

THE BIG IDEAS

Historical Context
& Intro to Stoicism.

A Surplus of Time
What do you do with it?

Visions of a Lifetime
Don't confuse yourself.

The Opinions of Others
Forget them.

Retire Within Yourself
In the midst of the crowd.

Being in Tune
With every note.

Time Is a River
Flow with it.

For What...
Were you made?

Your One Delight
To be of service.

The Equanimity Game
Recover your balance!

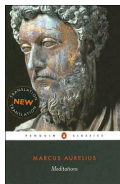
Your Power
To choose your response.

I Seek the Truth
You?

Do It Right
Or don't do it.

Soak Your Mind
In right thoughts.

The Bond
That unites all.



Meditations

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“Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible.”

~ Marcus Aurelius from *Meditations*

Not only is [Marcus Aurelius](#) one of my heroes, he's also one of history's leading Stoic Philosophers. Stoic philosophy. You know, one of the classic Hellenistic philosophies—right there with Epicureanism and Cynicism.

Huh?

Whether or not you've heard of Stoicism, you've probably met one of its leading thinkers: Marcus Aurelius—he's the old emperor in the movie *Gladiator*. :)

In this Note, we're going to take a quick look at the historical context in which Aurelius wrote *Meditations* and the Stoic philosophy that influenced his thinking. From there, we'll jump into some of my favorite Big Ideas from the classic Emperor-Philosopher's journals.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It was in the 2nd Century, during battles against Barbarian tribes in the Danube region near Hungary (not unlike the opening scene of *Gladiator*), when Aurelius wrote *Meditations*.

Imagine the powerful Roman Empire: Encompassing vast territory from England to Spain and Africa, to Egypt, Arabia and Turkey. This is the Empire that [Marcus Aurelius](#) defended from barbarians and pestilence and plague at every border.

Now, you can imagine Aurelius, the Emperor of this vast empire, trained in the Stoic philosophy, reminding himself to live the philosophy during some of the most trying times of his rule—in the battlefields of war.

Interestingly, the literal translation of the title is “To Himself”—as Aurelius was simply jotting notes to himself in his private journal.

His intention was not to publish anything; rather, he used his journal to remind himself of the lessons he learned as a young nobleman being groomed to one-day rule the empire.

The book is broken down into bite-size nuggets of wisdom that you can enjoy a few minutes at a time. I highly recommend you start enjoying!

[Note: I love Aurelius. I fell even more in love with him when I was in Budapest and ran into his exhibit in the Roman Antiquities wing of the Hungarian National Museum—which described the fact that he wrote *Meditations* pretty much on that location. So, as any good student would do, I rushed to the bookstore to pick up another copy of his book to study the master on his home turf!]

“Your time has a limit set to it. Use it, then, to advance your enlightenment; or it will be gone, and never in your power again.”

~ Marcus Aurelius

*"To live each day as though
one's last, never flustered,
never apathetic, never
attitudinizing—here is the
perfection of character."*

~ Marcus Aurelius

QUICK INTRO TO STOICISM

We'll begin with the basics. The modern word "stoic" is derived from the calm demeanor of the stoic philosopher. The philosophy itself, however, was named "stoicism" because its founder, Zeno (344-262 bce), taught in a well-known *stoa*: a colonnade or porch.

Stoicism is one of three prominent philosophies of the Hellenistic era (the other two: Cynicism and Epicureanism). The philosophy was founded by Zeno about 300 bce. (To put it in perspective, Plato founded the Academy in 385 bce.) Although relatively obscure today, Stoicism was the dominant philosophy of the Western world for several centuries. It lost its prominence when the emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century.

As the historian Lecky points out, "*Stoicism became the religion of the educated classes. It furnished the principles of virtue, coloured the noblest literature of the time, and guided all the developments of moral enthusiasm.*" With that, we'll jump into my favorite Big Ideas:

A SURPLUS OF TIME

"Take it that you have died today, and your life's story is ended; and henceforward regard what future time may be given you as an uncovenanted surplus, and live it out in harmony with nature."

I like that advice.

Imagine this: You just died.

Bam! You're gone.

And... You got the good fortune to come back starting... Now!

OK. Now live as if every moment is a gift. :)

And, know this: "Were you to live three thousand years, or even thirty thousand, remember that the sole life which a man can lose is that which he is living at the moment; and furthermore, that he can have no other life except the one he loses... This means that the longest life and the shortest amount to the same thing. For the passing minute is every man's equal possession, but what has once gone by is not ours."

VISIONS OF A LIFETIME

"Never confuse yourself by visions of an entire lifetime at once... remember that it is not the weight of the future or the past that is pressing upon you, but ever that of the present alone."

This is brilliant.

It's so easy to get overwhelmed by "*visions of an entire lifetime at once,*" eh?

As Aurelius reminds us: What really matters is THIS moment. So, while we go out and pursue our highest visions, let's remember to put all of our energy into impeccably taking the next step... and the next step and ...

