
Category: Stoicism & Buddhism/Mindfulness

Stoic vs. Buddhist Mindfulness by Mary Braun

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by Mary Braun



The first time I tried Buddhist meditation, I immediately felt my trachea shrink. Only a tiny, insufficient bit of air could move in or out. To learn Buddhist meditation, I had listened to a podcast. It said to notice and accept without judgement whatever happened. So, that is what I did. I noticed and accepted that my attempt to meditate had the effect of breathing powdered cement.

Being the diligent sort, I tried meditating again the next day. Again I got to notice and accept without judgement the sensation of being strangled. And again the third day.

I could not understand what was going on. I knew that I could not be getting into any physiologic trouble within two breaths of sitting down. I knew I should be able to sustain

myself in a seated position, breathing comfortably for several hours. Using all my Stoic techniques that I did not yet know were Stoic, I convinced myself that I would sit for ten breaths regardless of how sure I was that I would suffocate. Ten breaths in and out. This was all I could manage for several days. With more practice of living with insufficient oxygen, I could go for twelve breaths, then twenty. Eventually I got to the point where it no longer felt like the Buddha was Darth Vader using the Force to strangle me from a distance

At the time, I was fresh out of medical school. My new situation allowed some scary thoughts to arise, such as, “you probably just killed Mrs. Smith by increasing her insulin.” Buddhist meditation allowed me to gain distance from these thoughts, and the added distance improved my equanimity. Even after the disturbing, rookie doctor thoughts stopped coming around, I found Buddhist meditation helpful for my overall equanimity, so I continued it.

As happens with many Stoics, my Stoic practice developed spontaneously as a response to difficulties in my life. I was orphaned when I was seven, causing the life I had known to evaporate. In order to survive this loss, using my own intuition I developed some potent Stoic techniques for tolerating difficult situations. Unfortunately, I did not develop any techniques for avoiding difficult situations. Thus my personal brand of Stoicism carried me straight from suboptimal foster care right into a bad marriage.

A couple of decades and several life changes later, my boyfriend introduced me to Stoic philosophy. I was shocked to discover how much of my self-developed philosophy of living and coping techniques those ancient Greeks had known about all along. Thus, well into middle age, I started the formal practice of Stoic philosophy. Those ancient Greeks had a trick or two to teach me. My life got even better with their help.

At this point, I rely on my Stoic techniques when things start to go wrong inside my head. Earlier this week, a dying patient was reviewing his life with me. He told me about how much he valued the teamwork he and his wife shared to raise their children. It is a beautiful story and my eyes start to fill with tears. No problem so far. I am not expected to be without feelings, but if my feelings take control of my thinking, I cannot focus enough to be a good doctor.

As I listen to my patient talk about how raising their children deepened his relationship with his wife, I realize the one thing I wanted most out of life was to raise my kids well. I married and had children with a man who always had his way and whose method of childrearing I disagreed with. I could not figure out how to challenge his child rearing ideas or how to divorce him for twenty five years. Now I am too old to have more children, and will never get to have the experience of raising a child with a partner. I didn't get a father; I only got a mother for seven years. Life couldn't even deliver me a decent husband. I don't ask for much. My eyes are dripping tears now and I realize that I am not paying any attention to my patient.

I need to pull myself away from the attraction of self-pity and into the present. Even if I had the skills to turn my feelings off, that would not be helpful; I need them in order to take care of my patient. I remind myself of the Stoic maxim: "It seemed so to you at the time."

I have a sense that I am shoving my foot in a slamming door. If I can keep the door from closing, I can maintain control of myself, and my equanimity will be only briefly disturbed. It feels as though the force of emotion that wells up must be countered with something forceful. If what I bring to bear on it is not forceful, it will fail. Once the tears start forming, my Buddhist practice has nothing to offer me. Once I have started to lose my equanimity, my emotions flood me if I attempt to use Buddhist techniques. I have found that only Stoic techniques overcome the waves of emotion. Buddhist techniques feel more general and unfocussed.

What my Buddhist meditation practice does offer me is a decrease in my overall reactivity. When I am meditating regularly, I am less apt to be bothered by the unavoidable emotional events of life. This pattern has repeated itself a dozen or more times. I fall away from my meditation practice. I become more easily riled. I recognize this and resume meditating. Things improve until I fall away from my meditation practice again.

I asked people on the Facebook Stoicism Group about their experiences, and learned this is typical. The only consensus was that Stoic mindfulness practices are useful for the immediately present threat to equanimity, and Buddhist mindfulness practices help strengthen equanimity overall.

It is not surprising to me that Buddhist meditation works well for us on a daily basis because it has been honed over thousands of years by hundreds of thousands of people. What is surprising to me is that it does not always work well for me and my Facebook friends. It surprises me that our Buddhist practice fails us in the pinch.

Why does Buddhism not include techniques like “Amor Fati” or negative visualization? Are these incompatible with the Buddhist philosophy? I do not know enough about Buddhism to answer that.

It seems to me that if there were a significant fraction of people whose needs were not being met by Buddhism, and that there were non-Buddhist techniques that met their needs, then Buddhism would have figured out how to respond to them. Either these techniques would have been incorporated into Buddhism or variant forms of Buddhism would have developed that were compatible with these techniques. I think it is more likely that the Buddhist techniques worked well enough for most people in the society in which Buddhism developed.

When I receive a disturbing impression and begin to formulate my response to it, Buddhism would say that I need to distance myself from that nascent thought and to examine it scientifically as I would someone else’s emotion. So far, this is very similar to the Stoic teachings on disturbing impressions as I understand them. Buddhism recommends that I next lean into the unpleasant emotion, to really examine it, get to know it and to realize that it will pass soon. This technique results in me wallowing in my emotion as I wait for it to pass. I become so attracted to it that I will grasp it firmly and become unable to function. Perhaps if I practiced this technique for decades, it would work, but the dying patient in front of me does not have decades while I grapple with my inner demons.

Stoicism offers me techniques that I can use right in the moment. Instead of leaning in, I counter the emotion with a maxim that I have prepared and have at the ready for whenever disturbing emotions arise. The part of my mind that is not wrapped up in my personal tragedy can recite Stoic maxims forcefully to counter the attraction of “I didn’t get and I want.” Stoicism gets between my mind and the idea it is about to grip onto and stays my grasp before it happens. For me, for the most disturbing impressions, this is what works.

There is an idea in neurology of over-learning. Things which one repeats thousands of times during one's lifetime such as the ABC's or the response to "how are you today?" are over-learned. When a person is demented and has lost the ability to think in any meaningful fashion, they can often still recite the ABC's or other over-learned phrases. It seems to me that when I am caught by my deep feelings of deprivation and grief that I am like a demented person and can only say over-learned things. The little bit of my brain that is not sucked into the black hole of "I lack" can barely squeak out "It seemed so to you at the time." If it can however, it breaks the spell and the attractiveness of the disturbing impression is diminished.

Another common observation is that Western culture has more emphasis on independence and individuality. It seems likely that this emphasis develops minds that are more likely to work with individually oriented techniques. Stoicism emphasizing my personal inner citadel rather than Buddhism emphasizing dissolution of myself feels more comfortable to me. When I am most in pain, standing steadfast against an ocean crashing against the seawall of my personal virtue makes me feel less pain whereas the paradoxical teachings of Buddhism simply frustrate me.

I find that Buddhist techniques on an ongoing basis combined with Stoic ones on an as needed basis work best for me to maximize my equanimity. I do not have a good explanation for why. I am more at peace, at rest and am flourishing more than ever before in my life.

This reminds me of another Stoic technique that I practice. It has a Buddhist analog: I am grateful.

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patients in the medical system.

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Stoicism and the Art of Archery by John Sellars

Stoicism and the Art of Archery

by John Sellars



The Stoic philosopher Antipater is reported to have drawn an analogy with archery when trying to explain the goal of Stoic ethics. The good Stoic, Antipater suggested, is like an archer: he does everything he can to hit the target, but his happiness does not depend on whether he hits the target or not (Stobaeus 2,76,11-15). What matters is shooting well, for whether the arrow hits the target or not depends on other factors outside of the archer's control.

In the ancient literature this led some to characterize the Stoic's art – the art of living – as a *stochastic* art, like navigation or medicine, meaning that the outcome depends in part on factors other than the practitioner's skill (Alexander, *Quaest.* 61,1-28). It also led to concerns about whether Stoicism in fact had two slightly different goals: to live a good life and to do everything one can to live a good life (Cicero, *Fin.* 3.22). In his discussion of this point Cicero wrote:

“Take the case of one whose task it is to shoot a spear or arrow straight at some target. One's ultimate aim is to do all in one's power to shoot straight, and the same applies with our ultimate goal. In this kind of example, it is to shoot straight that one must do all one can; none the less, it is to do all one can to accomplish the task that is really the ultimate aim. It is just the same with what we call the supreme good in life. To actually hit the target is, as we say, to be selected but not sought.” (ibid.)

