Expanded Guide: What Is Stoicism?

The Stoic Fellowship Meeting Guide · Getting Started

For facilitators. Read before the meeting, after the Meeting Primer (about 15 minutes).

The Meeting Primer covers the readings and the key words, and the meeting guide covers the flow and timing. This guide covers the heart of the meeting: the introduction, the four topics, and the practice. It explains what each part is for, what to listen for, and what to do when the conversation goes somewhere unexpected.

What this meeting is for

This is often a group's first meeting, and many people in the room will be new to Stoicism. Its job is to introduce Stoicism as a practical philosophy for everyday life and get people thinking about how it applies to their own lives, so they come back for the answers.

- **The big picture.** Zeno's message: anyone who can reason, and who genuinely wants a good character, can flourish. A good life depends on character, not circumstances.
- **Four topics, each opened, none settled.** Each topic is a brief introduction followed by an everyday situation to discuss. In the Guided Year, they set up the sessions ahead:

TOPIC TODAY	COMES BACK IN
A good life	*What's Actually Good?*
What's up to us	*What's in My Control?*
The four virtues	*Difficult People*
Judgments and emotions	*Anger* and *Worry About the Future*

- **One practice to take home.** Each person chooses one of three simple practices and decides when to try it.

Keep two points in view throughout.

- **Open questions; don't settle them.** Give each topic about twelve minutes, take a few answers, and say where the group will pick it up. "We'll come back to that" is the right ending today.
- **Words carry special meanings.** The Stoics used *good*, *happy*, *passion*, and other words in their own way (see the table in the Meeting Primer). Introduce a Stoic meaning in a sentence when it comes up; don't lecture on it.

Leading the introduction

Keep the talk or video to ten minutes. Cover four points:

- Stoicism began in Athens around 300 BCE and later flourished in Rome. Familiar voices include Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.
- Its central concern is how to live well through wisdom, character, and deliberate action.
- Zeno taught that anyone who can reason, and who genuinely wants a good character, can flourish.
- Stoic practice examines our judgments and responses. It doesn't mean suppressing emotions or accepting injustice.

Where Zeno's message comes from. Whiting and Campbell (*What Is Stoicism?*, chapter 1) describe Zeno teaching at a public porch, where anyone walking past could hear his message: anyone capable of reason, with a genuine desire for a good character, can flourish.

The discussion: four topics

For each topic, give the one-line introduction from the meeting guide, ask the question, and take two or three answers. Each topic has a purpose, two follow-ups (the meeting guide prints the first), something to listen for, and a way to close it.

1. A good life: What makes a good life, and how much does it depend on our circumstances? *Purpose:* the central Stoic question. *Comes back in:* What's Actually Good?

- Can money or health ever do harm? When?
- Can you think of someone whose circumstances were hard but whose life you'd still call good?

Listen for examples where an advantage did harm: money spent badly, strength used to bully. That's the Stoic argument in people's own words. The Stoics kept the word *good* for what always benefits: good character. *To close:* "A later meeting asks what is actually good."

2. What's up to us: Pick an everyday frustration. What's outside your control? What choices remain? *Purpose:* the Fundamental Rule, informally. *Comes back in:* What's in My Control?

- What would a thoughtful response look like?
- Can you work to influence the outcome while accepting that you can't guarantee it?

Take two or three examples, such as traffic, criticism, or a delayed plan, and work through them aloud: what's outside my control, what choices remain, and what a thoughtful response would be. *Listen for* the difference between influencing an outcome and guaranteeing it. We can try to change things while recognizing that the result isn't fully up to us. *To close:* "Our next meeting starts right here."

3. The four virtues: A colleague takes credit for your work. What response would show these virtues? *Purpose:* the virtues as everyday conduct, especially with other people. *Comes back in:* Difficult People.

- How might firmness, fairness, and restraint work together?
- Which virtue would be hardest for you in that moment?

Listen for responses that are firm without being cruel: speaking up (courage), giving an accurate account (justice), choosing the right time and tone (wisdom and temperance). The virtues work together. *To close:* "We'll come back to how to treat people who make it hard."

4. Judgments and emotions: An important message goes unanswered. What do you know? What are you adding? *Purpose:* how judgments shape emotions. *Comes back in:* Anger, and Worry About the Future.

- What response would be reasonable and useful? How could pausing help?
- What were you afraid the silence meant?

