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MARCUS AURELIUS FOR CEOs

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FOREWORD

When *The Wall Street Journal* asked newly elected President Bill Clinton in 1993 to name the one book (other than the Bible) that had been most important to him, he chose the *Meditations* of the Roman Emperor, soldier and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. And with good reason.

Marcus Aurelius (121–180 A.D.) left behind a record of accomplishment anyone who has ever held or aspired to power – political or otherwise – would envy. He was the last of the line of Roman rulers known to history as the “Five Good Emperors,” Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Their combined reigns, from 96 to 180 A.D., formed “the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was the happiest and most

prosperous,” according to historian Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Marcus Aurelius also achieved success as a man of unimpeachable integrity in a world seething with corruption, a ruler who easily countered Lord Acton’s dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. For here was a man with absolute power in every sense of the word, who chose to live more in the manner of a monk than in the style of a Caesar, though he was a Caesar in full control of one of the greatest empires ever known to man.

Marcus Aurelius for CEOs was compiled to help readers who sense a need for personal reflection in the chaotic, erratic and fascinating world in which we live and work. Adapted into easy-to-understand everyday English (by Fred Louder, who also wrote the Introduction) these selections are designed to bring the thoughts of ancient Rome’s most widely admired Emperor within the immediate range of today’s senior business executives and others for whom time is that rarest of all commodities.

– Lawrence Creaghan

P.S. I actually had the opportunity to present an earlier version of this work to President Clinton through Paul Begala. I met Begala, who had played a key role in Clinton’s successful election, at a function in Montreal in early 1993, not long after Clinton was sworn into office and long before Monica Lewinsky and other revelations came to light.

INTRODUCTION

Emperor, Soldier, Philosopher: An Imperial CEO

Rome’s Philosopher-Emperor was singled out for leadership at an early age. He was born Marcus Annius Verus in Rome on April 26, 121, the son of a consul – one of the two co-chief executives of the state, an office dating from the earliest days of the Roman Republic eight centuries before. His parents and their connections to other prominent

families certainly played a part in his rise. The Roman paradigm of executive legitimacy was neither the modern corporate model with shareholders and directors, nor a liberal democratic combination of professional success and electoral patronage. In those periods when the army alone did not make the Emperor, the Roman establishment reverted to the old republican model of extended family interests, with the new Emperor succeeding as the old Emperor's legitimate son and heir. To ensure that talent should figure with heredity in the equation, the succession was managed by a complicated system of adoption and marriage.

So it was that the Emperor Hadrian (76–138), perhaps with an eye to his own penchant for poetry, took early notice of Marcus – a handsome and talented youngster who was diligently studying literature with Marcus Cornelius Fronto, the leading critic and rhetorician of the time. In 136, Hadrian betrothed Marcus, then age 15, to Ceionia, daughter of his designated successor, Aelius Commodus. But when Commodus died two years later, the engagement was promptly annulled. The new imperial successor, Titus Aurelius Antoninus, soon adopted Marcus, along with Commodus's son Lucius, as his own co-heirs. Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus, as he was now styled, was 17 years old.

Marcus served a long and thorough apprenticeship under Antoninus, an able and personally unassuming man, whose attachment to what we would call “family values” and preference for such representative government as the Roman Senate still afforded, earned him the nickname “Pius.” His adopted son's portrait of him in the first book of the *Meditations* shows a man inclined to regard himself more as an imperial CEO than as a king by divine right.

Consul in the years 140, 145 and 161, Marcus became a sort of junior co-Emperor with imperial and tribunicial powers in 147. Two years earlier, he married Antoninus Pius's daughter Anna Galeria Faustina. The marriage would be the foundation of a close and long-lasting family partnership. Some time during these years, Marcus largely abandoned his literary ambitions for a lifelong attachment to the study and practice of Stoic philosophy, whose greatest exponent, Epictetus, had returned to spend his last years in Rome just before Marcus was born.

Marcus finally assumed his imperial powers in 161, at the age of 40. In an extraordinary gesture, he voluntarily divided the government with his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus, sharing the purple on peaceful terms with equal constitutional status and authority.

It was not to be an easy reign. In the east, the Parthians invaded Syria. When Verus proved a military failure, an able Syrian general, Avidius Cassius, literally whipped the Roman legions into shape and drove the Parthians back across the border.

But the price of victory was an even greater disaster in the form of a plague brought back by the soldiers. The plague ravaged the Empire, carrying off perhaps half the population of Italy, destroying agriculture, precipitating famine and draining the imperial treasury.

Then in 168 the Marcomanni, a powerful German tribe, invaded the Roman provinces bordering the Danube. Marcus sold the crown jewels to refit the army, and both Emperors marched north. When Verus died the next year, Marcus continued the war alone. For the next seven years he would fight on the northern frontier. No sooner were the German tribes pacified than Avidius Cassius rebelled, and Marcus headed east – though Avidius was assassinated before his ambitions could amount to anything.

Marcus used his eastern victory to foster educational improvements, visiting Egypt and Greece and re-establishing Athens as a centre of philosophy. Not long after he reached Italy again, fresh invasions broke out in the north. It is said that before returning to the army, Marcus, as if sensing it might be his last opportunity, delivered a three-day public lecture in Rome on Stoic philosophy. Again he rode north, and defeated the German Marcomanni and the Slavic Iazyges. But his health, never robust, gave out. In the year 180, at the age of 59, he died, possibly of the plague, in a Roman camp somewhere in the region of what is now Austria.

