
Epictetus

(60-130 A. D.)

How many times have you heard this popular expression?

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to tell the difference.

That little chestnut of popular philosophy was coined in this century, but its ideas were also common twenty centuries ago in the classical world. The Roman philosopher, Epictetus, was only the most articulate and compelling proponent of this "stoical" way of viewing the world.

Early in his life, Epictetus must have been acutely aware that there were circumstances in his life which he was powerless to change. Born about 60 A. D. (during the Emperor Nero's reign), he was made a slave during his boyhood. ("Epictetus" means "acquired"; his early name is not known.) For nearly three decades Epictetus was owned by Epaphroditus, a freedman in the Roman imperial secretariat, who allowed him to attend the lectures of the most widely admired Stoic of his day, Gaius Musonius Rufus. According to Epictetus, Rufus "spoke in such a fashion that each of us as he sat there felt himself accused."

According to an anecdote related by Celsus, one of Epictetus' loyal followers, Epictetus must have been a quick study in developing the capacities for patience and endurance which Rufus encouraged. According to Celsus, Epaphroditus, in a fit of rage, broke Epictetus' leg, crippling him for the rest of his life. As his owner was twisting his leg, Epictetus only smiled and noted calmly, "You will break it." When it was broken, Epictetus noted, "I told you so." Now that is stoicism!

Epictetus was finally granted his freedom about 89 A.D., when he became a teacher of philosophy in Rome. When the Emperor Domitian expelled all philosophers from Rome (because he feared that they were extolling a republican form of government), Epictetus retired to the city of Nicopolis in northern Greece. There he spent the remaining fifty or so years of his life trying to teach and to live by Stoic principles. He lived in poverty, with only "earth, sky, and a cloak," as he put it. But

he lived also with intensely dedicated followers. After his death, one of them paid three thousand drachmas for an earthenware lamp Epictetus had used.

Like Socrates, Epictetus wrote nothing that has survived, but one of his devoted followers, the Greek historian Flavius Arrian, took careful notes of his lectures and discussions and published them in eight books, now called Discourses. Unfortunately, only the first four books have survived. Arrian insists in his preface that in the Discourses he has expressed his master's ideas "in the very language Epictetus used, so far as possible." Arrian also compiled the principle tenets of Epictetus' teaching out of his notes and published these as the *Encheiridion* (meaning "manual").

Epictetus' teachings have prompted some scholars to wonder if he was not perhaps influenced by early Christian missionaries in Greece or Rome. At any rate, Epictetus sees life as a great play, directed by an all-powerful God, who has our best interests in mind—a play in which each of us plays an individual role and in which everything happens for our ultimate good. The obligation of each actor is, therefore, to accept his assigned role and to play it as best he can. Each individual can best play his role by enduring patiently everything—misfortunes, sickness, death—over which he has no control and no individual responsibility. And he can take considerable comfort, as he suffers and ignores these vicissitudes, that everything happens for the best. There are things that fall within the individual's control, however, and these responsibilities he must look after relentlessly. He cannot, for instance, control much of what happens in his life, but he most certainly can and must control his own personal attitude towards those events and circumstances he is powerless to influence. Stoicism obviously has a number of striking affinities with Christianity, not the least of which is that both have been immensely appealing ways of making sense of things throughout the centuries and both, if their principles are followed closely, require an almost superhuman capacity for self-discipline.

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from the *Discourses*

Man, be not ungrateful, nor unmindful of your superior advantages. For sight, and hearing, and indeed for life itself, and the supports of it, as fruits, and wine, and oil, be thankful to God. But remember that He hath given you another thing, superior to them all, which uses them, proves them, and estimates the value of each. For what is it that pronounces upon the value of each of these faculties? Is it the faculty itself? Did you ever perceive the faculty of sight or hearing to say anything concerning itself? Or wheat, or barley, or horses, or dogs? No. These things are appointed as instruments and servants, to obey that which is capable of using things as they appear. If you inquire the value of anything, of what do you inquire? What is the faculty that answers you? How then can any faculty be superior to that which uses all the rest as instruments, and tries and pronounces concerning each of them? For which of them knows when it is to be used and when not? Which is it that opens and shuts the eyes and turns them away from improper objects? Is it the faculty of sight? No, it is nothing but the Will. Which is it that opens and shuts the ears? Which is it by which the ears are made curious and inquisitive—or, on the contrary, deaf and unaffected by what is said? Is it the faculty of hearing? No, it is nothing but the Will. Recognizing itself to exist amidst other faculties (which are all blind and deaf and unable to discern

anything but those offices in which they are appointed to minister and serve), the Will alone sees clearly and distinguishes the value of each of the rest. Will this, I say, inform us that anything is supreme but itself? What can the eye, when it is opened, do more than see? But what is it that tells us whether we *ought* to look upon the wife of any one and in what manner? The faculty of Will.

