

Paying attention: The skill of practice

Stoicism isn't an easy-to-follow road. There are many principles to keep in mind and to live by.

Being aware of what matters

And the most important prerequisite to practicing Stoicism is being aware of what's going on. Because Stoic philosophy is a lot about how we respond to what happens in the world around us. What happens doesn't matter because it's beyond our control. What matters is how we deal with it.

In order to deal with what happens effectively and to be mindful of our (re)actions, we need to be aware of what's going on. We need to be able to step in between stimulus and response. We need to be able to *not* go with our impulses, but to take a step back and look at the situation objectively.

Not reacting impulsively

Stoicism requires us to be able to not react impulsively to what happens to us. It requires us to spot our initial impressions, so that we recognize our ability to choose our response. Once we're able to spot our automatic impressions, we can test them and actively choose to go with the impression or not.

First step towards change

Awareness or attention (prosochê as the Stoics called it) is the first step toward any serious change. If you're not aware of what's going wrong in your life, then how can you want to fix it? If you don't realize when you get angry, how can you want to prevent it in the future?

A consciousness of wrongdoing is the first step to salvation. You have to catch yourself doing it before you can correct it.

Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, XXVIII

Stoicism asks of us to be aware of what we do in every moment.

The basis of virtue

The whole idea of virtue, to express our highest self in every moment, is based on our ability to be present in the moment and know what's going on. How else can we choose our best action? As we let our thoughts drift away, our actions become *mindless*, we stumble into folly, and give away our best chance for being our highest self in that very moment.

Our voluntary thoughts and actions are by definition the only things within our control. And they only exist in the here and now. *We can't choose an action if we're lost in thought, ruminating in the past, or dreaming about the future.*

Pay attention to the present moment

Therefore, we should focus our attention on the present moment, undistracted by the past or future. Then we can properly confront the challenge we're facing now, trying to accept it as it is, and choose a response consistent with our values.

Basically, we should be aware of our every step. We should watch ourselves like a hawk and bring the same attention into the moment as when we're walking barefoot in an area covered with shards of glass. *This focused and continuous self-observation is needed to practice Stoicism effectively.*

Although this focused self-observation is the Stoics' goal, Epictetus said that it's not possible to be faultless, but we can try and *we must be content if by never remitting this attention we shall escape at least a few errors.*

Epictetus, *Discourses*, On Attention



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