

Below is background information on the content. My current thoughts on the content will be reflected in footnotes at the bottom of each respective page. With the exceptions of annotations, page numbers, changes in font (for readability), name replacements or identifiers (protecting and indicating participants in discussion-based content), the original content is unedited.

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Date of commentary: December 22nd, 2016.

Date of original content (Approximate): November, 2012

Format: Reply to Facebook group post.

Subject (Approximate): Perseverance, self-discipline, self-analysis, patience.

Participants: 1-3 (Travis Hume, and other posters.)

Part (if Applicable): 1 of 1.

Synopsis: The content is drawn from a post in the facebook group "Stoicism Group (Stoic Philosophy) in 2012. The original poster asks for guidance on the approach practicing Stoics should take to develop self-mastery. My reply centers on a comprehensive approach as being the most effective.

~ Start of Original Content ~

Original Post:

Ought prospective Stoics to actively engage/seek out difficulty, or should they just accept and deal with the difficulties that they encounter naturally?

Response (Travis Hume):

Both. It's beneficial to occasionally resist desires and act in the face of fears for the sake of mental training. Everyday examples: resisting the desire to drink a soda, and choosing water instead, or (calmly) addressing a rude person in your grocery line (who may otherwise continue instigate others).

So long as your intent is focused on mental training, and you act without sake for admiration, you will benefit from both natural, and intentional occurrences.¹

Response (Original Poster):

The comment is very practical - both intentional and natural circumstances can be beneficial - again, a matter of conception, isn't it?

But is it rational to actively seek out difficult circumstances? I imagine that, on one hand, one is trying to develop one's character/soul, and if virtue is the only good, then doing so should a Stoic's priority.

¹ My reply was posted around the time that I began earnestly practicing Stoicism. In my response, I was speaking to both the poster and I. By committing my efforts in writing in the form of advice, I was reinforcing the habit of thinking purely in terms of guiding others while improving myself. This became the foundation for all my future writing: The self-imposed condition that I must write on first-hand attempts to work Stoic philosophy into real-world experiences; if I believe that I am writing for the sake of praise or popularity, even partially, I must forbid myself from writing until I can reign in those sentiments by scrutinizing the judgments underlying them.

On the other, however, is it not coming perilously close to a kind of self-flagellation?

Response (Travis Hume):

The idea behind intentionally putting yourself in difficult circumstances that are otherwise avoidable, is to expose yourself to circumstances that may come about ahead of time. By exposure to these difficult circumstances on your own terms, you are able to analyze the circumstance, and see it for what it is without compulsion and with a specific aim.

Your willpower is exercised, your intention is exercised, and you are able to practice reasoning through the situation. If or when the time comes that you are pressed into a similar circumstance that cannot be avoided, you can truthfully remind yourself that you prepared for that circumstance. You will be better able to maintain your calm, and work through it, with the reasoning you developed ahead of time.

It is not self-punishment, but self-discipline, or self-exercise, like training a muscle to lift greater weight.²

Response (Original Poster):

The problem can be when the individual gets lost finding his way the first time; and quits after being exhausted not figuring out how to develop his character/soul. Fair statement?

Response (Travis Hume):

I admit. In the beginning, it was extremely difficult to resist my desires or face my fears, intentionally or otherwise. The perspective and demands of Stoicism were (and are) fundamentally different than the culture that influenced my life for the 21 years prior to my taking it up.

In the beginning, I read Epictetus' Enchiridion (Handbook) once every day (it took about an hour) for four months. I tried to remember and apply Epictetus' recommendations on a small scale (like he recommends), such as reminding myself of the nature of fragile ceramic coffee cups when mine broke, or resisting eating a six inch sub, knowing half would fill me up for a few hours.

I experienced different circumstances that tested my then fledgling (if that) Stoic practice, which prompted me to abandon the practice. Yet, I would not, or more truthfully, I could not.

² Constructive self-denial is hand-in-hand with learning to overcome fears. As far as external things are concerned, desires and fears are more similar than they appear; they both portend that something may happen. They may be appropriately thought of as two sides to a single coin – Appearing to be opposites, but sharing the same form. The one, desire, pulls, the other, fear, pushes away. For the practicing Stoic, learning to resist seemingly simple desires, and act in the face of seemingly inconsequential fears, forms the building blocks for all future efforts to effectively practice Stoic philosophy. Accomplishing this – acting on willpower, on demand, without strain – will prove to be a necessary challenge for some time.

The techniques made sense, and I could not reasonably argue with them, no matter the opinions I received about it from others.³

Presently, if I was provided the chance to return to the point before I began practicing Stoicism, I would choose to take on the deep personal, mental, cultural, emotional struggle, over and over again, one hundred out of a hundred times.

Paraphrasing Epictetus, no good thing will come immediately. The state of mind of a Stoic that can be content or happy regardless of circumstance is an example. It takes hard work, diligence, courage, patience, and a willingness to endure internal and external challenges intentionally or otherwise. It is a craft that must be developed through training.

~ End of Original Content ~

³ I am referencing an experience I had with a significant other. I dated the person for a couple of months, and shared every interest I had with them except that I practiced Stoicism. I made no mention that I practiced the philosophy, or the reasons why, until certain that I could properly explain it to her. In the end, she recommended that I reject the philosophy and fully embrace past habits, or otherwise risk “becoming a robot.” Conflicted, but feeling strongly for her, I agreed for a short period of time. My commitments and studies suffered as I gave into habits I previously routinely kept in check, such as playing video games for great lengths of time, or regularly eating fast food. I ended the relationship after thinking a great deal on the effects and implications of my decision, and rebuilt my habits as a practicing Stoic.