Whether we ought to believe, or disbelieve what is said; or whether, if we do believe, we ought to be moved by it, or not, what is it that decides us? Is it not the faculty of Will? Again, the very faculty of eloquence (and other skills which ornament discourse), what does it do other than merely ornament and arrange expressions—as curlers ornament the hair? But whether it be better to speak or to be silent, or better to speak in this or in that manner, whether this be decent or indecent, and the season and use of each—what is it that decides for us but the faculty of Will? What, then, would you have it appear, and bear testimony against itself? Would you have that which serves to be superior to that to which it is subservient—the horse to the rider, the dog to the hunter, the instrument to the musician, or servants to the king. What is it, after all, that makes use of all the rest? The Will. What takes care of all? The Will. What destroys the whole man—at one time by hunger, at another by a rope, at another by a precipice? The Will. Has man, then, anything stronger than this? And how is it possible that what is liable to restraint should be stronger than what is not? What has a natural power to restrain the faculty of sight? The Will and its workings. And it is the same with the faculties of hearing and of speech. And what has a natural power of restraining the Will? Nothing beyond itself—only its own perversion. Therefore in the Will alone is vice; in the Will alone is virtue.

from the *Enchiridion*, or *Manual*

1. Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power. In our power are thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and in a word, everything which is our own doing. Things not in our power include the body, property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything which is not our own doing. Things in our power are by nature free, unhindered, untrammelled; things not in our power are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, dependent on others. Remember then that if you imagine that what is naturally slavish is free, and what is naturally another's is your own, you will be hampered, you will mourn, you will be put to confusion, you will blame gods and men; but if you think that only your own belongs to you, and that what is another's is indeed another's, no one will ever put compulsion or hindrance on you, you will blame none, you will accuse none, you will do nothing against your will, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy, for no harm can touch you.

Aiming then at these high matters, you must remember that to attain them requires more than ordinary effort; you will have to give up some things entirely, and put off others for the moment. And if you would have these also—office and wealth—it may be that you will fail to get them, just because your desire is set on the former, and you will certainly fail to attain those things which alone bring freedom and happiness.

Make it your study then to confront every harsh impression with the words, 'You are but an impression, and not at all what you seem to be.' Then test it by those rules that you possess; and first by this—the chief test of all—'Is it concerned with

what is in our power or with what is not in our power?' And if it is concerned with what is not in our power, be ready with the answer that it is nothing to you.

2. Remember that the will to get promises attainment of what you will, and the will to avoid promises escape from what you avoid; and he who fails to get what he wills is unfortunate, and he who does not escape what he wills to avoid is miserable. If then you try to avoid only what is unnatural in the region within your control, you will escape from all that you avoid; but if you try to avoid disease or death or poverty you will be miserable.

Therefore let your will to avoid have no concern with what is not in man's power; direct it only to things in man's power that are contrary to nature. But for the moment you must utterly remove the will to get; for if you will to get something not in man's power you are bound to be unfortunate; while none of the things in man's power that you could honourably will to get is yet within your reach. Impulse to act and not to act, these are your concern; yet exercise them gently and without strain, and provisionally.

3. When anything, from the meanest thing upwards, is attractive or serviceable or an object of affection, remember always to say to yourself, 'What is its nature?' If you are fond of a jug, say you are fond of a jug; then you will not be disturbed if it be broken. If you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself that you are kissing a human being, for then if death strikes it you will not be disturbed.

4. When you are about to take something in hand, remind yourself what manner of thing it is. If you are going to bathe put before your mind what happens in the bath--water pouring over some, others being jostled, some reviling, others stealing; and you will set to work more securely if you say to yourself at once: 'I want to bathe, and I want to keep my will in harmony with nature,' and so in each thing you do; for in this way, if anything turns up to hinder you in your bathing, you will be ready to say, 'I did not want only to bathe, but to keep my will in harmony with nature, and I shall not so keep it, if I lose my temper at what happens.'

5. What disturbs men's minds is not events but their judgements on events. For instance, death is nothing dreadful, or else Socrates would have thought it so. No, the only dreadful thing about it is men's judgement that it is dreadful. And so when we are hindered, or disturbed, or distressed, let us never lay the blame on others, but on ourselves, that is, on our judgements. To accuse others for one's own misfortunes is a sign of want of education; to accuse oneself shows that one's education has begun; to accuse neither oneself nor others shows that one's education is complete.

