

Focus on the present moment

JONAS SALZGEBER

“If that’s all you take away from Stoic philosophy, and if you bring enough mindfulness into your daily life, then you’ll benefit greatly.”

Present moment awareness

An important part of Stoicism is developing moment-to-moment awareness that allows you to take a step back, look at the situation objectively, analyze your impressions, and proceed with what’s constructive.

In a hectic moment, it’s easy to lose focus on the task at hand and get lost in the vastness of our lives. We look far in the uncertain future and back in the certain but gone past. No wonder we get overwhelmed.

Do not let the panorama of your life oppress you, do not dwell on all the various troubles which may have occurred in the past or may occur in the future. Just ask yourself in each instance of the present: ‘What is there in this work which I cannot endure or support?’ – Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 8.36

The past and the future are not under our control

Let’s not forget that the past and the future are not under our control. They are indifferent to the Stoics. The present moment is all anyone possesses, says Marcus. Bur

... no one can lose either the past or the future, for how can someone be deprived of what’s not theirs? Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 2.14

The past is unchangeably gone. The future can only be influenced by the actions we take here and now. That’s why the Stoics say we must be mindful in the present moment and focus on what’s real and graspable.

The power is in the present

The whole power we have comes down to this very moment. Right now, we can control the choices we make. You choose to

read this article now, which I chose to write right now.

Our voluntary thoughts and actions are the only things under our control. Only in this very moment.

If we want to express our highest self in every moment, then we need to be aware of our actions in the present moment. This mindfulness is a prerequisite for the practicing Stoic.

Regaining the now

The struggle is this: We get carried away by our thoughts about the past or future. And all the while lose touch with the here and now. This is the main reason why we get overwhelmed. Unlike animals, we worry about what’s long gone or yet to come, both beyond our control. Hear out Seneca:

Wild animals run from the dangers they actually see, and once they have escaped them worry no more. We however are tormented alike by what is past and what is to come. - Seneca, Letters from a Stoic, V

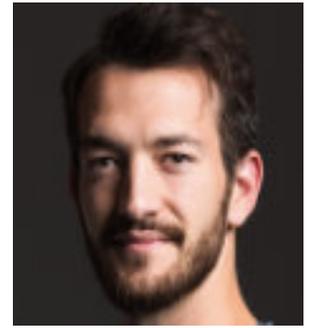
The present alone, he says, cannot make you miserable.

What is unbearable right now?

That’s why we should try to catch ourselves when we’re overwhelmed, and ask: “Right here, right now, what’s the task at hand and why does it seem unbearable?”

What’s important now?

If you’re able to focus on the present moment, and look at it in an isolated way, then these challenging moments will suddenly become easier to endure and deal with. It’ll be easier to accept them as they are, and focus on what you can do right



Jonas Salzgeber of jonas@njlifebacks.com is an author. At the core of his actionable philosophy lies the goal of leading a happy life even – and especially – in the face of adversity. He is the author of [The Little Book of Stoicism](#).

now to improve your situation, to make the best out of it.

What tiny steps you take now?

The better you become at retrieving your focus into the present moment, the more mindful you’ll become of your moment-to-moment actions, and the more likely you’ll act in correspondence with your highest self.

Marcus Aurelius (paraphrasing *Meditations*, 9.6) says that all you’ll ever need is:

- Certainty of judgment in the present moment: What does the situation look like objectively?
- Acceptance of external events in the present moment: Accept and be content with what’s out of control.
- Action for the common good in the present moment: What’s the best action I can take right now?

If that’s all you take away from Stoic philosophy, and if you bring enough mindfulness into your daily life, then you’ll benefit greatly!

Challenging our impressions

As aspiring Stoics, we want to focus on the present moment, and not get distracted by the past or future. That’s the only way we can challenge our impressions and look at the situation objectively, accept what’s not under our control with equanimity, and choose to align our actions with our deepest values such as wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline.

This will suffice.