



Aromatherapy and Stoicism

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AROMATHERAPY AND STOICISM

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INTRODUCTION

We all desire happiness, tranquility, wisdom, a stress-free life, and inner peace. We all want to be resilient in challenging times. However, it seems more elusive than ever to attain these states of mind. What if I told you there was a simple way to achieve all these things?

What is the secret?

The secret is in these words:

Some things are within your control and somethings are not.

This is a quote by Epictetus, one of the most famous Stoic philosophers.

Yes, the simple way to achieve happiness, a stress-free life, and inner peace is to embrace the philosophy of Stoicism.

I was recently surprised by this introduction by Ussher in *Stoicism Today: Selected Writings*:

I found the powerful prose of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and especially Epictetus mesmerizing. More importantly, I realized that what they were saying was just as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 2nd century ancient Rome.

I too have been awe-struck by the relevance of the words of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; how could something written over 2,000 years ago still be so relevant nowadays.

Stoicism is a robust philosophy and way of life that can cultivate virtue and help us to deal with life's challenges and lead a purposeful life. Stoicism is a practical philosophy because it does not shy away from the difficult realities of life and provides guidance on how to live in the face of these very difficulties.

There are now so many books and website promoting stoicism and they all suggest that Stoicism will deliver us happiness, alleviate our stress, helps us achieve a good life, promote resilience and inner peace?

The main reason why there is such a fascination in Stoicism is not because of its ancient history or deep philosophy, but because it works!

Stoicism has helped many people get through seriously challenging times in their lives – perhaps one of the most famous in recent times is United States Navy vice admiral James Bond Stockdale, who studied Epictetus while at Stanford University. He states that Epictetus helped him to survive many years in the so-called “Hanoi Hilton,” where he was held and tortured for more than seven years during the Vietnam War.

John Stellar, lecturer in Philosophy at Royal Holloway, University of London and author of *Lessons in Stoicism – What Ancient Philosophers Teach Us About How to Live*, asks;

What if someone told you that much of the suffering in your life was simply due to the way you think about things? I don't mean physical suffering like pain or hunger, but all the other things that negatively colour one's life: anxiety, frustration, fear, disappointment, anger, general discontent. What if someone claimed that they could show you how to avoid all of this? And what if they said that these things were in fact the product of looking at the world in a mistaken way? What if it turned out that the ability to avoid all of these things was completely within your control?

He explains this is exactly what the great Roman Stoics such as Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius promoted. Their work really is about how to live a good life – how to understand our place in the world, how to cope when things do not go well, how to manage our emotions, how to behave towards others, and how to live a good life worthy of a rational human being.

Yes, Stoicism is a philosophy; however, Stellar also regards it as a therapy for the mind. This got me thinking – there is so much in common between aromatherapy and Stoicism.

In this blog I will explain how why Stoicism is such an amazing practical philosophy, and we will examine how aromatherapy can help us embrace the philosophy of Stoicism and how to use the three beautiful blends - Grace, Wisdom and Tranquility which embody the virtues of Stoicism.

WHAT IS STOICISM?

Stoicism was one of the four principal schools of philosophy in ancient Athens, alongside Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum and Epicurus's Garden, where it flourished for some 250 years. It was popular among Romans, attracting admirers such as the Roman Statesman Seneca, the ex-slave Epictetus, and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The work of these three authors has survived two thousand years and come down to us from the Renaissance through to the present day.

Most of contemporary books on stoicism have drawn on the wisdom of three main stoic philosophers – Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. If you are interested in learning more about Stoicism, I recommend go straight to their books which are the three major surviving sources of Stoic literature;

- *Discourses* of Epictetus are transcripts of his discussions with groups of students at his philosophical school, where he can be seen answering questions and employing Socratic questioning, in a way that could be compared to group therapy or a self-help workshop.
- *Mediations* of Marcus Aurelius are a private record of his own contemplative practices, like a Stoic self-help or therapy journal.
- *Letters from a Stoic*, by Seneca show him offering advice and support to others. Many are addressed to his friend Lucilius. Here Seneca is acting in a manner comparable to an individual therapist or life coach.

These books are readily available in English and it is worth checking them out if you are keen to get right into stoicism.

While the philosophy of Stoicism is complex, the work of the Roman Stoics focused on practical advice and guidance for those trying to achieve wellbeing or happiness. Sellars lists four central ideas to understanding Stoicism:

- *Value*: The only thing that is truly good is an excellent mental state, identified with virtue and reason. This is the only thing that can guarantee our happiness. External things such as money, success and fame can never bring us happiness. While there is nothing wrong with these things, they do not hold value and while they may form part of a good life, often the pursuit of these things damages the only thing that can bring us happiness: an excellent, rational mental state.
- *Emotions*: Our emotions are the result of our judgements, of thinking that something good or bad is happening or is about to happen. Many of our negative emotions are based on mistaken judgements, but because they are due to our judgements it means they are within our control. Change the judgements and you change the emotions. It is a misconception that Stoics repress their emotions. The aim is to overcome harmful, negative emotions that are based on mistaken judgements while embracing positive emotions. Stellar reminds us that it is also important to remember that Stoics don't think that someone can just click their fingers and make emotions change. You cannot just say "I'm going to think about this differently, and see one's anger or grief magically disappear. However the more you become aware of your emotional responses, the more you will be able to overcome harmful, negative emotions.
- *Nature*: The stoics suggest we ought to live in harmony with nature. This means that we should acknowledge that we are but a small part of a much larger, organic whole, shaped by

processes that are ultimately out of our control. There is nothing to be gained from resisting these larger processes except anger, frustration, and disappointment.