6. Be not elated at an excellence which is not your own. If the horse in his pride were to say, 'I am handsome', we could bear with it. But when you say with pride, 'I have a handsome horse,' know that the good horse is the ground of your pride. You ask then what you can call your own. The answer is--the way you deal with your impressions in accord with nature, that you may be proud indeed, for your pride will be in a good which is your own.

7. When you are on a voyage, and your ship is at anchorage, and you disembark to get fresh water, you may pick up a small shellfish or a truffle by the way, but you must keep your attention fixed on the ship, and keep looking towards it constantly, to see if the helmsman calls you; and if he does, you have to leave everything, or be bundled on board with your legs tied like a sheep. So it is in life. If you have a dear wife or child given you, they are like the shellfish or the truffle, they are very well in their way. Only, if the helmsman call, run back to your ship, leave all else, and do not look behind you. And if you are old, never go far from the ship, so that when you are called you may not fail to appear.

8. Ask not that events should happen as you will, but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace.

9. Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to the will, unless the will consent. Lameness is a hindrance to the body, but not to the will. Say this to yourself at each event that happens, for you shall find that though it hinders something else it will not hinder you.

10. When anything happens to you, always remember to turn to yourself and ask what faculty you have to deal with it. If you see a beautiful boy or a beautiful woman, you will find continence the faculty to exercise there; if trouble is laid on you, you will find endurance; if ribaldry, you will find patience. And if you train yourself in this habit your impressions will not carry you away.

11. Never say of anything, 'I lost it', but say, 'I gave it back'. Has your child died? It was given back. Has your wife died? She was given back. Has your estate been taken from you? Was not this also given back? But you say, 'He who took it from me is wicked.' What does it matter to you through whom the Giver asked it back? As long as He gives it you, take care of it, but not as your own; treat it as passers-by treat an inn.

12. If you wish to make progress, abandon reasonings of this sort: 'If I neglect my affairs I shall have nothing to live on'; 'If I do not punish my slave-boy, he will be wicked.' For it is better to die of hunger than to be free from pain and free from fear, than to live in plenty and be troubled in mind. It is better for your slave-boy to be wicked than for you to be miserable. Wherefore begin with little things: is your drop of oil spilt? Is your cup of wine stolen? Say to yourself, 'This is the price paid for freedom from passion, this is the price of a quiet mind.' Nothing can be had without a price. When you call your slave-boy, reflect that he may not be able to hear you, but if he hears you, he may not be able to do anything you want. But he is not so well off that it rests with him to give you peace of mind.

13. If you wish to make progress, you must be content in external matters to seem a fool and a simpleton; do not wish men to think you know anything, and if any should think you to be somebody, distrust yourself. For know that it is not easy to keep your will in accord with nature and at the same time keep outward things; if you attend to one you must needs neglect the other.

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14. It is silly to want your children and your wife and your friends to live for ever, for that means that you want what is not in your control to be in your control, and what is not your own to be yours. In the same way if you want your servant to make no mistakes, you are a fool, for you want vice not to be vice but something different. But if you want not to be disappointed in your will to get, you can attain to that.

Exercise yourself then in what lies in your power. Each man's master is the man who has authority over what he wishes or does not wish, to secure the one or to take away the other. Let him then who wishes to be free not wish for anything or avoid anything that depends on others; or else he is bound to be a slave.

15. Remember that you must behave in life as you would at a banquet. A dish is handed round and comes to you; put out your hand and take it politely. It passes you; do not stop it. It has not reached you; do not be impatient to get it, but wait till your turn comes. Bear yourself thus towards children, wife, office, wealth, and one day you will be worthy to banquet with the gods. But if when they are set before you, you do not take them but despise them, then you shall not only share the gods' banquet, but shall share their rule. For by so doing, Diogenes and Heraclitus and men like them were called divine and deserved the name.

16. When you see a man shedding tears in sorrow for a child abroad or dead, or for loss of property, beware that you are not carried away by the impression that it is outward ills that make him miserable. Keep this thought by you: 'What distresses him is not the event for that does not distress another, but his judgement on the event.' Therefore do not hesitate to sympathize with him so far as words go, and if it so chance, even to groan with him; but take heed that you do not also groan in your inner being.

17. Remember that you are an actor in a play, and the playwright chooses the manner of it: If he wants it short, it is short; if long, it is long. If he wants you to act a poor man you must act the part with all your powers; and so if your part be a cripple or a magistrate or a plain man. For your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is another's.

18. When a raven croaks with evil omen, let not the impression carry you away, but straightway distinguish in your own mind and say, 'These portents mean nothing to me; but only to my bit of a body or my bit of property or name, or my children or my wife. But for me all omens are favourable if I will, for, whatever the issue may be, it is in my power to get benefit therefrom.'