A Personal Quest for Meaning

Meditations, the title under which the personal thoughts, notes and essays that Marcus Aurelius wrote in Greek during the last ten years of his life are popularly known, is a relatively recent name. The Emperor's writings were first so-called by their 19th century American translator George Long, whose version, once hailed as a spiritual classic, is still in print. The Emperor gave them a more modest title, *Ta eis heauton* – which, given the rich concision of ancient Greek, can mean both “notes to myself,” and “personal file.” Marcus's first English translator, Meric Casaubon, titled his still highly readable version of 1634 *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus the Roman Emperor concerning Himself*. As a result, some scholars have supposed that Marcus never intended his writings for publication. Professional philosophers, of course, have blamed him for not being nearly professional enough. As a writer Marcus is uneven, to say the least: sometimes poised and pithy and disarmingly realistic, sometimes so intellectually wrought up he becomes lost in his own interminable sentences. And indeed his reflections and reminiscences, with their barely concealed uncertainties, intellectual and practical frustrations, half-completed projects, and private griefs, reveal a highly personal quest for meaning.

Even so, Marcus is far more methodical than the casual reader might suppose. Part of the purpose of the *Meditations*, like the *Discourses* of his great Greek predecessor Epictetus, is to work out an acceptable view of every possible human situation. Though he is less consistent than Epictetus, it is fairly certain that Marcus had a program in mind. There is solid evidence that the title and conventional division into twelve “books” are Marcus’s own and not some later editor’s. *Book I*, for instance, seems actually to have been written last.

Marcus quite likely did not intend for the *Meditations* to be published in their present state. Yet he had no wish, as he says, to be called a “schoolmaster” after his death. And unlike many a professional academic, he actually succeeds in making his life and opinions accessible. Their very unevenness seems to add immediacy. The reader who takes the *Meditations* in whole is rewarded with the experience, rare in classical literature, of coming into contact with a living author. Spend any time with the pages of Marcus, and you begin, slowly, sometimes reluctantly, but inevitably, to see the world through his eyes.

A Technique of Self-Governance

Stoicism was already several hundred years old at the time of Epictetus and Marcus. Founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium (333–264 B.C.) in the third century before Christ (its name derives from the *stoa* or colonnaded public walkway that was a frequent open-air venue for freelance lecturers), it was a body of both ethical and philosophical teaching, partly a “way of liberation,” like some Eastern philosophies, part scientific investigation of human nature and behavior. In some ways it is not unlike Taoism, and the contact between Greek and Eastern civilizations in the wake of Alexander’s conquests may possibly have contributed to its rise. (By origin Zeno and his associate Chrysippus appear to have been Phoenicians, not Greeks.) Stoicism’s force as an ethical and practical supplement to the deep-seated primitivism of the old Roman religion and the stark exaltation of fate in Homeric myth and Greek tragedy made it an ideal vehicle for the Roman governing classes.

The *Enchiridion*, or Manual, of Epictetus opens with the clearest possible statement of the Stoic vision:

Of things, some are in our power and others are not. In our power are opinion, pursuit, desire, and aversion, quite simply whatever are our own actions. Not in our power are body, property, reputation and command, or whatever are not our own actions. Study therefore to be able to say to every harsh appearance, “You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing

you appear to be"...and if it concerns anything not in your power be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.

What, then, is in our power? The answer: self-knowledge, which in its truest form embraces a correct understanding of our place in the dynamic continuum of nature, including our relationship to a higher power. This power is sometimes identified as God, or the gods or "universal nature." Within each of us there is an inner power, a *hegemonikon* or interior ruler, governing our personal conduct in harmony with universal nature. This inner power must be nurtured and guided and assisted so as to enable us to act reasonably at all times, in terms of our desires and emotions. The technique of self-governance is logic. For Marcus Aurelius, this logic is a matter of the heart as well as the head. From self-knowledge comes understanding. Wisdom is goodness, being good and doing good, according to your fullest capacity:

Nature has not so utterly mixed you up as to deny you the power to set your own limits and take responsibility for yourself. It's all too possible to be a god on earth yet not be recognized by anyone! Remember this. And another thing: remember that you need very little to live a happy life. If you have abandoned all hope of being a great thinker or scientist, don't on that account give up being free, modest, sociable and obedient to God.

We can control our ideas and opinions. We can control our way of thinking. We can change, and improve it. To an era, like ours, dominated by psychoanalysis, Marcus says that, regardless of what we can do, we can always know what we think.

Try not to allow any pointless or useless ideas, especially prying or malicious notions, to enter your train of thought. You should acquire the habit of having only such ideas as those that, when anyone asks you point-blank, 'What are you thinking?' you can answer forthrightly and truthfully.

Tools for Living

The *Meditations* are not a manual of philosophy. There is no reasoned treatise on ethics, no trace of the three-day lectures on Stoicism Marcus is said to have given throughout his travels in the Empire and before he set out for his last campaign in 178. Instead, Marcus has his stock of *procheira*, "ready-to-hand principles," or tools for living: logically developed formulations for handling the illogical conditions of everyday adult life. It is a serious technique that is enjoying a revival in some forms of psychotherapy today.

