

# SUMMARY

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## LIVES OF THE STOICS

BY RYAN HOLIDAY

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# **Summary of Lives of the Stoics by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hansel**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

What we can learn from the lives of the great Stoic  
philosophers.

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# Introduction

What's the meaning of life? We've all wrestled with that question at one point or another and wished we could find a simple answer. Our search for meaning is sometimes complicated by the fact that we have too many contradictory answers available. For example, every religion has its own take on the meaning of life and so does every self-help book and psychologist. They rarely agree with each other either and that often leaves us feeling even more confused. So, what path should we really follow? Whose advice would be most beneficial? Over the course of this summary, we'll learn what the great Stoic philosophers of history had to say in response to these questions.



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# Who Were The Stoics?

Before we dive into the meat of this book, it's important to begin by understanding who the Stoics were and why you should care about them. Today, we have millions of different voices clamoring for our attention; every magazine, commercial, and self-help book is attempting to convince us that they have the answers we're looking for. As a result of being besieged by so many different voices, we've learned to exercise discernment when it comes to assessing the sources we believe. So, if you're not already familiar with the Stoics, let's take a moment and learn why their philosophy is relevant.

In a blog post about this very book, author Ryan Holiday defines Stoicism by explaining: "Stoicism was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC, but was famously practiced by the likes of Epictetus, Cato, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The philosophy asserts that virtue (such as wisdom) is happiness and judgment is based on behavior, rather than words. That we don't control and cannot rely on external events, only ourselves and our responses. But at the very root of the thinking, there is a very simple, though not easy, way of living: take obstacles in your life and turn them into your advantage, control what you can and accept what you can't.

In the words of Epictetus: "In life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, but the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find good and bad? In me, in my choices." Amazingly we still have access to these ideas, despite the fact that many of the greatest Stoics never wrote anything down for publication. Cato definitely didn't. Marcus Aurelius never intended for *Meditations* to be anything but personal. Seneca's letters were, well, letters and Epictetus' thoughts come to us by way of a note-taking student.

And so it was from their example, their actions, we find real philosophy. Because other than their common study of the philosophy, the Stoics were all men of action—and I don't think this is a coincidence. Marcus Aurelius was emperor of the most powerful empire in the history of the world. Cato, the moral example for many philosophers, defended the Roman republic

with Stoic bravery until his defiant death. Even Epictetus, the lecturer, had no cushy tenure—he was a former slave. And this shouldn't really be that surprising. The modern day philosopher and writer Nassim Nicholas Taleb defines a Stoic as someone who, “transforms fear into prudence, pain into transformation, mistakes into initiation and desire into undertaking.”

Using this definition as a model we can see that throughout the centuries Stoicism has been a common thread through some of history's great leaders. It has been practiced by Kings, presidents, artists, writers and entrepreneurs. Both historical and modern men illustrate Stoicism as a way of life. Prussian King, Frederick the Great, was said to ride with the works of the Stoics in his saddlebags because they could, in his words, “sustain you in misfortune.” Meanwhile, Montaigne, the politician and essayist, had a line from Epictetus carved into the beam above the study in which he spent most of his time.

The founding fathers were also inspired by the philosophy. George Washington was introduced to Stoicism by his neighbors at age seventeen, and afterwards, put on a play about Cato to inspire his men in that dark winter at Valley Forge. Whereas Thomas Jefferson had a copy of Seneca on his nightstand when he died. The economist Adam Smith's theories on the interconnectedness of the world—capitalism—were significantly influenced by the Stoicism that he studied as a schoolboy, under a teacher who had translated Marcus Aurelius' works. The political thinker, John Stuart Mill, wrote of Marcus Aurelius and Stoicism in his famous treatise *On Liberty*, calling it “the highest ethical product of the ancient mind.”

The list of those influenced by the Stoics goes on. Eugène Delacroix, the renowned French Romantic artist (known best for his painting *Liberty Leading the People*) was an ardent Stoic, referring to it as his “consoling religion.” Toussaint Louverture, himself a former slave who challenged an emperor by leading the Haitian revolution, read and was deeply influenced by the works of Epictetus. Theodore Roosevelt, after his presidency, spent eight months exploring (and nearly dying in) the unknown jungles of the Amazon, and of the eight books he brought on the journey, two were Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* and Epictetus' *Enchiridion*.



Indeed, Teddy seems to represent the temperance and self control of the philosophy beautifully when he said, “What such a man needs is not courage but nerve control, cool headedness. This he can get only by practice.” Likewise he expressed the necessity of action advocated by the Stoics when he famously remarked, “We must all wear out or rust out, everyone of us. My choice is to wear out.” Today’s leaders are no different, with many finding their inspiration from the ancient texts. Bill Clinton rereads Marcus Aurelius every single year, while Wen Jiabao, the former prime minister of China, claims that Meditations is one of two books he travels with and has read it more than one hundred times over the course of his life.

You see, Stoicism—and philosophy—are not the domains of idle professors. They are the succor of the successful, and the men and women of action. As Thoreau put it: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school...it is to solve some of the problems of life not only theoretically, but practically.” The mantle is ours to pick up and carry and do with what we can.”

So, now that we have this brief overview of Stoicism in the author’s own words, it’s time to really delve beneath the surface and learn what the lives of the great Stoic philosophers can teach us.



