

## Introduction

**The Stoics  
through the words of Epictetus**

Maidenhead  
22 February 2014

For today's talk on the Stoics, I hope to show that stoicism is a rich philosophy that aims to lead the follower to the fullness of a human life.

It is not, as it has come to mean for many, just gritting one's teeth when bad things happen.

Following on as it does from the Socratic tradition it resonates with much western philosophy through the ages. It also accords with much in the eastern tradition. Those familiar with the tradition of Advaita, as practised here in the School, will recognise much in the practical aspects.

Initially, I'll give a brief overview of Stoicism and then expand some of the main features, relying heavily on the work of Epictetus.

Before that, let's put Epictetus and stoicism on the map, as it were.

## Epictetus

### Epictetus



though you are not yet a Socrates, you ought, however, to live as one desirous of becoming a Socrates

**Slide \*2** Epictetus was born in about 55 C.E. in what is now modern-day south-western Turkey. He started life as a slave and while still a boy he was brought to **Slide** Rome. His last master had himself been a slave before becoming a rich and powerful freedman and he allowed Epictetus to become a student of stoicism while still a slave.

**Slide** Epictetus is always pictured with a crutch because he was lame.

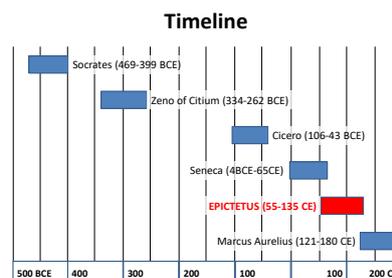
Some accounts are that he was born lame, others that he was mistreated by his first owner.

At some point Epictetus was freed from his slavery, and when he was in his mid-forties, he was banished along with other philosophers then in Rome. He went to north-western Greece **Slide**, where he opened his own school which acquired a good reputation, attracting many upper-class Romans.

Although some 400 years after the Stoics started, Epictetus quotes from the early teachers and refers to them often.

He also refers to Socrates often and holds him in high regard and as an exemplar: **Slide** “**though you are not yet a Socrates, you ought, however, to live as one desirous of becoming a Socrates**”

He is of course talking to us.



**Slide** So we have Socrates in the fifth century before Christ, **Slide** then Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism in the fourth

**Slide** And then Epictetus at the turn of the first and second centuries of the Christian era.

I could fill the gap with a list of teachers, none of whom you have probably heard of – or if you have then you probably know more about this subject than I do.

But worth just mentioning a few.

There are the famous Romans, **Slide** Cicero and Seneca.

And of course the emperor **Slide** Marcus Aurelius, who in his *Meditations* acknowledges his indebtedness to Epictetus<sup>1</sup>.

We have no direct writings by Epictetus. But we have two works composed by his student Arrian<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Meditations*, Marcus thanks Rusticus for the [Stoic](#) training he received from him:

From Rusticus I received the impression that my character required improvement and discipline; and from him I learned not to be led astray to sophistic emulation, nor to writing on speculative matters, nor to delivering little hortatory orations, nor to showing myself off as a man who practices much discipline, or does benevolent acts in order to make a display.<sup>[2]</sup>

Marcus also explains how it was from Rusticus that he first came to read the works of [Epictetus](#):

and I am indebted to him for being acquainted with the discourses of Epictetus, which he communicated to me out of his own collection.

The *Discourses* appear to record the exchanges between Epictetus and his students after formal teaching had concluded for the day, often as records of Epictetus' responses to questions or observations.

And there is the *Handbook* which appears to be an abstract of the *Discourses*, focusing on key themes in Epictetus' teaching of Stoic ethics. Indeed Epictetus appears to focus almost exclusively on ethics, whereas the early Stoics also dealt with logic and physics as well as ethics.

There are numerous translations of the *Discourses* and the *Handbook* available in book form and online.

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<sup>2</sup> . The works we have that present his philosophy were written by his student, Flavius Arrian. We may conjecture that the *Discourses* and the *Handbook* were written sometime around the years 104–107, at the time when Arrian (born c.86) was most likely to have been a student.

