Meeting Primer: What Is Stoicism?

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

The Stoic Fellowship Meeting Guide · Getting Started

Guiding Question: What would it mean to live well, whatever happens to you?

At the Meeting

- **Today's introduction: Stoicism 101**, a short outline of what Stoicism is and what it's for. We'll hear a brief talk or watch a **five-minute video** together.
- **The practice:** choose one of three simple daily practices to try this week.
  1. **Morning intention.** Anticipate a challenge and decide how you want to meet it.
  2. **A deliberate pause.** When something happens, ask: "What is mine to choose here?"
  3. **Evening review.** Review what went well, what was difficult, and what you could do differently.

What Is Stoicism?

To most people, "stoic" means keeping a stiff upper lip. The philosophy is something else.

Stoicism began in Athens around 300 BCE, when Zeno of Citium started teaching at the Painted Stoa, a public porch where anyone passing could stop and listen. It later flourished in Rome, where Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius wrote the works most people read today. Zeno's message was radical: anyone who can reason, and who genuinely wants a good character, can flourish, and live a life worth living. Wealth, birth, and luck don't decide it. Character does.

Stoicism is a practical philosophy. It asks how to live well through wisdom, character, and deliberate action. Its practice involves examining our judgments and responses. It doesn't ask us to suppress our emotions or to accept injustice.

Topics We'll Explore

- **A good life.** What makes a good life, and how much does it depend on our circumstances?
- **What's up to us.** In an everyday frustration, what's outside our control, and what choices remain?
- **The four virtues.** Wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. What would they look like when someone takes credit for your work?
- **Judgments and emotions.** When someone doesn't reply to an important message, what do we know, and what story are we adding?

Each of these comes back in a later meeting.

Words That Mean Something Different

The Stoics used some everyday words in their own way. Much of what sounds strange about Stoicism comes from these words, so it helps to know what they meant.

WORD	WHAT WE USUALLY MEAN	WHAT THE STOICS MEANT
Stoic	Unemotional; enduring without complaint	A follower of the school Zeno founded, named for the *stoa* (porch) where he taught
Happiness (*eudaimonia*)	A good mood; feeling pleased	Flourishing: a life worth living, as a whole
Virtue (*aretē*)	Rule-following or primness	Excellence of character: wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance
Good	Anything useful or pleasant	Only what always benefits: virtue
Bad	Anything harmful or unpleasant	Only what always harms: vice
Indifferent	Not caring	Everything else (health, money, reputation): neither good nor bad in itself. Some are worth choosing ("preferred"), but they don't decide whether we live well
Up to us	Under our control	Our own judgments, desires, and choices (*Enchiridion* 1)
Passion	Any strong feeling	An excessive impulse built on a mistaken judgment about good and bad, like anger, fear, or craving. The Stoics valued healthy feelings such as joy and goodwill

No need to memorize these. They're here for reference, and they'll come up again in later meetings.

Optional Reading (about 10 minutes)

1. **Stoicism 101** (5 minutes) The Stoic Fellowship's short introduction. Notice which ideas match what you thought "stoic" meant, and which don't.
2. **Foundations of Stoicism: Ten Fundamental Stoic Concepts** (10 minutes, to go deeper) Michael Tremblay's summary of ten key ideas, on our wiki. Several of the words above get their own section.

3. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1** (2 minutes) Epictetus opens his handbook here: some things are up to us, and some are not. Which items on his two lists surprise you?
4. **Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 5** (1 minute) People are disturbed not by things but by their judgments about things. How might that apply to an unanswered message?
5. **Seneca, *On Anger* 3.36** (2 minutes) Seneca describes reviewing his day each evening, one of the practices we'll try. What does he ask himself, and how does he treat his own mistakes?

Think About

Before the meeting, think about which of the three practices might suit you. Carry these questions with you.

- **Morning intention.** What challenge might you meet this week, and how do you want to meet it?
- **A deliberate pause.** When did a quick reaction get ahead of you recently? What was yours to choose?
- **Evening review.** What went well today, what was difficult, and what could you do differently?