For the Stoic, then, what matters is not always hitting the target but rather becoming an expert archer, with archery understood as a special kind of art in which expertise does not always guarantee success.

This Stoic idea shares something in common with the account of learning the Japanese art of archery in Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (London, 1953). Herrigel's book is a personal memoir recounting his own experience of trying to learn the art of archery from a Japanese master, something he tried to do in order to deepen his own understanding of Zen. Along the way Herrigel makes a number of remarks about Zen and archery that resonate with Antipater's image of the Stoic archer and may offer a fresh perspective on it.

Herrigel begins by reflecting on the artificiality of learning a medieval military art taken

out of its original context and turned into a hobby for people who have no need to learn how to shoot arrows. Archery is no longer a matter of life and death. Yet, he comments, “archery is still a matter of life and death to the extent that it is a contest of the archer with himself” (p. 15). It has become a “spiritual exercise” in which “the marksman aims at himself” (p. 14). The modern Zen art of archery “can in no circumstance mean accomplishing anything outwardly with bow and arrow, but only inwardly, with oneself” (p. 18). The goal, then, is ultimately one of self-transformation.

One of the greatest challenges Herrigel faced was to relax. His master made the art look effortless, and for him it was. The more Herrigel tried to achieve the desired result (hitting the target) the more he failed. It was a classic case of making a strenuous effort to keep relaxed. The key, his master told him, was to stop caring about the arrow: “what happened to the arrow was even more a matter of indifference” (p. 40). The less one cares about hitting the target, the more smooth and relaxed one’s shot will be, which paradoxically will increase one’s likelihood of hitting the target. So not caring about reaching the goal will in fact improve one’s chances of reaching it.

Far more important, though, is a shift in the very goal itself. The real goal should not be hitting the target at all; the real goal is something internal, not external. This “the right art [of archery] ... is purposeless, aimless” (p. 46). One must become purposeless, on purpose. One must aimlessly aim the arrow. This will enable one to reach both goals, internal and external: to perfect the art of archery and to hit the target, but *wanting* to hit the target now looks like part of the problem rather than contributing to either goal.

How to do this? The answer is simple: stop thinking and simply let oneself be led by the moment (pp. 49-50), or led by Nature we might say. The master archer will have “no ulterior motive” and will be “released from all attachment” (p. 55). This involves an internal transformation that is central to making progress in the art. Thus, “more important than all outward works, however attractive, is the inward work which he has to accomplish if he is to fulfil his vocation as an artist” (p. 65). The archer performs “as a good dancer dances” (p. 77), which was another analogy also drawn by the Stoics (cf. Cicero, *Fin.* 3.24).

What matters, then, is the performance of the art itself rather than any further outcome, such as hitting the target. Herrigel’s master insists that “if you hit the target with nearly

every shot you are nothing more than a trick archer who likes to show off ... Put the thought of hitting right out of your mind! You can be a Master even if every shot does not hit" (pp. 78-9). If one does hit the target this is not significant in itself: "hits are only outward confirmations of inner events" (p. 80). Thus all attention ought to be focused on the internal practice of the art rather than the external result. One ought neither to grieve over bad shots nor rejoice over good ones. "You must free yourself from the buffetings of pleasure and pain, and learn to rise above them in easy equanimity" (p. 85).

Herrigel did make some progress in the art of archery. At the end of his training his master said to him "You have become a different person in the course of these years. For this is what the art of archery means: a profound and far-reaching contest of the archer with himself" (p. 90).

Does this help us to understand Stoicism? I think it might in the following way. The ancient charge that Stoicism becomes confused by proposing two goals – effectively trying to hit the target but also trying not to care if one misses – has not completely gone away. 'Surely it is disingenuous to try to do something but then say you don't care when it doesn't work out.' 'If the Stoic is indifferent to the outcome of events, then why even try to do anything?' What Herrigel's account does is dismiss the first goal altogether: just forget about hitting the target. The real goal is not external at all; it is internal. It involves an internal transformation that, as it happens, will also improve one's external successes, although that is now almost beside the point.

What matters is *how* one acts, not the outcome of those acts. According to Herrigel this involves a process of letting go, just acting rather than over thinking. At first glance this might sound very Zen but not very Stoic and perhaps the point at which any parallel breaks down. But we might translate it into a broadly Stoic framework by saying that the advice is simply to follow Nature, to act spontaneously, to embrace one's natural instincts, rather than to over think about what the right thing to do is. The Stoics do encourage people to follow 'reason' but this is the reason or order within Nature, which is not necessarily the same thing as deliberative, instrumental rationality.

What the Zen art of archery and the Stoic art of living share is a seemingly paradoxical indifference to whether one is successful or not. What matters is mastering the art and practising it. In the case of Stoicism this means acting virtuously, with the right intentions,

at all times and for its own sake. It is about cultivating the appropriate frame of mind that, as Herrigel's master put it, enables one to enjoy an easy equanimity whether one hits one's targets or not.

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'Reflections of a Practising Buddhist on Stoicism' by Garry Bannister

Reflections of a Practising Buddhist on Stoicism

buddhism-stoicism

If I were not a Buddhist, I would most likely be a Stoic. There are huge similarities between Modern Stoic philosophy and Western Buddhist teachings. Amidst these there are three that I would like to examine in this essay. Firstly, the mutual belief in our innate ability to produce our own personal happiness. Like Buddhists, Stoics believe that happiness is not about the acquisition of assets such as money, celebrity or social position but by developing what we, in Buddhism, might call '*skillful means*'. In Stoic philosophy this same understanding is seen as learning how to develop the pertinent qualities that are essential for a human life; the development of '*The Virtues*' such as wisdom, courage, justice and self-control. Secondly, that all sentient beings are naturally beings who want to know and acquire a better understanding and a better world. This in Buddhist terms is known as '*basic goodness*' or our '*Buddha nature*'. Stoics would more probably refer to this phenomenon as a natural propensity to help others; an innate altruism which is common to all human and animal life. Like modern Western Buddhist practice, Stoics are encouraged to get involved in family life, in social and political activities[1] and to understand that we are, all of us, members of the one human family; we are brothers and sisters wherever we may be. This is extremely close to the Buddhist teaching of '*oneness*' and '*non-separation*' or in modern philosophical terminology, the teaching of '*non-duality*'. Finally, like Buddhists, Stoics, in their own particular way, affirm the importance of mind and hold that the universe itself is permeated by a providential principle of rationality and reason which in turn give shape and form to an intelligible universe, the understanding of which can generate a system of beliefs that informs our attitudes and desires in the most positively beneficial and constructive ways.

Before I start I want to explain clearly that the editor has asked me to write a account of my own personal Buddhist journey of 30 years in relation to what I have read and understood about Modern Stoicism. I must also admit that I have only a nodding

acquaintance with some of the principle themes of Modern Stoicism; only what I have gleaned from a very limited number of source-texts, academic publications and recently organised seminars. Therefore what I write is not in any way, shape or form a case of orthodox Western Buddhist teachings being compared to Stoicism but rather a few meagre offerings from one very idiosyncratic Buddhist practitioner.

It was a number of the fascinating articles that I read in the first publication of this journal that first attracted my attention to many aspects of Stoic Philosophy and which immediately inspired me to read once again the magnificently written Discourses of Epictetus [2] and the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. [3] However, my main focus in this short essay will be on the modern movement itself which is being impressively lead by Christopher Gill of Exeter University and by Patrick Ussher in a myriad of seminars and well-organized gatherings in Britain and now also in the US.

I preface my meanderings by saying that often where Stoicism draws a line in the sand, Buddhist practice and teachings do not. There is a transcendence in Buddhist teachings that is sometimes expressed in terms of '*crazy wisdom*' or *Koans*[4]. Both Modern Stoicism and Western Buddhism are, however, obviously firmly rooted in the natural world; in our private and public interactions, our relationship to our environment and neither speak of some other path or way forward rather than by advocating unequivocally the application of wisdom[5] to all our interactions with this world and in our personal relationships with one another; be those relationships private, professional, social, political or any other.

When I say Stoicism 'draws a line', I am not implying or trying to insinuate from my perspective that Stoicism is, in anyway, somehow less than Buddhism but rather that it focuses itself on a different set of outcomes. The example, I would give here is the difference between a Mercedes Benz and a Jeep. These both can travel equally well along the highway. However, off-road perhaps a Jeep might well be a better choice of vehicle. Then again, if I were planning a long journey across Europe, a Mercedes Benz, I imagine, would be a more preferable choice. But first all, let us look at what Buddhism and Stoicism have in common.

