

Stoicism and wabi-sabi

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Progress over perfection

One of the more attractive themes within Stoic thought is that of progress over perfection, the notion that we always are seeking to point our thoughts, words, and deeds toward virtue. However, there is no conclusive end to our efforts at sculpting our characters. Stoicism is wisely aware that aiming for perfection is a fool's game and isn't the point.

This Stoic preference for moral incrementalism puts me in mind of one of my favorite concepts. It's one of those beautiful ideas that doesn't easily fit into words. Often it is better expressed through poetry, music, art, or architecture, because it is an idea that doesn't readily conform to the categories of verbal language. But let's give it a try. Perhaps you've heard of it. It's wabi-sabi, which is variously described as the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.

Wabi-sabi

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese concept for an aesthetic and philosophical values system that has been associated with the Japanese tea ceremony, but it extends far wider than that. Wabi-sabi embraces modesty and all that which is humble, be it a material thing, a gesture, or an action, and it elevates the beauty of the unsung or the unconventional, the putatively inconsequential. It has moral implications too, which is where it best dovetails with Stoicism.

Get rid of all that is unnecessary

Wabi-sabi suggests that we would do well to get rid of all that is unnecessary. One can't help but notice the affinities with the simplicity and humility espoused in Stoic literature. Wabi-sabi and Stoicism both urge us to pull back from what the Stoics call the indifferents, so that we aren't living half-lives

tethered to unimaginative routines, frivolous cravings, and stale ignoble thought patterns. Each of these world views recognizes the emptiness of shiny things, celebrity, ostentation, or wealth without purpose.

Wake up to the simple exquisite now

Like Stoicism, wabi-sabi essentially prods us to wake up to the simple exquisite now. To this. Not to what could be, not to more would be better, but to a deep appreciation of the supposed minor details of everyday life. As Leonard Koren writes in his book on wabi-sabi, “the beauty of the inconspicuous and overlooked aspects of nature are where our attention might best land.”

The key lessons of wabi-sabi seem all of a piece with the spirit of modern stoicism: the idea that all things are impermanent, all things are imperfect, and all things are incomplete. As Marcus Aurelius says, “Nature which governs the whole will soon change all things which thou seest, and out of their substance will make other things, and again other things from the substance of them, in order that the world may be ever new”. This circle of life motif shows up in wabi-sabi art, design, and personal philosophy.

Greatness in the inconspicuous and overlooked details

Koren emphasizes “Greatness exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked details”. Thus beauty is part of and can be coaxed out of ugliness. I could imagine Epictetus having said just that in his insistent reminder to remember that it is not things themselves that disturb us or appear ugly, for example, but our reactions to those things.

Virtue, wabi-sabi. You say ta-mah-to. I say toh-may-toh.