## What is Stoicism

### What is Stoicism

- The aim is to live well, to secure *eudaimonia*
  - happiness, a flourishing life
- Stoicism starts from understanding that
  - everyone is not happy for much of the time;
  - that there is a reason for this; and
  - that there are solutions
- To learn what is in one's power and what is not
- Study/practice areas : desire, action, reaction

## Slide (title only)

The founder, Zeno of Citium began to teach in about 301 BCE. Unlike some other teachers, who established their schools or communities away from the centre of Athens, Zeno taught in a public space: a colonnade overlooking the central gathering place in Athens. The Greek for a colonnade is “*stoa*” – hence the name stoic.

Epictetus, along with other philosophers of this period from Socrates onwards, saw moral philosophy, ethics, as having the practical purpose of guiding people towards leading better lives. The aim was to live well, to secure for oneself **Slide bullet 1** *eudaimonia* ('happiness' or 'a flourishing life').

**Slide bullet 2** Stoicism starts from understanding that everyone is not happy, for much, let alone all, of the time; that there is a reason for this being the case and, most importantly, that there are solutions that can remedy this sorry state of affairs.

Indeed, Epictetus metaphorically speaks of his school as being a hospital to which students would come seeking treatments for their ills.

The role of the Stoic teacher was to encourage his students to live a life that leads to happiness and fulfilment.

For the Stoic, that means a life governed by reason. The only thing that is good is acting virtuously (that is, motivated by virtue), and the only thing that is bad is the opposite, acting viciously (that is, motivated by vice). To live virtuously, is to live 'according to nature', in conformity with God's will.

The key to transforming oneself into the Stoic wise person is to learn

**Slide bullet 3** what is 'in one's power', and what is not.

This aspect of power, of control is vital – but as we know, easier said than done. So to aid in this Epictetus gives three areas of study and practice:

**Slide bullet 4** relating to desires, actions and reactions

But before we get to that we need to say something about Epictetus' view of God and man's relationship to God because this informs the approach to the individual and their role in society and how to live a fulfilled and free life.

## Epictetus' view of God

### Epictetus' view of God

- There are those who deny the very existence of the Godhead;
- Others say that it exists, but neither bestirs nor concerns itself nor has forethought for anything.
- A third party attribute to it existence and forethought, but only for great and heavenly matters, not for anything that is on earth.
- A fourth party admit things on earth as well as in heaven, but only in general, and not with respect to each individual.
- A fifth, of whom were Ulysses and Socrates are those that cry:-  
I move not without Thy knowledge!

## Slide (title only)

The ancient Greeks and Romans appear to have lots of gods and they are referred to and honoured in various ways. But there is also acknowledgement in various philosophic writings to a single divine power. We find this also in other traditions; for example, in the Vedic or Indian traditions where there is reference to a multiplicity of gods yet there is still acknowledgement of the underlying unity of a single God.<sup>3</sup> Epictetus makes a distinction between God (sometimes referred to as the Godhead or Zeus) in the singular and gods, in the plural.

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<sup>3</sup> "Yadnyawalkya! How many gods are there?"

Yadnyawalkya said: "303 and 3,003, as is mentioned in the list of the hymns to all the gods"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

"Thirty-three"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

So Epictetus says, concerning the gods,

## Slide \* 5 bullets

- **there are those who deny the very existence of the Godhead;**
- **others say that it exists, but neither bestirs nor concerns itself nor has forethought for anything.**
- **A third party attribute to it existence and forethought, but only for great and heavenly matters, not for anything that is on earth.**
- **A fourth party admit things on earth as well as in heaven, but only in general, and not with respect to each individual.**
- **A fifth, of whom were Ulysses and Socrates are those that cry:-**

**I move not without Thy knowledge!<sup>4</sup>**

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"Six"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

"Three"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

"Two"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

"One and a half"

"Right, but how many in reality?"

"One God only"

"Then what are those 303 and 3,003?"

"the divine powers ..." *Brihadaraanyaka Upanishad*

4 Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. *Matthew 10:29-31*

For Epictetus, God sets up the creation and is directly involved, as it were, in its unfolding. The creation and everything in it is a gift of God.

This leads to what some can interpret as a fatalistic, indifferent even apathetic approach to life. But it seems to me that this is a mistaken view. Rather Epictetus is encouraging us to accept the glories of the creation – its wealth, beauty and bounty – as gifts of God and that it would be churlish to desire a different set of gifts.