- *Control*: there are some things we have control over (our judgements and our mental state) and some things that we do not (external processes and objects). Much of our happiness is caused by confusing these two categories: thinking we have control over something that ultimately, we do not.

WHY ALL THE INTEREST IN STOICISM NOW?

What can an ancient philosophy from over 2,000 years ago teach us about living a better life in the 21st century?

Delaney reminds us that the pandemic was a perfect example that exposed our lack of control. I agree with Delaney when she points out that we did not cope very well with the lack of control. Rates of drinking and mental illness spiked when our control over our environment was suddenly subjected to harsh laws and policing and the risk of catching a deadly new virus.

With a world that is becoming increasingly chaotic and unpredictable. We are constantly bombarded with news of natural disasters, global warming, wars, and other tragedies. This may make us feel as if we have little control over our lives. Stoicism offers us a way to cope with this chaos by teaching us to focus on what we can control, which is our thoughts and our actions.

The advice of the [modernstoicism.com](https://www.modernstoicism.com) website best sums up the simplicity and the key fundamental principles on how Stoicism can help us:

- Acknowledge that we cannot control much of what goes on in our life.
- See that our emotions are the product of how we think about the world.
- Accept that bad things are bound to happen to us from time to time, just as they do to everyone else.
- See ourselves as part of a larger whole, not an isolated individual; part of human race, part of nature.
- Think of everything we have as simply on loan, that will one day be taken back.

Stoicism is a philosophy that helps us reduce anxiety and stress, build our resilience, provides a path to self-improvement and allows us to find happiness:

- *Resilience* – Stoicism teaches us that we can overcome challenges and setback by focusing on what we can control and accepting what we cannot control.

- *Self-improvement* – Stoicism teaches us that we can become better people by practicing virtue and developing our character.
- *Happiness* – Stoicism teaches us that we can find happiness in the present moment by living in accordance with nature and by being grateful for what we have.

Stellar explains that if we tie our happiness to achieving a goal, we run the risk of being frequently disappointed, but if we make our goal simply to do the best we can, then nothing can get in our way.

Stoicism has been referred to as a philosophy for modern times.

For example, reading Seneca's letters to Lucilius was like reading a personal letter from Seneca to myself. Seneca clearly articulated his philosophy to his friend Lucilius, who was experiencing anxiety and was seeking advice on leading a better life. Seneca states in one of his letters;

You will hear many say: "after my fiftieth year, I will retire into leisure. And after my sixtieth year, I will give up all public duties." But what guarantee do you have, I ask, that your life will last longer? Who will allow your plans to proceed just as you desire? Aren't you ashamed just to save yourself the little that remains of life and to develop your mind using only time that can't be spent on business? How late it is to begin living just when life must end!

Seneca, Letter 6.1

While this was written over 2,000 years ago, Seneca's advice is so pertinent now as it was back then.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

While I was familiar with the ancient Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers, I had not paid much attention to Stoicism as I felt it was an antiquated philosophy that expected us to put up a brave face when faced with adversity - someone who acts with no emotion and the need to live a frugal life.

My perception of Stoicism was distorted by the way the English language has appropriated the term 'stoic.' The word is often used to describe someone who is unemotional or indifferent to pain or pleasure. This is far from the truth as I was soon to learn. Stoicism does not teach one to suppress our emotions, in fact, Stoics believe that emotions are an important part of the human experience, but they should be controlled and directed in a positive way.

My journey in understanding stoicism began in the middle of the pandemic when I was feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and fear as we struggled to keep our head above water in business, and there was and still is a real pending threat that we may lose everything.

I came across Bridgette Delaney's book in a book review in the *Guardian Reasons not to worry – How to be stoic in chaotic times*. Delaney explained how Stoicism became so relevant to her life experiences and the last few years with the pandemic and the lockdowns. This really resonated with me as so many of us were having similar experiences.

It was the perfect antidote to deal with my personal self-doubt, fear, and anxiety. One of the first things Stoicism taught me was the futility of my anxiety. Stoicism taught me that it is how we respond to life's daily challenges that matters and just doing this helped me to be more resilient.

A useful tool that the Stoics taught us is the 'control test,' otherwise known as the *Dichotomy of Control*. Before taking any action, the Stoics assessed what they could and could not control about a situation, and focused their attention on areas they could control.

Delaney explains the control test is the cornerstone of Stoicism. Epictetus states in the opening lines of the *Enchiridion*:

Some things are in our control and others are not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and in one word, whatever are not our own actions.

It is tempting to think that Stoicism means that we have little control over things we cannot directly control, for example climate change.

However, Delaney explains we can use Stoicism when dealing with the bigger issues. In regards to climate change, Delaney states we should focus on those things that we can control. For example, you may:

- talk to friends and experts – and acting on good advice and sound science
- taking part in community and grass-roots action groups
- voting
- becoming informed
- using reason and rationality, and avoiding fake news
- planting trees
- divesting from fossil fuels in my investments including superannuation
- developing your own sustainability practices such as flying less and taking public transport.

A PHILOSOPHY FOR THOSE WHO ARE WELL OFF?

In the beginning, I was cynical and questioned whether Stoicism was for the wealthy and powerful individuals. After all, Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of the most powerful country in world at the time, Seneca was a wealthy Roman statesman, and while Epictetus was a former slave, he also became a famous and wealthy teacher in his time.

As I learned more, it became apparent that they did not teach that material possessions and wealth are not inherently bad. They simply taught that we should not become attached to them, because they are ultimately out of our control.