And, let's forget:

THE OPINIONS OF OTHERS

"The approval of such men, who do not even stand well in their own eyes, has no value for him."

I love that. It's amazing how easy it is to worry about other people's opinions of us, eh? The irony is, as Aurelius points out here, that most people don't even have a favorable opinion of THEMSELVES and yet we worry about their opinions of US. Wacky.

*"You should banish any
thoughts of how you may
appear to others."*

~ Marcus Aurelius

*"The whole universe is
change, and life itself is but
what you deem it."*

~ Marcus Aurelius

" So here is a rule to remember in future, when anything tempts you to feel bitter: not, ' This is a misfortune, ' but ' To bear this worthily is a good fortune. "

~ Marcus Aurelius

" Look back over the past, with its changing empires that rose and fell, and you can foresee the future too. "

~ Marcus Aurelius

Reminds me of [Ayn Rand](#)'s classic [The Fountainhead](#) (see Notes). Her hero, Howard Roark, is asked by the novel's antagonist: "What do you think of me?" Roark replies: "I don't." :)

And, [Byron Katie](#), in [Loving What Is](#) (see Notes), tells us: "If I had a prayer, it would be this: 'God, spare me from the desire for love, approval, or appreciation. Amen.'"

RETIRE WITHIN YOURSELF

"Men seek for seclusion in the wilderness, by the seashore, or in the mountains - a dream you have cherished too fondly yourself. But such fancies are wholly unworthy of a philosopher, since at any moment you choose you can retire within yourself. Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul; above all, he possesses resources in himself, which he need only contemplate to secure immediate ease of mind - the ease that is but another word for a well-ordered spirit. Avail yourself often, then, of this retirement and so continually renew yourself."

I feel refreshed just imagining such a retreat. :)

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)'s wisdom (see Notes) comes to mind here: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

I (perhaps like you, too?) often yearn for a life of seclusion—fantasizing about the power of the quiet and stillness of the mountains or ocean. I love how Aurelius captures the power of our internal retreat and know that my own personal retreats—from my hour of daily AM meditation to my regular breaks throughout the day—ground me in the stillness that connects me to my Higher Self and fuels me with the power to create most fully.

How about you? Are you practicing retreating into yourself regularly throughout your day?

Susan Jeffers, in her great book *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, offers another cool way to look at it: She suggests we create a "Holi-hour" every day—kinda like a "holiday" only this one's for an hour. (And, I'll provide a friendly reminder that if you *immediately* think that such a thing is impossible, you *especially* need to make it happen. :)

Time for us to remain engaged and seek out the deepest refuges within ourselves and see the wisdom in:

BEING IN TUNE WITH EVERY NOTE

"O world, I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony. For me nothing is early, nothing late, if it be timely for thee. O Nature, all that thy seasons yield is fruit for me."

That's beautiful.

" Is it possible for any useful thing to be accomplished without change? "

~ Marcus Aurelius

Remember, all of these quotes are from notes that [Aurelius](#) wrote TO HIMSELF in his journal—reminding himself of the values in which he believed. Reading his private journal, we see the commitment and humility with which arguably the world's most powerful man of his era faced his challenges. It's quite remarkable to see this Emperor (!) from nearly two thousand years ago struggling with the same challenges we face and reminding himself of the same truths we all strive to embody.

Are you struggling with what Nature is sending your way? You do know that the best way to make God laugh is to tell her your plans, right? :)

So, let's be in tune with every note of Nature's great harmony. And know that for us nothing is early, nothing late and that all the seasons of our lives provide us with the perfect fruit for our growth and actualization. THAT is a pathway to flow, ease and joy, no? :)

"Cultivate these, then, for they are wholly within your power: sincerity and dignity; industriousness, and sobriety. Avoid grumbling, be frugal, considerate, and frank; be temperate in manner and speech; carry yourself with authority."

~ Marcus Aurelius

"How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it."

~ Marcus Aurelius

"... Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

~ Viktor Frankl from Man's Search for Meaning

TIME IS A RIVER

One prominent theme in Aurelius' notes to himself is the idea of change. He says: "Time is a river, the resistless flow of all created things. One thing no sooner comes in sight than it is hurried past and another is borne along, only to be swept away in its turn."

And: "Reflect often upon the rapidity with which all existing things, or things coming into existence, sweep past us and are carried away."

"Even while a thing is in the act of coming into existence, some part of it has already ceased to be."

Change. The one constant we can rely on. Are you fighting it or flowing with it in your life today?

... And, while you contemplate that, may I ask:

FOR WHAT WERE YOU MADE?

"Everything - a horse, a vine - is created for some duty... For what task, then, were you yourself created? A man's true delight is to do the things he was made for."

As you know if you've read any of these Notes, we come back to the idea that we all have a unique purpose again... and again... and again!

From [Seligman's](#) science of happiness (know your strengths and use them often!) to the Buddha's admonition to discover your work and then, with all your heart, to give yourself to it.

So, the constant question: For what were you created?!?