**Epictetus' view of God**

When we are invited to a banquet, we take what is set before us; and were one to call upon his host to set fish upon the table or sweet things, he would be deemed absurd.

If the Stoic making progress understands God, the universe, and themselves in the right way, they 'will never blame the gods, nor find fault with them'

## Slide \*1

**When we are invited to a banquet, we take what is set before us; and were one to call upon his host to set fish upon the table or sweet things, he would be deemed absurd.**

Since we are mortal, and limited, it is not for us to question how God has organised the creation and nor should we be upset when things that have been given to us are taken back. Rather we should enjoy them while we have them but not rail against God, or fate, or whatever, when they are lost or, as Epictetus would put it, returned. And this applies to possessions, relatives and friends who die and, of course, to our own life<sup>5</sup>.

## Slide \*1

**If the Stoic making progress understands God, the universe, and themselves in the right way, they 'will never blame the gods, nor find fault with them'<sup>6</sup>**

Now, I believe that this is the first lesson that can be learnt from the Stoics and practised. Whether or not you believe in God, or this version of God, we can all agree that what has happened, has happened; and what didn't happen, didn't happen; and what didn't happen, couldn't happen because what happened, happened.

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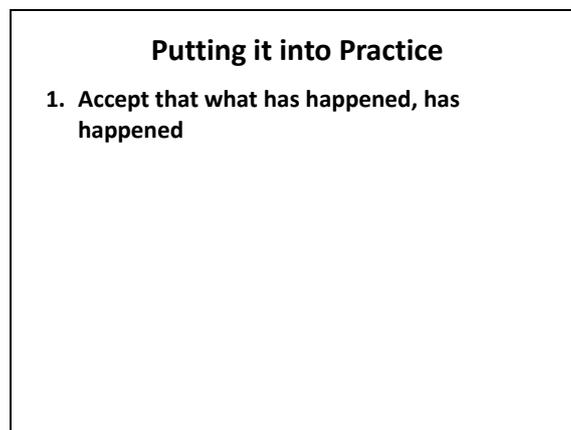
<sup>5</sup> the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord – *Job 1:21*

<sup>6</sup> In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly. *Job 1:22*

So at the very least when we look around us, we can acknowledge that the world right now is the result of what has happened – and while we may have debates about what is going to happen, or should happen, or what I should do, and indeed while there may be debate about what has actually happened – nonetheless what has happened, has happened.

How much time do we spend wishing that something else happened, imagining what might have happened, if only ... <sup>7</sup>

Now Epictetus lays out a number of practices in his Handbook and here in the School we are advocates of practical philosophy. So here is our first practice that will be beneficial to everyone, whether or not you call yourself a Stoic.



And the first practice is **Slide** to accept that what has happened, has happened.

Now this leads on to the question of what and is not within our control.

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<sup>7</sup> For man proposes, but God disposes; neither is the way of man in his own hands – *Of the Imitation of Christ, Thomas a Kempis Book 1 ch 19*

## **Control**

The *Handbook* of Epictetus begins with these words:

**Slide Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us.**

Epictetus makes a list of the things not in our control which has been brought more up to date.

**Slide – NOT In our control (build up per bullet)**

### Not in our Control

- Our body
- Our property
- Our reputation
- Our job
- Our parents
- Our friends
- Our co-workers
- Our boss
- The weather
- The economy
- The past
- The future
- The fact that we're going to die

## Slide– Title

### In our control

- Our opinions are up to us
- and our impulses, desires, aversions
- in short, whatever is our own doing

## Slide– Bullets \*3

**Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, aversions—in short, whatever is our own doing.**

That is, we have power over our own minds. The opinions we hold of things, the intentions we form, what we value and what we are averse to are all wholly up to us.

Now this is a challenge; for most of us it is clear from a little self-examination that we act in certain habitual ways, we think in certain ways, we respond to situations in certain ways, we have preferences, likes and dislikes.

And most of the time these ideas just operate without us being aware of them - and even should we become aware of them we cannot honestly say that we know where they have come from – except that we would say that at least some if not all have come from our upbringing and education, our culture and society, our family, our experiences, etc etc.

For the Stoics, it is important to take responsibility for what is in our control – our thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. and not to blame them on anyone or anything else, such as my family, my boss, the weather, the circumstances, society, the government, the media, etc.