As soon as the Buddha, Siddhartha, sits under the Bodhi tree in order to attain enlightenment, it is said that the devil, Mara, who in reality represents the unruly inclinations of the human mind, brings before him his daughters. At first, they try to

seduce him and then, when this fails, attempt to induce fear and terror in the Buddha. But Siddhartha remains completely unperturbed and free of his passions – both the lustful passions of desire and also any experience of revulsion, or the passions of aversion. Now if we look at this tale in the light of what Epictetus tells us, we quickly discover that when the prokoptôn, or the person wishing to follow the Stoic way, embarks upon developing “*The Virtues*”, that person will, we are told, consequently bring about his or her own *eudaimonia* or happiness. Like most Ancient Greek words, the word, *eudaimonia*, has a more differentiated meaning than its English equivalent. *Eudaimonia* in its original Greek meaning is happiness as in a form of a ‘*flourishing of life*’. It is a happiness that has within its constituent parts ‘*ataraxia*’ – imperturbability, ‘*apatheia*’ – freedom from passion or aversion and ‘*eupatheiai*’ – a sense of good feelings. So these aspects of the desired Stoic ‘*eudaimonia*’ or enlightened state, are also key in the relationship of Siddhartha to the daughters of Mara where he shows both imperturbability ‘*ataraxia*’ and ‘*apatheia*’ leading subsequently to ‘*eupatheiai*’ or in Buddhist terms *Nirvana*. It is quite clear that so far there is complete concurrence here with Buddhist thinking. Where perhaps, Buddhist thinking diverges from the Stoic world-view, is when Stoics speak of our inability to change certain things because they are “*outside our power*” to do so. Stoicism would certainly hold to the position of there being many things that cannot be changed or influenced such as the fact that we are all going to die, that we, as conscious beings, will cease to exist and this is outside of our control and so must be accepted as such, if we are to proceed wisely focussing our energies and attention on those things in our lives that can be changed. For Stoics, this philosophy is about life now, at this very moment, and living each moment in the most wise and positive way. However, in my own personal Buddhist understanding there is no such thing as death. Death, illness, the world itself are all part of mind – an illusion. So what then is real? Only experience is real. The experience of pain, joy, the physical world, the world of forms is very real but its actual essence is empty and devoid of any real substance. This, I believe, is a massively significant difference between the two philosophies and has far-reaching consequences as Buddhism interprets the observable material world as a manifestation of mind rather than “*a-thing-in-itself*”. This Buddhist belief brings with it the understanding that there is nothing outside of awareness and consciousness. So in philosophical terms, if Buddhism might be placed closer to the solipsism of George Berkley, Stoics would most probably be nearer to the worldview of John Locke. [6]

There have been a number of heated discussions in the past couple of years between

Modern Stoics, in regard to interpersonal detachment. Professor Gill addresses this issue in one of his seminars on Stoicism where he raises the concerns of scholars such as Richard Sorabji and Martha Nussbaum who consider that Stoic detachment might possibly hinder a fuller and more loving commitment to others due to a distancing of oneself or a remaining, to some extent, aloof from others. In Stoic terms, Professor Gill directs our attention to two strands of development. Firstly, the development of wisdom and secondly our involvement in sustained interaction with those in our personal spheres and with those in public or global communities. He points to the Stoic understanding that we are all brothers and sisters with one shared humanity and that Stoics have always maintained that there is an innate desire in humans and animals to look after and care for others. Wisdom dictates that there are no frozen truths in how to behave and he brings the example of a parent staying by the bed of its very sick child, rather than doing something “*useful*” like going to work.

However here again there is a notable difference in my Buddhist approach. ‘*Non-attachment*’ in Buddhist terms is the realization that there is in fact no ‘*other*’ – ‘*oneness*’ is ‘*non-separation*’ and so ‘*non-attachment*’ is our ability to let go entirely of any concept of duality, i.e. the mistaken idea that there is an ‘*us*’ and a ‘*them*’, a ‘*me*’ and a ‘*what is not me*’. We have seen this realization emerge recently, albeit in a rather cloaked fashion, with popular protest slogans such as: “*Je suis Charlie... Je suis Muslim... Je suis Juif... etc*”. This solidarity phenomenon is now appearing spontaneously across the globe after major tragedies or any major acts of unethical aggression. People instinctively feel today that they are one brotherhood and as Shakespeare’s Shylock put it so well “*If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?*” This human unity of our nature and being is very clearly emphasized and understood by the Stoics, but unlike Buddhism, there is a recognized separation inherent in Stoic teaching – a ‘*me*’ and a ‘*not-me*’. In Stoicism the world is populated by individuals working together to achieve a mutual happiness or flourishing, whereas in Buddhism – there is no self, merely habituations and there are no individuals – simply a deluded conscious awareness misguided by a misleading world of perceptions[7]. So when a Stoic speaks about ‘*interpersonal detachment*’ – it makes little sense to a Buddhist like me as there is nothing to be detached from, except perhaps, our deluded perceptions. The central teaching in regard to ‘*non-attachment*’ in Buddhism is compassion and pure compassion is ultimate wisdom. Chögyam Trungpa[8] once defined compassion as “*fearless generosity*” and this is what the

Buddhist '*non-attachment*' means in it fullest sense.

Now if we return to Stoic '*interpersonal detachment*' we can perhaps now see that it is, in fact, a subset of '*non-attachment*'. And hence the principal of Buddhist *non-attachment* would, for me, provide a more comprehensive answer to those concerns raised by Richard Sorabji and Martha Nussbaum. If we ask ourselves what would the compassionate person do (*i.e. the wise person*) then there is no doubt that he or she would organise their actions in such a way as to lessen the distress and the pain of "others" no matter what "*personal*" cost (*or courage*) that might entail.

Finally, from what I have read on Stoicism, our belief-systems also enjoy other similarities. If Buddhism is, as the Dalai Lama suggests "*a science of mind*" then Stoicism is every inch a science of mind. Modern Stoicism is an uncompromising investigation into the workings and the relationships of mind with the world. The belief in a Providential and rational world implies that the universe is intelligible and, according to the ancient Stoics at least, benign. Both philosophies also construct their beliefs, not from sacred texts, but from negotiable beliefs that have been wrought and derived out of human experience. Texts are, of course, consulted in both Buddhist and Stoic debates but are not the dogmatic glue of either philosophy. In the case of Buddhism, the differing traditions have a wide variety of texts according to their specific lineages and as for the Stoics, they gather together their various strands of thought from a wide variety of sources that have been developed through wise and intelligent observations in all areas of human activity from the writings of Emperors to the deliberations of modern psychologists. But for both it is within the mind itself that all heaven and hell are created and reside. One very telling text from Marcus Aurelius explains clearly this central understanding in Stoic reasoning which I'm sure Modern Stoicism would also endorse. In this particular passage, Marcus Aurelius is observing how people are generally inclined to go off somewhere, to a different place far away; to a retreat or off to the coast in order to relax and find some peace. But in the text Aurelius wisely, to my mind, observes:

"...this is altogether unphilosophical, when it is possible for you to retreat into yourself at any time you want. There is nowhere that person can find a more peaceful and trouble-free retreat than in his own mind, especially if he has within himself the kind of thoughts that let him dip into them and so at once gain complete ease of mind; and by ease of mind, I mean nothing but having one's own mind in

good order.” [9]

If this excellent translation does not implicitly imply that we should seek solutions within oneself then Marcus Aurelius again emphasizes his point by recommending that we all should constantly give ourselves time-out for this inner personal retreat in order to renew and replenish our lives.[10]

And Aurelius is right, we are frequently inclined to think that if only we could manage to go somewhere else, or to acquire some particular item then we would achieve true contentment but my Buddhist practice has shown me over the years the exact opposite, i.e. that Nirvana is not achieved by the acquisition of anything material but rather by the removal of that which obscures and creates confusion.

So, if I'm correct, that the bedrock of Modern Stoicism is a deeply compassionate philosophy rooted in rationality, logic and analytical observation of the natural world around us, it is therefore, in its essence, fundamentally materialistic and follows to some greater or lesser extent a Feynmanian[11] attitude, whereas my understanding of Buddhism would be, hopefully, an eventual transcendence of the very beliefs and science that inform the precepts of my perceived worldview. There is a wonderful and greatly celebrated Buddhist tale which, for me, quintessentially identifies this key and very basic distinction between the two philosophies. And it goes like this:

Hui-Neng was totally illiterate and looked after himself and his elderly mother by collecting and selling firewood. One day Hui-Neng was going about his business when he heard some verses being recited from the Diamond Sutra[12]. He was so impressed by this that he immediately went to the monastery of the 5th Patriarch, Hung-Jen. Hung-Jen took Hui-Neng into his monastery to do menial tasks. Eventually however, it was time to choose a new Patriarch. Shen-Hsui was the most intellectually brilliant of all the monks in the Monastery and so he composed a poem to prove that he was worthy of the position:

“The Body is the Bodhi tree, The mind – a mirror bright, Take care to keep it dust-free, So it may reflect the light”

Shen-Hsui's verse, like Marcus Aurelius in his meditations, urges us to maintain clarity in

our thinking and constant vigilance in regard to our behaviour, for only then shall we cultivate and maintain a mind that is “*in good order*”. Nonetheless Hui-Neng was not greatly impressed by this and so he decided to compose his own poem:

‘In truth there is no Bodhi tree, No mirror on a stand, There’s nothing there but emptiness, No place for dust to land.’

