Stoicism Study Guide

Virtue, reason, the dichotomy of control and the good life

Use this guide to: get the big picture fast, learn the key terms with everyday examples, choose what to read first, and test yourself. Full articles are at libraryofphilosophy.com/stoicism.html.

1. Stoicism at a glance

Fact	Detail
School name	Stoicism, from the *Stoa Poikile* ("painted porch") in Athens, where its founder taught
Founded	c. 300 BCE, Athens, by Zeno of Citium (c. 334–c. 262 BCE)
Main periods	Early Stoa (c. 300–200 BCE), Middle Stoa (c. 150–50 BCE), Roman Stoa (1st–2nd centuries CE)
Three parts of philosophy	Logic, physics (the study of nature and the cosmos) and ethics
Main thinkers	Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus; Panaetius, Posidonius; Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius
Core claim	Virtue (excellence of character and reasoning) is the only true good and is enough for a good life
Best known for	Dichotomy of control, the four cardinal virtues, living according to nature, cosmopolitanism, daily practices
Start reading with	Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (Handbook) or Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

2. The big idea in 60 words

For Stoics, a good life depends not on wealth, reputation or pleasure but on the quality of our character and reasoning. Events are not good or bad in themselves; our judgments about them cause distress. By focusing on what is up to us (our own choices) and acting with virtue and concern for others, we can live well whatever happens.

3. Three phases of Stoicism

Scholars usually divide the school into three periods. This is a helpful simplification, not a strict rule.

Phase	Core focus	Key figures and works	Key concepts
Early Stoa (c. 300–200 BCE)	Building a complete system of logic, physics and ethics	Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes, Chrysippus. Their writings survive mostly as fragments and quotations.	Virtue as the only good, living according to nature, logos, fate, the passions as judgments
Middle Stoa (c. 150–50 BCE)	Adapting Stoicism to Roman life and making its demands more practical	Panaetius, Posidonius; Cicero's *On Duties* draws on Panaetius	Duties tied to roles, a more practical ethics, links with Plato and Aristotle
Roman Stoa (1st–2nd centuries CE)	Stoicism as a practical way of life	Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*; Epictetus, *Discourses* and *Enchiridion*; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*	Dichotomy of control, daily exercises, duty, cosmopolitanism, resilience

4. Key terms with everyday examples

Term	Plain-English meaning	Everyday example
Logos	The rational order of the universe, which Stoics link with nature and providence; humans share in it through reason.	Seeing yourself as part of a larger whole that you can understand through reason.
Living according to nature	Living in line with both universal nature and our own rational, social nature.	Acting as a thinking, cooperative person rather than a slave to impulse.
Eudaimonia	Flourishing, or a good flow of life; the Stoics say it comes from virtue.	Feeling settled in who you are whatever praise or setbacks arrive.
Virtue (*arete*)	Excellence of character and reasoning; the only true good.	Telling the truth even when it costs you.
Four cardinal virtues	Wisdom, justice, courage and temperance.	Judge carefully, treat people fairly, face hard tasks, resist overindulgence.
Dichotomy of control	Some things are up to us (judgments, impulses, desires, actions); others are not (body, reputation, wealth, other people's actions).	You can prepare well for an exam, but you cannot control the result.
Prohairesis	Epictetus's word for the faculty of choice or will, the core of what is truly ours.	Choosing how to answer an insult.
Impressions and assent	Things first appear to us as impressions; we then agree to them (assent) or withhold agreement.	Pausing before accepting "that message means they are angry with me."
Indifferents (*adiaphora*)	Things neither good nor bad in themselves, such as health, wealth and reputation.	Losing your job is hard, but it does not make you a worse person.
Preferred indifferents	Natural advantages we may reasonably pursue, as long as virtue comes first.	Seeking a good job without cheating to get it.
Passions (*pathe*)	Distressing emotions the Stoics treat as mistaken judgments, such as excessive fear or anger.	Road rage as the belief "this should not happen to me."
Good feelings (*eupatheiai*)	Healthy emotions of the wise person: joy, caution and rational wishing.	Calm joy in doing well, without clinging to the result.
Apatheia	Freedom from destructive passions, not from all feeling. It is not the same as modern "apathy."	Staying steady in a crisis.
Oikeiosis	The process by which our concern widens outward from ourselves to family, community and humanity.	Caring first for family, then neighbours, then strangers.
Cosmopolitanism	The idea that all humans belong to one shared community.	Caring about the welfare of people far away.
Premeditation of evils (*premeditatio malorum*)	Rehearsing possible setbacks in advance so they cause less shock.	Imagining a delayed flight and planning a calm response.
View from above	Imagining yourself and your problems from a wide, cosmic perspective.	Zooming out in your mind to see a worry at its true scale.

5. The dichotomy of control in one picture

Epictetus opens the *Enchiridion* by saying that some things are up to us and some are not. Stoic practice is to put effort into the first group and meet the second with acceptance. This is not passivity: we still study, work and take part in public life, but we treat results as outside our command and treat our character as the true measure of success. Cicero reports a Stoic image for this: a good archer does everything right, yet whether the arrow hits is not fully theirs to decide.