Epictetus says that what we think, what we feel, how we react is entirely up to us – we have free will over our inner world. And more importantly, he says that the robber of our free will does not exist.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Invictus:

By contrast, everything external, is not – or at least not wholly - within our control.

Epictetus says that while it is important to take responsibility for what is in our control, our thoughts and beliefs etc., it is equally important to recognise the limitations of our control for everything else.

Broadly, everything else are the things that happen, and they are not in our power in the sense that we do not have absolute control to make them occur just as we wish, or to make them have exactly the outcomes that we desire.

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Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll.  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

For example, sickness is not in our power because it is not wholly up to us whether we get sick, and how often, nor whether we will recover quickly or indeed at all. Now, it may make sense to visit a doctor when we feel ill, but the competence of the doctor is not in our power, and neither is the effectiveness of any treatment that we might be offered.

Although it makes sense to manage our affairs carefully and responsibly, the ultimate outcome of any affair is, actually, not in our power.

**Putting it into Practice**

1. Accept that what has happened, has happened
2. **Don't blame others when things don't go our way**

So here is our next practice **Slide \*2** Don't blame others when things don't go our way.

## The three fields of study

It is easy to say that we have to take control over our thoughts and feelings, and to accept that external things are not within our control. In practice this seems less easy. Which is why we are going to take a look at the three fields of study or discipline laid out by Epictetus.

### **The Three Fields of Study/Discipline**

- **But what is philosophy? Does it not mean making preparation to meet the things that come upon us?**
- **The three areas of study or disciplines are:**
  1. **Firstly, concerning desire; the desire for some things and the desire to avoid others**
  2. **Secondly, concerning the impulse to act; knowing when and how to act – and when not to**
  3. **Thirdly, concerning our reactions; so that we are free from deception and hasty judgement**

## **Slide Title**

As said at the beginning, Stoicism starts from an understanding that everyone is not happy, for much, let alone all, of the time; that there is a reason for this being the case and, most importantly, that there are solutions that can remedy this sorry state of affairs.

Each of us, in consequence merely of being human and living in society, recognises that in the course of daily life we are beset by frustrations and setbacks of every conceivable type. Our cherished enterprises are hindered and thwarted, we have to deal with hostile and offensive people, and we have to cope with the difficulties and anxieties occasioned by the setbacks and illnesses visited upon our friends and relations.

Sometimes we are ill ourselves, and even those who have the good fortune to enjoy sound health have to face the fact of their own mortality.

In the midst of all this, only the rare few are blessed with lasting and rewarding relationships, and even these relationships, along with *everything* that constitutes a human life, are wholly transient.

So Epictetus says:

**Slide But what is philosophy? Does it not mean making preparation to meet the things that come upon us?**

The ills we suffer, says Epictetus, result from mistaken beliefs about what is truly good. We have invested our hope in the wrong things, or at least invested it in the wrong way. He says that our capacity to flourish and be happy is entirely dependent upon our own characters, how we dispose ourselves to ourselves, to others, and to events generally.

To help the Stoic student achieve excellence, the happy life, Epictetus articulates three fields of study.

They are practical exercises or disciplines, which all rational, reasonable beings are capable of following – and therefore importantly, are open to everyone; for everyone has the capacity to reason.

The three areas of study or disciplines are:

## **Slide \*1 – it autobuilds**

- Firstly, concerning desire; the desire for some things and the desire to avoid others
- Secondly, concerning the impulse to act; knowing when and how to act – and when not to
- Thirdly, concerning our reactions; so that we are free from deception and hasty judgement

Our capacity to employ these disciplines in the course of daily life is in our power. It is up to us, because they depend on our opinions, judgements, intentions and desires. They relate to how we meet the world rather than what the world throws at us.

And so, they are within our control.

Now I just want to make something clear. These areas of study are not optional. This is not like deciding to take up woodwork or to learn French. This relates to what we desire, how we act and how we react. And we are all, all the time, reacting to events, desiring things and choosing how to act. It is unavoidable; it is in the very nature of being alive.

So for the Stoic the choice is not whether there is desire or not – it is in taking control of desire so that what is desired leads to virtue, to what is ultimately good, to the fulfilled, excellent human life; and similarly with actions and reactions.

So now we can look with a bit more detail at the three disciplines.