After reciting this poem, Hui-Neng was installed as the 6th Patriarch but he had to run for his life from the other monks and go into hiding. Buddhist practice is not about dealing with life, it is life. It’s aim is to reflect the true nature of the mind its reality which is, in Buddhist terms, absolute emptiness.

Therefore, may I end this short essay by commending all my Stoic friends whose philosophy in worldly terms offers, for all those who practise it correctly, clarity of mind, an ordered and purposeful life, but most importantly of all a deep inner *eudaimonia* or happiness that cannot and will not be frustrated by the “*slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*”. I am firmly convinced that it is those who follow such a resourceful philosophy who will, in the end, achieve their personal dreams and aspirations by accessing their own maximum inner potential... fearlessly, wisely and of course, with good temperance. It is undoubtedly people with such a mindset as the Stoics, who will become the best captains of industry, the most honest politicians, the wisest and the wealthiest in this material world while alas, I and my Buddhist friends will be still up a mountain somewhere in Tibet, watching our village being ransacked by hostile invaders. But, I suppose, that is why I am a Buddhist and not a Stoic.

Garry Bannister was born in Sligo, Ireland, in 1953. His first encounter with Buddhism was at the age of 16 when a friend purchased a book of Buddhist Koans. It was not until his mid thirties, however, that he became a practising Buddhist. At first, it was Zen that attracted his interest because of its simplicity and minimalism. Bannister has a wide experience in various western Buddhist teachings and presently practises Nichiren Buddhism. He attended Trinity College Dublin where he studied Irish and Russian. On receiving a scholarship, he went to Moscow State University where he graduated with an MA in Russian language and literature and also, later, successfully defended a PhD in comparative linguistics. Bannister’s main interest today is the Irish language and its literature. He has many publications in this area and is presently working at St

Notes [1] **The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin**, Volume 1, Soka Gakkai: “No worldly affairs of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality....the Lotus Sutra explains that in the end secular matters are the entirety of Buddhism.” (page 1126). [2] Our knowledge of the philosophy of Epictetus and his method as a teacher comes to us mainly via two works composed by his student Arrian, **The Discourses** and the **Handbook**. [3] One of my main references being Prof. Gill’s **Marcus Aurelius Meditations Books 1-6**, translated with an introduction and commentary (Oxford University Press, 2013). [4] A ‘koan’ is a story that points to the ultimate nature of reality. Paradox is essential as it transcends conceptual or logical thought. [5] I would argue that in both Stoicism and Buddhism wisdom is key because if we are wise then we will undoubtedly be courageous, just and capable of maintaining self-control. [6] This is a very loose comparison just to illustrate the huge chasm that lies between the metaphysical and the materialistic strands in philosophy. [7] In Mahayana schools reality is often described in terms of **two truths – relative and absolute**. Relative truth can be either perverted relative truth or pure relative truth. The example is often given of a person observing a rope and perhaps believing the rope to be a snake (i.e. perverted relative truth) or another person who sees the rope as a rope (i.e. pure relative truth... perhaps the stoic view?). Whereas absolute truth is the understanding or realization that there is no rope there at all. [8] Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was a Tibetan monk who came to Britain in 1960’s and is the founder of Shambhala Buddhism in the West; one of the largest Western Schools of Modern Buddhism. [9] Prof. Christopher Gill – **Marcus Aurelius Meditations Books 1-6**, translated with an introduction and commentary (Oxford University Press, 2013); Book 4, section 3. [10] *ibid.* “So constantly give yourself this retreat and renew yourself” [11] **‘Feynmanian’** – a word I made up myself, based on the modus operandi of the world famous scientist, Richard Feynman (1918 – 1988) whose approach to investigating all phenomena of the natural world was consistently rooted in factual observation. James Gleick summed Feynman’s approach up as “*What scientists create must match reality.*” from ‘*Genius, The life of Science of Richard Feynman*’ (1992) page. 324. [12] **The Diamond Sutra** is a very ancient text containing a discourse between the Buddha and one of his senior monks, Subhuti



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Donald Robertson / February 19, 2016 / Exploring Stoic Philosophy, Stoicism & Buddhism/Mindfulness, Uncategorized, Understanding Stoic Philosophy / 23 Comments

'How to Become Virtuous' by Tim LeBon

How to become virtuous – Lessons from Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT)

by Tim LeBon

“If someone is able to show me that what I think or do is not right, I will happily change, for I seek the truth, by which no one was ever truly harmed. It is the person who continues in his self-deception and ignorance who is harmed.”

— [Marcus Aurelius](#), [Meditations](#) 6.21

Many people are attracted to Stoicism because it seems to offer something more profound than the usual self-help palliatives. Stoicism proposes *philosophy* as a foundation for wise living. One aim of the *Stoicism Today* project has always been to increase awareness of Stoic ideas and practices. The *Stoicism Today* team has written booklets, recorded guided meditations, started Facebook groups and given workshops at annual conferences to help spread Stoicism. At the same time it has aimed not merely to disseminate information about Stoicism but also to test Stoicism out and develop it

into a *modern* Stoicism. To this end the *Stoicism Today* team has designed and administered questionnaires, emphasised some elements of Stoicism more than others and incorporated a number of ideas from contemporary psychology. Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*, 6.21) alludes to one way to achieve personal and philosophical growth, namely to treat criticism as useful feedback. In this article I want to tackle two criticisms of Stoicism. By addressing them I hope to work towards making Modern Stoicism even more wise and helpful.

Two comments about Stoicism have given me particular cause for reflection. One came from participants at the [London Stoic Conference of 2014](#). They pointed out that whilst many speakers had talked the importance of virtue, they hadn't fully explained what virtue was or how we could become more virtuous. My Stoicism Today colleague Christopher Gill has since responded to the question [What is Stoic virtue?](#)^[i] He points out that the cardinal virtues are not plucked out of thin air.

“Taken together they [the virtues] make up the qualities essential to leading a full human life. The four are: (wisdom) understanding how to act and feel correctly; (courage) knowing how to act and feel correctly in situations of danger, in facing things seen as fearful (above all, death and other ‘disasters’); (self-control) knowing how to act and feel well in situations arousing other emotions such as desire, appetite, lust; (justice) knowing how to act and feel well in our relationships with other people, at individual, family or communal level, knowing how to act generously and with positive benevolence, with friendship and affection”

The Stoic cardinal virtues then are key qualities required to flourish as a human being. Here I will look at the second part of the question – how to become more virtuous. To be sure there is already much in Stoicism and the [Stoic Week handbook](#) about developing virtue. This is not the place to rehearse the plentiful advice contained in the handbook. On careful examination, though, it could be argued that much of this (for example counsel such as “control the controllables” and “only virtue really matters”) relates more to Stoic *wisdom* than the other specific virtues. One approach would be to collect all the Stoic maxims we can find about specific virtues – and this would actually be a very useful thing to do – the question is – what else can we do?

How to best build justice, self-control, courage, wisdom and other virtues is essentially

an empirical question. One of the key take-home points from contemporary psychology is this:- Whilst some plausible methods turn out to work well, other, equally plausible ideas do not.[ii] Thinking about how to develop virtue in our armchairs will only get us so far. A promising idea is to look at modern evidence-based psychologies to see if *they* can tell us anything about how to develop virtue.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness

Two obvious candidates are Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness. Perhaps they could help us be more virtuous. Although the focus of CBT is traditionally on reducing emotional distress rather than building virtue, CBT has a huge evidence base and should not be dismissed too lightly. We can certainly use CBT to help us develop the habit of [thinking more realistically and constructively](#), which is definitely part of wisdom. Furthermore CBT practitioners have developed a large toolkit of techniques that can be adapted to build individual virtues. Behavioural experiments, guided discovery, exposure to feared situations, thought records and formulation – to name but a few CBT tools – could all be adapted to help develop virtue. [iii] For example, to build courage you could challenge unhelpful negative thinking (“great harm will come to me if I tell the truth”) and develop behavioural experiments – for example “plan to do one act of courage today, record your predictions as to negative and most likely outcomes, note what happens and decide what you can learn from the experiment”. To build self-control you could learn to challenge thinking biases that contribute towards a lack of self-control. For example, you could challenge the short-term bias of the thought “What I gain in the short-term is more important than what I lose in the long-term”. CBT could also help you environments more conducive to virtue. For example “In order to go out for a run every day I will put my running clothes next to my bed so I put them on when I get up.” Donald Robertson’s [Stoic self-monitoring record sheet](#) is an excellent example of how drawing on CBT has already helped modern Stoicism teach us how to build the virtue of wisdom – see also my [Stoic worry tree](#).

