

MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS, CA. 170-180 CE

Written while Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) was on campaign in the land that includes modern-day Hungary and Austria, these compiled cogitations (written in Greek) reveal the Roman emperor's Stoic beliefs. Intended as a type of personal guide or reflective exercise, the Meditations touch on mortality, morality, social care, and self-control, among other themes. Consider the Roman emperor's elegant tone as well as his modest views of the transience of life, which contrast with his supreme political status.

Begin every morning by saying to yourself, "Today, I will encounter meddling, ingratitude, arrogance, deceit, envy, and selfishness, and all of these things will be due to their offenders' ignorance of the difference between Good and Evil. But I myself have long recognized the nature and magnificence of the Good and the nature and meanness of Evil; the nature, too, of the one who does wrong, for he is my brother (not in the physical sense of blood and seed, but as a fellow-creature endowed with intellect and a share of the divine). Therefore, none of those things can harm me, for no one can implicate me with what is base. Neither can I be angry with my brother nor hate him, for we were created to work together, like a man's two feet or hands, two eyelids, or two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To oppose each other, therefore, is against Nature. Anger and aversion are obstructions.

Bear in mind always that as a Roman and a man, you should perform your duties well and with dignity and in a spirit of kindness, liberality, and justice. In so doing, you free yourself of the burden of all cares, and you will be successful in this so long as you approach every deed as if it were the last action of your life, setting aside inattentiveness and the desire to avoid the dictates of reason, hypocrisy, self-regard, and complaint about what life has doled out to you. You can see how little a man needs in order to lead a quiet life—which is a divine life. The gods themselves will require nothing more from a man who lives this way.

Even if he were to live for three thousand years or as many as ten thousand, every man has but one life to live and to lose this one and no other. Remember this: for all lives, the longest and the shortest, come to the same end. The present moment is the same to everyone, although that which perishes [at any moment] is not the same; that is why that which is lost appears to be only a mere moment. A man, after all, cannot lose either the past or the future, for how can anyone take from him what he does not possess? So, remember these two things: first, that all eternal things are similar and come round in a circle, and it makes no difference at all whether one sees the same things for a hundred years or two hundred or for however so great a time; second, the man who lives the longest and the one who lives the briefest life both lose the same thing. The present moment is the only thing that one can lose, for it is all that one possesses. You can only lose what you possess.

A man's soul does violence to itself when it turns into a canker or tumor upon the universe, to the extent that that is possible. To be irritated at anything that happens is

to cut oneself off from Nature since Nature consists of the nature of all things combined. The soul also does violence to itself when it turns away from any person or advances upon any with the intent to harm—such are the souls of the wrathful. The soul does a third kind of violence to itself when it surrenders itself to pleasure or pain, a fourth kind when it dissembles and does or says something insincerely or falsely. And a fifth kind of violence is when it allows itself any act or movement that is without purpose or does anything thoughtlessly and without a care to its correctness. For it is right that even the smallest actions be done for a reason. The whole point of being a rational creature, after all, is to follow the dictates of reason and the law of the most ancient city and state.

The span of a human life is a mere point; its substance is in constant flux, its perception ever dims, the makeup of the body given to decay, its soul is a whirl, its destiny hard to determine, and its fame a matter without any meaning. In a word, everything that makes up a human body is a moving stream; what makes up the soul is a dream and vapor; life is a battle, a journey by a stranger, and what comes afterward is oblivion. What, then, is the one sure guide for a man in life? Philosophy. But Philosophy requires that a man keep his spirit free from violence and harm, above all pains and pleasures; that he does nothing without a purpose nor anything falsely and hypocritically; that he acts without feeling that a duty should be left to another man's care; and that he accepts everything that happens, everything that is fated—for everything comes from the place from which he himself comes.

Finally, he accepts death with a calm mind since death is nothing more than the dissolving of the particles of which every living being is made. If no harm comes to the elements themselves as they continually rearrange themselves into new beings, why should a man fear the change the dissolving represents? For it is part of Nature, and nothing in Nature is evil.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How is Marcus Aurelius emulating Epictetus' advice, and would this have been more difficult for an emperor to follow?
2. Why would accepting the transience of life lead to calmness in the face of death?