19. You can be invincible, if you never enter in a contest where victory is not in your power. Beware then that when you see a man raised to honour or great power or high repute you do not let your impression carry you away. For if the reality of good lies in what is in our power, there is no room for envy or jealousy. And you will not wish to be praetor, or prefect or consul, but to be free; and there is but one way to freedom--to despise what is not in our power.

20. Remember that foul words or blows in themselves are no outrage, but your judgement that they are so. So when any one makes you angry, know that it is your own thought that has angered you. Wherefore make it your first endeavour not to let

your impressions carry you away. For if once you gain time and delay, you will find it easier to control yourself.

21. Keep before your eyes from day to day death and exile and all things that seem terrible, but death most of all, and then you will never set your thoughts on what is low and will never desire anything beyond measure. . . .

26. It is in our power to discover the will of Nature from those matters on which we have no difference of opinion. For instance, when another man's slave has broken the winecup we are very ready to say at once, 'Such things must happen.' Know then that when your own cup is broken, you ought to behave in the same way as when your neighbour's was broken. Apply the same principle to higher matters. Is another's child or wife dead? Everyone of us would say, 'Such is the lot of man'; but when one's own dies, straightway one cries, 'Alas! miserable am I.' But we ought to remember what our feelings are when we hear it of another. . . .

31. For in piety towards the gods know that the most important thing is this: to have right opinions about them--that they exist, and that they govern the universe well and justly--and to have set yourself to obey them, and to give way to all that happens, following events with a free will, in the belief that they are fulfilled by the highest mind. For thus you will never blame the gods, nor accuse them of neglecting you. But this you cannot achieve, unless you apply your conception of good and evil to those things only which are in our power, and not to those which are out of our power. For if you apply your notion of good or evil to the latter, then, as soon as you fail to get what you will get or fail to avoid what you will to avoid, you will be bound to blame and hate those you hold responsible. For every living creature has a natural tendency to avoid and shun what seems harmful and all that causes it, and to pursue and admire what is helpful and all that causes it. It is not possible then for one who thinks he is harmed to take pleasure in what he thinks is the author of the harm, any more than to take pleasure in the harm itself. That is why a father is reviled by his son, when he does not give his son a share of what the son regards as good things; thus Polynices and Eteocles were set at enmity with one another by thinking that a king's throne was a good thing. That is why the farmer, and the sailor, and the merchant, and those who lose wife or children revile the gods. For men's religion is bound up with their interest. Therefore he who makes it his concern rightly to direct his will to get and his will to avoid, is thereby making piety his concern. But it is proper on such occasion to make libation and sacrifice and to offer first-fruits according to the custom of our fathers, with purity and not in slovenly or careless fashion, without meanness and without extravagance. . . .

33. Lay down for yourself from the first a definite stamp and style of conduct, which you will maintain when you are alone and also in the society of men. Be silent for the most part, or if you speak; say only what is necessary and in a few words. Talk, but rarely, if occasion calls you, but do not talk of ordinary things--of gladiators, or horseraces, or athletes, or of meats or drinks--these are topics that arise everywhere--but above all do not talk about men in blame or compliment or comparison. If you can, turn the conversation of your company by your talk to some fitting subject; but if you should chance to be isolated among strangers, be silent. Do not laugh much, nor at many things, nor without restraint.

Refuse to take oaths altogether if that be possible, but if not, as far as circumstances allow.

Refuse the entertainments of strangers and the vulgar. But if occasions arise to accept them, then strain every nerve to avoid lapsing into the state of the vulgar. For know that, if your comrade has a stain on him, he that associates with him must needs share the stain, even though he be clean in himself.

For your body take just so much as your bare need requires, such as food, drink, clothing, house, servants, but cut down all that tends to luxury and outward show.

Avoid impurity to the utmost of your power before marriage, and if you indulge your passion, let it be done lawfully. But do not be offensive or censorious to those who indulge it, and do not be always bringing up your own chastity. If some one tells you that so and so speaks ill of you, do not defend yourself against what he says, but answer, 'He did not know my other faults, or he would not have mentioned these alone.'

It is not necessary for the most part to go to the games; but if you should have occasion to go, show that your first concern is for yourself; that is, wish that only to happen which does happen, and him only to win who does win, for so you will suffer no hindrance. But refrain entirely from applause, or ridicule, or prolonged excitement. And when you go away do not talk much of what happened there, except so far as it tends to your improvement. For to talk about it implies that the spectacle excited your wonder.