A second candidate is Mindfulness. Mindfulness has become part of the Zeitgeist, there is proven benefits that it can help [iv], and there is a good argument for incorporating mindfulness into Stoic Practice.[v] Learning mindfulness – the capacity to take a step back and respond rather than react – could certainly be a useful part of virtue training. However, there is reason to doubt whether learning mindfulness is there is to learning to

be virtuous.

One problem is that mindfulness without the rest of virtue mindfulness could actually do harm. As Mathieu Ricard – a veteran of thousands of hours of mindfulness and a well-known exponent of mindfulness – [points out](#) – “a sniper waiting for his victim: ... To succeed in his ominous goal, he has to ward off distraction and laxity, the two major obstacles to attention. The practice of mindfulness thus needs to be guided by right view and insight ...and motivated by the right intention”. In other words, mindfulness needs to be guided by virtue and wisdom –otherwise it can be used in the service of morally indifferent or even evil ends – such as becoming a more skilled sniper.

So far we have found two evidence-based psychologies that can help us provide tools to develop virtue – CBT and mindfulness. We can and should incorporate these ideas into our approach – but it would be even better if we could find an evidence-based approach already uses these ideas and is more focussed on building virtue rather than part of virtue. We will return to this quest, after considering the second criticism of Stoicism that has given me much food for thought.

This objection will already be familiar to many readers. Some critics say that Stoicism comes across as a cold, unemotional philosophy, perhaps thinking of *Star Trek's* Mr Spock. Unfortunately, this impression isn't restricted to those who are ignorant of Stoicism. No less a philosopher than Martha Nussbaum has gone on record as saying that “[Stoicism is an anti-compassion tradition](#)”. Of course, Nussbaum's view is highly contentious. Unlike Epicureanism, its ancient rival, Stoicism has always had a strong political dimension. [Hierocles's concentric circles](#) provides ample illustration of Stoicism's benevolent concern for the whole of mankind. Perhaps the issue isn't so much about Stoicism not really being compassionate, but about how Stoicism *presents itself*. Maybe Stoicism needs to put its most compassionate foot forwards.

However it isn't just compassion to *others* that's an issue, it's also compassion to *oneself*. A couple of years ago, after I gave a workshop which included the [Evening Meditation exercise](#), someone came up to me and said “This is all very interesting, Tim, but I've got a bit of a history about being hard on myself, and my worry is that this material will make it worse”. It has to be agreed that the language of Marcus and Epictetus does not always appear very self-compassionate. To take a few examples

“Yes, keep on degrading yourself, soul.” (2:6)

“Stop talking about what the good man is like, and just be one” (10:16)

“Enough of this wretched, whining monkey life”. (9.37)

It could very reasonably be argued that Marcus knew this was the best way of giving *himself* a good pep talk, and that he wasn't suggesting that everyone else would be motivated by the same language. Marcus was, as far as we know, writing his *Meditations* purely for himself. However unlike Marcus, we are writing for a broader audience, including those who already have a tendency to be *too* self-critical. So perhaps we need to be mindful of the dangers of using compassionate language which isn't compassionate.

So far we have looked at two apparently separate topics. First, how to help people become more virtuous. Second, how Stoicism might benefit from presenting itself in a more compassionate and self-compassionate manner. It would be very good news indeed if there was an evidence-based therapy that addresses both of these concerns.

Compassion-Focussed Therapy and Compassionate Mind Training

It's entirely possible that there is such a therapy, and it's name is Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) and its related set of practices Compassionate Mind Training(CMT).[vi] CFT is an integrative, evidence-based, third-wave CBT therapy developed largely in the UK by psychologist Paul Gilbert and colleagues. CFT draws on ideas from CBT and mindfulness as well as neuroscience (e.g. [Porges's polyvagal theory](#)), developmental psychology (e.g. [attachment theory](#)) and philosophy, especially Buddhist ideas relating to compassion.

A key idea is that we have [three emotional regulation systems](#). These are

1. The *threat* system, associated with negative emotions such as fear and anger, which motivates us to deal with threats
2. The *drive* system, associated with dynamic positive emotions such as

excitement and achievement which motivates us to move towards pleasure and success and

3. The *soothing and affiliative system* which is associated with calm positive emotions such as contentment and trust, which manages distress and promotes bonding. [vii]

Each state has typical emotions, motivations and neurochemistry. The ultimate aim of CFT/CMT is to develop a compassionate self which is strong enough to achieve optimal emotional balance between these three emotional systems.

In order to do this, CFT/CMT takes people through a number of stages, as follows:-

- 1) Clearing up misconceptions about what is meant by *compassion*. A key point is that there is much more to compassion than just being kind and warm. CFT/CMT follows the Dalai Lama in defining compassion as

“a sensitivity to the suffering of self and others, with a deep commitment to try to relieve it”.

To do this, you need much more than just sentimental warmth and kindness. If you ask people for examples of compassionate people, they will give you names like the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jesus, Mother Teresa, Florence Nightingale and Gandhi. These people may be warm and kind, but they are also courageous, strong, wise and responsible. When CFT/CMT tries to build compassion, it also tries to build these other qualities.

It was when reading this that I had one of those “Aha” moments. Virtue in ancient philosophy means justice, courage, wisdom and self-control. Compassion in CFT/CMT is sounding a lot like virtue in Stoicism and ancient philosophy. If CFT/CMT provides an evidence-based route to building “compassion”, could this help us with building virtue?

- 2) The second stage of CFT/CMT is psychoeducation about the brain, including the new brain and old brain, the amygdala and the three emotional regulation systems. An important message here is that we all have “tricky brains” and many of us have difficult

pasts. The behaviours that cause you problems are not your fault. However learning to deal skilfully with your reactions and tricky brain is your responsibility. Note that CFT/CMT uses truly compassionate language – combining warmth and non-judgement with the need for courage and responsibility.

3) The next [viii] stage of CFT/CMT involves building up and strengthening the compassionate self. These include:-

- **Soothing Compassionate Breathing**. Breathing more slowly and deeply than usual for a few minutes to get into the habit of getting the soothing and affiliative system on line
- **Safe Place Guided Meditation**. Imagining a safe, welcoming place to help get the soothing and affiliative system on line.
- **Mindfulness** Learning how to choose a response rather than merely react
- **Ideal Compassionate Self Guided Meditation**. Having got the soothing system on line first with soothing breathing, imagining yourself having the qualities of compassion –kindness, confidence, maturity, strength and authority, wisdom and insight– and imagining acting in a compassionate way.
- **Ideal Compassionate Other Guided Meditation**. Imagining compassion flowing to you from another ideally compassionate being, imagining what advice they would give you – to help you build up the feeling of what it is like to feel compassion.
- **Compassionate Letter Writing**, Using expressive writing to understand your problems compassionately and planning how to deal with them more skilfully.
- **Behavioural experiments** Testing out more helpful strategies that cultivate compassion and self-compassion.

Can CFT/CMT help Modern Stoicism?

We are now in a position to explore whether CFT/CMT can help. Modern Stoicism and CFT/CFT have many similarities but there are also important differences.

- Stoicism is rooted in philosophy, so we can expect from Stoicism more insight into the nature of wisdom as well as the many ancient practices and readings to develop it to draw on

- CFT/CMT is rooted in modern science, so we can anticipate that it is based on a contemporary understanding of the brain (“in accordance with nature”) and will include many evidence-based techniques

Table 1 below gives a more complete comparison of some of the similarities and differences between Stoicism and CFT/CMT

STOICISM	CFT/CMT
Aims to build Stoic Wisdom and Virtue	Aims to build Compassion (which it turns out means building other virtues)
Early morning meditation & Negative visualisation to help prepare for the day and build wisdom & virtue	Ideal Compassionate Self meditation to help prepare for difficult situations and build compassion and other positive qualities
Evening meditation & “sage on your shoulder” to help review the day and build wisdom & virtue	Ideal Compassionate Other meditation to help get a sense of compassion and reflect on how to deal well with difficult situations
Marucs Aurelius’s Meditations – his own personal diary to help him develop Stoic virtue	Compassionate Letter Writing – expressive writing to help people develop a compassionate stance to themselves
Recognises the need to be vigilant so “first movements” so they don’t turn into full-blown negative emotions	Developing Soothing Compassionate Breathing & Mindfulness, first as exercises, then in difficult situations, to calm down the threat and drive systems and bring the soothing and affiliative system on-line so the compassionate self gets a chance to respond
To some extent. a reputation for being	Whole focus is on being more

to become kinder, a reputation for being cold and unemotional	compassionate and self-compassionate
Based on ancient philosophy	Based on science including neuroscience and psychology

Table 1: Stoicism and CFT/CMT – a comparison

5 Practical Ideas for Modern Stoicism

I believe that there is the potential for a powerful synergy between Stoicism and CFT/CMT. To conclude, here are five practical ideas which address the two concerns raised and could help Modern Stoicism be wiser and more helpful.