With today's libraries of psychotherapy, self-help books, religious manuals and spiritual exercises – not to mention 200 years of Romantic literature – modern readers

take the word “I” for granted. One of the most striking things about the *Meditations* is how seldom the most powerful man between northern England and the upper Nile, Marcus Antoninus, Roman Emperor, *autokrator*, uses “I” or me.” Louis XIV’s “*L’état, c’est moi!*” is utterly foreign to him. And this seems to have been a conscious choice, for other distinguished Roman essayists like Cicero and Seneca (himself a professed Stoic) are not afraid of putting themselves forward. Marcus wishes to stand apart even from his own personality, as a Stoic exercise perhaps. He will call himself “you” sooner than “I” and even the most personal entries are fiercely, resolutely objectified.

Managing the Unmanageable

Perhaps the highly personal impersonality of the *Meditations* has something to do with the Rome it was Marcus’s lot to rule. The Empire was by then some two centuries old. It had seen wars, imperial purges, massacres, and the new and ever-spreading Christian faith repeatedly persecuted – a persecution which Marcus himself (apparently fearing the new religion as a modern administrator might fear a new “cult”) actually supported for a short period. The corrupt political and court system that Antoninus and Marcus did their best to rectify was still beyond their power to abolish. Even the Emperor’s most valued general turned against him, and when the general himself was murdered, it was all Marcus could do to prevent equally self-seeking political purges and reprisals from destroying his power from within.

By Marcus’s time, the city of Rome had long become virtually unmanageable, with large parts of the population permanently unemployed. Italy had also ceased to be able to feed or support itself. The Roman Empire, civilization’s first major exercise in globalization, had grown immense, internally as well as externally. It was up to Marcus Aurelius, who traveled over a great deal of it in person, to manage its affairs and take care of its people, somehow, without losing heart.

Marcus himself seems to have suffered from continual ill-health. We have his letters on the repeated illnesses of his dearly beloved wife Faustina – she died before him, while a few stark passages in the *Meditations* hint at the deaths of his children and the impact these tragedies had on him. It must have become apparent to Marcus that in both his personal and public affairs, the extent of even a Roman Emperor’s control was really very limited. Yet if he, as imperial head of state, had so little power, so little grasp of what was going on at any one point, what hope was there for the Roman Empire as a whole? Or for the future well-being of the millions he regarded as his personal responsibility?

It has been brought home to us in our own time, especially since September 11, 2001, that “control” in any global context is largely an illusion. At the same time, the speed of daily change and the dizzying scope of modern communications have sometimes obscured the need for personal contact with the deeper meaning of our lives. Desperately we seek explanations. Yet we seem powerless to alter the course of events. In this context, the incompleteness of Marcus’s written achievement is almost reassuring. The reader of the 21st century can appreciate not only Marcus’s great personal sensitivity, but also perhaps even more poignantly, his resolution to do the right thing, to act as intelligently as possible, and to meet his obligations 100% – and his steadfast belief that his life makes sense, though its perfect sense may be hidden from him. If our time calls for renewed meditation on where meaning (let alone wisdom) is to be found, it certainly calls for the courage of our convictions – and our confusions. In the never-ending quest for meaning, Marcus Aurelius amply repays those who take the time to make his acquaintance.

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SELECTIONS FROM “THE MEDITATIONS”

Action

Don’t fool yourself. It isn’t likely you’ll live to read your own notebooks, or the stories of all the Greek and Roman heroes, or those books you were saving for your old age. Carry

on to the end. Let go of idle hopes. If you care for yourself at all, do the right thing and help yourself while you are still able.

— *Book 3: Meditation 14*

Don't act as if you had ten thousand years to live. Fate hangs over you. While you live and while you still can, be good.

— *Book 4: Meditation 17*

Pay attention to the matter at hand, whether it is an opinion or an act or a word.

— *Book 8: Meditation 22*

Anger

People will go right on doing the same things, even if you should burst.

— *Book 8: Meditation 4*

Guard equally against getting angry with people or flattering them. Both are anti-social and hurtful. Keep this thought handy for when you are angry: getting carried away by emotion is unfit for a man. Mildness and gentleness are more in keeping with human nature, and for that reason they are also more manly. Strength, nerve and courage all belong to people with these qualities, not the man who is subject to fits of resentment and indignation. The closer we are to freedom from emotional turmoil, the closer we are to real strength. Resentment is a mark of weakness. So is anger. You are crippled when you give in to either.

— *Book 11: Meditation 18*

Appearances

Look within. Do not let the distinctive quality of any thing or its value escape you.

— *Book 6: Meditation 3*

Beauty

Note that almost anything that occurs naturally to things in nature has something pleasing and attractive about it. When a large loaf of bread is baked, for instance, it splits partway at the surface. And though these cracks are defects from the baker's point of view, they have a certain beauty of their own. Somehow, when we see them, the bread looks delicious! Figs are most delicious and ripest when they begin to shrivel and wither. Ripe olives too are best when they are on the point of spoiling. And so with

many similar things that are not exactly beautiful in themselves, yet are comely and delightful because they are natural. If you look deeply and consider all things in the world, even seemingly unnecessary things, there will scarcely be anything in which you can fail to find pleasure and delight.

— *Book 3: Meditation 2*

Change

Consider often how fast all existing things, all events, are swept away and disappear. Their substance we perceive like a river in flood. The energies of things are in perpetual change, their causes in ten thousand changing forms. Even in the present almost nothing stands still or passes on unchanged. How foolish you would be to exaggerate or worry or be miserable over such things! For they trouble you only a while, and a little while at that.

— *Book 5: Meditation 23*

Nature, which governs the universe, will soon change all the things you see, and out of their substance will make other things, and again other things from the substance of those, so that the world may remain forever new.

