

# Marcus Aurelius

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121-180

If *The Laws* of Cicero teaches us Stoic dogma concerning Natural Law and Reason in the Universe, then the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (from which the following reading is taken) reveals a more personal and private side of Stoic philosophy.

This remarkable man was emperor of Rome from 161 to 180, a time when natural disasters within the Empire and barbarian invasions from without combined to threaten its very existence. For lengthy periods away from his family and home, Marcus did his duty at the head of his legions in the area south of the Danube River, and it was during the bleakness of these campaigns that he wrote a series of reflections which he called simply *To Himself*. In this journal we can feel both the strengths and the weaknesses of Stoicism, and we can appreciate the greatness of spirit which has made the *Meditations* one of the most widely read and admired tracts in Christian Europe.

In the selection following, Marcus is resolute in his claims for "Providence," the notion that all things which happen are meant to happen. For him nothing happens by chance. Every individual is caught up in an inevitable destiny, which it is one's duty to endure as bravely as one can. And so he counsels himself not to waste his energies fighting against what happens around him, but to devote his whole strength to the task of preserving the quietness and tranquillity of soul which will allow him to do what reason demands of him. The central concept of Stoicism, of course, was its insistence that the universe is **rational**. All things in the universe are governed by Natural Law; events which occur carry out some end or purpose; there is a divine order in the universe. Thus, for Marcus, even though the divine order is not always evident to us at first glance, we share in the essential rationality of the universe and have the power of reason to grasp the Natural Law that governs the universe and our own lives.

"Retire within yourself", he advises, and remember that your sole responsibility is to live in accord with the cosmic reason which orders the world. Happiness can be achieved only through cultivating inner calm and tranquillity, becoming independent of external things whether they bring pleasure, pain, or danger. Such self-control contributes to individual happiness and to the good of the universe; evil, on the other hand, arises from succumbing to one's emotions and desires.

Thus Stoics were taught: cultivate the virtue of *apatheia*—indifference to troubles outside us. The attraction of the Stoic position is seen clearly in Marcus' view that all of us are but tiny bits of the world soul, and therefore no one can prevent us from being what we should be. "Be your own master!" is the cry. This is the power of Stoicism.

## Review Questions

2. According to Marcus Aurelius, how do you fit into the universe?
2. How should a good Stoic act in everyday life?

3. For the Stoic, where is the “untroubled retreat”?
4. What two principles does Marcus Aurelius feel we should contemplate most frequently?

### **Issues for Discussion**

1. Where does the individual’s moral responsibility fit into a universe governed by an all-pervading providence? How can I be responsible for my actions if everything that happens is meant to happen?
2. Does the Stoic seem to you to be a person who would be interested in the “public good”? Would the Stoic be involved in activity to better the community?
3. What kind of person would make the best Stoic? Would you find comfort in these thoughts, as Marcus Aurelius seems to? Did Christianity offer something which makes up for apparent deficiencies in Stoicism?

# Marcus Aurelius

## From *The Meditations*

### Book II

1. Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will, and selfishness—all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil. But for my part I have long perceived the nature of good and its nobility, the nature of evil and its meanness, and also the nature of the culprit himself, who is my brother (not in the physical sense, but as a fellow-creature similarly endowed with reason and a share of the divine); therefore none of those things can injure me, for nobody can implicate me in what is degrading. Neither can I be angry with my brother or fall foul of him; for he and I were born to work together, like a man's two hands, feet, or eyelids, or like the upper and lower rows of his teeth. To obstruct each other is against Nature's law—and what is irritation or aversion but a form of obstruction?

2. A little flesh, a little breath, and a Reason to rule all—that is myself. (Forget your books; no more hankering for them; they were no part of your equipment.) As one already on the threshold of death, think nothing of the first—of its viscid blood, its bones, its web of nerves and veins and arteries. The breath, too; what is that? A whiff of wind; and not even the same wind, but every moment puffed out and drawn in anew. But the third, the Reason, the master—on this you must concentrate. Now that your hairs are grey, let it play the part of a slave no more, twitching puppetwise at every pull of self-interest; and cease to fume at destiny by ever grumbling at today or lamenting over tomorrow.

3. The whole divine economy is pervaded by Providence. Even the vagaries of chance have their place in Nature's scheme; that is, in the intricate tapestry of the ordinances of Providence. Providence is the source from which all things flow; and allied with it is Necessity, and the welfare of the universe. You yourself are a part of that universe; and for any one of nature's parts, that which is assigned to it by the World-Nature or helps to keep it in being is good. Moreover, what keeps the whole world in being is Change: not merely change of the basic elements, but also change of the larger formations they compose. On these thoughts rest content, and ever hold them as principles. Forget your thirst for books; so that

when your end comes you may not murmur, but meet it with a good grace and with unfeigned gratitude in your heart to the gods.

