

Stoic joy is found in the journey

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Stoicism and joy

When you tell most people that your philosophy of choice is Stoicism or that you profess to be influenced by Stoic ideas, a few things will come to their mind, but joy is unlikely to be one of them even though the Roman philosopher and statesman, Seneca the Younger advised his friend Lucilius:

Above all, my dear Lucilius, make this your business: learn how to feel joy.” - Seneca, Letter 23.3.

Are Stoics joyless?

Our current confusion about Stoics being “joyless” or “emotionless” perhaps results from the fact that a core Stoic tenet is that a complete sense of human happiness or flourishing (obtaining eudaimonia) is not necessarily a pleasurable experience but instead one rooted in reason. This means that joy is a product of the equanimity that comes with knowing that you alone are responsible for your attaining of that flourishing. Furthermore, in their steps towards eudaimonia, a Stoic practitioner will experience the joy that comes from seeing progress in the cultivation of a better character.

As we stated in the previous issue of THE STOIC, Stoicism isn’t merely about us as individuals but rather our role in the world community. Thus, there is also a joy to be had in the resulting improved relationships

you have with yourself, your family, colleagues, local community, and wider world.

Joy rooted in deep meaningful relationships

By extension, if Stoics are to find a sense of joy, it is not the kind of joy that merely makes us happy in the moment, because we ate our favourite ice cream, but the joy that is rooted in the development and maintenance of deep meaningful relationships and because of the decisions we took to encourage them to bloom.

After all, Stoicism isn’t merely about creating headspace by focussing on only what is up to us and letting everything else go. On the contrary, it’s about



distinguishing between what is up to us and what isn’t, so we give ourselves the power to help ourselves and support those that our life touches. It is about giving ourselves headspace so we can have a greater positive

impact in our communities because we are no longer bogged down by the petty or the pointless but driven by a purpose that goes beyond the self. This is in effect what Seneca says in the letter we quoted above:

Do you ask what is the foundation of a sound mind... knowing what to rejoice in – finding prosperity in that which no one else can control. - Seneca, Letter 23.2

Joy is the journey to eudaimonia

For Stoics, joy is as much of the journey to eudaimonia as any emotion that is derived from the ability to reason and not a mere reaction to something we like. Stoic joy is a product of a deep dive into what it means to progress along the path of human flourishing and the peace of mind that comes when the superficial slips away.

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