

# ***Stoic Spiritual Exercises***

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Richard Lewis reminded us in *The Price of Tranquillity* [1] and *Taking Advantage of Adversity* [2] that it was one thing to study the principles of Stoicism, but another to apply those principles in our everyday lives. He then mentioned some techniques he experimented with to help us. My goal in writing this essay is to attempt to further this work.

Stoic definitions of philosophy may appear dissimilar at first view, but they are in reality very close to each others. According to Seneca [3], 'some said that it consisted in exercising oneself to virtue (*studium virtutis*), others that it was to exercise oneself to correct our mind (*studium corrigendae mentis*) and consequently, some inferred that it was the search for correct reasoning (*adpetitio rectae rationis*.)'

In concrete terms, philosophy consists in exercising virtue. Virtue, which constitutes the excellence or nobility (*aretê*) of a human life, is also the *psyche's health*. Zeno chose to say that virtue consists in 'living according to' (*homologoumenôs zein*) where the Greek can be translated as both the accordance of each of us with the *logos* and the accordance of reason with itself, that is free of passions.

Virtue is also generally considered as being a science (*epistêmê*), which means full comprehension of a certain number of notions which forms a coherent and true system. What ancient Stoics tried to explain by using the term *full comprehension* was that a virtue should not be grasped only through mere intellectual investigation but also through *incorporation of the experience*.

Another very important notion is the idea that each of us is his own therapist. For the ancients the term *therapeutês* had two meanings. It can be translated as either 'to serve, to take care, to worship' or 'to cure'. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius [4] says that a man should not fail 'to hold fast to the guardian spirit within him and serve it single-mindedly' (*pros nomo to endon eanton daimoni einai kai touton guesios therapeuein*). So ancient Stoics also practised medicine (*iatrikê*) but their profession was superior to the one usually practised in cities, which only cures bodies, for they also aimed at curing the psyche when the latter was prey to harsh illnesses called passions.

All of these is very interesting, but this does not explain to us how we should proceed to be virtuous.

Every Hellenistic school of philosophy, including the Sceptics, had their own spiritual exercises (*askesis, meletê*), i.e., personal and voluntary practices designed to bring about an inner transformation.

Despite the fact that many texts refer to these exercises, no systematic treatise exhaustively codifies a theory of *askesis* and practice, for this teaching was probably transmitted orally. However, Pierre Hadot proposes that some treatises on such exercises existed which are now lost.

We know little about ancient Stoics practices: In fact, only a helpful little treatise written by Musonius Rufus [\[5\]](#) has survived in which he distinguishes two main categories of exercise:

Firstly, exercises peculiar to the soul. This first category is itself divided in two subsections:

(1) Those consisting in always keeping in mind (or meditating upon) the school's fundamental teachings which aim at developing a different outlook upon things. Here, the ancient Stoics required their students to learn by rote a summary of their doctrines in the form of short sentences logically and harmoniously linked together. Stoics were famed for their rigor among the other schools of philosophy.

(2) Those consisting in examining the purity of intention. What I call the '*apoptôsia*' exercises are a good example of this. (See below.)

Secondly, exercises peculiar to both the soul and the body. The goal of this second category of exercise is to get used to cold, heat, hunger, frugal food, an uncomfortable bed, etc. In doing so, the student's body becomes insensitive to pain, and consequently the soul itself is fortified and becomes courageous, disciplined and ready for action.

This essay will focus on the first category of exercise, that is, those peculiar to the soul. However, I do not underestimate the value of the second category of exercise, for it is obviously difficult to resist different kinds of desires if, for instance, one never leaves the security of a cosy house or has always been accustomed to expensive food or the luxury of beautiful and warm clothes.

There may be real value in practising such exercises today. I nevertheless believe that modern Stoics should be careful to always ask advice from physicians before undertaking exercises along these lines, for I suppose that this training was not an easy one. You should never forget that being a *therapeutès* implies that you have to *take care of yourself* and not to destroy your body through unwise training that would bring you nothing

However, I think that a good beginning would be to regularly practice some form of physical exercise along with a healthy diet. A good idea would be to ask one's physician to create a special programme.

This essay will firstly describe the different ways of meditation. Secondly, it will develop Pierre Hadot's theory that Stoic exercises are in fact constant application of Logic, Physics and Ethics before finally trying an attempt of reconstruction a form of stoic meditation.

## **I. The different ways of meditating**

Pierre Hadot [6] has made an approximate reconstruction of the way Stoic philosophers used to meditate. Such a reconstruction is difficult, although not impossible, because of the lack of sources. Nevertheless, he has been able to distinguish, as far as Stoics are concerned, the ‘writing meditation’ from the mental one.

### **A. The Writing Meditation (or *hypomnemata*)**

Pierre Hadot [7] has shown that the ‘writing meditation’ was a spiritual exercise in itself, especially for the Stoics of the imperial era.

As I explained above, ancient Stoics advised their students, day and night, to recall to mind their doctrines with the help of summaries composed as memorable maxims. Students were probably asked to write their own ‘journal,’ using the given summaries as models and starting points.

Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* should be understood in this way. In his work, the Emperor formulates for himself the dogmas of Stoicism. However it is not enough merely to re-read words. On the contrary, the important thing is to continuously reformulate the doctrines and the sentences which invite action of a particular character. What is really important is *the art of writing, of speaking to oneself*.

