

“A clear guide for those facing adversity, seeking tranquility, and pursuing excellence.”  
—RYAN HOLIDAY, bestselling author of *The Obstacle Is the Way* and *The Daily Stoic*

# HOW TO THINK LIKE A ROMAN EMPEROR

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF  
MARCUS AURELIUS

DONALD ROBERTSON




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**DONALD ROBERTSON**

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*For Poppy, little and wise*

## INTRODUCTION

When I was thirteen years old, my father died. He'd developed lung cancer in his fifties, which left him bedridden for a year before it finally killed him. He was a humble and decent man, who encouraged me to think more deeply about life.

I was totally unprepared for his death, and I coped with it badly. I became angry and depressed. I'd stay out all night, playing cat and mouse with the local cops, breaking into buildings and waiting for them to arrive so I could run into gardens and dive over hedges and fences to lose them. I was always in trouble, either for skipping lessons at school, arguing with my teachers, or getting in fights with my classmates. As soon as my sixteenth birthday came around, I was marched briskly down to the headmaster's office and given two choices: either leave voluntarily or be expelled. So I left, and I was subsequently placed in a special program for troubled kids. I felt that my life was spiraling rapidly out of control. I'd been labeled a "write-off" by school and social services. I didn't really see any point trying to prove them wrong.

Each evening my father would come home from his work as a digger driver on building sites and collapse exhausted in an armchair, hands covered in grease and dirt. The job didn't pay well, and he hadn't two pennies to rub together, but he never complained. When he was a young man, his best friend had passed away, leaving my father a farm in his will, to everyone's surprise. He refused the bequest, returning the land to the other man's family. He used to say, "Money won't bring you happiness," and he really believed that. He showed me that there are more important things in life and that true wealth comes from being contented with whatever you have rather than desiring to have more and more.

After my father's funeral, my mother placed his old leather wallet on the dining room table and told me to take it. I opened it slowly; I think my hands were shaking but I'm not sure why. Inside there was nothing except a badly worn scrap of paper. It turned out to be a passage he'd torn from the Book of Exodus: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." I was desperate to understand what on earth those words could possibly have meant to him. My own philosophical journey began *precisely* at that moment, as I stood there perplexed, with that piece of paper in my hand.

When I learned many years later that Marcus Aurelius had lost his father at an early age, I wondered if he'd been left searching in the same way I had for a sense of direction. After my father's death, I was left with religious and philosophical questions that troubled me very deeply. I remember being terrified of dying. I would lie in bed at night unable to sleep, trying to solve the riddle of existence and find some consolation. It was as though I had an itch at the back of my brain that I needed to scratch but couldn't quite reach. I didn't know it at the time, but that sort of existential anxiety is a common experience that drives people to the study of philosophy. The philosopher Spinoza, for example, wrote:

I thus perceived that I was in a state of great peril, and I compelled myself to seek with all my strength for a remedy, however uncertain it might be; as a sick man struggling with a deadly disease, when he sees that death will surely be upon him unless a remedy be found, is compelled to seek such a remedy with all his strength, inasmuch as his whole hope lies therein.<sup>1</sup>

I took the phrase "I am that I am" to refer to the pure awareness of existence itself, which at first seemed like something deeply mystical or metaphysical to me: "I am the consciousness of my own existence." It reminded me of the famous inscription from the Delphic Oracle's shrine: *Know Thyself*. That became one of my maxims. I grew quite obsessed with the pursuit of self-knowledge, through meditation and all forms of contemplative exercises.