The Stoics knew that wealth, status, and possession could be taken away from them at any time, and they did not want their happiness to depend on them.

Here are some quotes from the Stoic philosophers that highlight this:

Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants. – Epictetus.

Happiness is not achieved by possessing great wealth, power, or fame. It is achieved by living in harmony with your true self. - Marcus Aurelius.

It is not what we have, but what we enjoy, that makes happiness. - Seneca

It is best to consider that the Stoics were able to use their wealth and power in a virtuous way. They however used their resources to help others and to make the world a better place. They also knew their wealth and power were transient, and they did not let it define them.

To follow the Stoic path, we do not need to become ascetic as some of the Greek Stoics were; however, we should be mindful of our attachment to material things, and we should make sure that our possessions are not preventing us from living a virtuous life.

Some of the ways to cultivate a more Stoic attitude toward material possessions include:

- Be grateful for what we have, but do not take it for granted.
- Be mindful of our consumption habits.
- Avoid comparing ourselves to others.
- Use our possessions for good, not for selfish gain.
- Remember that our possessions are transient, and that true happiness comes from within.

ON ADVERSITY

I also had another misconception that Stoicism was a philosophy for those who are losers. For a while I was considering voluntary administration as the only way out, I felt like such a loser as I was potentially going to lose something I have been so passionate about for over 35 years ago.

It was of little comfort to read books on how to fail such as *Hojoki – A Hermit's Hut as Metaphor*, by Kamo no Chomei or *If You Should Fail*, by Joe Moran, or *On Failure*, by the School of Life. These books are beautifully written and teach us to embrace the impermanence of life and allow us to gracefully accept failure rather than be diminished or wounded by it. However, they did also help me to discover Stoicism.

Stoicism provides the framework to help us deal with failure. It teaches us how to live a good life, regardless of our circumstances. It teaches us that we should focus on what we can control, and not to worry about things that are outside our control. Stoicism also teaches us that we should accept failure as a natural part of life, and learn from it.

For example, Stoicism can help us to deal with failure by:

- Accepting that failure is a natural part of life. It is how we respond to failure that matters.
- Not dwelling on your mistakes. Learn from them and move on.
- Focusing on what you can control. Do not worry about things that are outside of your control.
- Be persistent and not giving up easily.
- View failure as an opportunity for growth. Every failure is an opportunity to learn and grow. It creates an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and what we are capable of.
- Do not take things personally. Stoics believe that we should not take things personally, especially when it comes to failure. When we fail, it is easy to blame ourselves and feel like we are not good enough. However, Stoics would argue that this is not helpful. Instead, we should focus on learning from our mistakes and moving on.

These are some of the specific Stoic practices that I also engaged in to help me deal with the pending loss of our business:

- *Negative visualization*: This is a practice of imagining all the possible ways that your plans could go wrong. This can help you to become more prepared for failure and to develop strategies for dealing with it.
- *Acceptance*: When we fail, practice accepting the situation and letting go of any negative emotions.

- *Detachment*: Do not attach happiness to success or failure. Instead focus on living a virtuous life and doing your best.
- *Gratitude*: Even when we fail, there are always things to be grateful for. Take some time to reflect on the good things in your life and appreciated the lessons that you have learned.

Marcus Aurelius reminds us that failure can be a catalyst for growth and success. When we fail, we are forced to learn and adapt. We can learn new skills and to become more resilient.

As Stellar points out no one in their right mind goes out looking for adversity, even if it can teach us some useful lessons along the way. However, developing the skills to cope with it can help us.

In a letter to his mother, Seneca states that adversity is hardest on those who do not expect it, but it is much easier to cope with when one is prepared for it.

Seneca explains that grief hits people hard because they do not anticipate it. We see and hear death and misfortune affecting others all the time, yet we rarely stop to contemplate how we might respond in similar circumstances. In a letter of consolation to his friend Marcia who was grieving the loss of her son three years earlier he says what we might prefer not to hear:

We are all vulnerable; our loved ones will inevitably die, and could do so at any time; whatever prosperity and security we have could be taken away at any moment by forces beyond our control; even when we think things are really tough, it is always possible for them to get still worse. How prepared would we be to cope if luck turned against us? Would we react as calmly and indifferently as we often do when we see such things reported in the news happening to strangers far away?

It is often easy to be philosophical when it is not happening to us or to our loved ones, but Stellar asks, what happens when it's our turn.

Seneca states it is illogical to think that misfortune will not happen to us, especially when we know that it could happen and does happen to many others. In the case of grief, it is even more illogical, given the inevitability of death for all living things.

We should therefore not assume that everything will work out as we hope or expect, for it is unlikely to do so. This is one of the most important and uncomfortable lessons of Stoicism.

MY FAVOURITE STOIC PHILOSOPHER?

This is a tough question to answer, because we only have the published works of the three main Roman Stoicism philosophers - Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius to refer to.

Marcus Aurelius's work appears to be one of the most quotable philosophers, perhaps because of the way it was written. You must remember, that it was his personal journal (his private notebook); it was the way he perceived what was going on in his inner world. It is very likely he was not happy to be the emperor of the world's most powerful country; he really wanted to be a philosopher and journaling was the way he dealt with this frustration.

Even though he did not want to be a Roman emperor; being an amateur philosopher made him one of the best of all the Roman emperors of all times. He wrote a series of personal meditations and daily reflections on life. The book entitled *Meditations*, is one of the most important works of Stoic philosophy. Aurelius writes about the importance of living in the present moment, accepting what we cannot control, and finding happiness in virtue. He also writes about the importance of self-discipline, courage, and compassion.