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# We Can Harness the Power of Our Minds to Cultivate Clarity in an Age of Distraction

We live in an age of digital distraction. Whether it's the constant onslaught of new messages pinging into your inbox, 5,000 Facebook notifications, or a bombardment of new work emails, we are constantly besieged by distractions. As a result, it's hardly surprising that we struggle to cut through the noise. These distractions can also impair our sense of clarity, interfere with our budding self-awareness, and make it tough for us to concentrate long enough to cultivate self-improvement. The philosophers of second century Rome couldn't have imagined the distractions future generations would face, but their advice remains scathingly relevant today.

That's because they knew how important it was to resist two of life's major pitfalls: temptation and distraction. But how do we do that? To answer this question, we can turn to the writings of Marcus Aurelius, a famous Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher. Marcus Aurelius had a unique solution for solving the problem of distraction: he suggested that we really try to live each day as if it was our last. That might sound overly simplistic or a bit cliché, but if you really think about it, that logic would orchestrate a massive shift in our perspective! After all, what do we say when we think about trying to make the most out of life? We ask, "What would you do if you only had 24 hours left to live?" The prospect of losing our time on earth motivates us to jump into hyper-speed as we're suddenly consumed with the desire to make the most out of every second.

If we thought we only have 24 hours to live, we might suddenly start working faster, more efficiently, and giving our best to the tasks ahead. We might put more of ourselves into our relationships. We would remind people that they're important to us and show loved ones how much we care. We would think differently about our impact on the world and the legacy we'll leave behind. Now, what if we started applying that energy to our daily lives? How much of a difference would that make? Would we continue to waste time scrolling through Facebook when we should be finishing a report? Would we

allow ourselves to be distracted by every little thing throughout the day? Or would we find ourselves thinking, “Every second is precious, I can’t let myself get distracted!” If we did, we might find that the task of time management suddenly becomes easier!

But that strategy might not work for you. So, if you think you might struggle to sustain that illusion for a prolonged period of time or it simply might not give you the boost you need, there are some other tips that you can try. Marcus Aurelius also advised creating your own personal mantra-- something you can repeat to yourself to help yourself stay on track. For example, you could say something like, “I have control over my own thoughts. I do not have to be ruled by distraction.” But that’s just an example; you can adapt your personal mantra to say anything that best suits you. If it helps keep you on task, it’s doing the trick! But if neither of these options work for you, relinquishing control can also be another helpful strategy.

I will be the first to admit that we often succumb to worry because we think it will help. We worry because we’re afraid of the outcome and because we feel helpless if we don’t turn the scenario over and over in our minds, preparing for all the possible worst outcomes. But unfortunately, you’ve probably noticed that worry never helps. In fact, not only is it never helpful, it just serves to keep us distressed and distracted. And in doing so, it steals our time, our energy, and our joy. But if we can make peace with the fact that we simply can’t control some things, we can free ourselves from the shackles of worry. This in turn will help us to focus!

If this seems like a lot of focus on the powers of the mind, you’re right! The mind was incredibly important to the Stoics because this school of philosophy believed that the mind was the only thing we could control. We can’t control our souls or our eternal destiny, we can’t control our appearance, and there’s only so much we can do to control our physical health, but we can control our minds and the development of our moral character. So, if we turn our attention to the things we can control-- our thoughts-- the Stoics believed that we could become better and healthier people. We can also learn to discover peace through logic because if we find

purpose in pursuing truth and cultivating clarity, we can relinquish needless stress.

Marcus Aurelius even believed that we could use this pursuit of truth to cultivate a healthy daily routine. For example, many of us begin our days by worrying about things we can't control: the traffic during our morning commute, the outcome of a business meeting, or someone else's actions. But if we implement Stoicism in our daily routines, we can start each day by reminding ourselves what we are and are not in control of. And the truth is that we can only really control our actions and reactions. Accepting this can feel empowering and it can help us to start the day with renewed vigor and peace. And, following Marcus Aurelius' advice, remind yourself of this three times a day! You can start first thing in the morning when you wake up, again at lunch to give yourself a midday refresher, and at night before you fall asleep. By doing so, you can fall asleep confident in the knowledge that you've done your best with what you can control and that the rest isn't up to you anyway!

Over time, this can also help you to improve your mental health. That's because the techniques employed by Marcus Aurelius are actually the same techniques that are implemented in a therapeutic practice called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (or CBT). CBT operates on the premise that we need to look inward, analyze our thoughts, and develop our self-awareness in relation to the effect these thoughts have on us. This in turn enables us to recognize toxic thought patterns and restructure them so we can eliminate them in favor of more productive coping mechanisms. So, if you follow the teachings of Stoicism, you're actually getting a little bit of free therapy! (Even if the early Stoics didn't realize their teachings would one day become common practice in the field of mental health!)



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## Final Summary

Today, we often think of philosophy as being dull or boring. We roll our eyes when people wax philosophical and argue that we have nothing to learn from long-dead old men in togas. But as the authors' insights demonstrate, we can actually learn a lot from the lives of the early Stoic philosophers!

Although this book only captures a fraction of the insights we can glean from the authors' collection of Stoic wisdom, it offers a valuable sample of the lessons we can absorb. For example, from this summary, we can learn the importance of cultivating clarity and motivation in our daily lives by living as though every day is our last. We can also benefit from the Stoic belief that we are the masters of our own destiny. By implementing these beliefs in our daily lives, we can increase our clarity, productivity, and peace. And if you want to learn more about the wisdom of the Stoics, you should check out the full version of this book!



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