



Stoic joy and lasting happiness

An excerpt from David Fideler's *Breakfast with Seneca*

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Self-sufficiency and the happy life: Rising above fortune and chance

We must make our escape to freedom. But this can only happen through disregard of Fortune. - Seneca, On the Happy Life 4.4–5

The way someone becomes free, or becomes self-sufficient, is by rising above Fortune. The more we grant importance to external things outside our control, the less free we will become. Blind greed, Seneca notes, impels us to seek out things that will never satisfy us. If those kinds of external things could satisfy us, they would have done so already. But as he points out, we don't often consider "how pleasant it is to ask for nothing, how wonderful it is to be satisfied without depending on Fortune." He writes, "I can show you many things that, once acquired, stole our freedom away. We would still belong to ourselves if those things did not belong to us."

The alternative to seeking happiness in external things is to realize that our real goods, our true sources of happiness, are

discovered within. People chase after endless pleasures in the outer world, in things that glitter and shine. But those shiny objects are never satisfying over the long term. By contrast, developing a sound character brings lasting happiness while still allowing us to appreciate the value of external things for what they are. This allows a Stoic, or anyone else for that matter, to experience real fulfillment.

Seneca describes the journey to self-sufficiency and fulfillment in many ways, sometimes using colorful metaphors. He describes it as an ascent, like climbing a mountain. Once the summit is reached, and we've risen above Fortune, we're able to "look down upon the things of Fortune from above" because we're no longer mentally or psychologically under Fortune's spell. Instead, we're free. In one dramatic image, Seneca describes this kind of self-sufficiency as involving total protection from Fortune's attacks: "All the arrows of Fortune that attack the human race," he explains, "bounce off a wise person like hail hitting a roof, which then rattles down the roof and melts away without harming the person inside."

For Seneca, "reaching the summit" means finding the source of real happiness. It also

involves possessing an inner joy that no one else could ever take away. As he writes, "The person who reaches the heights knows the source of real joy – finding happiness beyond the control of anyone else."

It's important to realize, though, that this sense of self-sufficiency doesn't mean being aloof to others or uncaring. For Seneca, the Stoic wise person is notable for his or her human kindness. Likewise, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't appreciate the things we possess in the world. The wise person will appreciate and use all the gifts of Fortune he or she might possess, but will not rely upon those things for happiness. In addition to deeply treasuring the ones we love, we should make full use of the gifts of Fortune we possess at the moment, but realize that all these things are gifts on loan to us from the universe. They are not fully under our control. A self-sufficient person can appreciate everything deeply but doesn't depend upon external events or possessions to experience lasting happiness. A Stoic's happiness comes from within, from having an excellent character.

Once a Stoic begins to live "a life that is already complete," at that moment, he truly belongs to himself, having achieved a state

Facing our fears and aversions *(From the previous page)*

of inner freedom. Rather than waiting for death to “complete” life, a Stoic should complete life now. If one lives with peace and calm in the present moment, one need not worry about the future. In this state, we will have truly found ourselves. Living fully “at home,” a Stoic can then spend the remainder of his days in happiness, which no one can take away. As Seneca writes to Lucilius, “Consider how fine it is to complete your life now, before you die, and then to live out your remaining days in peace and self-sufficiency, in full possession of the happy life.” This idea of living “a life that is already complete” is closely related to Seneca’s idea of living each day as if it’s your last, or “trying to live each day as if it’s a complete life,” discussed in chapter 11. The end result of both approaches is a sense of freedom, living fully in the present moment, and lack of anxiety.

Put another way, the happy life is totally present, right here and now, if we would only choose to claim it. But by seeking it elsewhere, or in other things, people lose the freedom of unshakeable confidence and peace they would otherwise possess.

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Believe me, real joy is a serious matter!
- Seneca, Letters 23.4

Joy is your goal, but you’re wandering off course! You think you’ll arrive there among riches and official accolades. That is to say, you seek joy surrounded by anxieties! You chase after these things as if they’ll bring happiness and pleasure when, in fact, they are sources of pain.
- Seneca, Letters 59.14

For the Stoics and other Greek philosophers, true happiness, eudaimonia, differed from our modern idea of happiness significantly. For modern people, happiness is a temporary feeling, a mood, or a passing emotional state. For the Greeks, though, eudaimonia was a lasting excellence of character – “an enduring, continuous, and relatively stable state of mind.” That major difference between modern and ancient views helps to explain why ancient philosophers took happiness so seriously.

For Seneca, “Only an excellent mind develops real tranquility.” The result of having an excellent character, which arises from virtue, is “steadiness of joy.” As Seneca writes to Lucilius, “If a wise person is never lacking in real joy, you have a good reason to desire wisdom. But this joy only springs from awareness of the virtues. To experience this joy, you’ll need courage, justice, and moderation.”

We all have the seeds of these virtues (and other virtues) within us, but in order for them to fully flower, they need cultivation. Like a garden, our character requires tending. In this process, we also need to exercise our rationality. We need to weed out our false judgments and opinions, many of which we’ve been encouraged to embrace, unconsciously, from social conditioning. This includes removing things from the mind that are not truly “our own”: things like fear, worry, the false promises of society, the desire for empty pleasures, and the pain and emotional suffering that arise from false beliefs. As Seneca writes, “Our

mind is never greater than when it sets aside those things that are not its own: It makes peace for itself by fearing nothing; it creates wealth for itself by desiring nothing.”

By removing those things that are not our own, and by developing a steady character based on sound judgments, a remarkable transformation of the personality takes place, which results in lasting joy. Seneca explains:

Once we have driven away all things that disturb or frighten us, there follows unbroken tranquility and unending freedom. For when pleasures and pains have been banished, a boundless joy comes in to replace all that is trivial, fragile, and harmful – a joy that is unshaken and unwavering. Then follow peace and harmony of the mind, and true greatness coupled with gentleness, since ferocity is always born from weakness.

In my view, this passage is Seneca’s most detailed and compelling description of the final goal of Stoic training. It also brings us back to the metaphor of the sun and the clouds, mentioned at the end of chapter 3.

When we become psychologically self-sufficient and experience Stoic joy, our personality becomes steady and radiant. In this way, it metaphorically resembles the sun, always shining, even when clouds float beneath it that might block out its light for a moment.

Seneca tells us that the most advanced Stoic will sometimes experience small disturbances. Like everyone else, a fully developed Stoic sage will share normal human feelings, instinctual responses, and will be startled by unexpected events. But those disturbances will be temporary, just like clouds floating across the face of the sun. Thanks to the Stoic’s steadiness of character, he or she will quickly “return home,” to a state of inner harmony, joy, and tranquility.

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