UP TO US

Where choice, effort and virtue live

- Our judgments and opinions
- Our impulses and intentions
- Our desires and aversions
- Our own actions and choices
- How we respond to events

Put your effort here

Meet these with acceptance

NOT UP TO US

Accept these; act well regardless

- Our body, health and death
- Reputation and status
- Wealth and property
- Other people's actions
- Outcomes and chance events

6. Timeline

Year	Event
c. 334 BCE	Zeno born in Citium, Cyprus
c. 300 BCE	Zeno founds the Stoa in Athens
c. 230 BCE	Chrysippus becomes head of the school
155 BCE	Diogenes of Babylon visits Rome on an Athenian embassy
44 BCE	Cicero writes *On Duties*, drawing on Panaetius
c. 4 BCE	Seneca born
c. 50 CE	Epictetus born
c. 62–65 CE	Seneca writes *Letters to Lucilius*; he dies in 65 CE under Nero
c. 100 CE	Epictetus teaches at Nicopolis; Arrian records his *Discourses*
161–180 CE	Marcus Aurelius reigns as Roman emperor
c. 170–180 CE	Marcus Aurelius writes the *Meditations* while on campaign
1584	Justus Lipsius publishes *On Constancy*, reviving Stoic ideas
1955	Albert Ellis begins developing rational emotive therapy, citing the Stoics
2008	William Irvine publishes *A Guide to the Good Life*
2012	First Stoic Week held by the Modern Stoicism project

7. Where to start reading

Order	Book	Why read it	Difficulty
1	Epictetus, *Enchiridion*	A short, direct handbook built around the dichotomy of control.	Easy
2	Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*	Private notes from a Roman emperor on duty, impermanence and character.	Easy to moderate
3	Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life* or Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic*	Modern introductions that turn Stoic ideas into practice.	Easy
4	Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*; *Letters on Ethics*	Warm, practical writing on time, anger, friendship and death.	Moderate
5	Epictetus, *Discourses*	Fuller classroom talks recorded by his student Arrian.	Moderate
6	Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*	Reads Marcus Aurelius through the three disciplines and Stoicism as a way of life.	Moderate
7	Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1	Source texts and commentary on early Stoic logic, physics and ethics.	Hard

8. Common misconceptions

- **“Stoics suppress all emotion.”** They aimed to remove destructive passions that rest on false judgments, while valuing good feelings such as joy, goodwill and caution.
- **“Stoicism means passive resignation.”** The dichotomy of control is about where to direct effort. Stoics urged duty and public service: Marcus Aurelius ruled an empire.
- **“Stoics think health, money and success are worthless.”** They call them indifferents for happiness, yet some are “preferred” and may be pursued, with virtue coming first.
- **“Stoicism is just a self-help technique.”** It is a full system of logic, physics and ethics. Modern advice draws mainly on its ethics.
- **“Stoics only care about themselves.”** They stress cosmopolitanism and duties to family, community and humanity.

9. Main criticisms

Hegel argued that Stoic freedom is abstract because it retreats into thought and leaves the world unchanged. Martha Nussbaum argues that trying to remove attachment-based emotions such as grief risks devaluing love and loss. Others say the unshakeable wise person is an unattainable ideal, and that the claim that virtue alone suffices for happiness is too demanding; Aristotelians hold that external goods matter. Some scholars also worry that modern popularizations reduce Stoicism to productivity tips. Defenders reply that Stoic practice is about steady progress, not perfection, and that it stresses care for others and the common good.

10. Test yourself

- In your own words, what is the dichotomy of control? Give one example.
- Why do Stoics say virtue is the only true good?
- Name the four cardinal virtues and give an everyday example of each.
- How do Stoics understand emotions such as anger, and how should that change the way we respond?
- What is the difference between a preferred indifferent and a true good?
- Explain the three disciplines of desire, assent and action.
- Why is “Stoicism means suppressing emotion” a misleading summary?
- Choose a current setback and analyse it with a Stoic exercise such as premeditation of evils or the view from above.

Answer hints

1. Some things (judgments, choices) are up to us and others (outcomes, other people’s opinions) are not; put effort into the first and accept the second. 2. Only virtue is always good and always within our control; external goods can be used well or badly. 3. Wisdom, justice, courage, temperance; examples vary (judging carefully, paying a fair wage, speaking up, resisting overindulgence). 4. Passions arise from mistaken judgments, so examine the impression and withhold assent before reacting. 5. Preferred indifferents such as health are naturally advantageous but do not decide happiness; virtue does. 6. Desire: want only what is up to you. Assent: test impressions before agreeing. Action: act for the common good. 7. Stoics aim to remove destructive passions, not all feeling, and they cultivate good feelings. 8. Answers vary; ground them in the dichotomy of control or a named exercise.

Sources and further reading

- Epictetus. *Enchiridion* and *Discourses*.
- Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*.
- Seneca. *Letters on Ethics*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- Hadot, P. *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Stoicism”: plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/
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