— *Book 7: Meditation 25*

To change your mind and follow the person who corrects you is just as much a free act as to discover what is right and just on your own, without help. All you need do is exercise your natural impulse and judgment, and your own understanding too.

— *Book 8: Meditation 16*

Conduct

Do not distract or overstrain yourself. Be free, and look at things as a person who is humane, a social being, and a mortal creature. Among the readiest thoughts you turn to for serenity, let there be these two. One is that mere “things” do not touch the soul, but remain external and unmoving. Trouble and turmoil only come from our opinions – the way we take things inside ourselves. The other is that everything you see is changing before your very eyes and will no longer exist. Constantly bear in mind how many of these changes you have witnessed already. “The world is mere change. Life is opinion.”

— *Book 4: Meditation 3*

See how much easier a life you have when you don't pay attention to what your neighbor said or did or was thinking, but only to what you do yourself to be just and reverent and entirely good. Ill-nature isn't worth paying attention to. Look straight ahead, and stay the course.

— *Book 4: Meditation 18*

All those things you hope to achieve by a roundabout way, you can have and enjoy right now, if you don't grudge the true way to happiness. Which is to forget the past entirely, trust the future to Providence, and steer your present thoughts towards reverence and justice. Reverence, so that you cherish your assigned role, for nature brought it to you and you to it. Justice, so that you always speak the truth freely and plainly and act in keeping with law and human dignity. Don't become entangled in anyone else's malice or opinion or words – still less the sensitivities of your own poor, pampered body. Your capacity for suffering will take care of itself. And when the time comes to depart this life, if you abandon everything else and respect only your inner power and the divine spirit within you – if you fear not your eventual death but the possibility of never having lived in harmony with nature – then you will become fully human, and worthy of the universe in which you had your beginning. Then you will cease to be a stranger in your own country, and to wonder at everyday occurrences as if they were strange or unexpected, and anxiously depend on things you cannot change.

— *Book 12: Meditation 1*

Death

No particular activity that ends at the right time suffers harm merely because it has ended. Nor has the person who did this act suffered harm merely because the act has ended. Likewise, if that entire series of acts that make up our life should end at the right time, we suffer no harm merely because it has ended. Nor is the person badly affected who terminated this series in due season. As for due season and time, nature determines these – sometimes an individual nature, as when one dies of old age, but always universal nature, by whose changing parts the world continues fresh and new. And whatever is for the good of the universe is always best and in due season. So it appears that the termination of an individual life is in itself no evil. It is nothing shameful, since it is independent of your will and does not harm the community. On the contrary, since it is seasonable and right and in harmony with the universe, it must be good. So too is a person divinely led and inspired, when their will and mind move in the accordance with God's.

— *Book 12: Meditation 23*

The person to whom the only good is what comes in due season, to whom it is the same to have done more or fewer acts according to right reason and to whom it makes no difference to view the spectacle of this world for a longer or a shorter time – for this person death is nothing to be afraid of.

— *Book 12: Meditation 35*

Destiny

Do not become worked up about things in life. Make yourself perfectly simple. Is someone doing wrong? They are doing wrong to themselves. Why should that trouble you? Has something happened to you? Fine! Everything that happens to you, or has happened, or will happen, has been allotted to you and spun out of the universe from the beginning. To put it briefly: life is short. Try to make the most of the present, with reverence and justice

— *Book 4: Meditation 26*

Nothing happens to anyone that they are not naturally capable of bearing.

— *Book 5: Meditation 18*

Whatever may happen to you, it was fashioned for you from all eternity. And from eternity the web of causes was spinning out the substance of your being and whatever happens to it.

— *Book 10: Meditation 5*

Discipline

If your body can hold out against stress in life, it is a shame that your soul should fail first and give up. Take care that you don't turn eventually from a philosopher into a mere Caesar, and take your character from your own court.

— *Book 6: Meditation 29*

The proper role of reason and intelligence is to set limits, and never give in to sensual or instinctive urges, for both are animal in nature. The intelligence claims superiority and will not be overpowered. And rightly so, for it was formed to make use of our other senses. A rational constitution is neither quick to judge nor easily deceived. Then let your inner guide, which has all this, keep a straight course and own what is its own.

— *Book 7: Meditation 55*

Duty

If you are doing your duty, it should make no difference whether you are half frozen or comfy-warm, half-asleep or fresh and well rested, slandered or praised. Or dying, or doing anything else. For the act of dying is just one of our many duties and acts in life. There too it is enough to do the work at hand and do it well.

— *Book 6: Meditation 2*

I do my duty. Other things don't trouble me. For they are either things without life, or things without reason, or things that have wandered and don't know the way.

— *Book 6: Meditation 22*

Either you are living your life here, and are used to it. Or you are departing, and that is what you wanted. Or you are dying, and your duties are fulfilled. There really is nothing else besides these things. Keep cheerful, then.

— *Book 10: Meditation 22*

Existence

Here today, gone tomorrow – the rememberer, and the thing remembered.

— *Book 4: Meditation 35*

Fame

Perhaps that foolish thing called fame will torment you. Remember how quickly all things are forgotten. Look back at the immense chaos of infinite time on either side of the present. Then consider the emptiness of applause, and the fickleness and want of judgment in people who pretend to praise us, and the narrowness of the limited, little world where this all occurs.

— *Book 4: Meditation 3*

Flexibility

Adapt yourself to the things that you are destined for. As for the people whose company you were born to share, love them – love them sincerely.

— *Book 6: Meditation 39*

Freedom

No one can prevent your living as your own nature requires. Nothing can happen to you contrary to what universal nature requires.