4. Think of your many years of procrastination; how the gods have repeatedly granted you further periods of grace, of which you have taken no advantage. It is time now to realize the nature of the universe to which you belong, and of that controlling Power whose offspring you are; and to understand that your time has a limit set to it. Use it, then, to advance your enlightenment; or it will be gone, and never in your power again.

5. Hour by hour resolve firmly, like a Roman and a man, to do what comes to hand with correct and natural dignity, and with humanity, independence, and justice. Allow your mind freedom from all other considerations. This you can do, if you will approach each action as though it were your last, dismissing the wayward thought, the emotional recoil from the commands of reason the desire to create an impression, the admiration of self, the discontent with your lot. See how little a man needs to master, for his days to flow on in quietness and piety: he has but to observe these few counsels, and the gods will ask nothing more.

6. Wrong, wrong thou art doing to thyself, O my soul; and all too soon thou shalt have no more time to do thyself right. Man has but one life; already thine is nearing its close, yet still hast thou no eye to thine own honour, but art staking thy happiness on the souls of other men.

7. Are you distracted by outward cares? Then allow yourself a space of quiet, wherein you can add to your knowledge of the Good and learn to curb your restlessness. Guard also against another kind of error: the folly of those who weary their days in much business, but lack any aim on which their whole effort, nay, their whole thought, is focussed.

8. You will not easily find a man coming to grief through indifference to the workings of another's soul; but for those who pay no heed to the motions of their own, unhappiness is their sure reward.

9. Remembering always what the World-Nature is, and what my own nature is, and how the one stands in respect to the other—so small a fraction of so vast a Whole—bear in mind that no man can hinder you from conforming each word and deed to that Nature of which you are a part.

## Book IV

1. If the inward power that rules us be true to Nature, it will always adjust itself readily to the possibilities and opportunities offered by circumstance. It asks for no predeterminate material; in the pursuance of its aims it is willing to compromise; hindrances to its progress are merely converted into matter for its own use. It is like a bonfire mastering a heap of rubbish, which would have quenched a feeble glow; but its fiery blaze quickly assimilates the load, consumes it, and flames the higher for it.

2. Take no enterprise in hand at haphazard, or without regard to the principles governing its proper execution.

3. Men seek for seclusion in the wilderness, by the seashore, or in the mountains—a dream you have cherished only too fondly yourself. But such fancies are wholly unworthy of a philosopher, since at any moment you choose you can retire within yourself. Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul; above all, he who possesses resources in himself, which he need only contemplate to secure immediate ease of mind—the ease that is but another word for a well-ordered spirit. Avail yourself often, then, of this retirement, and so continually renew yourself. Make your rules of life brief, yet so as to embrace the fundamentals; recurrence to them will then suffice to remove all vexation, and send you back without fretting to the duties to which you must return.

After all, what is it that frets you? The vices of humanity? Remember the doctrine that all rational beings are created for one another; that toleration is a part of justice; and that men are not intentional evildoers. Think of the myriad enmities, suspicions, animosities, and conflicts that are now vanished with the dust and ashes of the men who knew them; and fret no more.

Or is it your allotted portion in the universe that

chafes you? Recall once again the dilemma, 'if not a wise Providence, then a mere jumble of atoms', and consider the profusion of evidence that this world is as it were a city. Do the ills of the body afflict you? Reflect that the mind has but to detach itself and apprehend its own powers, to be no longer involved with the movements of the breath, whether they be smooth or rough. In short, recollect all you have learnt and accepted regarding pain and pleasure.

Or does the bubble reputation distract you? Keep before your eyes the swift onset of oblivion, and the abysses of eternity before us and behind; mark how hollow are the echoes of applause, how fickle and undiscerning the judgements of professed admirers, and how puny the arena of human fame. For the entire earth is but a point, and the place of our own habitation but a minute corner in it; and how many are therein who will praise you, and what sort of men are they?

Remember then to withdraw into the little field of self. Above all, never struggle or strain; but be master of yourself, and view life as a man, as a human being, as a citizen, and as a mortal. Among the truths you will do well to contemplate most frequently are these two: first, that things can never touch the soul, but stand inert outside it, so that disquiet can arise only from fancies within; and secondly, that all visible objects change in a moment, and will be no more. Think of the countless changes in which you yourself have had a part. The whole universe is change, and life itself is but what you deem it.

4. If the power of thought is universal among mankind, so likewise is the possession of reason, making us rational creatures. It follows, therefore, that this reason speaks no less universally to us all with its 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not'. So then there is a world-law; which in turn means that we are all fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city. Is there any other common citizenship that can be claimed by all humanity? And it is from this world-polity that mind, reason, and law themselves derive. If not, whence else? As the earthy portion of me has its origin from earth, the watery from a different element, my breath from one source and my hot and fiery parts from another of their own elsewhere (for nothing comes from nothing, or can return to nothing), so too there must be an origin for the mind.