Do not go lightly or casually to hear lectures; but if you do go maintain your gravity and dignity and do not make yourself offensive. When you are going to meet any one, and particularly some man of reputed eminence, set before your mind the thought, 'What would Socrates or Zeno have done?' and you will not fail to make proper use of the occasion.

When you go to visit some great man, prepare your mind by thinking that you will not find him in, that you will be shut out, that the doors will be slammed in your face, that he will pay no heed to you. And if in spite of all this you find it fitting for you to go, go and bear what happens and never say to yourself, 'It was not worth all this;' for that shows a vulgar mind and one at odds with outward things.

In your conversation avoid frequent and disproportionate mention of your own doings or adventures; for other people do not take the same pleasure in hearing what has happened to you as you take in recounting your adventures.

Avoid raising men's laughter; for this is a habit that easily slips into vulgarity, and it may well suffice to lessen your neighbour's respect.

It is dangerous to lapse into foul language; when anything of the kind occurs, rebuke the offender, if the occasion allow, and if not, make it plain to him by your silence, or a blush or a frown, that you are angry at his words. . . .

42. When a man speaks evil or does evil to you, remember that he does or says it because he thinks it is fitting for him. It is not possible for him to follow what seems good to you, but only what seems good to him, so that, if his opinion is wrong, he suffers, in that he is the victim of deception. In the same way, if a composite judgement which is true is thought to be false, it is not the judgement that suffers, but the man who is deluded about it. If you act on this principle you will be gentle to him who reviles you, saying to yourself on each occasion, 'He thought it right.'

43. Everything has two handles, one by which you can carry it, the other by which you cannot. If your brother wrongs you, do not take it by that handle, the handle of his wrong, for you cannot carry it by that, but rather by the other handle--that he is a brother, brought up with you, and then you will take it by the handle that you can carry it by. . . .

45. If a man washes quickly or if a man drinks much wine, do not say that he drinks badly, but that he drinks much. For till you have decided what judgement prompts him, how do you know that he acts badly? If you do as I say, you will assent to your apprehensive impressions and to none other.

46. On no occasion call yourself a philosopher, nor talk at large of your principles among the multitude, but act on your principles. For instance, at a banquet do not say how one ought to eat, but eat as you ought. Remember that Socrates had so completely got rid of the thought of display that when men came and wanted an introduction to philosophers he took them to be introduced; so patient of neglect was he. And if a discussion arise among the multitude on some principle, keep silent for the most part; for you are in great danger of blurting out some undigested thought. And when someone says to you, 'You know nothing,' and you do not let it provoke you, then know that you are really on the right road. For sheep do not bring grass to their shepherds and show them how much they have eaten, but they digest their fodder and then produce it in the form of wool and milk. Do the same yourself; instead of displaying your principles to the multitude, show them the results of the principles you have digested. . . .

48. The ignorant man's position and character is this: he never looks to himself for benefit or harm, but to the world outside him. The philosopher's position and character is that he always looks to himself for benefit and harm.

The signs of one who is making progress are: he blames none, praises none, complains of none, accuses none, never speaks of himself as if he were somebody, or as if he knew anything. And if any one compliments him he laughs in himself at his compliment; and if one blames him, he makes no defense. He goes about like a convalescent, careful not to disturb his constitution on its road to recovery, until it has got firm hold. He has got rid of the will to get, and his will to avoid is directed no longer to what is beyond our power but only to what is in our power and contrary to nature. In all things he exercises his will without strain. If men regard him as foolish or ignorant he pays no heed. In one word, he keeps watch and guard on himself as his own enemy, lying in wait for him.

50. Whatever principles you put before you, hold fast to them as laws which it will be impious to transgress. But pay no heed to what any one says of you; for this is something beyond your own control.

51. How long will you wait to think yourself worthy of the highest and transgress in nothing but the clear pronouncement of reason? You have received the precepts which you ought to accept, and you have accepted them. Why then do you still wait for a master, that you may delay the amendment of yourself till he comes? You are a youth no longer, you are now a full-grown man. If now you are careless and indolent and are always putting off, fixing one day after another as the limit when you

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mean to begin attending to yourself, then living or dying, you will make no progress but will continue unawares in ignorance. Therefore make up your mind before it is too late to live as one who is mature and proficient, and let all that seems best to you be a law that you cannot transgress. And if you encounter anything troublesome or pleasant or glorious or inglorious, remember that the hour of struggle is come, the Olympic contest is here and you may put it off no longer, and that one day and one action determines whether the progress you have achieved is lost or maintained.

This was how Socrates attained perfection, paying heed to nothing but reason, in all that he encountered. And if you are not yet Socrates, yet ought you to live as one who would wish to be a Socrates.