I find Marcus Aurelius's philosophy to be both practical and inspiring. Some of the things that I admire about Marcus Aurelius include:

- *His wisdom:* He was a wise and compassionate person who had a deep understanding of human nature. His book is full of insights that can help us to live better lives.
- *His courage:* He was a courageous person who faced many challenges during his life, including the death of his son and the decline of the Roman Empire. He never gave up hope or lost his sense of purpose.
- *His humility:* He was a humble man who was aware of his own limitations. He never claimed to be perfect, and he was always willing to learn from others.
- *His love for humanity:* He loved humanity and wanted to help people live better lives. His meditations are full of advice on how to live a virtuous and meaningful life.

I am sure you are familiar with visualization techniques and you may have heard of the concept of taking a 'view from above.' I was surprised that it was Marcus Aurelius who first wrote about this.

It involves imagining yourself far above Earth and looking down on the Earth below, to see how insignificant and small we are and to help us realise how small our personal troubles are in relation to the greater universe.

Look down from above on the countless herds of men and their countless rituals, and the infinitely varied voyages in storms and calms, and the differences among those who are born, who live together, and die. And consider, too, the life lived by others in olden times, and the life of those who will live after you, and the life now lived among barbarous nations. And how many do not even know your name, and how many will soon forget it, and how they who perhaps now are praising you will very soon blame you, and that neither a posthumous name is of any value, nor reputation, nor anything else.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations; 9:30.

The 'view from above' helps us to:

- *See our problems in perspective.* When we get caught up in our problems, it can be difficult to see them clearly. Taking a step back can help us to see our problems in a larger context and to realise that they are not as big as we think they are.
- *Detach ourselves from our emotions.* When we are emotionally attached to our problems, it can be difficult to think clearly and to make rational decisions. Taking a step back can help us to detach ourselves from our emotions and to think more clearly.
- *Gain a sense of peace and tranquillity.* When we can see our problem in perspective and detach ourselves from our emotions, we can experience a sense of peace and tranquility.

Taking 'a view from above' is not always easy, but it can help us to cope with stress and anxiety. By learning to step back and see the big picture, we can learn to accept our problems and focus on the things we can control. Some ways to help us take 'a view from above' include:

- *Meditate on the impermanence of things.* Stoics believe that everything in the world is impermanent, including our problems. When we remember that our problems will not last forever, it can help us to feel less stressed about them.
- *Think about the bigger picture.* When we focus on the small details of our lives, it can be easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Take some time to think about your goals and what you want to achieve. This can help you put your problem into perspective.
- *Remember that you are not alone.* Everyone experiences problems in life. When we remember that we are not alone, it can help us to feel less overwhelmed. Connect with friends, family, or a therapist to talk about your problems and get support.

- *Spending time in nature.* Nature helps us to experience awe and when we experience awe, we feel connected to something larger than ourselves and can gain perspective on our problems.

ON FLOURISHING

The ancient Stoics knew that happiness could not be gained from a set number of external events; they conceived of 'happiness' as a state of moderation, free from negative emotions, in other words – tranquility.

Stoicism is a philosophy that teaches us how to live a good life. Stoics believe that the key to a good life is to focus on what is within our control and accept what is not. In doing so we can help to reduce much of the stress, anxiety, and worry and live a far more fulfilling life.

The Stoics state the key to happiness is to also live in accordance with nature. This means accepting the things that are beyond our control, developing our reason, and living simply and courageously.

- *Accept what we cannot control.* Stoics believe the only way to achieve lasting happiness is to focus on the things that are within our control and let go of the things that are not. Stoics believe that there are two types of things in the world – those that are in our control, and those that are not. The things in our control are our thoughts, our actions, and our choices. The things that are not within our control are everything else, such as the weather, the action of other people, and our own physical circumstances.
- *Develop our reason.* Stoics also state that our reason is our highest faculty and to develop our reason allows us to live virtuously. When we develop our reason, we become better at making wise choices and living in accordance with our values. We are also less likely to be influenced by our emotions or by the opinions of others.
- *Live simply.* Stoics also believed that we should live simply and avoid material possession and other distractions that can prevent us from living a virtuous life. We should focus on what is truly important such as relationships, our health, and our own personal development. When we live simply, we are less likely to be attached to things that we cannot control. We are also more likely to be happy with what we have, which is essential for happiness.
- *Be courageous.* Stoics believe that courage is the most important virtue, because it allows us to face challenges and adversity without fear. When we are courageous, we are not afraid to stand up for what we believe in, even when it is difficult.

The Stoics believed that eudaimonia is achieved through the development of virtue and the mastery of one's emotions.

You may have heard me previously speak of the term flourishing, which I think is often misunderstood to translate to ‘happiness.’ Having a much better understanding of Stoicism, I now understand that Stoicism helps one to experience eudaimonia, which is often described as having meaning and purpose in one’s life.

The Stoics believed that eudaimonia is not something that can be achieved by pursuing external things such as wealth, fame, or power. Instead, it is achieved by developing the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice.

Wisdom is the ability to see the world clearly and understand what is truly important. Courage is the ability to face challenges and overcome fear. Temperance is the ability to control our desires and impulses. Justice is the ability to act fairly and justly towards others.

By developing these virtues we can become more rational and less affected by the ups and downs of life. This will lead to a state of tranquility and peace of mind, which in turn allows us to flourish.