The ‘writing meditation’ is not a summary like a mathematical formula that one should re-read and apply mechanically whenever one so pleases. Its aim is not to solve abstract and theoretical questions, but to put oneself in such a situation that one feels obliged to live as a Stoic. This is why Marcus Aurelius so many times appears to repeat the same thing in various ways in his *Meditations*, as you have probably noticed.

This form of exercise is typically Stoic, and its use extended through the centuries. In his *Exercises* (or *Askemata*), Shaftesbury, a modern Stoic living during the eighteenth century, still respects this tradition.

### ***B. Prosoché or the art of attention***

*Prosoché* is the exercise of self-attention or mindfulness. It is a form of mental development by which we progressively learn to be attentive to every single action, thought or sensation we may have or feel at the very time they appear.

Of course, developing this ability requires some training using adequate tools. Indeed, whether you are walking, sitting down, standing up, crouching, sleeping, eating, drinking, etc., you should be fully conscious of what you are doing. This means that you should live in your present action. This does not mean that you should forget about the past and the future. On the contrary, you have to think about other times, but in relation to the present, and your present action, and when it is necessary.

This idea is well rendered by one of the Stoic conceptions of present, where the present is defined in relation to the human's consciousness which perceives it and the degree of attention applied to it. From this point of view, the present has a certain duration, a certain 'density' which may be more or less large (*kata platos*).

*Prosoché* does not mean that you should actually think: 'I am doing this' or 'I am doing that.' The danger in thinking 'I am doing this' arises when you become conscious of yourself and, consequently, you do not live in the action but in the idea of 'I am'.

The same attention should be applied to every feeling or sensation you may have. In fact you should be able to observe yourself as a scientist would.

It is strange to note that a person who gets angry usually does not realise that she is angry. As soon as someone makes her realise her emotion, she becomes quieter and often

somewhat uneasy. Attention to thoughts and sensations is, I think, the most difficult to practice.

The ancients generally defined the psyche in terms of activity, as ‘that which moves itself’. Hence, the *hegemonikon* – sometimes called *nous* or *daimon* by ancient Stoics as Pierre Hadot demonstrated – gives rise to good or bad thoughts and emotions in response to various kinds of impressions. These may be qualified as ‘movements of the soul’.

With reference to the uneducated person, the *Hegemonikon* can be qualified as being *aeikinetos kai polukinetos*, which means ‘always and extremely agitated’. Thus, the uneducated person is not likely to control the multiple passions that may arise if she is not able to pacify her psychê.

As Epictetus explained:

The soul is like a vessel filled with water; and impressions are like a ray of light that falls upon the water. If the water is disturbed, the ray will seem to be disturbed likewise, though in reality it is not. Whenever, therefore, a man is seized with vertigo, it is not the arts and virtues that are confounded, but the spirit in which they exist; and, if this comes to rest, so will they likewise.[\[8\]](#)

Developing attention, which cannot be achieved without pacifying the mind, helps us to get out this state of dispersion.

It is clear in the *Discourses* that attention, or *prosoché*, is the foundation needed for the practice of all the spiritual exercises I will detail below. All of them require constant self-awareness of the movement of the mind, assuming full responsibility for our own judgement, actions, fears and desires. Without *prosoché* there can be no *epoché* or *aprotôsia*, which require the mental ability to be mindful at all times.

## **II. The Exercises as Continual Applications of Logic, Physics and Ethics**

Despite the loss of treatises by Zeno and Chrysippus, it is possible, with the fragments we have, along with Cicero's, Marcus Aurelius', Seneca's and Epictetus' works to understand the main features of their teaching.

In Stoicism, logic, physics and ethics are not only theoretical disciplines but also constitute three themes of exercises for students which must be concretely applied by those aiming at living as a philosopher.

It appears that there is a certain correspondence between the three parts of the philosophical teaching and the three disciplines as applied by Epictetus in the *Discourses* and the *Handbook* (the focus for these disciplines being *hypolepsis*, *orexis* and *hormê*).

For instance, the discipline of desire (*orexis*), which may be understood as *being careful to the orientation of our desire* when confronting events (Fate), may be perceived as a concrete application of physics. The discipline of impulse (*hormê*) is a part of ethics, and is focused on the orientation of our impulsion (*hormê*) through the application of the 'duties'. And lastly, the discipline of judgment (*hypolepsis*) is of course the direct application of logic.

I am now going to describe in detail the different types of existing exercises. I do not pretend to offer an exhaustive list, and I have relied heavily on Pierre Hadot's varied research on this subject.<sup>(12)</sup>

Firstly, I will, focus on practical logic, secondly on practical physics, and finally on practical ethics.

## A. Practical Logic

### 1. *The Discipline of Judgement*

The discipline of judgement is also known as the proper use of impressions or representations. Before introducing this major Stoic spiritual exercise, it is well worth studying the concepts of representation (*phantasia*), of judgement (*krisis, hypolepsis*) and of assent (*sunkatathesis*). I will try not to take too long, as I suppose that most people reading this essay are already acquainted with these fundamental notions.