## The Discipline of Desire

### The Discipline of Desire

- Passions are produced by the disappointment of our desires, and the incurring of our aversions.
- This introduces disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, & calamities; and causes sorrow, lamentation & envy; renders us envious & jealous, and incapable of listening to reason.
- It is not the love of power and wealth that sets us under the heel of others, but even the love of tranquillity, of leisure, of change of scene – of learning in general, it matters not what the outward thing may be – to set store by it is to place yourself in subjection to another.
- Where is the difference then between desiring to be a Senator, and desiring not to be one: between thirsting for office and thirsting to be quit of it?

## Slide Title

The first discipline concerns what someone striving for true happiness should truly believe is worthy of desire, because it leads to virtue and excellence.

For most people, desire and its counterpart, aversion, lead to what

Epictetus calls “passion” and these passions **Slide Build 1 are produced in no other way than by the disappointment of our desires, and the incurring of our aversions.**

And by the disappointment of our desires I am including the losing of it should we get it.

**Slide Build 2** **It is this that introduces disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; and causes sorrow, lamentation and envy; and renders us envious and jealous, and thus incapable of listening to reason.**

Note that for Epictetus it does not matter what external thing is being desired, it is the very desire itself that gives rise to the problems.

**Slide Build 3** **Remember that it is not the love of power and wealth that sets us under the heel of others, but even the love of tranquillity, of leisure, of change of scene – of learning in general, it matters not what the outward thing may be – to set store by it is to place yourself in subjection to another.**

**Slide Build 4** **Where is the difference then between desiring to be a Senator, and desiring not to be one: between thirsting for office and thirsting to be quit of it?**

Some might think that there are some desires that lead to virtuous results. But Epictetus is not having any of it.

### The Discipline of Desire

- Or what reason have you for desiring to read? For if you aim at nothing beyond the mere delight of it, or gaining some scrap of knowledge, you are but a poor, spiritless knave.
- But if you desire to study to its proper end, what else is this end than a life that flows on tranquil and serene? And if your reading does not secure you serenity, what is its profit?
- And what serenity is this that lies at the mercy of every passer-by? ... [That] trembles at a raven's croak and piper's din, a fever's touch or a thousand things of like sort!
- ... the life serene has no more certain mark than this, that it ever moves with constant unimpeded flow.

He continues:

## Slide Build 1 ... Or what reason have you for desiring to

**read?** (or one might say, to come to a talk such as this one this morning?) **For if you aim at nothing beyond the mere delight of it, or gaining some scrap of knowledge, you are but a poor, spiritless knave.**

So if you've come here just for a good time, or to pass the time, Epictetus would have no hesitation in calling you a poor, spiritless knave!

## Slide Build 2 **But if you desire to study to its proper end,**

**what else is this end than a life that flows on tranquil and serene? And if your reading** (or coming to this talk) **does not secure you serenity, what is its profit?**

But he then points out while many of us gain serenity from study or our practices, that many of us easily lose that serenity if disturbed. So he

continues **Slide Build 3 And what serenity is this that lies at the mercy of every passer-by? ... [That] trembles at a raven's croak and piper's din, a fever's touch or a thousand things of like sort!**

Do we find this? There you may be, happy and content – it could be in reading, in meditation, simply in being still and in touch with nature – and, wham, something is seen or heard and that contentment seems to fly away. By contrast:

**Slide Build 4... the life serene has no more certain mark than this, that it ever moves with constant unimpeded flow.**

What is it that makes you believe that the world has to go in a certain way so as not to disturb your happiness? Is your serenity so fragile, that a passing car or a telephone ring can disturb it?

And why should the world go as you think it should?

What makes you think that you know better than God how the world should unfold?

Epictetus says:

**Don't seek to have events  
happen as you wish, but wish  
them to happen as they do  
happen, and all will be well  
with you**

**Slide Don't seek to have events happen as you wish, but wish  
them to happen as they do happen, and all will be well with you.**

There is another aspect to desire.

#### **The Discipline of Desire**

To you, all you have seems small: to me, all I have seems great. Your desire is insatiable, mine is satisfied.

See children thrusting their hands into a narrow-necked jar, and striving to pull out the nuts and figs it contains: if they fill the hand, they cannot pull it out again, and then they fall to tears.

