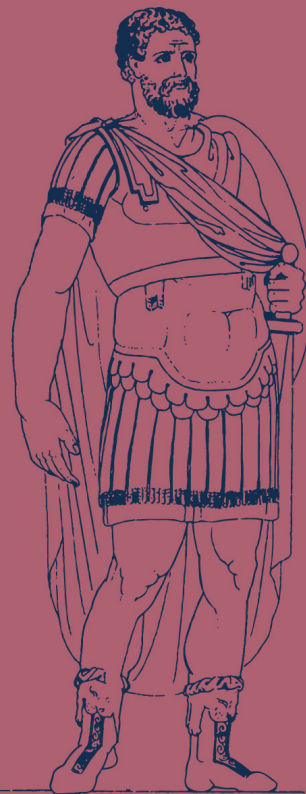


# SUMMARY

# LETTERS

# FROM A STOIC

## SENECA



# **Summary of “Letters From a Stoic” by Seneca**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How to cultivate the good life according to Roman philosophy.

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# Introduction

What do you remember about the ancient Romans? Chances are, like most of us, your encounters with them have been limited to high-school history and philosophy. We know they were important and they contributed so much to our history and culture, but you probably don't feel a connection with them. After all, why would you? This very book was written in the year 65 CE and that feels awfully removed from 2020. But as Seneca's letters will you, people have always been people: possessed of the same questions, struggles, hopes, and dreams. And who better to answer our questions than one of the world's greatest philosophical minds? By engaging with Seneca's 2,000-year-old letters over the course of this summary, you'll see that not only can Seneca help you, he was actually the author of the world's first self-help book!



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# How do You Define True Wisdom?

How would you define true wisdom? Would you say it's something that has to be inspired by a sense of the divine? Is it embodied by a religious text like the Bible or the Quran? Or is it something different altogether-- a sense of peace, of knowing the right thing to do? Seneca posits that wisdom can be a synonym for divinity and that the divine isn't something that's limited to the religious realm. Instead, it's a sense of purpose and meaning, the knowledge that we have a higher calling and a purpose for our existence in the world. As a result, divinity doesn't have to be inspired by a religious experience or calling; it's simply a part of us. According to Seneca, our souls are made of divinity in the way that stars are made of stardust.

But how do you access or define your soul? You can't, really. After all, we can't see it and we can't touch it, but philosophers like Seneca believe they're there, giving us a sense of meaning. But since it's impossible for us to point to a part of the body and say, "That right there-- that's my soul," Seneca argues that we can't really improve or take credit for our souls in the same way that we can be proud of other aspects of ourselves like our appearance or our character. So, because we can't access our souls, we have to devote our critical thought and attention to the aspects of our existence that we can improve: like our minds. The cultivation of the mind is deeply important to Stoic philosophers like Seneca and we're going to examine that in closer detail during this chapter.

So, why are our minds important? We know they are; we hear it all the time. We know it's important to go to school, to read, to learn, to take care of our mental health. But have you ever stopped to ask the question, "What makes my mind important?" Pondering those questions is one of the core tenets of Stoic philosophy and Seneca devoted a great deal of his life to finding those answers. He posits that the mind is of vital importance because it makes us who we are. It's also what makes us different from animals. Because even though we know that animals are intelligent and have the power to think and feel and make decisions, what sets humans



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apart is self-awareness. Your cat doesn't really have the mental capacity to conduct an evaluation of its moral landscape and think, "You know what? I'm a jerk. I should really work on that so I can be a better person. From now on, I'm going to be kinder and try to put myself in others' shoes." Quite simply, an animal just can't do that. (And--let's be honest-- knowing cats, they probably wouldn't even if they could!)

But as human beings, we do have the power to take a sort of moral inventory. We can evaluate our strengths and weaknesses and we can devote ourselves to self-improvement. We have the capacity to apply dedicated effort to the task of becoming our best selves. And because we have that ability, Seneca argues that it is our moral duty to become the best people we can be. We have a responsibility to cultivate our ability to think, to be rational, logical, and people of sound logic. We have a responsibility to think critically about the information we receive, to ask questions, and to form our own opinions. And most importantly, we have a responsibility to draw on the inherent divinity (or wisdom) that lies within us. Quite simply, because we exist, we have a responsibility to make something of ourselves.

That's because-- as corny as it sounds-- every person in the world is unique. And Seneca doesn't mean that in the touchy-feely way your grandma means it when she tells you you're special. No, Seneca is speaking purely from a foundation of science and logic, which states that there has never been a person exactly like you and there never will be again. There is no one else who possesses your exact combination of tastes, talents, struggles, and strengths. Even if you have a partner or best friend with whom you share very similar tastes, at the core, you're still two different people. And when you cultivate your mind, you become even more unique by virtue of strengthening the qualities that make you who you are.