Every living being acts according to ‘impressions’ stimulated by the sensible world on the different senses: consequently, they are able to respond to these impressions and search for food, for example, and also run away from what appears to be menacing (among a wide range of actions).

Human beings are, like other creatures, guided by their sensible impressions. However, because humans have a capacity for reason, we can control our responses with the help of inner discourse. When someone engages in such a discourse they formulate a judgement (*krisis, hypolepsis, dogma*) that represents the situation as they understand it, and which enables them to assent to the impression. It is at this stage that the passions may arise if the discourse is not conducted properly.

Epictetus gave many examples, both in the *Discourses* and the *Handbook*.<sup>[9]</sup> A very famous one concerns the journey by sea:<sup>[10]</sup> You are on a boat and you can see the sea and the sky, and you can feel the wind. On this occasion, you may formulate an inner discourse: ‘There is some wind,’ or ‘I can no longer see the harbour.’ Judgements such as these may result in a case of mild consternation. However, other representations may rise from the subconscious though not directly stimulated by the reality you have right before your eyes. Therefore, the initial discourse becomes different, and you may say to yourself: ‘What a terrible sea!’ or ‘It will be a horrible death!’ and a passion like fear may consequently appear.

So, according to Epictetus, not every representation or impression is provoked by outside objects, but also by all sorts of images created by the mind. The only way to control our

passions is not to give our assent to such representations. Pierre Hadot explains that Stoics named some impressions '*phantasia kataleptiké*' or 'comprehensive representation,' a representation that was free of any value judgement. This is an objective and primary impression in which no subjective interpretation is present.

The aim of most Stoic spiritual exercises is to train oneself to resist subjective representations, to reach psychological invulnerability. They insist on the fact that what is in our power is the correct use of representations.

## 2. The *Aproptôsia* or *Epoché* Exercise

One spiritual exercise that appears regularly in the *Handbook*[\[11\]](#) consists of doubting the initial impression, to wonder whether it is in fact a false one. [\[12\]](#)

This exercise is called *aproptôsia*, and consists of the Stoic practice of not assenting too quickly to judgements that correspond directly to representations.[\[13\]](#) The concrete application of the discipline of judgement is realised in two steps.

Firstly, the reaction to a representation or inner image which troubles or terrifies us because of its harshness *must be resisted*. This supposes a 'retreat from our projections' which prevent us from seeing 'what is'.

An important element of the ancient's therapy is *epoché*, 'to bracket'; looking at something, somebody, an event and 'to put it in brackets.' We do this in order to '*suspend our judgment*', not to project on the object in question our fears, our desires, and all our 'packets of memories.'

Seeing clearly, primarily is to see what is; what is and nothing else. *Epoché* concerns emotion as well as judgment and thought. It supposes a great freedom in relation to our reactions. As indicated above, we usually do not control reactive attitudes, which are often mistaken 'actions'. Before even imagining that such a thing is possible, we should be conscious of this. *Epoché* provides a very important moment to allow to get away from

‘our own point of view’ and our conditioning before assenting to a *phantasia*. This is the beginning of *clear vision*.

The second step consists of ‘adding something’ to what the impression initially implies. This second step is called *epilegein* by Epictetus, which means ‘saying something more.’ The inner discourse, or dialogue with oneself I referred to above, appears at this stage. These mental images give rise to our desires and impulses and are often accompanied by terrifying or alluring value judgements, as I explained above.

The goal of the Stoic *epilegein* is to establish the truth about the impression by distinguishing what is in our power from what is not in our power. [\[14\]](#) Is this thing in your power? If it is in your power, it can be either a good or an evil. If it is not in your power, it is not an evil (though neither can it be a good).

Epictetus imagines that representations ask us questions [\[15\]](#), and that is why the *epilegein* is a form of inner dialogue.

It is important to remember that our *hegemonikon* is constantly stimulated by impressions. A regular meditative practice, as detailed in the last part of this essay, is of great help for it aims at developing attention and pacifying the mind.

We are now going to see how the Spiritual exercises apply to Stoic physics and ethics.

## **B. Practical Physics**

### **1. The Discipline of Desire (and aversion)**

How should we define the discipline of desire?

Epictetus advises<sup>[16]</sup> those wishing to practise this discipline to bear insults, to drink wine with moderation, to refrain from eating a cake or having sex with a beautiful girl, not to be afraid of poverty, illness or death, or again, not to pursue honour or riches.

Desires correspond to the attraction we have towards what we believe is good and of which we can be deprived, and aversions correspond to the repulsion we feel towards what we believe is evil, and consequently fear.

Thus, the discipline of desire is concerned firstly with things that affect us and secondly with the search for a certain state of mind by reaching for a good or avoiding an evil.

It seems that for many philosophers, the simple act of desire is in itself a sickness, a sign of dissatisfaction, a more or less painful 'deficiency'.

In the handbook, Epictetus insists on the fact that his students should stop having desires. This seems surprising. One may perfectly understand that Epictetus forbids the desire of things which are not 'up to us,' because we might lose them and as a consequence fall prey to a 'passion.' But how could it not be right to desire things which are 'up to us' and which conform to nature? How could it be possible not to desire moral goodness, being capable of right judgement and right action, that is, to desire *eudaimonia*?