1) Use the language of compassion and self-compassion

If we start to use more compassionate language, then there is less risk Stoicism will be confused with a non-compassionate or even anti-compassionate practice. Here are some good sayings to try out

- “We are all fallible human beings.”
- “It’s not your fault.”
- “You can’t choose what’s happened to you so far – your genes, your upbringing – but you can choose how you respond to it.”
- “Work towards being the best possible version of yourself.”

All of these are often used in CFT/CMT and would I believe would sit well in Stoic Training.

2) Learn soothing breathing and mindfulness so you have a better chance to notice the “first movements” and bring the green soothing system on line. Here are some links to recordings:- <http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk/resources/audio.htm>

3) Use CFT-informed Compassionate Self meditations as rehearsals for the day ahead and for challenges you face in general. These are eyes closed exercise, starting

with soothing breathing. Like an actor, you imagine yourself with all the elements of virtue – wisdom, courage, persistence, justice, compassion, self-control, moderation. You imagine yourself behaving in a virtuous way, even when difficulties arise. This is obviously similar to the morning meditation and negative visualisation – the value added is in incorporating ways to bring the soothing and affiliative system on-line and to rehearse using specific virtues.

4) Use [CFT-informed ideal compassionate-other meditations](#) to review how you've done in the day in facing life's challenges. Again, this is an eyes closed exercising starting with soothing breathing. You imagine an ideal virtuous other – someone who fully embodies the virtues – wisdom (including Stoic wisdom), courage, persistence, justice, compassion, self-control, moderation. You imagine yourself interacting with this being – and that they are encouraging you, being warm to you, and also helping you become the best version of yourself. [ix]

5) Blending CMT/CFT/CBT/Mindfulness & Modern Stoicism

The Idea is to blend Stoic ideas about wisdom and other specific virtues using compassionate language and evidence-based methods like soothing breathing, mindfulness and compassionate self meditations. Over Stoic week 2015 I wrote a script for several of these, on [self-control](#), the [serenity prayer](#) (Stoic Wisdom) and [Stoic compassion](#). Here I will give the full script and a [recording on persistence](#), an important quality modern psychologists call [“grit”](#).

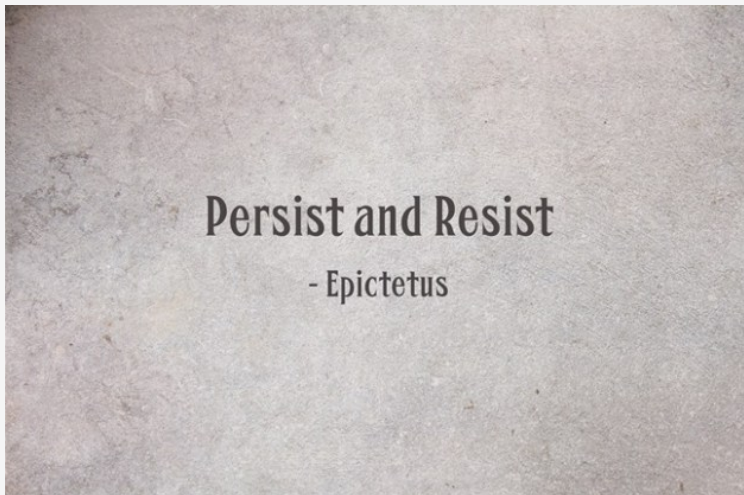
Modern Stoic Meditation on the Virtue of Persistence

Epictetus would say that there were two vices much blacker and more serious than the rest: lack of persistence and lack of self-control. Lack of persistence stops us from enduring hardships that we need to tolerate, lack of self-control stops us from resisting pleasures or other things we ought to resist.

‘Two words,’ he says, ‘should be committed to memory and obeyed by alternately exhorting and restraining ourselves, words that will ensure we lead a mainly blameless and untroubled life.’ These two words, he used to say, were ‘persist and resist’.”

Anyone who says that philosophers are too obscure or complicated should be made to read that quote. Stoicism couldn't be simpler. We must commit the words “Persist and

Resist” to memory and keep saying them to ourselves. Move over mindfulness, recite the “persist and resist” mantra instead.



- At the time when we feel like giving up, we can train ourselves to become aware of the negative thoughts that make us feel that way. We can then remind ourselves “This thought is just an impression in my mind and not an objective fact like it claims to be.”
- For example, if you are running a marathon and thinking “I won't be able to finish” remind yourself

“This is just a thought, not a fact.”

- As well as negative thoughts, people often give up because of a setback or an obstacle . Here the Stoic advice to think of what the sage would do in this situation is valuable. When it comes to dealing with setbacks, I really admire the attitudes of Winston Churchill and Thomas Edison.
- Churchill said “Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.”
- Thomas Edison suggested “Negative results are just what I want. They're just as valuable to me as positive results. I can never find the thing that does the job best until I find the ones that don't.” When asked by a journalist how he had coped with failing in his first 10000 attempts to invent the lightbulb he responded

“I had not failed. I had just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

- The Stoics give us one more relevant piece of wisdom in the analogy of the archer. An archer should take accurate aim, and then accept fate if the arrow gets blown off course. In the same way we should focus on what is under our control and not get discouraged if fate prevents success. We should control the controllables.
- So the Stoics give us four excellent pieces of advice when it comes to persisting and developing grit. We can use the mantra “persist”, we can challenge the validity of discouraging thoughts, we can reframe failure in the same way as the sages on success and failure do, and we can focus on what we can control and leave the rest to fate.
- Let’s spend a few moments using a visualisation informed by Stoicism and Compassionate Mind Training to help us build up the virtue of persistence.
- So think of something you want to achieve – it could be developing Stoicism into daily rituals, or changing career, or getting fitter – or something else that is important to you.
- If you are comfortable doing so, now close your eyes and prepare for this modern Stoic meditation.
- First to help your mind be in a calm state, let’s try a few moments slow soothing compassionate breathing.
- Imagine trying to achieve this and then something getting in the way. Now in your mind’s eye imagine saying to yourself “Persist, Persist”. Next imagine a negative thought getting in the way – perhaps “I’ll try again next year when circumstances are better”. Remind yourself that this thought is just an opinion, it’s not an objective fact. Reflect, like Thomas Edison did, on what you can learn from this setback. Perhaps you’ve learnt another way not to do it!
- Next think of something you can do that is under your control to take you in the right direction. Imagine doing it, whilst repeating to yourself—persist, persist, persist. Then imagining yourself persisting until you succeed.
- Finally imagine feeling satisfied for having persisted, despite the temptation to give up, putting into practice the virtue of persistence.

To conclude, in this article I have taken Marcus Aurelius’s advice to learn from criticisms of Stoicism to heart and explored how CFT/CMT can help develop modern Stoicism into a more compassionate practice that can develop specific virtues. We can now see that

Marcus's advice is itself an example of true self-compassion, meaning not sentimental warmth but a wise, responsible, courageous commitment to improving the well-being of oneself and others.

Tim LeBon is a BABCP accredited CBT therapist and UKCP registered existential therapist, an APPA and SPP registered philosophical counsellor and is also trained as a life coach and integrative counsellor. He is a past Chair of the Society for Philosophy in Practice (SPP) and the founding editor of Practical Philosophy. He is the author of [Wise Therapy](#) (Sage, 2001) and [Achieve Your Potential with Positive Psychology](#) (Hodder, 2014). You can read more about Tim's work on his blog, [Socrates Satisfied](#), and his [website](#).

References

[i] See Gill, G. (2015) *What is Stoic Virtue?*

<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/11/21/what-is-stoic-virtue-by-chris-gill/>

[ii] See LeBon, T. *Achieve Your Potential with Positive Psychology* pp xi-xvi (Hodder Teach Yourself Series, 2014) for some examples of how some very plausible ideas about personal development don't actually work so well in practice.

[iii] See LeBon, T. (2014) chapter 9 for more on the CBT toolbox.