STOICISM, MENTAL HEALTH, AND COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

Stoicism is a practical philosophy that can help us manage our emotions, cope with stress, and live a more fulfilling life. Stoicism can teach us:

- *To focus on what we control.* Stoics believe that we should only worry about things that are within our power to control. This can help us to reduce stress and anxiety, as we no longer dwell on those things that we cannot change.
- *To accept what we cannot control.* Stoics believe we should accept things that are beyond our control. This does not mean that we must like or agree with everything that happens, but it does mean that we should not let it control our emotions.
- *To live in the present moment.* Stoics believe that we should focus on the present moment and not dwell on the past or worry about the future. This can help us to reduce anxiety and live a more mindful life.
- *To cultivate virtue.* Stoics believe that the goal of life is to live a virtuous life. This means living a life of courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. By cultivating virtue, we can improve our mental health and wellbeing.

Socrates considered philosophy to be, among other things, a form of talking therapy, a medicine for the mind. However, it was the Stoics who placed most emphasis on the therapeutic dimension of philosophy. Epictetus wrote;

It is necessary for the soul to be cured than the body, for it is better to die than live badly.

Epictetus also referred to the philosopher's school as a hospital for the soul.

Stoicism is the precursor of modern-day cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) who went on to influence Aaron T. Beck, directly drew on Stoic teaching to establish the modern therapeutic practice of CBT. Stoicism and CBT both show that by coming to understand the challenge that distorted thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that cause suffering, psychological anxiety can be significantly reduced.

Ellis explained the central premise of his cognitive approach to psychotherapy is that emotional disturbances and associated symptoms are not caused by external events, but mostly by irrational beliefs about such events. He states 'many of the principles incorporated in the theory of rational-emotive psychotherapy are not new; some of them, in fact, were originally stated several thousand years ago, especially by the Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers.'

CBT is the most studied form of psychotherapy and is considered the 'gold standard' in treating mental anxiety. Fidler cites studies that report that CBT has helped 75-80% of patients to recover from different types of anxiety, including panic attacks.

CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are all interconnected. CBT helps us to identify and challenge negative thoughts and beliefs, and to develop a more helpful and adaptive way of thinking and behaving.

There are several ways in which Stoicism has influenced CBT:

- *The focus on reason and logic:* Stoicism teaches us that we should use reason and logic to control our thoughts and emotions. CBT also emphasizes the importance of rational thinking, and teaches us how to identify and challenge negative thoughts and beliefs.
- *The importance of acceptance:* Stoicism teaches us to accept what we cannot control, CBT also tells us that we cannot control everything that happens to us, but we can control how we respond to it.
- *The focus on the present moment:* Stoicism teaches us to focus on the present moment and let go of the past and the future. CBT also emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment.
- *The importance of virtue:* Stoicism teaches us that we should strive to live a virtuous life. CBT also emphasizes the importance of values and goals and teaches us how to set and achieve meaningful goals.

In recent decades, partly because of CBT's growing popularity, Stoicism has undergone a wider resurgence in popularity. The growing number of blog articles, podcasts on the internet support the growing public interest in Stoicism as an approach to self-help and self-improvement. Donaldson states that while the field of CBT is changing with the emergence of the third wave therapy which introduces greater emphasis on themes like mindfulness, acceptance, and valued living, often turning to Buddhist literature and practices for inspiration. Ironically, Donaldson states that many therapists are not aware that practices such as mindfulness and acceptance are already practices in Stoic philosophy.

ANGER AND INSANITY

Seneca stated that anger is a temporary form of insanity. I reflected upon this statement and my personal behaviour and wondered if this applied to me as I must admit that over the last 3 years expressing my anger often at ruthless, cold-hearted selfish landlords.

Seneca wrote extensively about anger. What Stoics mean by anger is rage, which they describe as the worst and most toxic of all the extreme negative emotions. Now keep in mind, that many contemporary writers of Stoicism forget to mention that Seneca was senior advisor to one of the Roman Empire's worst emperor's – Nero, whom I am sure was inflicted with serious mental health disorders.

Seneca explains there are three stages of anger. The first is an involuntary action, which is a natural physiological reaction out of our control; the second is our judgement in response to the experience, which is in our control and the third is an emotion that, once created is out of our control. Once the emotion is there, there is nothing we can do but for it to subside.

Professor of Philosophy, Massimo Pugliucci points out that when you read the American Psychological Association (APA) web page on how to manage anger, most of the advice matches the advice that Seneca provides us.

When we become angry it is very unlikely that we think clearly and we are more likely to say and do things that we will regret later. The Stoics believed that we should control our emotions, and that we should not let our emotions control us. It is wrong to suggest that Stoics believed we should suppress our anger, they recognised it is a natural human emotion; however, the key is to not let anger control us. We should learn to manage anger in a healthy way. Some Stoic practices for managing anger include:

- Taking a deep breath. When you feel yourself getting angry, take a few deep breaths – this will help to calm your body and mind.

- Count to ten. This is another way to give yourself a moment to calm down.
- Walk away. If you need to, walk away from the situation that is making you angry. This will give you some space to cool down.
- Talk to someone you trust. Talking about anger can help you to process it and to feel better.
- Practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment without judgement. This can help you to become more aware of your anger and learn to manage it more effectively.

ON GRATITUDE

Marcus Aurelius beautifully describes gratitude;

Pass through this tiny span of time in accordance with nature, and come to your journey's end with good grace, just as an olive falls when it is fully ripe, praising the earth that bore it and grateful to the tree that gave it birth.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 4.48

Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what's left and live it properly.

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 7.56

Garvey reminds us that the word humility derives from the Latin *humus*, for soil or earth – the ground from which we came, from which we draw our sustenance, and that will ultimately reclaim our bodies. Through humility we embrace the acceptance of life as an unearned gift and we can arrive at gratitude. However, it is often difficult to 'count our blessing' when life's is often obscured by our day-to-day difficulties, by the usual dire headlines, and by the ongoing challenge of keeping our minds clear and our thinking straight.