Seneca posits that this can also help you discover your purpose in life. This is of vital importance because it directly addresses one of the primary questions of humanity: "What does it all mean?," "Why am I here?" or, "What's the meaning of life?" However we phrase it, the desire to know that our life has meaning is of utmost importance to every human being. We



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want to feel as though there's more to life than simply living and dying. We want to feel like we were put on this earth for a reason. That's why we often dedicate extensive time, money, and effort into pursuing therapy, religion, or recreational drugs in the hopes of finding something that will answer that question and give us peace. Unsurprisingly, a number of answers have popped up in response to this question. Every religion has a different take on the meaning of life and so does pretty much every philosopher and therapist.

Unfortunately, however, the plethora of available answers often creates more confusion. Left to flounder between multiple options, we often feel even more lost than before as we wonder whose solution is the right one. Seneca aims to cut through this noise by providing a simpler solution, one that can truly answer all our questions. He posits that the meaning of life is, quite simply, to pursue wisdom. According to Seneca, it's possible to cultivate or strengthen the wisdom that is inherently within us and use these efforts to become better, stronger, and wiser people. Put simply, this helps us become the best version of ourselves. Ergo, the meaning of life is to focus on becoming the best and wisest you that you can be. Sounds pretty simple, right? But how do we do it? And what does wisdom look like?

According to Seneca, wisdom means living in harmony with nature. And if that sounds a little too new-agey for you, don't worry; that's not what he means. While Seneca isn't advocating that we all go off the grid and disconnect completely, he is inviting us to look to nature for an example. As you've probably noticed, everything in nature has a balance. There is a rhythm and a balance to every season, to every change. Nature is also constantly in motion, constantly growing; in fact, the only true constant is change. This can therefore be read as both a metaphor and a standard for our own lives: if we are seeking true wisdom, then we will also seek growth. And rather than being upset by change, we will embrace it. That's because living in harmony with nature ultimately translates to being at peace with the cycle of life, even when that involves painful changes like growth and loss and death. Living in harmony with nature can also help us to be content with what we have. How? Well, as you've probably noticed, nature



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primarily seeks to grow and flourish. Trees, flowers, rivers, and birds aren't concerned with acquiring material things or outdoing each other with flashy displays of wealth or status. Instead, each is simply content to grow at its own pace. According to Seneca, we should do the same.



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# Philosophy and Wisdom

So, now that we've established that our life's purpose is the pursuit of wisdom, we're faced with a new question. How do we pursue wisdom? What practical steps must we take to find it? And how will we know when we're wise? Unsurprisingly, being a philosopher, Seneca's advice is closely linked to the study of philosophy. We often consider philosophy to be an aloof and complicated discipline, the realm of great minds like Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, but that's not necessarily the case. Put simply, philosophy is the study of fundamental truth. It examines questions about morality, ethics, the universe, knowledge, and existence in an effort to make sense of our world. So, when you think about it that way, philosophers are really just like everybody else: they're on a quest for meaning, just like the rest of us. The only difference is that they devote their entire lives to this pursuit because they believe that if we can answer these fundamental questions, we can access "the good life" that everybody craves.

But what is "the good life?" And how do we find it? Most people would say that the concept of "the good life" varies from person to person; for me, it might involve sitting on a beach with an unlimited supply of books, martinis, and a sense of peace. But for you, it might be a happy marriage, having happy and healthy kids, or the ability to watch football and eat potato chips all day long. But of course, all of these definitions are subjective; they vary according to what you or I think would bring us the most happiness. And tellingly, all of the definitions I mentioned are centered around feelings or material things. They involve us getting what we want but under no circumstances do they make us better people. That's why philosophers like Seneca would argue that none of those examples actually represent "the good life" at all.

Instead, he posits that good living can only be attained through the pursuit of truth. That's because philosophers believe that only truth can bring us lasting happiness. Here's how it works: if we can see the truth, we can make better decisions. And if we make better decisions, we can be happy. If you



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stop and think about it, this actually makes a lot of sense! After all, how often do we make the wrong choice because we think it will make us happy? How often do we turn to impulse purchases or meaningless sex in an attempt to fill the void within us? And how much of our lives do we waste on faulty beliefs, like the idea that drugs and alcohol will make us happy or that accumulating material goods will bring us lasting joy?

