

The indirect ways of Stoic happiness

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“Stoicism itself in nothing else than one great elaboration on human happiness.”

What’s in it for us?

One of the frequently asked questions about Stoicism is this: what’s to be gained? Why should we be Stoics, what’s in it for us? It’s a down to earth question but still a pressing one.

The answer I highlight time and time again is that the ultimate goal of stoic life is happiness. Being happy, being content, joyful or simply satisfied – you name it. Today’s piece isn’t about semantics. You can choose whatever term you want. The concept of happiness we all have a right to pursue is self-evident. And it is the very goal of Stoicism. Stoicism is not about some abstract “indifference.” It’s not about fortitude for the sake of fortitude, nor just acceptance of fate. The goal of it all is to be happy – to live a joyous, satisfying life.

No shortcuts, no magic wands

This is the goal. How do we achieve it? How to be happy in the Stoic manner? The Stoic take on this can be expressed in just one sentence. That sentence is a bit paradoxical but brief. Here it is. Stoicism itself is nothing else than one great elaboration on human happiness. If you ask about Stoic happiness, the whole of Stoicism is the answer. There are no shortcuts, there are no magic wands and

golden bullets here. If you want to be happy in the Stoic fashion, you need to ingest and digest entire Stoicism. There are no workarounds.

All of Stoicism covers happiness

In other words, there is no straightforward answer to the question “how to find happiness in Stoicism.” There is no “how to be happy” chapter in the Stoic textbooks because all of Stoicism covers this (and, it might be added, Stoicism covers nothing else). There is no difference between “the Stoic way to happiness” and “the Stoic way of life.” They are the same thing. There is no other way to happiness than sticking to dichotomy of control, embracing useful narratives, building proper alternatives, and employing all other exercises from the Stoic toolbox.

Saying this is not skirting the question though. Emily Dickinson famously wrote that truth needs to be told slant and this is exactly the case with Stoic happiness. It’s achieved only indirectly.

One who aims at happiness head-on makes a tactical error. It’s even more than a tactical error – it’s a conceptual confusion. Stoic happiness isn’t something we get directions to as if while navigating an unknown area. Happiness is on no map. It’s not something

that can be “found,” or “attained.” The most cliché statement of all is that it’s not the destination that matters but the way itself. This is precisely how it works in Stoicism.

It is simple... and difficult

Happiness is not some abstract entity we can shoot at, nor it is a reward that one can “earn.” Stoic happiness is rather a byproduct – a collateral gain one may say – from living a good, virtuous life. Live virtuously, live a good life, and at the end of the day you realize that you have been happy all along. It’s as simple – and as difficult – as that.