I found out later that the passage my father carried with him all those years plays an important role in the rites of a Masonic chapter called the "Royal Arch." During initiation the candidate is asked, "Are you a Royal Arch Mason?" to which he replies, "I—AM—THAT—I—AM." Freemasonry has a

long history in Scotland, going back at least four centuries, and it has deep roots in my hometown of Ayr. My father and many of my friends' fathers were members of the local lodge. Most Freemasons are Christians, but they employ nondenominational language, referring to God as "the Great Architect of the Universe." According to the legend presented in some of their texts, a set of spiritual teachings originating with the builders of King Solomon's temple was brought to the West by the philosopher Pythagoras and further disseminated by Plato and Euclid. This ancient wisdom was reputedly handed down through the centuries by medieval Masonic lodges. They used esoteric rituals, geometric symbols such as the square, and compasses to convey their spiritual doctrines. Freemasonry also celebrates the four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy, which correspond symbolically with the four corners of the lodge: *Prudence*, *Justice*, *Fortitude*, and *Temperance*. (Wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation, if you prefer more modern terms.) My father took these ethical teachings seriously, and they shaped his character in a way that left a lasting impression on me. Freemasonry, at least for sincere practitioners like my father, didn't represent the bookish sort of philosophy taught in the ivory towers of universities, but rather something derived from a much older conception of Western philosophy as a spiritual *way of life*.

As it happened, I wasn't old enough to become a Freemason, and with my reputation around town I wouldn't have been invited to join anyway. So, with negligible formal education behind me, I began reading everything I could about philosophy and religion. I'm not sure I would have even been able to articulate exactly what I was looking for at that time, except that it would have to somehow combine my interests in philosophy, meditation, and psychotherapy. I needed a more rational, philosophical guide to life, but nothing seemed to fit the bill. Then I had the good fortune to encounter Socrates.

I had been studying the collection of ancient Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, which are inflected with Greek philosophy. This led me to begin reading the Platonic dialogues, which portray Socrates, the quintessential Greek philosopher, questioning his friends and other interlocutors about their deepest values. He tended to focus on the cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy, later adopted by Freemasons. Socrates didn't write any books on philosophy—we know about him only through the works of others, mainly dialogues written by two of his most famous students, Plato



and Xenophon. According to legend, Socrates was the first person to apply the philosophical method to *ethical* questions. He particularly wanted to help others to live wisely, in accord with reason. For Socrates, philosophy was not only a moral guide but also a kind of *psychological therapy*. Doing philosophy, he said, can help us overcome our fear of death, improve our character, and even find a genuine sense of fulfillment.

The Socratic dialogues are often notoriously *inconclusive*. Indeed, Socrates's insistence that he knew that he knew nothing about certain matters, referred to as "Socratic irony," later inspired the tradition known as Greek Skepticism. Nevertheless, he appears to have communicated *positive* teachings to his students about the best way to live. The cornerstone of these is captured in a famous passage from Plato's *Apology*. Socrates faces the trumped-up charges of impiety and corrupting the youth, which would lead to his execution. Rather than apologize, though, or plead for mercy and parade his weeping wife and children before the jury as others did, he just carries on doing philosophy by questioning his accusers and lecturing the jury on ethics. At one point, he explains in plain language what it means to him to be a *philosopher*:

For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, as I say to you: "Wealth does not bring about virtue, but virtue makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively."<sup>2</sup>

That's how he lived his life, and his students sought to emulate that example. We are to place more importance upon wisdom and virtue than anything else. A "philosopher," in Socrates's sense, is therefore a person who lives according to these values: someone who literally *loves wisdom*, the original meaning of the word.

Looking back, I realize that I turned to Socrates and other ancient philosophers to find a *philosophy of life* like the one my father had found in Freemasonry. However, as mentioned earlier, the surviving dialogues typically portray Socrates's method of questioning rather than providing a detailed *practical* account of the Socratic art of living wisely.

While the ancient philosophers didn't provide me with the practical answers I was looking for back then, they did inspire me to read further. My newfound sense of purpose also helped me to get my life back on track: I stopped getting in trouble and enrolled to study philosophy at university, in Aberdeen. I noticed, though, that something wasn't right—the way we approached the subject was too *academic* and *theoretical*. The more time I spent in the basement of the library poring over books, the further away I seemed to be drifting from Socrates's original conception of philosophy as a way of life, something that could improve our character and help us flourish. If ancient philosophers were veritable *warriors* of the mind, their modern counterparts had become more like *librarians* of the mind, more interested in collating and organizing ideas than putting philosophy to work on a daily basis as a psychological practice.

