

## What are the core principles of Stoicism? A brief explanation of the main Stoic beliefs.



*Last Words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius by Eugène Delacroix (1844)*

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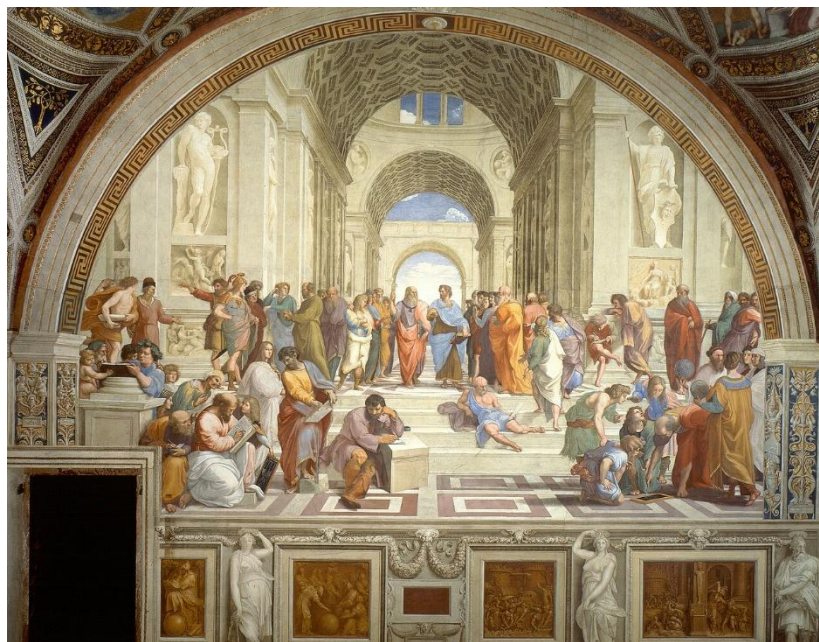
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*Raphael, The School of Athens (1509-1511)*

## **Stoicism History**

Stoicism was founded by Xeno of Citium in the 3rd century BC. Xeno taught publicly in the covered marketplace, which is where the name comes from (stoa pokile - painted porch). However, the most famous stoics are Roman: Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

The goal of stoicism is Eudaimonia, sometimes translated as human flourishing. Stoicism is practical and has a logically consistent set of exercises towards this end. Stoics are often portrayed as cold or passionless, however this is due to a mistranslation of the word passion which in the Stoic context means suffering.

Eudaimonia can be achieved by observing nature and acting in accordance with it. It proposes that only certain things are under individual control, and to base happiness on what is not under control is folly. Thought, speech and action are considered controllable, therefore Eudaimonia can be achieved by making virtuous choices, while suffering and evil is the result of ignorance.

## ***What does living well constitute for the Stoics?***

### **1. Living well lies in doing what his nature seeks**

"We suffer more in imagination than in reality." – Seneca

"Some things are up to us and some things are not up to us." Epictetus's Dichotomy of Control

The above sayings summaries the core principle that we are best to focus our attention on what is up to us: our actions, thoughts and beliefs. Otherwise, we suffer.

The Stoics saw the cosmos as being harmonious, governed by reason (logos). The universe is perceived as one rational system. Following the nature means accepting reality, created by this reasonable system, rather than bending it to our wishes. Another significant part of this tenet is accepting our social responsibility. Humans are inextricably linked to the universe and to each other. Thus, fulfilling our roles in society, helping the community, also play a key part in avoiding an imbalance between us and our surroundings.

The stoics considered external factors such as wealth, popularity, sensual pleasure as indifferent. The stoics did admit that some indifferents were preferable, such as

health, good company or shelter. However, the standard for whether an action was correct was not whether it would lead to pleasure, but whether it was virtuous.

The classic stoic virtues are wisdom, courage, justice and temperance.

The stoic ideal was that any person could become wise through examining their thoughts and actions, and so remain peaceful and cheerful while even if in physical pain, in the face of death, ridicule or disgrace. This did not leave the stoic passive in the face of difficult situations, rather able to choose a wise course of action with peace of mind and indifferent to external personal consequences.

### ***What is the main path to happiness for the Stoics?***

## **2. Virtue as the SUMMUM BONUM (the highest good)**

The main underlying thread of one's life, what can truly bring happiness is attaining virtue. The Stoics interpreted it as a pursuit of perfecting one's reason; they saw it as a form of knowledge. Wisdom, Justice, Courage, and Self-Control are the main pillars of virtuous living. External factors are in themselves neutral; we humans interpret them. By pursuing a virtuous life and attaining the necessary knowledge, one truly achieves alignment within themselves and with the cosmos.

### ***Is happiness attainable for everyone according to the Stoics?***

## **3. Happiness is fully in our power**

Each of us possesses the tools to find fulfilment and reach the ultimate goal of life: happiness. If one is able to attain the necessary discernment and knowledge to lead a virtuous life, no external factor can influence their wellbeing. We possess the necessary attributes to achieve this state; thus, it depends solely on us to get there.

***What is the main way to approach what we see, and experience based on Stoic beliefs?***

#### **4. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can choose our reaction**

Everything that one sees or experiences inevitably leaves a mark on us. Despite the fact that one cannot simply erase the impression that something leaves on her, she is still ultimately in control of assessing its worth. The object or action in question is considered in relation to its contribution to the system that governs the world. This assessment is the core part of making a decision about how one should behave in a given situation.

‘The cosmos as a whole is providentially designed, and so is as good as it can be, and so its parts are as good as they can be, and so our attitude towards every part ought to be acceptance.’<sup>1</sup>

***How do the Stoics approach Pathê (passion)?***

#### **5. To suffer a passion is to be in conflict with nature**

Stoics consider passions to be irrational reactions that are not in accordance with the rules of the cosmos. They are roadblocks in to achieving a happy state. Since we are in charge of our reactions, we should be careful with attaching the meaning to occurrences or objects that could be against their purpose, as prescribed to them by universal laws.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcus-aurelius/#LivSto>

***How do the Stoics see our position as humans within the universe?***

## **6. Cosmopolis: We are all part of a whole**

No individual is ever truly alone. The Stoics believed that by virtue of our shared rationality, all human beings, together with Zeus, make up the citizenry of one universal city or cosmopolis. All humans are bound by his universal laws and should strive to live in accordance with the perfect system that governs all of us.

***Are individual and collective well-being connected according to Stoics?***

## **7. Interdependence and Social responsibility**

‘Wherever one lives, one should live as a citizen of the cosmic city’<sup>2</sup>

Our well-being depends on the well-being of others. Stoics believe that there is no dichotomy between the good of an individual and the good of the whole community. Each member is an essential part of the whole; therefore, contributing to the societal good inadvertently helps each one of us.



*Boethius and Philosophy, Mattia Preti (17th century)*

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Aurelius, Meditations (x.15)

**Sources:**

- 1) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Meditations-by-Marcus-Aurelius>
- 2) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcus-aurelius/#LivSto>
- 3) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/#Ethi>
- 4) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall1999/entries/stoicism/#Phil>
- 5) <https://dailystoic.com/9-core-stoic-beliefs/>
- 6) <https://dailystoic.com/7-stoic-tenets-to-keep-in-mind-today/>
- 7) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stoicism>



*Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, British Museum*