Epictetus suggested that gratitude can help us regain our lost sense of wonder or awe. It is a virtue that enjoys high standing among Stoics.

Garvey suggest if we regularly pray, meditate, or practice some form of reflection focused on self-improvement, an easy step might be to add a minute or two explicitly to acknowledge those things, people, and events from your day for which you are particularly thankful. Once you get started, the number of good things that happen in your life will surprise you and hopefully encourage you. You may also consider those broader circumstances of your life such as:

- a rational nature, a mind built for learning

- the presence, or the happy memory, of loved ones
- the ability, and the will, to rise above challenging circumstances
- good health
- meaningful work
- kindness from unexpected quarters
- a capacity for doing good
- nature: its power, beauty, and endless variety

Practice daily and if you are the journaling type, you can keep a written record of your reflections. Just remember Marcus's Meditations were not written for publication; they were written as a tool for self-improvement and a form of spiritual exercise.

Garvey states that once you have established the regular practice of gratitude, you will notice its impact on your daily life such as lengthening your patience, recalling your attention to life's smaller pleasures, and generally improves your resilience in challenging times.

WHAT ARE THE VIRTUES OF STOICISM

As you may recall, Epictetus stated the philosophy enables us to take care of our soul. What does it mean to take care of your soul?

It is fundamentally about how we live our life – how we understand our place in the world, how we cope when things do not go our way, how we manage our emotions, how we behave towards others and how to live a good life worthy of a rational human being. It is about having a good character. It is about being virtuous. As Stellar states, virtue can appear to be a very-out-of-fashion word; however, it is more important than ever for humankind, and I am sure the world would be a much better place if all people behaved with virtue.

According to the Stoics character is the only thing we can control in life. According to Stoics, good character is cultivated through four virtues – courage, self-control, wisdom, and justice. The Stoics believed that regardless of one's circumstances or position in life, anyone could develop a good character. It is part of human nature and with practice and commitment, these four virtues could flourish in each person.

A virtue is a state of character that enables us to live in accordance with nature. The stoics believed that there are four cardinal virtues - wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice:

- **Wisdom** is the ability to discern what is good and bad, and act accordingly. Stoics believe that wisdom is the goal of philosophy, and that it can be achieved by living a life of virtue. It

is the foundation of all virtues, because without wisdom, we cannot make good choices or live a good life.

- **Courage** is the ability to face fear and adversity with strength and without fear. Stoics believe that courage is essential for living a good life, as it allows us to overcome challenges and achieve our goals.
- **Temperance** is the ability to control our desires and emotions. Stoics believe that temperance is important for living a balanced and harmonious life.
- **Justice** is the virtue of giving to others what is rightfully theirs. Stoics believe that justice is essential for creating a just and equitable society. It is the fairness and righteousness that we should strive to embody in all our interactions with others.

These four virtues are all interconnected. Wisdom helps us to understand what is just, courage helps us act justly, temperance helps us to control our desires and avoid injustice, and justice helps us to create a society where everyone can live a virtuous life. Stoics believe that cultivating these four cardinal virtues are the foundations of a good and a happy life.

The Stoics believe that virtue is the only good, and that everything else is indifferent. This means that things like wealth, fame, and pleasure are not inherently good or bad. They are only good if we use them virtuously, and bad if we use them to indulge our desires or harm others.

AROMATHERAPY AND STOICISM

As we have learned Stoicism is a philosophy that emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment, accepting what we cannot control, and finding happiness in virtue. In much the same way, I believe that aromatherapy can help us to cultivate these qualities by promoting feelings of calm, peace, and acceptance. More importantly we have also learned that Stoicism is therapy for the soul and I believe that the true power of essential oils is in the way they can nourish and heal the soul.

For example, aromatherapy can:

- *Reduce stress and anxiety.* Whenever we are stressed or anxious, it is difficult to think clearly or focus on the present moment. By helping to reduce stress and anxiety, aromatherapy can help us cultivate a Stoic mindset. To reduce stress and anxiety consider using essential oils such as bergamot, Roman chamomile, fragonia, geranium, lavender, sweet orange, patchouli, sandalwood or ylang ylang.
- *Promote focus and concentration.* This allows us to also cultivate a Stoic mindset. Stoicism requires us to be able to focus on the present moment and to let go of distractions. To

promote focus and concentration consider using essential oils such as basil, fragonia, lemon, cold pressed lime, peppermint, rosemary, pine, or thyme.

- *Enhance introspection.* This creates a calm and relaxing environment that is conducive to thinking deeply. Stoicism encourages us to engage in introspection, or self-reflection. To promote introspection consider using essential oils such as Atlas cedarwood, buddha wood, fragonia, hinoki wood, patchouli, sandalwood, or vetiver.
- *Promote acceptance.* Stoicism teaches us to accept what we cannot control. In the same way aromatherapy can help promote acceptance by helping us to let go of negative emotions such as anger and resentment. To promote acceptance consider using essential oils such as bergamot, fragonia, frankincense, grapefruit, jasmine, sweet orange, rose absolute or otto and ylang ylang.
- *Enhance compassion.* Stoicism teaches us to be compassionate towards ourselves, even when we make mistakes. In much the same way, aromatherapy can help promote self-compassion by helping us to feel calm, peaceful, and loved. To promote compassion consider using essential oils such as bergamot, fragonia, geranium, lavender, palmarosa, neroli, rose absolute or otto.