— *Book 6: Meditation 58*

The Future

Don't let the future bother you. You will get there if you are meant to, and will bring along the same reasoning power you use for things right now.

— *Book 7: Meditation 8*

Good and Evil

Theophrastus, in his comparison of sins (based upon the common notions of humankind), says like a true philosopher that the crimes people commit out of immoderate desire are worse than those they commit in anger. A man in a rage seems, with a kind of pain and unconscious shrinking, to turn away from reason. But when a man sins out of lust, because he is overpowered by pleasure his sins seem somehow more excessive and decadent. Rightly then, like a philosopher, he said that the man who sins with pleasure is more to be condemned than the man who sins with grief. In the one case, it seems more as if the offender is wronged first, and is then somehow driven into a rage by his own pain. Whereas the other has actually decided to do wrong, and is drawn towards his crime by immoderate desire.

— *Book 2: Meditation 10*

Death and life, honour and dishonour, pain and pleasure, riches and poverty – being neither virtues nor vices, they all come to good people and bad alike. Therefore, they are neither good nor evil.

— *Book 2: Meditation 11*

The substance of the universe is obedient and compliant. And reason, which governs it, has in itself no motive whatever for doing evil. For it has no malice. It does no wrong to anything. Nothing is ever harmed by it. But everything comes into being and is fulfilled according to it.

— *Book 6: Meditation 1*

Generally, human wickedness does no harm whatever to the universe. And individual wickedness does no harm to anyone but the wicked man. It is harmful only to the one man who has it in his power to be rid of it once and for all, whenever he so desires.

— *Book 8: Meditation 55*

Not in passivity but in activity do good and evil consist for a rational and social being. Likewise virtue and vice lie not in passivity but in activity.

— *Book 9: Meditation 16*

Happiness

Accomplish your immediate task in a straightforward manner, seriously, vigorously, good-naturedly and not as if it were some trivial object. But keep your own soul constantly pure, as if you had to let it go this very moment. Commit yourself to this. Expect nothing. Fear nothing. Be content to do whatever you can according to nature. And whatever you say, say it with complete sincerity. Do these things and you will live happy. No one has the power to stop you.

— *Book 3: Meditation 12*

Be like the headland: the waves incessantly break against it, but it stands firm and tames the fury of the waters all around.

— *Book 4: Meditation 39*

“I feel awful because this terrible thing happened to me.” No! Rather, “I’m happy, because even though it happened to me I can carry on, free of pain. I am not crushed by the present. I am not afraid of the future.” For the thing might have happened to anyone, but not everyone would have kept free of pain. Why then is one a misfortune and the other good fortune? Can you say it’s a misfortune in human terms, when it is not a check to human nature? Do you suppose it’s a check to human nature when it’s not against nature’s will? Well, you yourself are a follower of nature’s will. So can what has happened prevent you from being just? Or magnanimous? Or temperate? Or wise? Or prudent? Or loyal, modest, free? Or from being everything else which together rightly belongs to human nature and makes life worth living? And so, on every occasion of sorrow, remember to apply this principle: that the misfortune that happens to you is nothing in itself, but that to bear it nobly is true happiness.

— *Book 4: Meditation 49*

Harm

Whatever does not make you worse than you were, does not make your life worse. It does you no harm – neither from outside nor from within.

A Higher Power

Since it is quite possible that you could depart from this life at this very moment, govern your every thought, word and deed accordingly. But to depart from among human beings? If the gods exist, death is nothing to be afraid of. The gods will do you no evil. But if there really are no gods, or the gods do not care about human affairs, why should I care to live in a universe devoid of gods or Divine Providence? But the truth is, the gods really do exist, and they do care for human things, and they have given you every means of not falling into real evil. And if there was anything else evil besides, the gods would have provided for that too, so that we all would be able to avoid it. Now how can a thing that doesn't make a man worse make his life worse? Universal nature could not possibly have overlooked these things through ignorance, or in full knowledge but without power to prevent or correct them. It cannot be that nature, for want of skill or power, should have committed such a thing as to allow anything and everything, good or evil, to fall indiscriminately on each and every human, good or bad.

— *Book 2: Meditation 11*

An instrument, tool or implement of any sort does what it is designed to do, even if its maker isn't present. But with things formed naturally, the power that made them is present, and abides within them. Accordingly you must revere this power all the more. Acknowledge that if you yourself live and act according to its will, everything will go as it should for you – and for everything else as well.

— *Book 6: Meditation 40*

Either there is a fatal necessity and inflexible order, or a forgiving Providence, or an utterly purposeless and merciless chaos. If inflexible necessity, why resist? But if there is an understanding and caring Providence, make yourself worthy of God's help. But if undirected chaos, rest content that in such a tempest you have within yourself a certain ruling intelligence. And even if the tempest carries you away, let it carry away your poor flesh, breath, everything! Your intelligence will not be carried away.

— *Book 12: Meditation 14*

Universal nature initiated the creation of the world. Either everything that occurs is a logical consequence, or else everything is irrational, even the most crucial events towards which the ruling power of the universe appears to be moving of its own accord. Remember this, and you will feel more serene about a lot of things.

Ignorance

To expect that ignorant people will do no wrong is madness – you’re expecting the impossible. But to allow them to commit crimes against others, yet expect they will do you no wrong, is irrational and tyrannical.