[iv] See LeBon, T. (2014) chapter 10 for more on mindfulness.

[v] Though as Patrick Ussher has argued, [Stoic mindfulness](#) (*prosoche*) has a bigger part of Stoic virtue, and is a bit different from mindfulness.

[vi] CFT was originally developed to help people who have particularly high degrees of shame and self-criticism, who often didn't respond particularly well to standard CBT. Of particular interest to us though is that is how CFT is now being extended to include broader populations. The training that is aimed at the general population as well as a clinical one is called *Compassionate Mind Training* (CMT) and it is this part of CFT that is particularly relevant to us here. For the rest of this article I will refer to this approach as CFT/CMT, because our focus is more on helping the general population than on

psychotherapy.

[vii] See

http://media.psychology.tools/worksheets/english_us/emotional_regulation_systems_en-us.pdf

[viii] In CFT (as opposed to CMT) there would be an important third stage – understanding your problems in terms of unhelpful – but understandable – strategies developed – often sub-consciously – to deal with threats your “tricky brain” didn’t have a better way to deal with. For example, someone who fears overwhelming emotions such as sadness and loneliness may have developed drinking as a means of avoiding these emotions. This understanding of problems in a new way is called a *compassion-focussed formulation*.

[ix] See <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/06/14/how-to-become-more-virtuous-and-less-like-basil-fawlty-tim-lebon/> for my 2014 workshop which was aimed at developing an Ideal Stoic Advisor.

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'Stoic Resilience in Face of Illness' by

Carmelo Di Maria

Stoic Resilience in Face of Illness

by Carmelo Di Maria

2015 didn't begin well for me – the end of a sentimental liaison had caused me a lot of turmoil on the emotional front (lots of sleepless nights, crying, rumination, loss of appetite, chain smoking... you name it). The bright side of it, though, was that in an attempt to make sense of it all, I started devouring self-help books, especially those about relationships and the insecure attachment style (me) and narcissistic personality disorder (him). Fascinating reading, I tell you.

And it was in this frantic pursuit of enlightenment and self-amelioration that I eventually landed on the shores of ancient Rome and got acquainted with the Stoics. I started reading a lot on their philosophy of life and it was music to my ears. For starters I've always been a fan of CBT and the idea that the Stoics could be considered the forerunners of this psychotherapy school made me immediately warm up to them. In addition, I was already used to stick on the fridge nice philosophical maxims, so their pocket-sized pearls of wisdom fitted the purpose beautifully. I also happened to love their pragmatism, the idea that you could do routine exercises – like the mantra-like repetition of maxims, the morning and evening meditations, the 'view from above' meditation, the pre-meditatio malorum (meditation on adversities) – with the aim of training your mind in a sort of mental fitness regime. Through their reflective meditations you could practice being more mindful of your thoughts and emotions, reframing some aspects of reality, making sure that your actions fall in line with your values and above all that you have values in the first place and that they occupy a prominent place in your life, ultimately you could practice how to become a better person.

Personal development had always been a constant in my life (I had been struggling with self-esteem and an anger management problem for years) so in a sense the Stoics were speaking a language I could completely understand. It was a question of nodding all the way. But there was one thing that for me represented a revolutionary new way of thinking, i.e. the idea that some of the things generally most valued in life have no

intrinsic value, namely: money, health, reputation, and everything else that lies outside our sphere of control. These things fall under the category of 'externals', things deemed outside our control and therefore 'indifferent'. What are instead of the utmost importance, the Stoics thought, are our thoughts, emotions and behaviour, in a nutshell whatever is under our control and can lead us to live life according to virtue.

Health was the one aspect of life deemed by the Stoics 'indifferent' that stood out for me. Here were some people who were saying that if you're suffering from ill health, it doesn't really matter, it's your attitude that counts: 'The thing that matters the most is not what you bear, but how you bear it' (Seneca, *On Providence*) or 'Remember too on every occasion which leads thee to the present difficulty to apply this principle: not that this is a misfortune, but to bear it nobly is good fortune' (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*). This was very refreshing and comforting to hear for a person with two chronic conditions. So from a feeling of inferiority and impotence and of being somehow 'less than' when compared to healthy people, I began to see my value as a person reinstated and judged according to different standards: my resilience, my strength, my dignity, my ability to reframe things. I must say if I was yearning for a CBT fix, the Stoics were providing me with one of epic proportions, taking reframing to a whole new level. Money? Health? 'That is nothing to me!' This is how Epictetus was inviting his students to address aspects of life considered external, indifferent. The idea being that the only thing that matters is your character, being the best you can be and be strong in the face of adversity. It may sound a bit of a radical statement at first, but you can clearly see its value especially for somebody who is currently facing adversity. And whether you are indeed currently facing adversity or wise enough to prepare for it, Stoics suggested the practice of 'pre-meditatio malorum': imagining that something bad may happen to you and by so doing reaching the twofold goal of preparing psychologically for it, i.e. getting rid of the element of shock and surprise that might otherwise overwhelm you, and secondly appreciating your current situation. There have been times when I have meditated on my health condition worsening or even on my own death as a practice. The Stoics' invitation to remember that 'thou must die' or otherwise known as 'memento mori' is something else that resonates me. Gone is the taboo typical of modern societies which makes death even more morbid and scary and in is a healthy realistic acknowledgement of death as a part of life: as Seneca said, life is a constant dying, each day that goes by means getting closer and closer to death. And if you're ever despairing about your health condition, feel overwhelmed by a sense of injustice and anger, and are inclined to think 'why me?', the Stoics, on the back of their cosmopolitan view of the world and a sense of brotherhood in

humankind, would be likely to reply: 'Indeed, why not you?'

In sum, it seems to me that people with chronic conditions would derive a lot of comfort and a renewed sense of pride by adhering to a Stoic philosophy of life and following its precepts. All you need to do is showing resilience in crisis, acknowledging that some

things like health are not under your control, but your attitude towards them are, not cursing your lot and instead accepting it with equanimity and good grace ('Don't demand that things go as you will, but will that they happen as they do, and your life will go smoothly'), taking inspiration from role models, historical figures and contemporaries alike, who may have faced adversity with strength and dignity.

The meditative practice of 'A view from above' is yet another invitation to distance oneself from an egocentric view of the world and embracing one of connected humankind. Incidentally, it is only by seeing it in the context of a big human melting pot that your pain becomes smaller and doesn't morph into suffering. It is only by looking at the big picture and considering yourself as an infinitesimal part of the universe, a tiny grain of sand, and viewing your difficulties as nothing compared to all the misfortune on the planet and across the centuries, that you have any hope to minimise your suffering.

Where so much in the health literature seems to point at how to best manage your chronic condition, and patch things up as it were, but never highlights the strengths and qualities which can be derived from it (something referred to as 'post-traumatic growth' in certain quarters), stoicism allows us to take a different stance. The only good in life is virtue and you can be proud of yourself if you show courage, resilience and wisdom in the face of adversity.

And if the Stoics place so much importance on the meditation of adversities and on the reflection of life's transiency, a chronic patient's brush with mortality puts him/her in a position of advantage for carrying out both practices. He/she can more easily contemplate a deterioration of his/her health for example or meditate on death itself. Likewise, a person living with a chronic condition can more easily savour all the things in life one can be grateful for. A rose smells nicer when you happen to have a more vivid sense of how transient life is. Finally, if you are ever troubled by the brevity of life, make every day count, as Seneca suggests in the following two quotes:

‘Show me that the good in life does not depend upon life’s length, but upon the use we make of it; also, that it is possible, or rather usual, for a man who has lived long to have lived too little’ (Seneca, On the Shortness of Life).

‘Begin at once to live and count each separate day as a separate life’ (Seneca, On the Futility of Planning Ahead).

Because if it’s true that the Stoics bang on about ‘memento mori’ (remember that thou must die), the inevitable corollary is a resounding ‘memento vivere’ (remember to live).

Carmelo Di Maria *is an Italian living in London. Loves to smile and have a laugh. Taurean to the bone. Has a soft spot for parmigiana and rugged men. Hopes to teach one day a blend of mindfulness and Stoic reflective meditation to people with chronic conditions. Best thing that’s ever happened to him: his mum. (I could go on but I edit things down for a living).*

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'How Stoicism Helped me Overcome Depression' by Andrew Overby

How Stoicism Helped me Overcome Depression

by Andrew Overby



Light at the end of the tunnel. Sourced [here](#).

We all start out wanting to change the world. Depressives hold onto this impulse longer than most, I think, and thus when the inevitable realization comes that we cannot, it hits home all the harder.

The realization that we are but players on the world stage and not its prime architect is one of those momentous but possibly subtle shifts in conscious awareness that separates some aspects of youth from adulthood, such an effect does it have. This is maybe one of the first intellectual brushes with human limitations.

