



What does it mean to flourish?

A life well-lived

As Stoics we often talk about living a good life and being happy. And it goes without saying that we all want to be happy.

But what do we mean when we say *happy*? The ancient Stoics had a very specific term for what we are aiming at: *eudaimonia*, or the deep, rich sense of satisfaction that comes with a life well lived.

Stoic scholar A.A. Long, in his *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, defines *eudaimonia* as a “condition in which a person of excellent character is living optimally well, flourishing, doing admirably, and steadily enjoying the best mindset that is available to human beings” In fact, many of us today use the term *flourishing* when we want to talk about deep, long-lasting happiness.

Flourishing as a state of mind

Flourishing is not an external condition, but rather a state of mind. We can flourish no matter what is going on in our lives because our mental fitness does not depend on external factors. Even if the world around you is crumbling, or if fortune does not hand you an easy life, it is still within your power to flourish. That’s because our state of mind depends on our own character and our responses to the world. We can feel deep satisfaction knowing that we have responded well, even in a difficult situation.

Creating the state of mind

So if you’d like to learn how to flourish, in the Stoic sense of the word, start by focusing on your responses to the world. Instead of complaining about your life or feeling sorry for yourself, just think about offering the best possible response to whatever situation you find yourself in. Here’s a simple formula for staying focused on a Stoic response:

$$\text{Character} + \text{Cosmos} + \text{Control} = \text{Choice}$$

Let’s look briefly at each element of this formula.

- **Character.** You create your character from your beliefs about the world and your habitual responses to events. Your character develops over time and makes you who you are.
- **Cosmos.** You are one small part of a vast and beautiful world. When we only focus on ourselves, it can sometimes seem like nothing is working out well for us. But when we think about how we are connected to other people and things, we see how our lives fit into everything else, like one piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Knowing where we fit into the big picture can help us regain a sense of perspective and inner peace.
- **Control.** In any situation, you can pause to ask yourself, “What in this situation is really up to me? What is not up to me?” This classic Stoic dichotomy of control can help you reset your

expectations about what is possible for you to change. Remember, if something is outside of your control, it doesn’t make sense to get upset about it.

- **Choice.** After thinking through your character, your place in the cosmos, and what you can control, it’s time to choose your response to the situation. You may not make a perfect choice every time--after all, no one can know everything--but thinking through these guidelines will help you make the best choice possible, given your understanding of the situation.

When you focus on your response to the world, rather than getting upset about what the world is doing, you begin to develop a steadiness of mind that eventually leads to long-lasting happiness. No one ever said flourishing is easy, but it is certainly possible to make progress. So no matter where you are, and no matter what conditions you may face, you can start to develop “the best mindset that is available to human beings”. Make the choice to flourish!

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