— *Book 11: Meditation 18*

Impressions

Look at the cooked meats and other dishes on the table. What do we see? A dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. And again, this fine Falernian wine – really just a little grape juice. And your purple toga – just some wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish. These are impressions of our senses, which reach out and penetrate the things themselves. And so we see what kind of things they are. We should do the same all through life. When things appear most worth your trust, strip them bare, look down on their cheapness and all the pomposities and lies surrounding them. Vanity is a formidable twister of minds. And it fools us the worst when we most think we’re dealing with serious matters.

— *Book 6: Meditation 13*

Inner Strength

Dig deep. Within you is the fountain of good, always ready to well up and flow, if only you keep digging.

— *Book 7: Meditation 59*

Insanity

To chase after impossibilities is insane. But it’s impossible for ignorant people not to act that way.

— *Book 5: Meditation 17*

Integrity

They kill you. They cut you to pieces. They curse you. How can they prevent your mind from remaining pure, wise, sober, just? Suppose a person passing by a pure, clear spring, stops and curses it. A stream of water never stops bubbling up. And even if they

throw mud or filth into it, it will quickly wash them away and again grow clear and unpolluted. How, then, can you have a perpetual fountain, not a mere well? By making yourself grow in freedom good-heartedly, simply, modestly, every hour of your life.

— *Book 8: Meditation 51*

The best kind of revenge is not to become like your enemies.

— *Book 6: Meditation 6*

Justice

Whatever happens in the world, happens justly. Observe carefully, and you will find this is so. I mean not only in relation to a meaningful universe, but in actual terms of what is just, as if each thing or event were actually measured and valued at its true worth. Keep observing this, as you do already. And whatever you do, do it with this intention: to be good, in the proper sense of the word. Preserve this principle in all your affairs.

— *Book 4: Meditation 10*

Life

Though you may be destined to live three thousand years, or thirty thousand years, remember that no one loses any life other than the one they are now living – or lives any life other than the one they are now losing. So the shortest life comes to the same end as the longest. The present is the same to all, though what perishes is not the same, and what does perish seems a mere moment. You cannot really lose either the past or the future. How can anybody steal what you do not own? There are two things always to bear in mind. First, that all things are of one kind and nature through all the revolutions of eternity, so that it does not matter whether one sees the same things for a hundred years or two hundred, or forever. Second, that the oldest living person on earth and the very next to die lose the very same thing. For the present is the only thing you can be deprived of, since this is only thing you have. You can't lose what you don't own.

— *Book 2: Meditation 14*

Pass through this short space of time in accordance with nature, and gently end your journey the way a ripe olive falls, blessing the earth that produced it and thanking the tree on which it grew.

— *Book 4: Meditation 48*

Nature has not so utterly mixed you up as to deny you the power to set your own limits and take responsibility for yourself. It's all too possible to be a god on earth yet not be recognized by anyone! Remember this. And another thing: remember that you need very little to live a happy life. If you have abandoned all hope of being a great thinker or scientist, don't on that account give up being free, modest, sociable and obedient to God.

— *Book 7: Meditation 67*

Before long you will be nobody and nowhere. And none of the things you now see or people now living will exist. For all things are formed by nature to change and be changed, and to perish so that other things may continually come into being.

— *Book 12: Meditation 21*

Nature

A cucumber is bitter? Throw it away. Thorns in your path? Walk around them. Isn't that enough? Don't keep saying, "Why do such things exist?" For any rationally minded person would laugh at you, just as a carpenter or shoemaker would laugh if you were in their shop and complained about seeing shavings or cuttings from their work on the floor. But they have somewhere to throw away their rubbish. Nature has no outback. Yet that's the most wonderful thing about nature's artisanship. Within the universe's self-imposed limits, all that appears to decay, grow old and become useless is changed into other new things. So universal nature uses no outside substance, no place to discard spoiled or decayed things. She is satisfied within her own space and with her own materials and skills.

— *Book 8: Meditation 50*

Opinion

"Everything is opinion," said Monimos the Cynic and that is obvious. Also obvious is the usefulness of this saying insofar as it is true – that is, if you take it for what it is worth.

— *Book 2: Meditation 15*

It is possible to have no opinions about things, yet not be confused spiritually. For things themselves have no natural power to form our judgments.

— *Book 6: Meditation 52*

Who can change people's beliefs? But without a change of beliefs, what else is there but slavery – people groaning and pretending to obey?

— *Book 9: Meditation 29*

The Natural Order

The intelligence of the universe is social. Accordingly it has made inferior creatures for the sake of the superior, and adapted the superior creatures to one another. Do you see how it has subordinated, coordinated, assigned every thing its due part in proportion to its value, and has brought the best together in unity among themselves?

— *Book 5: Meditation 30*

Pain

Pain is an evil either to the body (which manifests it at once) or to the soul. But the soul has the power to preserve its own serenity and clarity, and not to think of pain as an evil. For your every judgment and movement, aspiration and aversion lies within, where no evil can reach you.

— *Book 8: Meditation 28*

Paying Attention

Make it your habit to pay the closest possible attention to what anyone is saying to you. Try, as far as possible, to share their point of view.

— *Book 6: Meditation 53*

In speech, pay attention to what is said and watch carefully for the real significance of every single word. Likewise observe every bodily movement or gesture, and you should be able to see directly what it refers to.

— *Book 7: Meditation 4*

Perseverance

Don't feel disgusted or discouraged or hopeless if you don't score high for acting perfectly right at each and every point. Go back to where you had trouble and simply start over. If you stray from the path, be glad if most of what you do is more or less human. If you must backtrack try to feel good about it. But don't go back to philosophy like a schoolteacher after vacation, but like a natural lotion to wipe your tired eyes, or a

dressing to comfort a wound. Let obedience to reason be your true path to serenity. And remember that philosophy only demands of you what nature requires.