Is there one essential oil that truly embodies the essence of Stoicism.

This is a bold call, but I think there is one. I suggest that the oil is fragonia. I love fragonia so much that I have named it as the 2023 essential oil of the year! Fragonia is the one oil that embodies all the virtues of stoicism.

Robbie Zeck beautifully describes fragonia when she states:

... fragonia is like a candle carrying the light of dignity, nurturing the spirit, and helping you to come to terms and resolve any past traumas and unresolved family issues. Fragonia gently helps remove scars from past emotional pain.

Robbie explains that it helps you build resilience, allowing you to enjoy life despite any illness, disease, and emotional discomfort.

Is it not surprising that I have used fragonia in all three Stoic blends.

THE STOIC COLLECTION - GRACE, TRANQUILITY AND WISDOM

Grace is often seen as a virtue in stoicism, it is the ability to act with poise and dignity, even in challenging times. Stoics believe that we should accept what is beyond our control with grace, and focus on what we can control.

Tranquility is another important virtue in stoicism. It is a state of being calm and undisturbed, even in the face of adversity. Stoics believe that we can achieve tranquility by understanding that the only things that we are truly within our control are our thoughts and actions.

Wisdom is the ability to discern what is good and bad, and to act accordingly. Stoics believe wisdom is the goal of philosophy, and that it can be achieved by living a life of virtue.

Grace, tranquility, and wisdom are all important qualities that Stoics strive to cultivate. Stoics believe that these qualities are essential for living a happy and fulfilling life.

Grace is the outward expression of inward tranquility – Seneca

Tranquility is the happiness of a wise man – Seneca

Wisdom is the supreme happiness – Marcus Aurelius

The three blends embody the most important virtues of the philosophy of Stoicism. Grace promotes temperance, Tranquility promotes courage and Wisdom promotes wisdom.

These blends can be a powerful catalyst for encouraging Stoic virtues. They can help you embrace the philosophy of Stoicism which will lead to a calmer and help you find inner peace and resilience in tough times.

Grace

A blend of comforting essential oils that promotes temperance, compassion, and inner peace, inspired the Stoic virtue of temperance.

- *Bergamot* – The fresh floral scent of bergamot lifts our mood and evokes joy and warms the heart. Perhaps Peter Holme's perfectly describes bergamot when he says that it allows us to experience life in a balanced way and allows us to accept the experience of each moment for what it is, without prior expectations.
- *Fragonia* – the sweet camphoraceous scent of fragonia nurtures our heart and spirit. It helps us to be more resilient, allowing us to celebrate life despite any illness, disease, or emotional discomfort.

- *Frankincense* – the sacred, balsamic scent of frankincense is spiritually elevating. It quiets the mind and is often used to assist in meditation. It is spiritually elevating and helps us experience and integrate divine wisdom.
- *Geranium* – the fresh herbaceous scent of geranium is nurturing and it promote harmony and balance, it comforts and opens the heart.
- *Lavender* – the herbaceous floral scent of lavender embodies the virtue of grace; it promotes harmony and compassion.
- *Melissa* - the fresh sweet scent of melissa is comforting and revitalizes the soul. It embodies gratitude and allows us to reflect on all that we must be grateful for.
- *Neroli* – the heavenly fresh floral scent of neroli elevates our spirit and nourishes the soul. It embodies purity, love, and grace.
- *Palmarosa* – the sweet floral scent of palmarosa encourages us to be kind and gentle to ourselves. It prevents us from being over-critical or judgmental so we can love who we are, and allowing us to love others in the same way.
- *Rose* - the exquisite floral scent of rose embodies the love and embraces the virtue of grace; it teaches us to forgive others when they hurt us and gently protects us so we are not affected by negativity.

Grace helps to reduce stress and anxiety, it promotes forgiveness, it enhances self-love, boosts self-confidence, and promotes feelings of peace and tranquillity.

Tranquility

A blend of calming essential oils that promotes inner peace and serenity, inspired by the Stoic virtue of tranquility.

- *Lavender* - Promotes tranquility and helps us to let go of stress and anxiety. It calms the emotions and promotes harmony.
- *Bergamot* - Known for its uplifting and refreshing aroma that promotes positivity and optimism. It is recommended whenever we feel overwhelmed and lost confidence in life.
- *Petitgrain* - Has an uplifting effect on our mood and is also useful for alleviating stress and anxiety. It is recommended whenever we feel fragile and vulnerable, and gives us courage and strength to move forward, encouraging positive outcomes during difficult and challenging times.

- *Frankincense* - Is spiritually elevating and helps reduce anxiety. It calms and focuses our mind and opens our consciousness to create a mindful, meditative state in which we can experience and integrate divine wisdom.
- Roman chamomile – The floral herbaceous scent of roman chamomile is known to relax the nerves, and alleviate anxiety and nervous tension.
- *Fragonia* - The fresh delicate camphoraceous aroma of fragonia induces a profound feeling of calm, nurtures the spirit, and strengthens our resolve and resilience.

Stoicism emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment and accepting what we cannot control, and finding happiness in virtue. The essential oils in *Tranquillity* allow us to cultivate these qualities by promoting feelings of calm, peace, and acceptance.

Wisdom

A blend of evocative essential oils that promotes clarity of thought, intuition, and inner guidance, inspired by the Stoic virtue of wisdom.