In fact, evil does not lie in the act of desiring, for it is a sign of life, *but in the bad orientation of desire*. The drama of human life is that man desires external goods, which are transitory realities, and mistakes them as being 'the' reality, believing them to be unchanging.

The perversion of desire is to idolize objects. When someone fails to reach their goal, another state of mind arises such as the passion of sadness, fear or anger. For this reason, Epictetus also calls the discipline of desire, the discipline of the passions.<sup>[17]</sup>

Epictetus wishes to teach us to take care of our desire, to reorient the desire towards virtue. The reason why he recommends us to stop having desires is simple.

Here we should recognise one of the most powerful ancient spiritual practices (later adopted by the Christians): you should not pretend that you can immediately reach a high state of perfection without ascetic preparation. You should start with aversion of irrational behaviour and learn to identify your flaws. Desiring an inaccessible perfection before 'cleansing your soul' would create sadness and discouragement.

## 2. Examples of *Epilegein* in Desire

### a. Premeditation

It is not enough to agree to *accept* events once they have happened, a Stoic student should learn to *anticipate* such events.

One of the most important Stoic exercises is that of the *praemeditatio*, in which Stoic students prepares themselves to endure unpleasant or painful experiences.

It consists in representing to oneself anything which may occur in the course of daily life: difficulties, setbacks, sufferings or even death, for instance. Of course, practising the *praemeditatio*, the Stoic wishes to smooth the impact of unpleasant events (but not to escape from them) and above all to restore his peace of mind.

In fact, we should not be afraid to think about what other people consider to be evils. On the contrary, we should think about these often to remind ourselves, firstly that future evils are not evils because they are not yet present, and secondly that events such as disease, poverty and death are not evils because they are not in our power, and consequently have no bearing on morality.

One important thing to note is that the constant thought of death radically transforms our way of living, for it makes us realise the sheer value of every single moment of time:

At every hour devote yourself in a resolute spirit, as suits a Roman and a man, to fulfilling the task in hand with scrupulous and unaffected dignity, and love for others, and independence and justice; and grant yourself a respite from all other preoccupations. And this you will achieve if you perform every action as though it were your last, freed from all lack of purpose and wilful deviation from the rule of reason, and from duplicity, self seeking, and dissatisfaction with what is allotted to you.[\[18\]](#)

This exercise is intimately linked to the discipline of desire, because when a Stoic acts he foresees every obstacle, and consequently nothing really happens against his will, and his moral intention remains unchanged.

## **b. Physical Definition**

This exercise is a typical example of *epilegein*. It consists of precisely defining what it is one is attached to, and what one wishes to keep. The definition will enable one to clearly distinguish subjective and affective judgements from the objective representation that one should have about it.

Thus, Marcus Aurelius says:

Always define or describe whatever presents itself to your mind, so as to see what sort of thing it is when stripped to its essence, as a whole and in its separate parts; and tell yourself its proper name, and the names of the elements from which it was compounded and into which it will finally be resolved.[\[19\]](#)

The discipline of desire implies successfully reducing desire for material possessions or social position. Consequently, this exercise must apply to everything that surrounds us and we must try to see these things as they truly are. Try to apply it when you wander down streets full of very attractive shops: I can assure you that it is quite efficient!

Of course, the goal of the physical definition is learning to get inwardly detached from what we love, and it has to be practised progressively.<sup>[20]</sup> Your ‘self’ will tend to feel separated from everything, both to feel free and to foresee one’s own death.

### **c. Restitution**

One of the core teachings of Stoicism is understanding that everything you possess (riches, honours, as well as the people you love) may be taken from you at any time.

Consequently, a Stoic outlook on those things is always to see them as being mere loans, because a loan must always be returned to its true owner one day or another. So when you are about to lose your life or some possession, or when you learn that a person that you cherished has died and you feel sad, the following sentence should immediately come up to your mind: it is a ‘restitution.’

In sum, we should get used to the idea that we will lose everything that we love: as you may guess, this little exercise is designed to instill detachment from everything that for the non philosopher is supposed to have value, and is ultimately a means to reach inner freedom. <sup>[21]</sup>

#### **d. Impermanence or universal metamorphosis**

Ancient Stoics linked ethics and good life to a full comprehension of Nature, and consequently a form of meditation have been designed to educate the Stoic student to comprehend impermanence and appreciate the link which binds all living beings on this earth.

Ultimately, this enables us to understand what our place is in this constantly ever-changing universe. In this sense, Stoicism is undoubtedly a spiritual path for it develops in students a deep love for the world which created them and everything which surrounds them.

Comprehension of impermanence can be achieved by various means: by way of writing meditation, or by way of an *epileigēin*. It is possible, but there is no evidence at all, that these practices included visualisation techniques. Reconstruction of these types of exercise will require much imagination and meditative practical knowledge from us. This will take some time I am afraid, but it is necessary, for I believe Stoicism will remain incomplete without this aspect of the philosophy.

A good example of applied physics is the exercise called ‘universal metamorphosis.’ In this exercise the Stoic trains themselves to observe how things constantly change.