— *Book 5: Meditation 9*

Politics

How cheap all these little people are, who play at politics and imagine they're acting like philosophers!

— *Book 9: Meditation 29*

Procrastination

Remember how long you have been putting off these things, and how many times the gods have given you a second chance. And still you don't use it! Starting now, you must become aware of the world you are part of, what ruler of the world you are an emanation of. The time you are given is limited. If you don't use this time to clear the fog from your mind, the time will be gone and you will be gone, and it will never return again.

— *Book 2: Meditation 4*

Reason

For a rational being, anything done in accordance with nature is also in accordance with reason.

— *Book 7: Meditation 11*

A person who follows reason in every respect is at once serene and flexible, and at the same time cheerful and possessed of self-control.

— *Book 10: Meditation 12*

There are three relationships to consider in this life: to the divine cause from which all things originate, to those who live with you, and to the body that surrounds you.

— *Book 8: Meditation 27*

Self and Others

Don't waste the rest of your life imagining things about others, unless your thoughts about them involve some common benefit. You are depriving yourself of something better to do when you imagine things such as: what are they doing? Why? What are they

saying? What are they thinking? What are they dreaming up? And whatever else makes us wander from due attention to our own inner power.

— *Book 3: Meditation 4*

Consider yourself fit for every word and deed in accordance with nature, and do not let any resulting criticisms or remarks distract you. If it's a good thing you're doing or saying, don't disparage yourself. Others have their own inner power and obey their own particular instincts. Pay no attention, but carry on, following your own nature and universal nature. The way of both natures is one.

— *Book 5: Meditation 3*

There are some people who, when they have done someone else a good turn, are ready to keep score and expect repayment. Others, though they may not insist on being repaid, still tend to consider the other person as their debtor, and his awareness of what they have done as acknowledging a debt. But there are others still who do not even know what they have done, but are like a vine that has produced grapes and seeks nothing more than to have borne fruit. A horse after a race, a hunting dog that has hunted, a bee that has made honey, will not call to others to come and see. Nor does a person who has done a good turn. Instead, they go on to do another good turn, just as a vine that bore good fruit will go on to produce again in due season. You too should be like those who do good without any further thought.

— *Book 5: Meditation 6*

In a sense, people are closest to us, insofar as we must do well by them and tolerate them. But insofar as some people stand in the way of my doing right, they become indifferent to me, just like the sun or the wind or a wild animal. True, they may hamper my activity somewhat, but they do not become real obstacles, for my motives and disposition can remove them or turn them around. For our intelligence can turn every obstacle around and turn it into something that helps us towards our guiding purpose. What blocked our effort can be made to work for it. What stood in our way can help us along the way.

— *Book 5: Meditation 20*

People were born for one another. So either teach them, or learn to put up with them.

— *Book 8: Meditation 59*

THE NINE RULES FOR DEALING WITH OTHERS

1. What is my relationship to others? We are made for one another. But in another sense, I was made to lead and protect them, like a ram with his flock or a bull with his herd. But on a higher level, think: "It is nature that orders the universe." If so, then inferior things exist for the sake of the superior. And the superior things exist for the sake of one another.
2. How do other people behave at meals, in bed and so forth? Most of all think how they take their own beliefs for inevitabilities. And how vain they are when they do what they do!
3. If others do right, then don't make difficulties. But if they do wrong, they obviously are acting unaware and in ignorance. No human soul wishes to be deprived of the truth or the ability to treat each person as they deserve. At any rate, they are hurt if they hear themselves called unfair, ungrateful, greedy – in a word, wrongdoers against their neighbors.
4. You also commit many wrongs. You're the same as everyone else. If you do avoid certain wrongs, you still may be just as inclined to commit them. Maybe you hold back out of cowardice, or fear of unpopularity, or from some other low motive.
5. But you don't even know if others are doing wrong. For a lot depends on circumstances. All told, you must learn a great deal before you are fit to pass judgment on someone else's behavior.
6. When you get irritated or impatient, remember that human life is only a moment. In a little while we'll all be dead and buried.
7. It isn't people's behavior that bothers us, for their actions stem from their inner compulsions. It's our opinion that causes the trouble. So put an end to it. Make a decision to let go of your judgment as if it were a burden to you and your anger will be gone! How to do this? By realizing that no one else's wrongs can bring shame upon you. For if shameful acts alone are bad, you too would be bound to commit many crimes, become a thief and heaven knows what else.
8. How much more trouble comes to us through our own grief and anger over these sorts of things than by the actual things that make us angry and upset.
9. A kindly attitude is invincible, if it is genuine. But it must not be an affected smile or mere play-acting. What can the most violent persons do to you, if you keep showing them kindness? Give gentle warnings when you can. Get close to them and teach them. Even right when they are raising a hand against you say, "No, child, we're all made for something better. I'm not the one who's being hurt. You're only hurting yourself!" And show them gently, tactfully, on general principles, that this really is so – that even the bees do not act that way, or any animals that are

naturally sociable. Say all this without sarcasm, not to humiliate them, but affectionately and without bitterness. And not as if you were lecturing or trying to impress them. Treat them as if they were alone, even if others are present. How much more trouble comes to us through our own grief and anger over these sorts of things than by the actual things that make us angry and upset.

Remember these nine rules, as if you had received them as a divine gift and begin at last to be human while you live.