What makes you feel most alive? If you had all the money and all the time in the world, what would you do? What are you doing when time simply evaporates for you? What are your greatest gifts and how are you giving them to the world?!?

Let's look at those questions and discover the true delight of doing the things for which we were made!!

... And, while we do that, let's combine that with:

YOUR ONE DELIGHT

"Let your one delight and refreshment be to pass from one service to the community to another, with God ever in mind."

That sounds like a plan to me.

You? :)

[Note: Combining knowledge of what you're here to do with service to the community is pretty much EXACTLY Seligman's science of living a meaningful life. Let's get on that!]

THE EQUANIMITY GAME

"When force of circumstance upsets your equanimity, lose no time in recovering your self-control, and do not remain out of tune longer than you can help. Habitual recurrence to the harmony will increase your mastery of it."

This one brings a smile to my face.

When I first read it years ago, it inspired me to create what I call the "equanimity game."

The rules of the game are simple: Notice when you're off-balance (when you start to lose your patience with the traffic or your spouse or your colleague or your kids or whatever), and see how fast you can catch yourself and correct yourself—bringing yourself back to equanimity.

"How ridiculous not to flee from one's own wickedness, which is possible, yet endeavor to flee from another's which is not."

~ Marcus Aurelius

"Keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, and unassuming; the friend of justice and godliness; kindly, affectionate, and resolute in your devotion to duty."

~ Marcus Aurelius

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe'; a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison."

~ Albert Einstein

As Aurelius says in his rockin' 2nd century prose: "Habitual recurrence to the harmony will increase your mastery of it." :)

[btw: *equanimity* is a finalist in my list of greatest words ever. From the Latin: *aequus*, (even) + *animus*, (mind), the word means "balanced mind." That's hot.]

YOUR POWER

"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

The golden rule. Well, one of them, anyway. :)

NOTHING outside of ourselves has power over us.

We ALWAYS (yes, *always!*) have the power to choose our response. So, we need to quit being victims, blaming a circumstance or a person for our ills. They're not the problem. We are. Let's choose to create a new response.

"Take me and cast me where you will; I shall still be possessor of the divinity within me, serene and content."

I SEEK THE TRUTH

"I seek the truth... it is only persistence in self-delusion and ignorance that does harm."

What do *you* seek? Know that only persistence in self-delusion and ignorance does harm. (Strong words.)

Are you deluding yourself? Me, too, way too often. How about we make seeking the truth our primary objective from here on out? :)

DO IT RIGHT

"Nothing is worth doing pointlessly."

Reminds me of the [Buddha](#)'s comment: "If anything is worth doing, do it with all your heart."

Do it. Or don't do it.

But if you do it, do it with all your heart.

(Pretty, please.)

And know this: "Because a thing is difficult for you, do not therefore suppose it beyond mortal power. On the contrary, if anything is possible and proper for a man to do, assume that it must fall within your own capacity."

SOAK YOUR MIND

"Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible."

This thought is worth repeating and it makes me want to reach back in time and give Aurelius a big hug and a high five. Seriously. How hot is *that*?

In what are you soaking *your* mind in? Thoughts of power? The desire to create an optimal life of service, integrity and love?

Good. Keep on soaking. :)

THE BOND THAT UNITES ALL

“Think often of the bond that unites all things in the universe, and their dependence on one another.”

I like to think as often as possible of the incredible bond I share with you and with everyone and everything on this beautiful planet of ours.

When I drive my car, I often silently thank the people who made it (that alone is an unending meditation when we trace all of the parts of our cars back to the all of the people in the world who played a role in getting it to us), the people who built the roads on which I’m driving, and the ultimate Creator who created the beautiful view out my window. :)

There’s so much to be grateful for...

We can do this reflection throughout our day.

Pick anything you’re touching (the paper this is printed on, the chair you’re sitting on, the office or home you’re in) and think about the array of beautiful human beings on whom *you depend* to enjoy such a wonderful life.

It’s an incredibly humbling and inspiring exercise and one that opens us to the power of the bond we all share.

May we celebrate this bond as we discover our purpose, live with equanimity, soak our minds, and serve our world,

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you’ll probably like...

[Letters from a Stoic](#)

[The Enchiridion](#)

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

[Loving What Is](#)

[The Fountainhead](#)

[Man’s Search for Meaning](#)

About the Author of “Meditations”

MARCUS AURELIUS



Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (called “the Wise”) (April 26, 121 – March 17, 180) was Roman Emperor from 161 to his death in 180. He was the last of the “Five Good Emperors,” and is also considered one of the most important Stoic philosophers. His tenure was marked by wars in Asia against a revitalized Parthian Empire, and with Germanic tribes along the Limes Germanicus into Gaul and across the Danube. A revolt in the East, led by Avidius Cassius, failed. Marcus Aurelius’ work *Meditations*, written on campaign between 170 and 180, is still revered as a literary monument to a government of service and duty and has been praised for its “exquisite accent and its infinite tenderness.” (from Wikipedia where you can learn more!)

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.