Separate three things aloud: the fact (what we actually know), the interpretation (the story we're adding), and the response (what would be reasonable and useful). *Listen for* stories that turn into anger ("they're ignoring me") or worry ("something's wrong"). Epictetus says we are disturbed not by things but by our judgments about them (*Enchiridion* 5). *To close:* "Later meetings take up anger and worry one at a time."

Going deeper, for a room that is ready: Zeno claimed that anyone who can reason and genuinely wants a good character can flourish, whatever their circumstances. Do you believe it? Let skeptics speak; the claim is bold, and testing it is the point.

The practice: choose one daily practice

> Present three simple practices. Give two quiet minutes for each person to choose one and decide when they'll use it this week. Invite a few people to say theirs aloud.

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.

Passing is always welcome.

> **Sample response:** "I'll try the evening review. When the kids are in bed, I'll ask myself the three questions before I pick up my phone."

Seneca describes the evening review in *On Anger* 3.36: each evening he reviews his whole day, names his mistakes plainly, pardons himself, and resolves to do better next time.

Misunderstandings to watch for

IF YOU HEAR…	THE MISUNDERSTANDING	TRY
“Stoics don’t have feelings.”	Stoicism means suppressing emotion.	The Stoics examined the judgments behind emotions, and valued healthy feelings like joy and goodwill.
“So I should just accept whatever happens.”	Stoicism means accepting injustice.	The Stoics were active in public life. Justice is one of the four virtues.
“So money and health don’t matter.”	*Indifferent* means worthless.	They’re worth choosing and using well. They don’t decide whether you live well.
“So I shouldn’t care about what I can’t control.”	What isn’t up to us doesn’t matter.	It can still deserve care and effort. What’s up to us is how we judge and act.
“Happiness means feeling good.”	*Eudaimonia* is a mood.	It’s a whole life going well: flourishing, not a feeling.
“The evening review is about beating yourself up.”	The practice is self-criticism.	Seneca names his mistakes, pardons himself, and resolves to do better.

Facilitating the people in the room

A first meeting draws a mix of people. Each brings something the meeting needs.

WHO	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TRY
The expert	Has read a lot and starts to lecture.	“That’s helpful. How would you put it for someone hearing it for the first time?”
The newcomer	New to the ideas and quiet.	“Here’s the one idea we’re exploring today: character over circumstances.”
The skeptic	Thinks the central claim is naive.	Welcome it: “What would you point to?” Then ask the room to test it.
The deep diver	Wants to settle one topic fully.	“Good question. A later meeting takes that up; let’s note it.”
The talker	Fills every silence.	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet.”

WHO	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	TRY
The quiet one	Listening closely but not speaking.	Offer an easy entry: “Which of these topics matters most to you?” Passing is always fine.

When an example is painful. Frustrations, conflicts, and worries can bring up real hurt. If someone shares something painful, thank them, and don’t press for details. Offer a pause or move on. The group is for philosophy, not therapy; if someone seems to be struggling, check in with them privately afterward.

Questions you may be asked

“Isn’t Stoicism about suppressing emotions?” That’s the everyday meaning of “stoic,” not the philosophy. The Stoics examined the judgments behind emotions and valued joy, goodwill, and care.

“What did the Stoics actually study?” Three parts of philosophy: logic (how to reason well), physics (how the world works), and ethics (how to live well). They compared them to a garden: logic is the fence, physics the soil, and ethics the fruit (Diogenes Laertius 7.39–40). Within ethics, Chrysippus and others taught topics including impulse, good and bad, the passions, virtue, and the goal of life (Diogenes Laertius 7.84). Our meetings work through many of these.

“Is Stoicism a religion?” No. The ancient Stoics had views about God and nature, and members today hold many different beliefs. The group focuses on practice.

“Do I need to read anything?” No. Newcomers need no preparation. The Meeting Primer is optional.

Adapting the meeting

- **Mostly newcomers.** Keep the introduction short, and give the first two topics more time.
- **Mostly experienced members.** Shorten the introduction, and leave room for the going-deeper question.
- **A break.** If your group likes one, take five minutes after the second topic and trim each topic slightly.
- **Online.** Share the video on screen, call on people by name, and remind them they may pass.
- **A large group.** Discuss the topics in pairs or threes, then hear one answer from each group.
- **Short on time.** Shorten topic 3 or 4. Every topic comes back in a later meeting.

Built on Stoicism 101 and Whiting & Campbell, What Is Stoicism?*, chapter 1.*