— *Book 11: Meditation 18*

Self-Confidence

What is the point of guessing what you have to do, when you can know it? If you can see it clearly, go ahead – don't look back. But if you don't see your way clear, stop and obtain the best possible advice. If other obstacles arise, carry on as best you can, all things considered, and try to do what seems right. The best thing of all is to reach your goal. But even if you fail, at least you have tried. A person who follows reason in all things is at once serene and flexible, cheerful and self-controlled.

— *Book 10: Meditation 12*

Self-Renewal

People seek special retreats for themselves such as country houses, seashores, mountains. And you too often long for these things. But this is really simple-minded, for you have the power to retire into yourself any time you choose and rest. There is no place freer from stress than deep within your own soul – especially if you have furnished it with thoughts that offer perfect tranquility as soon as you look at them again. By tranquility I mean good spiritual order, no more, no less. Allow yourself this retreat often. Go there to renew yourself. And let your principles be brief and fundamental. These will be enough to cleanse your soul completely the moment you recall them and free you from all discontent with those things you must return to. And what were you discontented with? Human wickedness? Only recall these thoughts: that rational beings exist for one another, that it is part of justice to be patient with others, and that people do wrong without meaning to.

— *Book 4: Meditation 3*

Soul

The human soul does violence to itself whenever it becomes a separate growth, a sort of tumor on the world as much as on itself. Growing angry about things that occur is a departure from nature, which embraces the natures of all things. Likewise when the soul turns away from any person, or else turns toward them with intent to harm. The souls of angry persons are like this. The soul dishonours itself a third time when it gives in to pleasure or pain. Fourth, when it plays the hypocrite and does or says anything insincere or untrue. Fifth, when it lets any act or impulse of its own be aimless, or does anything thoughtlessly or inconsiderately. It is right for even our smallest actions to fit a purpose. And the purpose of rational beings is to follow the reason and the law of the noblest, most ancient city and state.

— *Book 2: Meditation 16*

Starting off the Day

In the morning, say to yourself: “I shall meet with people who are meddlesome, ungrateful, arrogant, deceiving, envious and anti-social. All these faults happen to them through their ignorance of good and evil. But I – who have seen the nature of the good, which is virtue, and the nature of evil, which is shame – cannot be wronged by any of these people, for no one can lay any shame upon me. Nor can I be angry at my fellow men, nor hate them. To act against one another is against nature. That is what you do when you are antagonized, and turn away.”

— *Book 2: Meditation 1*

The Straight and Narrow

Acquire a method for studying how all things change into one another and apply it constantly. Work hard on this point, for nothing is so apt to make us open-minded. Do this, and you will have stepped out of your body and realized that you must leave everything anyway – how soon no one knows – and depart from your fellow men. Only then will you entirely devote yourself to justice in your affairs, and to universal nature in everything else. Never bother about what anyone might say about you, or think of you or try to do to you. Rest content with two things: that you act justly in the thing you now have to do, and cherish the lot assigned to you at present. You have let go of business cares and rivalries. And you desire nothing else than to hold a straight and lawful course, and in holding a straight course, to follow God.

— *Book 10: Meditation 11*

Success

Accept your good fortune without arrogance and be ready to let it go at any time.

— *Book 8: Meditation 33*

Surprises

Remember that it's absurd to be surprised if a fig tree produces figs. It would be absurd for your doctor or your ship's pilot to be surprised if a patient gets a fever or a headwind comes up. And it's absurd for you to be surprised when the world produces the sorts of things the world is likely to produce.

— *Book 8: Meditation 15*

Temptation

Let the part of your soul that is your inner power and governor be indifferent to your bodily sensations, whether gentle or violent. It should not mingle with them, but rather surround itself and restrict those feelings to their bodily parts.

— *Book 5: Meditation 26*

Time

Time is like a river made up of the events that occur in it – and often the current is a violent one. For no sooner is a thing seen than it is swept away and another comes in its place. It, too, will soon be swept away.

— *Book 4: Meditation 43*

Truth

If anyone can convince me and prove that I am not thinking or acting right, I will gladly change. For I seek the truth, which never injured anyone. The one who is injured is the person who remains in self-deception and ignorance.

— *Book 6: Meditation 21*

Values

Never value anything as profitable to yourself which will compel you to break your promise, lose your self-respect, hate anyone, act suspicious, curse people, play the hypocrite, or desire anything that needs walls and curtains.

— *Book 3: Meditation 7*

Virtue

When you wish to feel good, think about your friends' superior qualities: one person's energy, another's modesty, the generosity of a third friend and so on. Nothing delights us so much as examples of virtue abundantly exhibited in the morals of those we are close to. Which is why you must stay close to them.

— *Book 6: Meditation 48*

When you have done good and someone else has benefited, why do you still have to seek a third satisfaction, as fools do, to pass for a benefactor or be paid in return?

— *Book 7: Meditation 73*

Work

Don't do your work grudgingly, or without regard to the common interest, or inconsiderately or absentmindedly. Don't get distracted fussing over fine details. Don't be someone who talks too much or is busy with too many things. Furthermore, let the divinity that is in you be guardian of a living being: courageous, mature, politically active, a citizen and a leader who has his life and his affairs in order, and now waits for the signal to leave this life, ready to go without need for anyone's sworn testimonials. Be cheerful too, and don't seek outside help or rely on others for peace of mind. For a man must stand firm on his own and not be shaped by others.

— *Book 3: Meditation 5*

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FOR FURTHER READING

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