slake your thirst with a search.

- How many drink deeply enough to fully quench desire, instead of sipping at the sources of wisdom? Though they have been handed the keys to all the libraries of the world, they cannot unlock wisdom.

There have never been more well-informed idiots who know all of the facts and none of their implications.

I put it down to instant gratification. Not only do we feel entitled to satisfy our every want, but what we think we deserve we want right now.

The worst thing you can do with a child is to satisfy their every want, for then they never learn the difference between wants and needs. Are we to be spoiled children into advanced age?

Not all appreciate that hard work and sacrifice are not just the price for rewards, but a necessary precondition for valuing them.

- If I give you something for free, and you have invested no effort in obtaining it, you will value it as highly as any other common thing you can pick up off the ground.
- Because free and easy are today within short reach, few grasp past them to the costly and the challenging.

But if we wish to ensure our safe passage, the hard way is where our path lies. The longer we toil upwards, the greater will be our reward.

The joy that comes from mastering your thoughts is not only the greatest possession, it is the one that cannot be taken from you by another.

I pay now my debt and take my leave:

The greatest wealth is to live content with little,  
for there is never want where the mind is satisfied.

This comes courtesy of Lucretius, and you marvel at the many routes by which I return to this point.

That is because it is a road you must travel down before you are safe to venture further on. It is also the road to which all others eventually return.

I would have you hear this lesson until it becomes second nature, and you are a safe navigator for yourself and others.

Be well.

## Chapter Five

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# On the Meaning of Life

How do we find meaning? By learning to identify all those things that are meaningless, and serve only to weigh us down

**S**o, I understand your friend is trying to convince you he has figured out the meaning of life.

I recommend a healthy skepticism towards anyone who says they have it all figured out. Exercise particular care with the ones who are selling you a simple solution.

Do you know how rare it is that a person becomes truly enlightened, in the sense of the Buddha or the Dalai Lama? A person who puts their worldly cares behind them and lives a life of joy and compassion?

Perhaps we see signs of it in children. This transcendence is so seldom achieved in adulthood, and so striking when we do find ourselves in its midst, that you will have no trouble mistaking the practitioner for the master.

“My friend is calm and composed” you say, “when others are incensed by small things.”

You can observe a cobra from a distance every day and never see it bare its fangs. Until you do. Perhaps it is simply that your friend has not been sufficiently provoked.

Do not be impressed by a person who remains calm when there has been no disturbance. The fact that others are disturbed by small things tells us nothing.

“He condemns politicians who abuse their power, who tend to themselves rather than their constituents.”

This says nothing of his true nature, dear reader. For among all those who shrink from the whip, there are but few who would not themselves wield it willingly if the whip should fall into their hands.

The only thing preventing the average person from becoming tyrants themselves is they lack the means to implement their whims. Situations make most people who they are, and it is exceedingly uncommon for a person to make themselves in spite of their limitations.

Though your friend is unlikely to be a guru, if for no other reason than he professes himself as such, there is no shame in being a practitioner.

We are all pilgrims walking the same path and the value for most of us is in the progress we make. Point yourself in the right direction and take a single step, and you have advanced farther than those who run a thousand miles aimlessly.

How do we find meaning? By learning to identify all those things that are meaningless, and serve only to weigh us down:

- public opinion and trends;
- fashion, fame, and fortune;
- anger, envy, and longing.

Note how fickle these things are, and how insubstantial. Though you cannot see them or hold them in your hand, still they are the heaviest of burdens.

With each of these chains we shrug from our shoulders, our load becomes lighter, and our steps more carefree. Satisfaction and joy lie along this path, and the cost to us is giving up things that require us to pay a price, whether in money, time, or attention.

For everything we plan to seek in life, let us first understand the cost to obtain it. Naval Ravikant shows wisdom when he says:

Desire is a contract you make with yourself to be unhappy until you get what you want.

What is keeping you unhappy? What you want. What do you want? ... Happiness

We do not want things. We want what we think those things will bring us. No matter how eagerly we sought a possession or a promotion, notice how quickly they start to lose their luster the moment we attain them.

- The new car becomes a used car the instant you drive it off the lot.
- The new phone is soon outshone by a rival as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow.

- The big new office that comes with the big new job is quickly filled with the big new problems that you now feel weighing you down.

To make yourself unhappy by wanting things that will not make you happy is not a recipe for success. Let me end again with Lucretius because it bears repeating:

The greatest wealth is to live content with little,  
for there is never want where the mind is satisfied.

Our most important possession is our self-possession, and once having taken ownership of this, you have all that you need for a meaningful life.

Be well.