Marcus Aurelius describes it in this way:

Acquire a method to examine systematically how all things are transformed from one to another, and direct your attention constantly to this area of study, and exercise yourself in it, for nothing is so conducive to elevation of mind.[\[22\]](#)

And again:

Look carefully at every existing thing and reflect that its dissolution is already under way and it is in the course of change and, as it were, of decay or dispersal, or is dying in whatever way its nature appoints.[\[23\]](#)

In this case, this meditation could involve visualisation techniques. For instance, you may try to visualise a tree and try to follow its evolution through the seasons. Or again, you can visualise a human body through the stages of life, then its death and decay.

In fact, a large variety of objects are suitable subjects for this meditation. Finding appropriate subjects for the ‘universal metamorphosis’ exercise could contribute to its effectiveness for the Stoic apprentice.

#### **e. Wand of Hermes**

The ‘Wand of Hermes’ exercise is another way of not being dominated by one’s impressions. When something ‘bad’ happens to you, you should immediately distinguish what is up to you from what is not up to you.

Epictetus refers to this exercise in a whole discourse:[\[24\]](#) moral intention finds in every occasion the ability to exercise virtue. In fact, it is like the wand of Hermes, which has the power to change everything to gold.

The one who insults you gives you the occasion to exercise patience. Illness gives you the occasion to exercise courage and serenity. Death obliges you to conform your will to Nature’s own will. Other examples of duties are, as Epictetus would say ‘eat as a man, drink as a man, clean yourself as a man, marry yourself, have children, have a proper life of a citizen etc.’

Stoicism is, I think, a very realistic but optimistic philosophy: life may not be easy, but it is up to you to see things differently and to obtain strength from this outlook on life.

## **C. Practical Ethics**

### **1. The discipline of Impulsion**

The discipline of impulsion engages our sense of responsibility. It is about about how we relate to other human beings, those of our kind, who may be the source of passions *because* they are of our kind and because we should care for them, despite the fact that they may be despicable.

The discipline of impulsion is of course linked to the discipline of desire, for a person not subject to passions is more likely to act wisely, that is, to act in a way appropriate to nature.

This idea is rendered in Stoic philosophy by the very important notion of *kathekon*. A *kathekon* – often translated in English as duty- represents for Stoics an action appropriate to nature. This action, which is up to us, also supposes a good or bad intention that cannot be accomplished in an indifferent way. However, this action is also in relation to an indifferent matter, because it is not entirely ‘up to us’ but rather up to other beings, circumstances or external events.

In order to design a practical code of conduct which enables us to select among the indifferents which ones can be the object of our actions, Stoics noticed, as a starting point, that a fundamental instinct of nature was an expression of the ‘will’ of Nature.

Indeed, thanks to a natural impulsion, every being on earth tends to love themselves and to select what is most appropriate for their survival and to avoid what may be a threat to their integrity. Through this natural instinct that which is appropriate to nature is revealed.

According to stoic philosophy, this natural impulsion should be exerted with respect to the hierarchy introduced by nature's *scala naturae*. As some of you already know, Stoics had indeed developed a very interesting theory about nature's inner levels (*scala naturae*) and divided macrocosm into four levels: *haixis* (stones), *phusis* (flowers, plants, trees), *psuchê* (animals) and finally *nous* (a characteristic belonging only to human beings). Human beings, the most complex creation of Nature, are composed of all four of these levels and there are consequences to this in relation to impulsion.

For example, the word '*phusis*' also means 'strength of growth', and human beings, like plants, also possess this strength which leads them, for instance, to feed themselves, to clothe and to breed. It is essentially taking care of one's body

But human beings do not only possess 'strength of growth', but also 'strength of sensation' (*psuchê*): this is an higher level of strength, which is also called the 'strength of the animal'. In this case, self preservation is achieved via the vigilance of the senses. It is interesting to note that the terms '*psuchê*' and '*pneuma*' (breath) often have the same etymological origins: indeed, the Stoics thought that 'intelligent' *pneuma* throughout the human body were the medium for sensation (aisthesis). *Pneuma* may be then considered as the gate to *psuchê*. It is taking care of your *psuchê*.

However, if exaggerated the role of sensation could have a bad influence on an even higher level of strength called '*nous*' or '*hegemonikon*', or which enables human beings to consent to the great laws of Nature, or to fate and to the events that are parts of this universal nature.

I will describe below some exercises that are usually linked to this discipline.

## 2. Examples of *Epilegein* in Impulsion

The discipline of action should be added to the rigorous discipline of desire but should be practised with measure and reservation.

### a- Defining the planned action

The Manual, in chapter 4, relates to the activities we plan to undertake. It is important that we remind ourselves of every possible action that is likely to occur as a result of attempting to complete this activity.

*When you are going to take in hand any act, remind yourself what kind of an act it is. If you are going to bathe, place before yourself what happens in the bath: some splashing the water, others pushing against one another, others abusing one another, and some stealing; and thus with more safety you will undertake the matter, if you say to yourself, I now intend to bathe, and to maintain my will in a manner conformable to nature. And so you will do in every act: for thus if any hindrance to bathing shall happen, let this thought be ready; it was not this only that I intended, but I intended also to maintain my will in a way conformable to nature; but I shall not maintain it so, if I am vexed at what happens.*

Bathing is ordinarily considered to be a very agreeable activity, but it can also be accompanied with several possible misfortunes. Seneca had already used the example of the bath to illustrate the exercise of premeditation applied to the discipline of action[25]. This exercise is also linked to the practice of ‘acting with reservation’ described below.