5. Death, like birth, is one of Nature's secrets; the same elements that have been combined are then dispersed.

Nothing about it need give cause for shame. For beings endowed with mind it is no anomaly, nor in any way inconsistent with the plan of their creation.

**6.** That men of a certain type should behave as they do is inevitable. To wish it otherwise were to wish the fig-tree would not yield its juice. In any case, remember that in a very little while both you and he will be dead, and your very names will quickly be forgotten.

**7.** Put from you the belief that 'I have been wronged', and with it will go the feeling. Reject your sense of injury, and the injury itself disappears.

**8.** What does not corrupt a man himself cannot corrupt his life, nor do him any damage either outwardly or inwardly.

**9.** The laws of collective expediency required this to happen.

**10.** Whatever happens, happens rightly. Watch closely, and you will find this true. In the succession of events there is not mere sequence alone, but an order that is just and right, as from the hand of one who dispenses to all their due. Keep up your watch, then, as you have begun, and let goodness accompany your every action—goodness, that is, in the proper sense of the word. In all your operations pay heed to this.

**11.** Do not copy the opinions of the arrogant, or let them dictate your own, but look at things in their true light.

**12.** At two points hold yourself always in readiness: first, to do exclusively what reason, our king and lawgiver, shall suggest it for the common weal; and secondly, to reconsider a decision if anyone present should correct you and convince you of an error of judgement. But such conviction must proceed from the assurance that justice, or the common good, or some other such interest will be served. This must be the sole consideration; not the likelihood of pleasure or popularity.

**13.** Have you reason? 'I have.' Then why not use it? If reason does its part, what more would you ask?

**14.** As a part, you inherit in the Whole. You will vanish into that which gave you birth; or rather, you will be transmuted once more into the creative Reason of the universe.

**15.** Many grains of incense fall on the same altar: one sooner, another later—it makes no difference.

**16.** You have only to revert to the teachings of your creed, and to reverence for reason, and within a week those who now class you with beasts and monkeys will be calling you a god.

**17.** Live not as though there were a thousand years ahead of you. Fate is at your elbow; make yourself good while life and power are still yours.

**18.** He who ignores what his neighbour is saying or doing or thinking, and cares only that his own actions should be just and godly, is greatly the gainer in time and ease. A good man does not spy around for the black spots in others, but presses unswervingly on towards his mark.

**19.** The man whose heart is palpitating for fame after death does not reflect that out of all those who remember him every one will himself soon be dead also, and in course of time the next generation after that, until in the end, after flaring and sinking by turns, the final spark of memory is quenched. Furthermore, even supposing that those who remember you were never to die at all, nor their memories to die either, yet what is that to you? Clearly, in your grave, nothing; and even in your lifetime, what is the good of praise—unless maybe to subserve some lesser design? Surely, then, you are making an inopportune rejection of what Nature has given you today, if all your mind is set on what men will say of you tomorrow.

. . .

**31.** Give your heart to the trade you have learnt, and draw refreshment from it. Let the rest of your days be spent as one who has whole-heartedly committed his all to the gods, and is thenceforth no man's master or slave.

**32.** Think, let us say, of the times of Vespasian; and what do you see? Men and women busy marrying, bringing up children, sickening, dying, fighting, feasting, chaffering, farming, flattering, bragging, envying, scheming, calling down curses, grumbling at fate, loving,

hoarding, coveting thrones and dignities. Of all that life, not a trace survives today. Or come forward to the days of Trajan; again, it is the same; that life, too, has perished. Take a similar look at the records of other past ages and peoples; mark how one and all, after their short-lived strivings, passed away and were resolved into the elements. More especially, recall some who, within your own knowledge, have followed after vanities instead of contenting themselves with a resolute performance of the duties for which they were created. In such cases it is essential to remind ourselves that the pursuit of any object depends for its value upon the worth of the object pursued. If, then, you would avoid discouragement, never become unduly absorbed in things that are not of the first importance.

**33.** Expressions that were once current have gone out of use nowadays. Names, too, that were formerly household words are virtually archaisms today; Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, Dentatus; or a little later, Scipio and

Cato; Augustus too, and even Hadrian and Antoninus. All things fade into the storied past, and in a little while are shrouded in oblivion. Even to men whose lives were a blaze of glory this comes to pass; as for the rest, the breath is hardly out of them before, in Homer's words, they are 'lost to sight alike and hearsay'. What, after all, is immortal fame? An empty, hollow thing. To what, then, must we aspire? This, and this alone: the just thought, the unselfish act, the tongue that utters no falsehood, the temper that greets each passing event as something predestined, expected, and emanating from the One source and origin.

[From Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, tr. M. Staniforth (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1964) © Penguin Books: 1999/Cancopy]