Upon graduating, I began studying and training in psychotherapy because learning to help others seemed to offer me a route to self-improvement that I could relate to my studies in philosophy. It was a time of transition for the therapy field: Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic approaches were slowly giving way to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which has since become the dominant form of evidence-based practice in psychotherapy. CBT was closer to the philosophical practice I was looking for because it encourages us to apply reason to our emotions. However, it's something you typically do for a few months and then set aside. It certainly doesn't aim to provide us with a whole way of life.

Modern therapy is necessarily more modest in scope than the ancient Socratic art of living—most of us these days are looking for a quick solution to our mental health problems. Nevertheless, once I started working as a psychotherapist, it became evident to me that most of my clients who suffered from anxiety or depression benefited from the realization that their distress was due to their underlying *values*. Everyone knows that when we believe very strongly that something very bad has happened, we typically become upset as a result. Likewise, if we believe that something is very good and desirable, we become anxious when it's threatened or sad if it has already been lost. For example, in order to feel social anxiety, you have to believe that other people's negative opinions of you are *worth* getting upset about, that it's really bad if they dislike you and really important to win their approval. Even people who suffer from severe social anxiety disorder (social phobia) tend to feel “normal”

when speaking to children or to their close friends about trivial matters, with a few exceptions. Nevertheless, they feel *highly* anxious when talking to people they think are very important about subjects they think are very important. If your fundamental worldview, by contrast, assumes that your status in the eyes of others is of *negligible* importance, then it follows that you should be beyond the reach of social anxiety.

Anyone, I reasoned, who could adopt a healthier and more rational set of core values, with greater indifference toward the things most of us worry about in life, should be able to become much more emotionally resilient. I just couldn't figure out how to combine the philosophy and values of Socrates with something like the therapeutic tools of CBT. Around that time, though, as I was training in counseling and psychotherapy, everything changed for me because I suddenly discovered *Stoicism*.

The potential value of Stoicism struck me immediately when I stumbled across the French scholar Pierre Hadot's *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (1998) and *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (2004). As the latter title implies, Hadot explored in depth the idea that ancient Western philosophers did in fact approach philosophy as a way of life. My eyes were opened to a whole treasure trove of *spiritual practices*, tucked away in the literature of Greek and Roman philosophy, which were clearly designed to help people overcome emotional suffering and develop strength of character. Hadot discovered that contemplative practices became very common in the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period, a few generations after the death of Socrates. The Stoic school in particular focused on the practical side of Socratic philosophy, not only through the development of virtues such as self-discipline and courage (what we might call emotional resilience) but also through extensive use of psychological exercises.

Something puzzled me, though. Hadot compared these philosophical practices to early Christian spiritual exercises. As a psychotherapist, I spotted immediately that most of the *philosophical* or *spiritual* exercises he identified could be compared to *psychological* exercises found in modern psychotherapy. It very soon became evident to me that Stoicism was, in fact, the school of ancient Western philosophy with the most explicitly therapeutic orientation and the largest armamentarium, or toolbox, of psychological techniques at its disposal. After scouring books on philosophy for over a decade, I realized that

I'd been looking *everywhere* except in the right place. "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (118th Psalm).

As I began to devour the literature on Stoicism, I noticed that the form of modern psychotherapy most akin to it was rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), the main precursor to CBT, first developed by Albert Ellis in the 1950s. Ellis and Aaron T. Beck, the other main pioneer of CBT, had both cited Stoic philosophy as the inspiration for their respective approaches. For instance, Beck and his colleagues had written in *The Cognitive Therapy of Depression*, "The philosophical origins of cognitive therapy can be traced back to the Stoic philosophers."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, CBT and Stoicism have some fundamental psychological assumptions in common, particularly the "cognitive theory of emotion," which holds that our emotions are mainly determined by our beliefs. Anxiety largely consists of the belief, for example, that "something bad is going to happen," according to Beck. From shared premises, moreover, Stoicism and CBT were bound to arrive at similar conclusions about what sort of psychological techniques might be helpful to people suffering from anxiety, anger, depression, and other problems.

