



# THE STOIC

## JOURNAL OF THE STOIC GYM



### THE STOIC

Journal of The Stoic Gym  
Volume 4 Issue 1  
JANUARY 2022  
© The Stoic Gym, 2021

Published by TheStoicGym.com

Issued free online  
Subscribe [here](#)

Follow us on  
[www.TheStoicGym.com](http://www.TheStoicGym.com)  
twitter [@thestoicgym](#)  
Facebook: [The Stoic Gym](#)

### BACK ISSUES

The Stoic Gym does not carry back issues of THE STOIC. They may, however, be obtained from [Magzter.com](http://Magzter.com):  
<https://bit.ly/3aVVmeY>

## Stoic joy, an oxymoron?

CHUCK CHAKRAPANI

### 'Stoic' vs. 'stoic'

In everyday language, the word stoic has come to mean "a person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining". How did the word stoic (which was derived from Stoicism) come to be associated with uncomplaining endurance rather than with what we understand by Stoicism? It is not so hard to understand when we review Stoic literature.

### The didactic approach of Stoicism

Probably the most widely read and most beloved of all Stoic books is Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. Yet there's no denying its melancholic tone. Epictetus' *Discourses* may not be melancholic, but the tone is stern and relentlessly logical and didactic. One of Seneca's major works is *On Anger*, a detailed examination of that destructive emotion. In short, Stoic literature is full of advice on human fallibilities and misfortunes and how to deal with them. Where is joy in all this? Why did the Stoics pay so much attention to human suffering and misfortune?

### Why the focus on suffering?

To understand this, we first need to understand that Stoicism is not – and has never been – an academic philosophy. It has always been a practical philosophy whose aim is to teach anyone how to lead a better life. Stoicism does not exist in a vacuum but in the context of human experience. To be relevant it has to relate to people's day-to-day experience at any given time.

Unfortunately the experiences of the ancient Roman Stoics (such as Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius) were far from normal. Marcus Aurelius may have been the most powerful person of his time, but his life was not an easy one. He spent most of his reign

fighting invaders, coping with internal betrayals, and doing a job out of a sense of duty rather than because he chose it.

With regard to the remaining major Stoics – Musonius, Seneca, and Epictetus – they lived under cruel and arbitrary emperors (such as Nero, Caligula, and Domitian) and were exiled, some more than once. Seneca was forced to commit suicide. Just as nowadays we cannot avoid talking about Covid in general, neither could the ancient Stoics avoid talking about disasters that could strike at any time. So it is not surprising that Marcus Aurelius was melancholic, Epictetus was stern, and Seneca wrote a major treatise on anger.

Stoic literature, especially for a casual reader, is not brimming with joy. Probably because of that, over time, the word 'stoic' came to be associated with enduring hardship without complaining rather than with the joy of living.

### The 'dangerous dichotomy'

Yet, Stoicism is an eudaimonic philosophy and its objective is 'doing and living well' (as defined by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*). However, 'living well' has two somewhat contradictory meanings (Timothy Miller, *How to Want What You Have*). One meaning is doing whatever we think will bring us happiness at the moment whether or not it is ethical. The other meaning is doing the right thing, 'living correctly' whether or not it brings us joy. In short, one meaning of living well points to a hedonistic lifestyle while the other points to moral restraint. These two apparently contradictory meanings set up a 'dangerous dichotomy,' as one seems to preclude the other.

This contradiction is indirectly acknowledged and dealt with in Abrahamic

# Stoic joy, an oxymoron?

(Continued from page 2)

traditions (such as Christianity and Islam). These religions offer everlasting happiness in an after-life in heaven as a compensation for living ethically now.

In Stoicism, there is no after-life. Why then should we live a life of virtue if it interferes with living a life of pleasure and there's nothing to compensate for it? After all, all human beings want to be happy. Why give up pleasure (which we naturally seek and is available now) to be virtuous (as Stoicism teaches)?

Because it does not postulate an after-life, Stoicism would make sense only if it offered happiness and joy in *this* life. Otherwise, a Stoic could only mean "a person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining," for no apparent purpose.