"Let go a few of them, and then you can draw out the rest!"

You too, let your desire go! Covet not many things, and you will obtain.

**Slide Title**

Epictetus points out the one of the problems with desire it that it can never be satisfied – the more you desire the less able you are to be satisfied. We are like children, always wanting more, with no idea that it's bad for us.

**Slide Build 1 To you, all you have seems small: to me, all I have seems great. Your desire is insatiable, mine is satisfied.**

**Slide Build 2 See children thrusting their hands into a narrow-necked jar, and striving to pull out the nuts and figs it contains: if they fill the hand, they cannot pull it out again, and then they fall to tears.**

**Slide Build 3 "Let go a few of them, and then you can draw out the rest!"**

**Slide Build 4 You too, let your desire go! Covet not many things, and you will obtain.**

And so the next practice. While giving up all desires seems like it might be a challenge we can at least start. So: **Slide \*2**

**Putting it into Practice**

1. Accept that what has happened, has happened
2. Don't blame others when things don't go our way
3. Fewer desires, less often

Fewer desires, less often.

## The Discipline of Action

### Slide Title

**The Discipline of Action**

A photograph of a person in a blue shirt and dark pants, seen from the side, drawing a bow and arrow. They are aiming at a target with a bullseye in the center, set on a wooden stand. The background is a grassy field with trees in the distance.

**The non-Stoic views success in terms of hitting the target**

**The Stoic views success in terms of having shot well**

It could be felt that if we are not to desire any external thing and that the world is going to unfold as it will that there is no point in undertaking any action. But this is mistaken for two reasons:

- Firstly action is unavoidable; by the sheer fact of being alive actions take place. Even the act of not acting is an action
- Secondly, and more importantly for the Stoic, we are sociable human beings living in society, in the great brotherhood of human kind

So, the second discipline concerns our 'impulses to act and not to act', that is, our motivations, and answers the question as to what we each should do as an individual in our own unique set of circumstances to successfully fulfil the role of a rational, sociable being who is striving for excellence.

The outcome of our actions is not wholly in our power, but our inclination to act one way rather than another, to pursue one set of objectives rather than others, *this is in our power*.

The Stoics use the analogy of the archer shooting at a target to explain this notion.

## **Slide Build 1**

The ideal, of course, is to hit the centre of the target, though accomplishing this is not entirely in the archer's power, for she cannot be certain how the wind will deflect the arrow from its path, nor whether her fingers will slip, nor whether the bow will break, nor whether an eagle swoops down and grabs the arrow.

The excellent archer does all within her power to shoot well, and she recognises that doing her best is the best she can do. The Stoic archer strives to shoot excellently. She will not be disappointed if she shoots well but fails to hit the centre of the target.

And so it is in life generally.

## **Slide Build 2** The non-Stoic views their success in terms of hitting

the target, whereas the Stoic views their success in terms of having shot well<sup>9</sup>.

So this gives us our next practice:

**Putting it into Practice**

1. Accept that what has happened, has happened
2. Don't blame others when things don't go our way
3. Fewer desires, less often
4. **Do the best we can in all circumstances**

## **Slide \*2** to do the best we can in all circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> One of the greatest lessons I have learnt in my life is to pay as much attention to the means of work as to its end. *Vivekananda*

<sup>10</sup> "Hold yourself responsible for a higher standard than anybody else expects of you. Never excuse yourself. Never pity yourself. Be a hard master to yourself and be lenient to everybody else" - *19th century Congregational minister, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887)*

It still leaves open the question of what we should do. Which target to aim for. **Slide (title and picture)**

**The Discipline of Action**



Actions should be motivated by our natural relations to others and the roles we have adopted in the wider community

**For I should not be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my natural and acquired relations as a man who honours the gods, as a son, as a brother, as a father, as a citizen.**

The actions we undertake, Epictetus says, **Slide build 1** should be motivated by the specific obligations that we have in virtue of who we are, our natural relations to others, and what roles we have adopted in our dealings with the wider community.

**Slide build 2** **For I should not be unfeeling like a statue, but should preserve my natural and acquired relations as a man who honours the gods, as a son, as a brother, as a father, as a citizen.**

Put simply, to live well as rational beings obliges us to act virtuously, to be patient, considerate, gentle, just, self-disciplined, even-tempered, dispassionate, unperturbed, and when necessary, courageous. Which returns us to the central Stoic notion that the happy life is realised by those who are motivated by virtue.

