January Meeting Primer

An optional read-ahead and quick reference, about 10 minutes

On Stoic Living Discussion Series · Guide 1 of 12

Guiding Question: What am I being asked to believe — and what supports it?

At the Meeting

- **Today's reading: Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.12.13–17**. We'll bring it into the discussion when we examine the grounds for a judgment.
- **The shared case:** An unanswered email seems to show deliberate avoidance. We examine what the evidence supports, then test a judgment together. Everyone can reason from this case without having done the weekly practice.

When Your Mind Jumps to Conclusions

An email goes unanswered, and before you have decided anything, a conclusion has arrived: *they're ignoring me.* It feels like knowledge. What you actually know is narrower: you sent the email and haven't heard back.

The Stoics thought this gap between how things appear and what we accept is where good judgment is won or lost. An impression arrives on its own; whether we agree with it is up to us. January's practice is simple to state and hard to do: notice a conclusion as a conclusion, and give it no more confidence than its grounds support. That isn't the same as thinking positively. A comforting explanation needs evidence too.

The readings below give you the key ideas in their own words. *For ancient texts, use any translation you like.*

Optional Reading (about 8 minutes)

1. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1** (2 minutes) This is where Epictetus starts nearly everything: some things are up to us, and some are not. As you read, sort the email case into his two lists. Which part is the colleague's, and which part is yours?
2. **Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.12.13–17** (3 minutes) This is the passage we'll read aloud at the meeting. Epictetus compares examining an impression to a night watch who won't let a visitor pass without seeing their credentials. What would count as credentials for an impression?
3. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 5** (1 minute) Epictetus separates what happens from the judgment we add to it. In your own words, what is the event in the email case, and what is the added judgment?

4. **Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.49** (1–2 minutes) Marcus notices how quickly a report turns into a verdict. Look for the line between what the first impression actually reports and what the mind adds afterward.

Think About

We begin with the case and compare reasons before using the application steps. Consider these questions if useful; the meeting supplies all the background needed.

- Why can a plausible interpretation feel like something already known?
- What would count as grounds for accepting it? What would weaken it?
- What can remain unsettled even when part of a judgment is supported?

Application at the Meeting

Test an impression: use these three steps after discussing the case.

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1. **Pause.** Your judgment is yours to examine.
2. **Bracket.** What do I know? What am I adding?
3. **Weigh.** How much certainty do those grounds justify?
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Compare two interpretations and the confidence each deserves. Add the new evidence supplied during the meeting and reconsider. No practical response needs to be performed to establish a better-grounded judgment.

Key Terms

For reference during the meeting. No need to memorize these.

The Fundamental Rule. Some things are up to us and some are not (*Enchiridion* 1). It's the starting point for everything else this year.

Up to us (*eph' hēmin*). What depends on our own judgment: our opinions, desires, and choices. Other people's replies, our reputations, and how things turn out are not up to us, though they can still deserve care and effort.

Impression (*phantasia*). The way something first appears to us: "they're ignoring me," "this is going to end badly." Impressions arrive on their own, and how convincing one feels doesn't make it true.

Assent (*synkatathesis*). Accepting what an impression presents as true. For the Stoics, this is where our responsibility lies.

Withholding assent. Leaving a claim unsettled when the grounds don't justify accepting or rejecting it. "Not yet" is a judgment, and it doesn't stop you from acting on what you do know.

First movements (*propatheiai*). Involuntary reactions, such as a startle or flush, which do not themselves require assent (Seneca, *On Anger* 2.1–4). A fast reaction may also involve a judgment already accepted; speed alone does not tell us which it is.

The Stoic Pause. A modern name for an old move: making a little room between an impression and your agreement with it. Epictetus describes asking an impression to wait while he examines it (*Discourses* 2.18.24).

Bracketing. Holding what happened apart from the judgment you added: "What happened, and what did I add?"

The Discipline of Assent. The training of judgment, one of Epictetus's three areas of practice. It's January's focus in *On Stoic Living*: *How can I judge more wisely what deserves my assent?*