One Stoic technique particularly caught my attention. Although it's well attested in the ancient sources, there's very little mention of anything like the "view from above"—as Hadot called it—in modern psychotherapy or self-help literature. It involves picturing events as though seen from high overhead, as they might be seen by the gods atop Mount Olympus, perhaps. Broadening our perspective often induces a sense of emotional equanimity. As I practiced it myself, I noticed, as Hadot did, that it brings together a confluence of themes central to ancient philosophy in a single vision. I also found that it was easy to turn it into a guided meditation script. As I was now training psychotherapists myself and speaking at conferences, I was able to guide rooms full of experienced therapists and trainees, up to a hundred at a time, through my version of the exercise. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that they took to it instantly, and it became one of their favorite exercises. They would describe how they were able to remain exceptionally calm while contemplating their situation in life from a detached perspective. I began sharing my resources online via my personal blog.

In America, the marketer and entrepreneur Ryan Holiday embraced Stoicism in *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014) and *The Daily Stoic* (2016, coauthored with Stephen Hanselman). In the UK, the illusionist and television

celebrity Derren Brown later published a book called *Happy* (2017), which drew inspiration from the Stoics. These authors were reaching a whole new audience far beyond academia and introducing it to Stoicism as a form of self-help and a philosophy of life. The scientific skeptic and professor of philosophy Massimo Pigliucci published *How to Be a Stoic* in 2017. In the same year, Republican politician Pat McGeehan released *Stoicism and the Statehouse*. Stoicism was also being used in the military, as part of Colonel Thomas Jarrett's Warrior Resilience Training. The NFL executive and former New England Patriots coach Michael Lombardi embraced it, and the philosophy began to gain more and more adherents from the world of sports. Stoicism was clearly experiencing a resurgence in popularity, and this was just the tip of the iceberg. Online communities for Stoics were flourishing, attracting hundreds of thousands of members across the internet.

## TELLING THE STORY OF STOICISM

A few years ago, when my daughter Poppy was four, she began asking me to tell her stories. I didn't know any children's stories, so I told her what came to mind: Greek myths, stories about heroes and philosophers. One of her favorites was about the Greek general Xenophon. Late one night, as a young man, he was walking through an alleyway between two buildings near the Athenian marketplace. Suddenly a mysterious stranger, hidden in the shadows, blocked his path with a wooden staff. A voice inquired from the darkness, "Do you know where someone should go if he wants to buy *goods*?" Xenophon replied that they were right beside the *agora*, the finest marketplace in the world. There you could buy any goods your heart desired: jewelry, food, clothing, and so on. The stranger paused for a moment before asking another question: "Where, then, should one go in order to learn how to become a *good person*?" Xenophon was dumbstruck. He had no idea how to answer. The mysterious figure then lowered his staff, stepped out of the shadows, and introduced himself as Socrates. Socrates said that they should both try to discover how someone could become a good person, because that's surely more important than knowing where to buy all sorts of goods. So Xenophon went with Socrates and became one of his closest friends and followers.

I told Poppy that *most* people believe there are lots of good things—nice food, clothes, houses, money, etc.—and lots of bad things in life, but Socrates

said perhaps they're all wrong. He wondered if there was only one good thing, and if it was inside of us rather than outside. Maybe it was something like wisdom or bravery. Poppy thought for a minute, then, to my surprise, she shook her head, saying, "That's not true, Daddy!" which made me smile. Then she said something else: "*Tell me that story again,*" because she wanted to continue to think about it. She asked me how Socrates became so wise, and I told her the secret of his wisdom: he asked lots of questions about the most important things in life, and then he listened very carefully to the answers. So I kept telling stories, and she kept asking lots of questions. As I came to realize, these little anecdotes about Socrates did much more than just teach her things. They encouraged her to think for *herself* about what it means to live wisely.