While that's not to say that sex, stimulants, or shopping are inherently evil or that they can't bring us temporary pleasure, Seneca is saying that they are poor substitutes for true happiness. So, instead of putting a band-aid on our problems, why not try to fix them by finding the truth? Why not invest in the development of your best and happiest self? Seneca believes that the study of philosophy can help us find the truth and make healthier choices by avoiding these common pitfalls. For example, if we frequently seek comfort in a bottle and crave the temporary high of alcohol, philosophy can help us understand that a few beers won't fix your insecurity or your anxiety or the problems in your marriage. Similarly, accumulating wealth isn't going to make you cooler, prettier, or more popular. Instead, it's more likely to result in you feeling empty because you've invested more in your stuff than in relationships.

The same is true of death and change. Most people are afraid of these things and while that fear is normal, Seneca argues that we don't have to be held captive by it. If we consider the insights of the previous chapter and view these worries through the lens of living in harmony with nature, we can get a new perspective. This will help us understand that death and change are both natural parts of the human life cycle and that we should embrace them instead of fearing them. Because we understand that these cycles are an intrinsic part of our development and growth, we can learn to accept the uncertainty and move on. And once we do so, we will find that we have been released from fear.

Living into this purpose can also help us get rid of bad habits that detract from life's meaning and steal our joy. Seneca was especially concerned with vices because he knew that everybody has them and we often allow them to



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hold us back. For example, many people struggle with procrastination. Even if we had an entire year to do a homework assignment, many of us would still procrastinate and do it in a rush the night before it's due. A lot of people are also lazy and prefer to while away the hours in bed instead of getting up and being productive. And by contrast, many people struggle with impulse control. These people often rush into foolish decisions without thinking, only to regret it later. And when you mix any of these vices with other toxic traits like drinking too much or impulse shopping, the results can sometimes be disastrous.

And when it comes to these traits, we don't need to spend a lot of time or mental effort analyzing them; we already know, without question, that these habits impede our growth and destroy our happiness. So, how can we get past them and live into our true purpose? What do we do when we're already set in our ways? The good news is that, as the author of the first self-help book, even in 67 CE, Seneca realized that everybody can change. No matter how many poor decisions you've made, it's never too early to course-correct and make the right choice. And he believed that philosophy can help with that too.

If we can attack bad habits and toxic traits with the knowledge that the pursuit of wisdom is our purpose, then we can know from the get-go that these pitfalls are in direct contrast to our true purpose. So, that means they have to go. We can once again rely on the strategy of living in harmony with nature to help us conquer these struggles. That's because most vices stem from fear, apathy, or the desire to be better than other people. For example, if we're lazy or tend to procrastinate, it's probably because we don't feel alive with purpose. It might also be because our lives feel so dull or stressful that we'd rather focus on moments of fleeting happiness, even if that's not what we're supposed to be doing right then. Likewise, if we're overly concerned with material things, our appearance, or our popularity, it's often because we have an unhealthy amount of vanity or pride or because we want to be perceived as being better than other people.



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But if we view these traits through the lens of our desire to live in harmony with nature, then we recognize that every vice is inherently at odds with that definition of growth. As we discussed in the previous chapter, nature does not seek competition with others and it doesn't procrastinate. Instead, nature works slowly, steadily, and triumphantly towards its purpose: growth. If we can tap into our sense of purpose and focus on becoming the best version of ourselves, then we can eagerly pursue wisdom and renew our zest for life. And in doing so, we'll discover that it doesn't matter if we appear cooler or smarter or better than anybody else; what matters is relinquishing our fears and insecurities in favor of growth.

Freedom from fear and insecurity is a vital part of philosophical teachings because philosophers like Seneca believe that this is how we grow. If we live in awareness of our purpose and are constantly in pursuit of wisdom, then our focus is on growth and moving forward. As a result of this shift in perspective, we are not chained to the past or bogged down by our fears or drifting purposelessly as we wonder what we're doing here.

And by removing those pitfalls and replacing them with something good, we can put ourselves on the path to lasting happiness. So, because philosophy teaches us to pursue wisdom and find true happiness, you can see why philosophers like Seneca consider it to be extremely valuable! And maybe you can also see how the study of philosophy can make a difference in your life.



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## Final Summary

Everybody wants to live the good life. And everybody wants their life to matter. The trouble is that we often don't know how to achieve either of those things. So, in our quest to find meaning and happiness, we often invest our lives and energy in a number of bad choices that will only bring us fleeting pleasure. Seneca believes that the study of philosophy can help us redirect and find lasting happiness. Because philosophy is the pursuit of fundamental truth and wisdom, we can use our knowledge of truth and wisdom to make better-- and therefore, happier-- decisions.

It may not always be easy; living in harmony with nature and pursuing growth requires a lot of work. It requires us to cull our bad habits and replace them with good ones, to embrace things that make us uncomfortable, like death and change. But if we have truth and wisdom as our guides, then we can follow their path to healthy choices. We can relinquish our fears and insecurities and become the best versions of ourselves.



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