Surely that can't be right. After all, the Stoics were master logicians and rational philosophers. They wouldn't have advocated a philosophy of life devoid of joy and happiness. So, is there a place for joy in Stoicism?

## Dismantling the 'dangerous dichotomy'

Clearly, Stoics advocated a life of virtue. In fact, they did more than that. They equated a virtuous life to a happy life. A happy life is not the result of a virtuous life, but is the same as the virtuous life.

## Life itself as pleasurable

One way of interpreting this would be to see life itself as pleasurable. When we observe small children, we see them happy for no reason – not because they live in a big house, have social status, or their future is secure, but simply because they're alive. Similarly, to live pleasantly, we don't need to do anything or get anything, but unlearn our mistaken beliefs about happiness and joy. It is simply removing the impediments to joy. As Sharon Lebell points out "This is the genius of Stoicism: removing the factors that eclipse joy".

How do we "remove the factors that eclipse joy"? By leading a life of virtue. By living a life guided by practical wisdom, moderation, courage, and justice. It is the same as getting rid of foolishness,

excessiveness, cowardice, and injustice from our lives. When we get rid of the obstacles to joy, what we are left with is a joyous life.

In Stoicism, practicing the virtues is the same as removing impediments to joy.

## The joy of the Stoic

Yet the question remains – if joy is part of Stoicism, shouldn't there be explicit mentions of joy, even granting that it is implied in Stoicism?

As a matter of fact, there are several passages in Stoicism that talk about joy. Most clearly, here is Seneca's advice to his protégé, the young prefect Lucilius, placing the feeling of joy above everything:

*Above all, my friend Lucilius, make this your business: learn how to feel joy.* - Seneca, Letters, 18.

Marcus Aurelius points us to the majesty and grandeur of everyday life that can make us joyous:

*A loaf of bread splits open in the oven; random cracks appear on it. These unintended flaws are right and sharpen our appetite. Figs, when they ripen, also crack open. Olives, when they are about to fall just before they decay, appear more beautiful. So are drooping stalks of wheat, wrinkling skin of a staring lion, foam from a wild boar's mouth, and many more such sights.* - Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 3.1

Similarly, Epictetus admonishes us for failing to notice the splendour of everyday life and take joy in it:

*Is it not enough for you, what you look at every day? Could you have anything better or greater to see than the sun, the moon, the stars, the whole world, the sea?* - Epictetus, Discourses 2.16.32

This poor, lame ex-slave, exiled in his later life, still saw everyday life as a festival and challenged us:

*Why not enjoy the feast and the pageant while it is given to us to do so?* - Epictetus, Discourses 4.1

## Joy as a byproduct of virtue

So why go about it in the long way? If finding joy is important, why not go after it like a hedonist would? Why practice virtue?

Seneca has the answer.

*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

The short answer is that real joy cannot be found in the externals. This is also reiterated by Musonius Rufus:

*Therefore, we can rationally assume that a human being also does not live according to nature when they live for pleasure, but only when they live according to virtue. This is when they deserve praise, and they can rightly think of themselves as hopeful and courageous. A cheerful nature and serene joy habitually go with these attributes.* - Musonius Rufus, Lecture 17

So joy is not something that you can directly pursue and get. "A cheerful nature and serene joy" are the result of a life of virtue. The apparently 'dangerous dichotomy' is more apparent than real.

## Joy even while dying

A true Stoic is happy until he dies as the following anecdote illustrates. Chrysippus, the third scholar of Stoicism, literally died laughing during the 143rd Olympiad at the age of 73. He was watching a donkey eat some figs and cried out: "Now give the donkey a drink of pure wine to wash down the figs" and died in a fit of laughter.

## Stoic joy is real

Joy is an integral part of Stoicism and Stoic joy is not an oxymoron. Just as a fruit is hidden behind the leaves, Stoic joy is hidden behind the practice of virtue.

We cannot pursue joy and happiness directly, because joy is a state of mind, and cannot be found in externals. Happiness and joy are byproducts of living a virtuous life and indistinguishable from it.

In this issue of THE STOIC our distinguished authors give their perspectives on Stoic joy.

I wish our readers (and everyone else as well!) a very happy new year. - Chuck