

# Shift your attention to flourish

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“Many ask, “flourishing sounds great, but how do you do it?” By these itty-bitty shifts in attention. That’s it.”

*Do not waste the remainder of your life in thoughts about others, when you do not refer your thoughts to some object of common utility. For you lose the opportunity of doing something else when you have such thoughts as these. Marcus Aurelius Meditations, Book III:4*

The *Meditations* and Epictetus’ *Discourses* are two texts I sometimes consult much like oracles if I am casting about for answers to a small or vexing problem. While I don’t consider these books infallible or complete sources of life guidance, like the *I Ching* or the *Bible*, they always serve up the right insight at the right time.

The quotation above is a case in point. The past several days I was at a low ebb from a combination of fighting off the flu and the weight of too many personal and professional obligations. I watched my tired mind drift into petty reruns of a handful of difficult personal encounters. These private cinematic dramas that imputed ill motives to others, progressively grew like weeds, overtaking the practical, reasoned part of my thinking. No good was coming of this.

Marcus’ *Meditations* winked at me from my bookshelf. I opened to a random page, and sure enough, this quotation leaped out, giving me just the right nudge at the right time.

And thus I was able to rein in my mind and heart, because Marcus set me straight about the cost of perversely enjoying the cheap comfort of righteous indignation and the folly of ruminating about other people. I got “back to business”. I practiced my musical instrument. I wrote a speech. I pointed my mind towards worthy things and thus accomplished small though valuable objectives. This is how we change. This is how we get better: a small conscious shift in where we let our attention land.

Stoicism speaks of flourishing as an ideal. Many ask, “flourishing sounds great, but how do you do it?” By these itty-bitty shifts in attention. That’s it.

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