February Meeting Primer

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

On Stoic Living Discussion Series · Guide 2 of 12

Guiding Question: Can I want this without making living well depend on getting it?

At the Meeting

- **Today's reading: Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 4**. We'll bring it into the discussion when we consider pursuing a task with reserve.
- **The shared case:** A table sale makes useful income and honesty seem to compete. We examine what the seller wants, then test the ordering of those aims. Everyone can reason from this case without having done the weekly practice.

When Wanting Turns Into Needing

You're selling a table, and a buyer asks about its condition. One leg wobbles. You want a fair price. As you consider how much to say, getting the sale starts to feel more important than giving an accurate answer.

February asks how we can learn to pursue and avoid wisely. Start by noticing what a want promises. Money may serve a real need. A sale may also seem to promise approval or proof that you're good at negotiating. Once the promise is clearer, ask whether getting the result has become a condition of living well.

For the Stoics, living well means using judgment and choice with wisdom and good character. Circumstances can make that harder and change the help we need. We can care about the outcome while learning to want honesty or fairness more. Two Missions gives that priority a name. The first mission concerns character; the second is the external result, pursued as circumstances allow.

The readings below develop these distinctions. *For ancient texts, use any translation you like.*

Optional Reading (about 8 minutes)

1. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 2** (2 minutes) Desire and aversion promise getting or avoiding something. Why does placing those hopes on things outside our choice make us vulnerable to frustration?
2. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 4** (1 minute) This is the passage we'll read together. What purpose does Epictetus want to preserve if his visit to the baths is disrupted?

3. **Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.5.1–9** (3 minutes) Epictetus distinguishes the materials of an activity from their use. What reason remains to take care with the task if its outcome cannot make us good?
4. **Seneca, *Letters* 76.15–18** (2 minutes) Seneca examines what makes a human being good. What would his account require when a profitable choice would compromise honesty?

Think About

We begin with the case and compare reasons before naming the two missions. Consider these questions if useful; the meeting supplies all the background needed.

- What practical value does the sale have, and what else might it seem to promise?
- What makes a preference become a condition of living well?
- Would honesty remain worth wanting if it failed to win the buyer's approval?

Application at the Meeting

Two Missions: use these three steps after discussing the case.

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1. **Notice.** What do I want or fear, and what does it promise?
2. **Prefer.** I would prefer this result, if circumstances allow.
3. **Re-aim.** Whatever happens, I want to practice this virtue most.
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Compare two possible priorities, then consider refusal by the buyer. Examine what each priority makes living well depend on. The aim is to understand the valuation; a polished sales reply does not demonstrate a change of desire.

Key Terms

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

Desire (*orexis*). Movement toward what appears good. What we want reveals what we currently value.

Aversion (*ekklisis*). Movement away from what appears bad. Ask what you fear losing or being unable to bear.

Virtue (*aretē*). Excellence in reason and choice. Wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance give character its direction.

Externals. Things beyond our own use of choice, including money, reputation, and another person's answer. They may deserve care and effort.

Indifferents (*adiaphora*). Things that are neither virtue nor vice in themselves. Health and adequate resources usually have practical value and deserve thoughtful selection.

Preference and demand. A preference recognizes reasons to seek something. A demand makes obtaining it seem necessary for living well.

Reserve Clause. Qualifying an intention with "if circumstances allow." We prepare and pursue the task while allowing for what could prevent completion.

Acceptance. Willingness to work with the facts that have arrived. Disappointment, a desire to repair damage, and acceptance can coexist.

Two Missions. A modern teaching exercise drawing on Epictetus's bath example. Character is the first mission; the external task is the second. Character governs how the task is pursued.

The Discipline of Desire. Training what we pursue and avoid, including the value we place on outcomes. February's question is *How can I learn to pursue and avoid wisely?*