- *Atlas Cedarwood* - The woody scent of Atlas cedarwood is grounding and promotes wisdom.
- *Fragonia* – The fresh delicate camphoraceous aroma of fragonia induces a profound feeling of calm, nurtures the spirit, and strengthens our resolve and resilience. *Fragonia* allows us to see with new eyes, experiencing a profound insight, change our perspective and opens us to intuitive insight and wisdom, it teaches us to learn from experience and emotional intelligence.
- *Frankincense* – the sacred, balsamic scent of frankincense is spiritually elevating. It quietens the mind and is often used to assist in meditation. It is spiritually elevating and helps us experience and integrate divine wisdom.
- *Lemon* - the fresh vibrant citrus aroma of lemon alleviates mental fatigue; clears your head and paves the way for rational thinking. It encourages us to be fully present the mind and strengthens our intuition. It also promotes joy and optimism.
- *Patchouli* - The rich earthy aroma of patchouli is grounding and harmonizing and helps whenever we ruminate and worry. It helps the mind to relax and connect with the knowledge of the body.
- *Rock rose* – the warm powerful, amber note of cistus is centering and is often used as an aid in visualizing spiritual experiences and bringing them to consciousness.
- *Rosemary* – the fresh herbaceous aroma of rosemary enhances focus and is beneficial wherever there is a need for mental clarity.

- *Vetiver* – the rich earthy scent of vetiver is grounding and stabilizing. It helps us to face challenges with confidence and resilience. It is ideal whenever we are feeling overwhelmed, ungrounded, and confused. It helps us to remain calm when unsettling events affect us or we face adversity.

Wisdom allows us to focus on the present moment, to let go of distractions and face challenges with courage and resilience.

SOME STOIC QUOTES TO INSPIRE

Everyone likes to quote the Stoics, admittedly their phrases are very quotable. Some of my favourite Stoic quotes include:

The soul carries within itself the seed of everything, that is honourable, and this seed is stirred to growth by advice, as a spark that is fanned by gentle breeze develops its natural fire.

Seneca, Letters 94. 29

The object of life is not to be on the side of the majority, but to escape finding oneself in the ranks of the insane.

Marcus Aurelius.

No person has the power to have everything they want, but it is in their power not to want what they don't have, and to cheerfully put to good use what they do have.

Seneca

Most of what we say and do are not essential. If you can eliminate it, you'll have more time, and more tranquillity. Ask yourself at every moment, "Is this necessary?"

Marcus Aurelius

Your days are numbered. Use them to throw open the window of your soul to the sun. If you do not, the sun will soon set, and you with it.

Marcus Aurelius

People are frugal in guarding their personal property; but as soon as it comes to squandering time, they are most wasteful of the one thing in which it is right to be

stingy.

Seneca

“Not to feel exasperated, or defeated, or despondent because your days aren’t packed with wise and moral actions. But to get back up when you fail, to celebrate behaving like a human – however imperfectly – and fully embrace the pursuit you’ve embarked on.”

Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations* 5:9

CONCLUSION

What I really like about Stoicism is that you do not need to be fully committed to Stoicism to benefit from it. The Roman Stoics offer a model of how one might start to draw on Stoic practices even though one is not fully committed to the Stoic philosophical system.

I love Seneca’s essay *On the Shortness of Life*. He explains that for many of us, by the time we are ready to start living, our lives are almost over. We procrastinate, pursue things of little or no value, or wander aimlessly through life with no clear focus. Some of us strive for nothing, just going through the motions of daily routines without a sense that the most valuable commodity that we have – time – is slipping away. Some of us have a clear idea of what we want to do, but are paralysed by fear of failure, putting off and delaying things and coming up with excuses for why now is not the time to act. Seneca explains that all of these are a failure to live.

The goal therefore is not to strive make our lives last as long as possible, we ought to make sure that we enjoy and make full use of each day as it comes, not forgetting that it could perhaps be out last.

As Nancy Sherman, author of *Stoic Wisdom – ancient lessons for modern resilience*, reminds us at the end of this eloquently written book on the contemporary relevance of stoicism;

We are living in anxious times. Our conception of politics has become upended. Our democracy is threatened. Our control of disease has been tested. Economics, social, and health inequities rip open the sin of enslavement and the legacy of Jim Crow America. There is moral outrage in the streets. ... All this makes it hard to know how to go forward. We need leaders, we need education, we need science, and we need greater equity.

While Stoicism cannot help us with all these challenges, it can provide solace, it can help us manage our emotions, to be better prepared for sudden shifts in fortune, it can provide a sense of

connectedness that supports resilience and it can cultivate our humanity. As Epictetus reminds us – it is not what happens to us, but how we react to it that matters.

Sherman states that Stoicism is a way to endure and cultivate inner virtue when tight control from outside threatens your very being. It was a philosophy suited to the ancient Roman times, but it once again feels like a philosophy for now. We have much to learn from the ancient Stoics. Stoicism can help unite us to deal with our individual and shared challenges; however, this can only happen when empathy and mercy course through the veins of reason. This Sherman says is the way forward as a healthy modern Stoic.

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RECOMMENDED READING

- My favorites contemporary authors on Stoicism include Bridget Delany, William Irvine, Massimo Pigliucci, Nancy Sherman, John Stellar, Donald Robertson and most recently I discovered Svend Brinkmann, author of *Stand Firm*, who is very critical of the ‘self-help and personal improvement culture and suggests we should instead embrace the philosophy of Stoicism.
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WEBSITES

You might also want to check out the www.dailystoic.com by Ryan Holiday, who makes stoicism so accessible to all of us.

Another excellent website is www.modernstoicism.com They offer free online courses based on ideas and practice drawn from the ancient philosophy of Stoicism. They also run Stoic week, which runs each October and a Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training, a four-week course. They also have an excellent collection of articles on Stoicism.