Remember that Epictetus' view, is that what happens is God given.

### The Discipline of Action



**Remember that you are an actor in a play, and of such sort as the Author chooses, whether long or short.**

**If it be his good pleasure to assign to you the part of a beggar, a ruler, or a simple citizen, it is yours to play it fitly.**

**For your business is to act the part assigned well; to choose it, is another's.**

So another analogy that he uses is that we all have been given parts in a

play **Slide Title and Picture** and that as actors we need to

play the part to the best of our ability, fully and nicely.

**Slide Build Remember that you are an actor in a play, and of**

**such sort as the Author chooses, whether long or short.**

**If it be his good pleasure to assign to you the part of a beggar, a ruler, or a simple citizen, it is yours to play it fitly.**

**For your business is to act the part assigned well; to choose it, is another's.**

## The Discipline of Reaction

**The Discipline of Reaction**



**Socrates used to say that we are not to lead an unexamined life**

**so neither are we to accept an unexamined impression, but to say, 'Stop, let me see what you are, and where you come from'.**

## Slide Title only

What we desire and how we act are driven in many instances by how we react to the impressions that we receive. But the common experience is that our interpretation of events is often faulty and so our actions are not always appropriate

We see certain things, we interpret them in certain ways and we respond in certain ways.

So we might walk into a room and the people talking suddenly stop and what impression do we take? Well, obviously, they were talking about me. And so off we go into an imaginary world which has no basis in reality. And worse we don't just stay in this make believe world, we then act on the basis of this misguided interpretation of events.

The challenge as human beings is that the sensory impressions are received and filtered through our already existing mindset of preferences, likes and dislikes, prejudices etc. And then we act based on these interpretations – which as we know from experience are often wide of the mark.

For the Stoics the discipline is to move from interpreting and judging impressions based on this mindset to understanding the impressions correctly and then acting based on this. It is a movement from “how we think things are” to “how they actually are”.

As said at the beginning Epictetus refers back to Socrates **Slide**

**Picture.** He reminds us that

**Slide Build 1** **Socrates used to say that we are not to lead an unexamined life**

And so for this disciple, he continues

**Slide Build 2** **so neither are we to accept an unexamined impression, but to say, ‘Stop, let me see what you are, and where you come from’.**

So our next practice:

### **Putting it into Practice**

1. **Accept that what has happened, has happened**
2. **Don't blame others when things don't go our way**
3. **Fewer desires, less often**
4. **Do the best we can in all circumstances**
5. **Ask yourself "is my reaction due to what has happened or just to what I think has happened?"**

## **Slide \*2**

Whenever possible, ask yourself "is my reaction due to what has happened or just to what I think has happened?"

## Living in Harmony with Nature

So finally we can bring these three disciplines of desire, action and reaction together, into what Epictetus calls 'following nature' or 'living in harmony with nature'.

### Slide Title only

**Living in Harmony with Nature**

**"My brother ought not to have treated me thus."**

**True: but he must see to that.**

**However he may treat me, I must deal rightly by him. This is what lies with me, what none can hinder.**

For the Stoic this is to live the best that we are able, to live excellently, at all times.

If, for example, the Stoic is berated unfairly by his brother, he will not respond with angry indignation, for this would be 'contrary to nature', for nature has determined how brothers should rightly act towards each other. But the student complains:

**Slide Build 1 "My brother ought not to have treated me thus."**

To which Epictetus replies that the correct response is:

## Slide Build 2 **True: but he must see to that.**

## Slide Build 3 **However he may treat me, I must deal rightly by him. This is what lies with me, what none can hinder.**

The task the Stoic student takes on is to pursue actions appropriate to him as a brother, *despite all and any provocation to act otherwise.*

Keeping ourselves in harmony with nature requires that we focus on two things.

- Firstly, we must pay attention to our own actions so that we respond appropriately, and
- secondly we must pay attention to the world, we must understand our place in it and our relationships with it.