Those prone to perfectionism and to dreaming big can be strongly affected. To simultaneously be a daylong dreamer and to know that one's dreams of changing the world—by leveraging the force of one's perceived destiny or willpower—are extremely unlikely to be borne out is to invite depressive thinking for a visit.

To some degree, this is my story. At 24, my adult life so far has consisted in some measure of making the circuit around the pull of this immense truth. I really have yet to reconcile the real world with the one I envision and the place in it I would wish for myself.

More than most, depressives would benefit from the words of prominent Stoics like the

Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius or like the former slave Epictetus. With his dichotomy of control in mind, we can keep before our mind's eye that only some certain things are under our power to influence and others are beyond our ability to control. (In fact, I think the trichotomy of control introduced by William B. Irvine in *A Guide to the Good Life* is even better, with the addition of a third category in the middle for things we have some amount of control over). We must evaluate what control we have and learn to take comfort in letting go of that which we can't influence.

This is exactly somewhere Stoic thinking can come in: Like those involved in the now-famous Quantified Self movement and who daily measure galvanic skin response, sleep patterns, diet, steps walked per day, among many possible metrics to score their own physical state, those able to with depressive tendencies or other negatively affecting mental health conditions need to monitor themselves.

This type of acknowledgement of what is ours to hold in our sovereign hands in contrast to those many things we cannot control at all seems to me like one area of Stoic practice that is rich with lessons for depressives—or anyone at all wanting to experience a bit more tranquility in daily life.

I have always read widely and in high school, having a passing familiarity with the well-known proper nouns of Western culture, I knew vaguely who the Stoics were. (I was impressionably taken with the fact that many prominent individuals had adopted at least parts of Stoicism for themselves—or at least had the desire to be seen in that light). I remember visiting the Clinton Library in Arkansas and hearing of the former president's reverence for Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. It has sat in the back of my mind since those years.

More recently, I began exploring the Stoics' wisdom in a more significant way, seeking to understand their beliefs and see what could be applied to my own life, which has included depression and the resulting missed opportunities and long-term underperformance that come with it. I had heard of comparisons with Buddhism and was eager to know more. I came across several books written for a general audience. Once I started reading, I was intrigued.

Here was a philosophy that tried to rationalize life, that did not seek to eliminate emotion

or attachment but to instill a deep-seated appreciation for these by cultivating a kind of detached regard. It disregarded mass consumerism and the mad acquisition of new products simply to satisfy an urge for perpetual novelty. It has high regard for the entire human community, all of whose members makes up the cosmopolis to which the Stoics belong.

These philosophers emphasize duty and virtue, teaching practitioners to put themselves to their best use as rationally capable human beings as well as to seek excellence in the situations in life they find themselves in, whatever they might be—whether in, say, excelling in ruling an empire or excelling in teaching a classroom full of students. They urge equanimity in the face of life's challenges. For my personality type and in light of my life experiences, Stoic thinking seems rather natural.

Turning Depression Into An Asset

If the test of Stoic thinking and ethics is how they are put into practice, then let me elaborate on a few practices that might prove valuable to others.

Actually, I think many who have dealt with depression or other mental health concerns will find themselves quite receptive to the contents of Stoicism. For them, and for anyone at all who's interested in delving into fundamental insights into human psychology, it's just a matter of hearing about the Stoics in an age that has largely relegated them to the sidelines.

Depressed people are rather self-aware; in fact, they are too self-aware, and too negatively so, often deriding themselves for small infractions of their own idealized standards, putting themselves down for not being perfect even in a world they recognize as being full of imperfections and human capital squandered.

Part of depression is fixating on failures in the past, ruminating continually on past events or circumstances and even drawing a kind of negative confidence from them. This type of thinking is antithetical to good outcomes at the present time, at least the vast majority of the time. It causes failure in the present, building a feedback loop whose hunger cannot be easily filled. One failure builds atop another, and now another.

Stoic thinking can help by teaching willing students how to separate past from present in the mind. To return to Epictetus' dichotomy of control, the past is something over which we have no control. We must learn how to mindfully control how we peer backward into the past and how to only do on our own terms when it may prove useful.

Depressives may also gain comfort by appreciating the Stoic injunction to treat adversity as a training ground for mental capacity and for resilience—generally speaking, for life. Focusing on what our response can be instead of what is happening to us, what is being done to us, what we cannot influence or have control over is the step needing to be taken by all individuals, depressed or otherwise, who wish to maintain a healthier balance in their daily living.

Enabled by Stoic habits, a depressive can turn this overly critical self-awareness into a strength. Having a clear-eyed vision of things as they really are (without losing tranquility) is quite an asset. Seeing reality rather than confirming only what we wish to see is a skill others would have to acquire. What's known as "depressive realism" is a rough-cut diamond waiting to be fashioned into the glowing jewel that is a well-developed sense of resilience, one that can more easily withstand the slings and arrows of adverse circumstances.

Stoic empowerment extends to include both professional and personal concerns. It seems to me those with depression are less likely to be hypocritical than those who are not nor have been, as well as perhaps being less likely to tell lies. This is purely a subjective opinion, but being compelled to lay bare the emotional foundations of one's mental state is going to produce more empathy, and be far less conducive to deceit or deception. In short, a depressed person is more likely to express honesty and empathy.

Empathy, for Stoics, is fundamental. With exercises like Hierocles' Circle, expanding the realm of one's concern outward from oneself to family, city, country, and then the world, and a commitment to acting in the public interest or taking part in public affairs, Stoicism prove itself like depression in the sense that integral to its patterns is a highly developed sense of empathy.

If empathy can be boiled down to a reasonable appreciation for the plight of another that goes deeper than surface-level social platitudes, then those with depression will naturally

prove themselves capable in this manner. For others, the best way for a person to develop this empathetic skill-set might be with Stoic exercises. When it comes to emotional intelligence and empathizing, I think depressive actually have something others can learn from. Where lessons await, however, is in empathizing without losing a level head, using emotion as a vital component of reason without ever subverting it.

This relates not to changing external events or happenings, but our responses to them. Changing the state of mind a person is in can be difficult (when it can be done), but realizing that it is only a representation of something rather than the thing itself can be a relief. Remembering that reactions differ from actual reality is vital.

Good habits can be a great help in maintaining mental health. Adapting to follow the best habits possible right now is an excellent step, allowing time for small steps to build up. Adaptation is powerful, and depressives are better suited for adapting than we often believe ourselves to be.

When depressing or frustrating thoughts come to mind, the thought substitution technique might work. This means turning an unhelpful thought into one more helpful at the time. A thought about a past event or a memory about an old acquaintance that proves troubling can be turned to something more constructive with mental discipline and practice. Perhaps an unhelpful urge to focus on something negative can be made into a trigger for a taking a positive action. Many have used memories like childhood bullying or some kind of past anguish to spur themselves onward to achieve goals as adults; this seems like a potentially helpful route for those seeking to align depressing history with Stoic virtue.

A very valuable Stoic practice is that of negative visualization. This exercise is about visualizing all the bad things that could happen, all the things that could go wrong, every wound that might be reopened, every point of vulnerability, every secret exposed to sunlight, every mistake turned into a major faux pas. For a depressed person, this might feel more like putting names to faces seen before, I think, than an entirely new experience. I imagine many others would find this exercise somewhat morbid, but I suspect many depressives would appreciate it.

The second component I would add to the negative visualization exercise is its

counterpoint: gratitude. Imagine feeling grateful everyday. This is an excellent habit. Before sleeping, think about the day's events, or something more permanent. Consider those who have prepared the way and laid the groundwork. This exercise is very useful.

Humility is also a valuable aspect of Stoic thinking. Being plain in appearance or diet is a mark of humility. Depressed people often feel they have been humbled, but there is value in translating that into a general, pervasive sense of modesty, when possible.

Remembering one's own smallness in the larger context of the universe and all living things within it can be useful for alleviating some anxiety by providing some of the mental distancing from an immediate reaction or stressful situation that Stoic habits are meant to instill.

The final exercise I would offer is the headline rule: This practice is imagining one's actions being displayed in the headline of a newspaper—presumably, one that everyone reads. It is simple, and easy to conceptualize. This is like the spotlight effect—except pretend that everyone truly is going to be watching and discussing. If something would not look good on the front page of a newspaper, it might not be a virtuous action.

What all of the above ultimately come down to is making active choices. At best, passivity is neutral—if it does not actually worsen or prolong matters. This is not always possible, yet engaging in some series of actions—really, making a series of choices—is all a person can reasonably try to hold himself or herself responsible for. If there is anything that Stoics can teach those with mental health concerns, it is that employing reason can lift some of the burden.

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