This exercise help the Stoic *prokopton* to never forget that the most important thing is to ensure the purity of his/her intention.

A very important notion should be introduced here. As in any other art or profession, the 'job' of being a Stoic philosopher has its own goal (*scopos*) and end (*telos*). *Telos* means 'reward' and *scopos* 'running in the stadium'.

The *telos* of the Stoic philosopher, his reward, is of course *eudaimonia*, which Zenon defined as being a 'good flow of life'.

*Scopos* is defined as being a will of the psychê, a constant application of the mind of which the Stoic philosopher should never depart[26]. The *scopos* of the Stoic philosopher is, as Musonius Rufus would have said, being attentive to *the purity of intention*. This purity of intention is then the sole guide or reference for the philosopher's desires and actions. In order to ensure this purity of intention, the Stoic student has to be well disciplined, submit to a training to make proper use of impression, to a diet, to read and to practice virtues.

The ancient Greek is very clear when it says '*kata scopon diocho*' or 'I am running, guiding myself on the goal'. If the Stoic forgets to stick to his goal with strength and perseverance he will be then unable to reach his *telos*, the eudaimonistic life.

Ancient Stoics used the analogy of the archer shooting at a target to explain this notion[27]: 'The archer must do everything possible to reach his goal (*skopos*), but it is this very act of doing everything possible to reach his goal, which is, if I may say, the End (*telos*) of the archer, and which corresponds to what we call, when we refer to life, the supreme good; reaching the goal is only a thing that we should wish, but this is not something which deserves to be searched for itself'.

The above chapter of the Handbook underline the fact that the prokopton should always remember that he/she *now intends to bathe (or any other action), and to maintain his/her will in a manner conformable to nature*. In this way, he/she never forgets 'to run guiding himself on the goal'

## b. Acting with ‘reservation’

As many of you probably know, ‘acting with reservation’ is a technical expression: someone acts with reservation when they realise that in the course of their action it is very likely that they will meet obstacles that are independent of their will, and that might well prevent success.

The Stoic foresees (or tries to foresee) every obstacle, and so keeps his equanimity in all circumstances because this will help him to remain faithful to his choice of life.

Seneca says[\[28\]](#):

*The wise man sets about every action with reservation: ‘if nothing happens which might stop him’. For this reason, we say that he always succeeds and that nothing unexpected happens to him: because within himself he considers the possibility that something will get in the way and prevent what he is proposing to do.*

And again[\[29\]](#):

*The safest policy is rarely to tempt [Fortune], though to keep her always in mind and to trust her in nothing. Thus: ‘I shall sail unless something happens’; and ‘I shall become praetor unless something prevents me’, and ‘My business will be successful unless something interferes’. That is why we say that nothing happens to a wise man against his expectations.*

Regarding this exercise, Keith Seddon explains[\[30\]](#) that “Once we realise that things that happen in the world, including the way other people act, are not wholly in our power, we come into possession of a wonderful gift, for now we can engage in our affairs with a sort of serenity, a new found peace of mind and an empowering confidence.”

However, these exercises, that are variations of premeditation, are not easy to practice.

Marcus Aurelius warns us:

‘Do not disturb yourself by picturing your life as a whole; do not assemble in your mind the many and varied troubles which have come to you in the past and will come again in the future’

The answer to this problem is to concentrate only on present actions, and also on present difficulties, which then become an easier burden to bear, as they are isolated to the present moment only. It is very important not to fall prey to some future anguish.

### **III- Attempt of reconstruction of a stoic meditation**

#### **A : The help of Buddhist ‘ Samatha –Vypassyana’ therapy**

Having found a very interesting quotation in the *Discourses*, I am convinced that the ancient Stoics had their own system of meditation:

The soul is like a vessel filled with water; and impressions are like a ray of light that falls upon the water. If the water is disturbed, the ray will seem to be disturbed likewise, though in reality it is not. Whenever, therefore, a man is seized with vertigo, it is not the arts and virtues that are confounded, but the spirit in which they exist; and, if this comes to rest, so will they likewise.[\[31\]](#)

At first sight, it appeared to me that Epictetus describes a typical meditation technique which seems to be similar in many respects to the Buddhist's Samatha-Vipassyana (Sa-Vi). This basic Buddhist meditation technique [\[32\]](#) is seen as a process in which one aims to re-educate one's mind. The state one wishes to reach is one in which one is fully conscious of everything that happens in one's immediate experience, exactly in the way that it happens, exactly when it happens with a total consciousness of the present moment.

To accomplish this, the Buddhists teach a technique to pacify the mind, which is called 'Samatha': to be sure that their students will understand the goal of meditation, they often compare the mind to a pool of water, very similar to Epictetus' analogy, which is really stunning.

In his *Discourse*, Epictetus refers only to the contemplation of impressions. In fact, it appears that our whole mind is 'made up' of impressions reflected by our mind 'like a sun ray that falls upon the water.' Consequently, we should be able to observe them carefully.

