



The small price of tranquility

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We value things of little value

This is one of my favourite Stoic ideas:

Starting with things of little value—a bit of spilled oil, a little stolen wine—repeat to yourself: ‘For such a small price I buy tranquility and peace of mind.’ – Epictetus, Enchiridion 12

The sentence “I buy tranquility instead,” has saved me countless times from getting angry and irritated. How often do we get angry at trifles? How often do we lose our mind for something as insignificant as a fart in the bathroom?

We trade tranquility for trifles

We let small things arouse our anger, and our consequential actions arouse anger in others, and so forth. The Stoics want to stay calm even in the midst of a storm, and yet we go crazy when our roomie forgets to do the dishes, leaves skid marks behind in the toilet, or doesn’t do his chores.

It doesn’t need to be this way

Before you react to whatever arouses anger within, say to yourself: “I buy tranquility instead.” Then smile, do what needs to get done, and move on with your life.

Nothing happened. You will soon realize that the small things that usually irritate you are not worth the hassle. Let go of the feelings that arise within and move on. This will save you a ton of energy and nerves.

Observing your feelings

Attention: This is not about suppressing your emotions. It’s about observing your feelings, and actively letting go of them. It is about realizing that you do not want to follow that path of resentment, anger, and ego-inflation. Something happens, or you discover something, and this arouses some negative feelings within you. As you’re aware in the moment, you’re able to observe these feelings and can decide to let go of them.

Observe them and see how they go away as you don’t get engaged with them. Don’t follow along with whatever your ego is telling you about what you just discovered. Observe these thoughts and feelings that could be something among the lines of, “Oh come on, brother. You didn’t do the dishes. Again. And last time you told me to do the dishes. And you don’t do it. But you don’t realize it. And anyway, you don’t do anything in the household, etc.”

Being mindful

You see where this is going. If we’re aware of the situation and can let go of the arising thoughts and feelings, we can buy tranquility instead.

The main challenge is this: We need to be aware of the arising feelings in the first place. So we need to be able to step in between stimulus and automatic response. And once we’re in that gap, we need to have the self-discipline actually to buy tranquility and not react

at all.

Start small

Start with small things. You’ll get better at buying tranquility and will soon be able to do it in more and more challenging situations.

Skid marks are easy. It just takes a few seconds to clean up. Red wine on your white dress is still easy. It’s just a dress. A late and decisive equalizer against your favourite team is still manageable. It’s just a game. A cheating boyfriend is much more challenging because it’ll take some grieving and anger.

Practice buying tranquility

The point is, the more you practice buying tranquility, the better you’ll get.

Ultimately, this all comes down to the Stoic principle that it’s not events that upset us, but our judgment about those events. If we recognize our power and bring enough awareness and discipline into challenging situations, then we’re on our way to becoming an emotionally resilient and steadfast person.

If that’s the path you want to go, ask yourself: “In which situations could I buy tranquility more often?”

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