### **Living in Harmony with Nature**

**It is circumstances which show what men are.**

**Therefore when a difficulty falls upon you, remember that God, like a trainer of wrestlers, has matched you with a rough young man.**

**For what purpose? To train you. Why, that you may become an Olympic victor;**

**but it is no shame to be defeated without sweat.**



## Slide Build 1 **It is circumstances which show what men are.**

Slide Build 2 **Therefore when a difficulty falls upon you,**

**remember that God, like a trainer of wrestlers, has matched you with a rough young man.**

Slide Build 3 **For what purpose? you may say. Why, that you**

**may become an Olympic conqueror;**

Slide Build 4

**but it is not accomplished without sweat.**

Every problem we face in life should be understood as a new opportunity to strengthen our moral character, just as every new bout for the wrestler provides an opportunity for them to train their skill in wrestling.

Although undoubtedly a key element of the Stoic approach I think it is this kind of analogy that has given the general impression of stoicism as being an acceptance when bad things happen, of gritting one's teeth etc.

It may be a good place to start and it may help to see all adversity as an opportunity to improve<sup>11</sup>. But it is a limited view of stoicism.

Epictetus invites us to be stoical when things happen that we like or agree with, not just when things don't happen to go our way.

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<sup>11</sup> "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." - Friedrich Nietzsche

While the stoic would not get upset if the target is missed nor would she get elated when the target is hit. To the same extent that we should not be upset if the winds blows unexpectedly strongly we should not be unduly pleased if the wind does not blow. It is not up to us whether or not the wind blows.

Epictetus uses the metaphor of life as an athletic event. He invites us to see an analogy between one's training in Stoic ethics as preparatory for living the philosophic life and someone's training in athletics as preparatory for entering the contest in the arena.

Or a concert pianist practices every day so that he may perform on the stage. No one pays to hear him practice, and yet without the practice and preparation the performance would not be the best possible.

Such training can be difficult, demanding, even unpleasant. This applies to philosophic training no less than to training as a wrestler in preparation for competing in the Olympic games.

Epictetus is pointing out to us that to seek the happy life, the fulfilled life, we are going to have to work hard to examine, challenge and give up the habitual way of looking at things, at our value system and at our actions.

### Living in Harmony with Nature

Therefore take the decision right now that you must live as a full-grown man, as a man who is making progress;

and all that appears to be best must be to you a law that cannot be transgressed.

And if you are confronted with a hard task or with something pleasant,

... remember that the contest is now, and that the Olympic games are now, and that it is no longer possible to delay the match.



And just in case you think that this is something that can be put off for a

little while, Epictetus says, **Slide Title** continuing the Olympic

theme:

**Slide Build 1** Therefore take the decision right now that you must live as a full-grown man, as a man who is making progress;

**Slide Build 2** and all that appears to be best must be to you a law that cannot be transgressed.

**Slide Build 3** And if you are confronted with a hard task or with something pleasant,

**Slide Build 4** ... remember that the contest is now, and that the Olympic games are now, and that it is no longer possible to delay the match.

Which brings us to our last practice – **Slide \*2** do not delay; do it

now

## Summary

**Summary**



**Show me a person who can say,  
'I concern myself only with what  
is my own, with what is free from  
hindrance, and is by nature free.  
That is what is truly good, and  
this I have.  
But let all else be as God may  
grant;  
it makes no difference to me.'**

**Slide Title** Epictetus' life as a Stoic teacher can perhaps be

regarded as a personal quest to awaken to true philosophic enlightenment  
that person who will stand up proudly when his teacher pleads:

**Slide Build** **Show me a person who can say, 'I concern myself  
only with what is my own, with what is free from hindrance, and  
is by nature free. That is what is truly good, and this I have. But  
let all else be as God may grant; it makes no difference to me.'**

For having attained such enlightenment himself (for surely this we must  
suppose), Epictetus devoted his life to raising up others from the crowd of  
humanity who could stand beside him and share in a perception of the  
universe and a way of life that any rational being is obliged to adopt in  
virtue of the nature of things.

And so as a form of summary let's just put up again the suggested practices:

## **Slide \*2**

### **Putting it into Practice**

- 1. Accept that what has happened, has happened**
- 2. Don't blame others when things don't go our way**
- 3. Fewer desires, less often**
- 4. Do the best we can in all circumstances**
- 5. Ask yourself "is my reaction due to what has happened or just to what I think has happened?"**
- 6. Do not delay**

And on that we should stop for refreshments.