For what purpose, then, have we received reason from nature? To make a proper use of impressions. And what is reason itself? Something compounded from impression of a certain kind: and thus, by its nature, it becomes contemplative of itself too.[\[33\]](#)

It is consequently very plausible to think that the Stoics taught the pacification of mind in their meditation system because such a contemplative work would really be impossible without active attention.

After having pacified the mind, the Buddhist progressively learns to observe all phenomena (thoughts, emotions, physical sensations) which arise in the mind: this is the 'vipassyana' component of their meditative system. It is the capacity to have an awareness of something without being captivated by it.

For example, it means being aware of a thought without thinking the thought. Or again 'seeing' a thought, emotion or sensation as one would observe a car passing on a motorway.

I suspect that the *hegemonikon* could be this ability, for I found some interesting quotations in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. I need to work on this further, but I think that I need to improve my own meditative practice before trying to propose a workable solution.

## **B : The help of the Desert Fathers tradition**

I discovered some years ago that early Christians were inspired by ancient philosophers, and especially the Stoics, to set up their own therapy. A good example may be found in the works of Jean-Yves Leloup, an orthodox theologian, who is well known in France as a popular author on spirituality and psychology. Many of his books are now available in English translation.

Having studied with the Athos monks he shared with us in *Being still, Reflections on an ancient mystical tradition* [\[34\]](#) the way of Hesychastic prayer according to Father Seraphin.

This teaching is purely natural and therapeutic way of meditation, using the *scala naturae* (*haixis, phusis, psuchê, nous*); Humanity has indeed often lost contact with these natural elements, which go together to form our microcosm, and this often leads to all sorts of discomfort, sickness, insecurity and anxiety. The human being feels unwelcome, estranged from the world. That is why meditation, according to the ancients, is to first of all enter into the meditation and praise of the entire universe.

I tried to isolate from this orthodox teaching the philosophical elements that early Christians obviously borrowed from Stoics to attempt a reconstruction of a probable original Stoic *askesis/melete*.

It is important to stress the importance of the oral transmission. It is very probable that if such exercise really existed within the ancient Stoic tradition, its transmission was also by way of oral teaching. This could explain why it is now impossible to find a written description.

1. to meditate like a mountain (*haixis*)

The first instructions concerns stability: settling into a good posture. Indeed, the first counsel to give anyone who wants to meditate is not on the spiritual level but on the physical. Sit down.

To sit like a mountain also means to feel your weight, to be heavy with presence. At the beginning, you may find difficult remaining stationary, with legs crossed, and the hips a little above the knees (you could use a zafu for help.)

With perseverance, you will realise that your understanding of time will completely change. Mountains know another time, another rhythm. To be seated like a mountain is to have time before you. It is the right attitude for anyone who wants to enter into meditation. It is learning how to be, simply to be, without aim or purpose.

Meditating like a mountain will also modify the rhythm of thoughts: you will learn to see without judging, as though you were giving to all that grows the right to exist.

2. to meditate like a poppy (*phusis*)

Meditation is first of all a posture, but meditation is also an orientation, and this is what the poppy teaches: to turn towards the sun, to turn from the depth of yourself towards the light, towards beauty (*to kalon*) to make of meditation the inspiration of all your strength and vigour.

You will also learn from the poppy that in order to maintain this position the flower has to have a straight stem, and so you will begin to to straighten your spine.

The poppy is also fragile, its blossom soon fades. So it is necessary not only to blossom, but also to wither. The mountain gives us a sense of eternity, the poppy of time. Thus you will learn to meditate without 'purpose or profit', but for the simple pleasure of being and of loving the light.

### 3. to meditate like ocean (*psuchê*)

Meditation is adopting a good posture and a proper frame of mind, but it is also learning to listen to your own breathing, and this is what the ocean teaches.

You will be asked to harmonize your own breath with the great breathing of the waves. You inhale, you exhale...then you are inhaled and you are exhaled. Let yourself be carried by your own breath.

You may well first lose consciousness, or to float on your back. But soon you will no longer be carried away by the deepened rhythm of your breathing and you will learn that to meditate is to breath deeply, to let the breath's ebb and flow just be.

You will also realise that thoughts come and go. They foam around you. Listening to your breathing will enable you to become deeply aware of the productions of the *hegemonikon*.

4. to meditate like a sage (*nous*)

With the meditation of the sage, you will enter into a new and higher awareness, the awareness of the *logos* which manifests itself in the intimate exchange of all things but that cannot be grasped by all things.

Heraclitus deeply inspired the physics of the Stoics and thus it is very important to understand the meaning of the word *logos* as he used it. Translators of the Gospels usually replaced the *logos* by ‘the word’ but this translation does not help us much. Philosophers often use the word ‘discourses’. This is not wrong, but this kind of linear comprehension of Heraclitus leaves us starving. How should we understand the *logos* in Greek. Far before being the word or the discourse, *logos* is *the gathering*. *Legein* means firstly to ‘to gather’ or ‘to pick’. It was only with the development of the classical Greek that *logos* will come to mean ‘to speak’ or ‘to say something’. But even around 270 BCE the poet Moschu of Syracuse was still writing *aglaien rhodou legein* which translates as ‘to pick the bloom of a rose’.

Heraclitus invites us ‘to pick the bloom’. The listening is also contemplation, which implies the absence of direction. An oriented listening, to the contrary, is a listening of the known, of the thought, of the mind, of memory, of habit. Other traditions use the term ‘*ego*’.

Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* describes this exercise as follows

There are three things of which you are composed: body, breath and mind. Of these, the first two are your own in so far it is your duty to take care of them; but only the third is your own in the full sense.

So if you will put away from yourself – that is to say, from your mind – all that others do or say, and all that you yourself have done or said, and all that troubles you with regard to the future, and all that belonging to the body which envelops you and the breath conjoined with it is attached to you independently of your will, and all that the vortex whirling around outside you sweeps in its wake, so that the power of your mind, thus delivered from the bonds of fate, may live a pure and

unfettered life alone with itself, doing what is just, desiring what comes to pass, and saying what is true – if I say, you will put away from your governing faculty all that accretes to it from the affections of the body, and all that lies in the future or in time gone by, and make yourself, in Empedocles' words, '*a well-rounded sphere rejoicing in the solitude around it*,' and strive to live only the life that is your own, that is to say, your present life, then you will be able to pass at least the time that is left to you until you die in calm and kindness, and as one who is at peace with the guardian-spirit that dwells within him.

Remaining in this state of listening, of openness, in every circumstances, is making yourself '*a well rounded sphere rejoicing in the solitude around it*'. That is the very meaning of the motto 'living according to nature' as Zeno stated or 'living according to the experience of nature' according to Chrysippus, which is my favourite one.

#### **IV. Concluding Thoughts**

It really important to understand that I have tried to give only an overview of Stoic meditative practices in this short essay.

Some may criticise the extensive use I made of Pierre Hadot's theories: I recently learnt that they are the subject of controversy, especially regarding his interpretation of the theory of knowledge and the treatment of impressions.

I nevertheless chose to rely on Hadot because I felt in reading some of his various works that there is some sort of spirituality which arises from it. Furthermore, in my view, his interpretation of 'impressions' can be easily incorporated in a comprehensive meditation system.

I myself went through a considerable evolution on my way to understanding these practices, especially when I discovered the early traditions of the Desert Fathers. Indeed early Christians drew deep inspiration from ancient philosophers, perhaps even Stoics or Platonists. We now are aware that Arrian' *Encheiridion*, for instance, has been used by Christians, after having been heavily modified, for their daily practice, and even later to evangelise the Chinese people.

I realized that it would be fairly easy to attempt a reconstruction of some core Stoic teachings using Cassian collations of the works of Jean-Yves Leloup. Another advantage of this method is

that we can rely on a living tradition that I believe to be the sole genuine authentic way of teaching the art of living well.

My Buddhist studies have been of great help, especially as far as the meditation techniques are concerned.

It is interesting to note that David Fontana remarks that although meditation techniques developed in many different cultures (and not only in oriental ones), the techniques in themselves are similar everywhere. That is why early Christians also focused on breathing in order to develop attention.

I hope that you enjoyed this essay and above all that it will be of great help to you.

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[1] Richard Lewis, *Stoic Voice Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 4.

[2] Richard Lewis, *Stoic Voice Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 6.

[3] Moral Epistle n°89

[4] Meditations 2.13

[5] In A-J Festugière's *Deux prédicateurs de l'Antiquité : Télès et Musonius*, Paris, Vrin, 1978, p. 69–71.

[6] Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est ce que la philosophie antique?*, folio essais, Gallimard, 1995. This book has been translated into English under the title *Philosophy as a way of life*.

[7] Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Etudes augustinienes, Paris, 1987.

[8] *Discourses* III, 3, 20-2

[9] *Handbook* 45

[10] *Discourses* II, 16, 22

[11] *Handbook* 3, 4, 9 and 12

[12] *Discourses* III, 12, 15

[13] *Discourses* II, 8, 29

[14] *Discourses* III, 3, 15; III, 16, 15

[15] *Discourses* III, 8, 1-6

[16] *Discourses* III, 12, 10

[17] *Discourses* III, 2, 3

[18] *Meditations* 2.5

[19] *Meditation* 3, 11

[20] *Discourses*, IV, 1, 111

[21] *Discourses* I, 1, 32 and I, 24, 14

[22] *Meditations* 10.11

[23] *Meditations* 10. 18

[24] *Discourses* III, 20

[25] *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, letter 107. 2

[26] See a very interesting collation of St John Cassian where Abba Moise exposes in details the doctrine of telos and scopos within the frame of early christian philosophy. I chose to adopt this interpretation as I believe that it helps to understand better the ancient Stoic sources, and was probably inspired by them, than the usual explanation given by scholars which link these notion with the uncertainty of the outcome of our actions.

[27] *On Ends*, III, 6, 22

[28] *On Benefits* 4.34.4, trans Donini, Inwood and Donini 1999, p 737

[29] *On tranquility of mind* 13.2-3, trans, Costa 1997, p 51-2

[30] *Introduction to Stoic Philosophy – The Quest for inner peace – Paper n°2*

[31] *Discourses* III, 3, 20-2

[32] In Henepola Gunaratama's, *Mindfulness in plain english*, 1991

[33] *Discourses* I, 20, 5

[34] *Being still, Reflections on an ancient mystical tradition*, translated and edited by M.S. Laird (2003 Gracewing Edition)