One day, Poppy asked me to write down the stories I was telling her, so I did. I made them longer and more detailed, then I read them back to her. I shared some of them online, via my blog. Telling her these stories and discussing them with her made me realize that this was, in many ways, a better approach to teaching philosophy as a way of life. It allowed us to consider the example set by famous philosophers and whether or not they provide good role models. I began to think that a book that taught Stoic principles through real stories about its ancient practitioners might prove helpful not just to my little girl but to other people as well.

Next, I asked myself who was the best candidate to use as a Stoic role model, about whom I could tell stories that would bring the philosophy to life and put flesh on its bones. The obvious answer was Marcus Aurelius. We know very little about the lives of most ancient philosophers, but Marcus was a Roman emperor, so far more evidence survives about his life and character. One of the few surviving Stoic texts consists of his personal notes to himself about his contemplative practices, known today as *The Meditations*. Marcus begins *The Meditations* with a chapter written in a completely different style from the rest of the book: a catalogue of the virtues, the traits he most admired in his family and teachers. He lists about sixteen people in all. It seems he also believed the best way to begin studying Stoic philosophy was to look at living examples of the virtues. I think it makes sense to view Marcus's life as an example of Stoicism in the same way that he viewed the lives of his own Stoic teachers.

The following chapters are all based upon a careful reading of history. Although I've drawn on a wide range of sources, we learn about Marcus's life

and character mainly from the Roman historical accounts in Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*, as well as from Marcus's own words in *The Meditations*. Sometimes I've added minor details or pieces of dialogue to flesh out the story, but this is how, based on the available evidence, I imagine the events of Marcus's life to have unfolded.

The final chapter of this book is written in a different style, resembling a guided meditation. It's closely based on ideas presented in *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, although I've paraphrased his words to turn them into a longer account that's deliberately intended to evoke mental imagery and a more elaborate contemplative experience. I've also included a few sayings and ideas derived from other Stoic authors. I gave it the form of an internal monologue or fantasy because I felt that was a good way to present the Stoic contemplation of death and the "view from above."

This entire book is designed to help you follow Marcus in acquiring Stoic strength of mind and eventually a more profound sense of fulfillment. You'll find that I've combined Stoicism with elements of CBT in many places, which as we've seen is only natural because CBT was inspired by Stoicism and they have some fundamental things in common. So you'll notice that I refer to modern therapeutic ideas like "cognitive distancing," which is the ability to distinguish our thoughts from external reality, and "functional analysis," which is evaluating the consequences of different courses of action. CBT is a short-term therapy, a *remedial* approach to mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Everyone knows that prevention is better than cure. Techniques and concepts from CBT have been adapted for use in resilience building, to reduce the risk of developing serious emotional problems in the future. However, I believe that for many people a combination of Stoic philosophy and CBT may be even more suited for use as a long-term *preventive* approach. When we take it on as a philosophy of life, with daily practice, we have the opportunity to learn greater emotional resilience, strength of character, and moral integrity. That's what this book is really about.

The Stoics can teach you how to find a sense of purpose in life, how to face adversity, how to conquer anger within yourself, moderate your desires, experience healthy sources of joy, endure pain and illness patiently and with dignity, exhibit courage in the face of your anxieties, cope with loss, and perhaps even confront your own mortality while remaining as unperturbed as Socrates. Marcus Aurelius faced colossal challenges during his reign as

emperor of Rome. *The Meditations* provides a window into his soul, allowing us to see how he guided himself through it all. Indeed, I would invite you, as a reader, to put effort into reading this book in a special way, to try and place yourself in Marcus's shoes and look at life through his eyes, through the lens of his philosophy. Let's see if we can accompany him on the journey he made as he transformed himself, day by day, into a fully-fledged Stoic. Fate permitting, more people may be able to apply the wisdom of Stoicism to the real challenges and everyday problems of modern living. However, that change won't leap off the page. It only comes by making a firm decision, here and now, to begin putting ideas like these into practice. As Marcus wrote to himself,

Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be; just be one.<sup>4</sup>