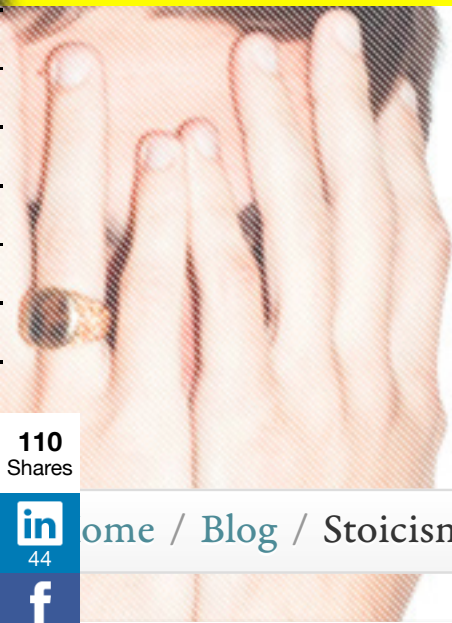




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# RYAN HOLIDAY

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September 17, 2014 — 41 Comments



## STOICISM: PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE



When most people think of “philosophy,” their eyes glaze over. It’s the last thing they want, let alone something they need.

But this, as you already know, is silly and naive.

Philosophy is not just about talking or lecturing, or even reading long, dense books. In fact, it is something men and women of action use—and have used throughout history—to solve their problems and achieve their greatest triumphs. Not in the classroom, but on the battlefield, in the Forum, and at court.

It was jotted down (and practiced) by slaves, poets, emperors, politicians and soldiers, as well as ordinary folks to help with their own problems and those of their friends, family and followers. This wisdom is still there, available to us.

Specifically, I am referring to [Stoicism](#), which, in my opinion, is the most [practical of all philosophies](#).

A brief synopsis on this particular school of Hellenistic philosophy: Stoicism was founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC, but was famously practiced by the likes of [Epictetus](#), Cato, [Seneca](#) and [Marcus Aurelius](#). The philosophy asserts that virtue (such as wisdom) is happiness and judgment be based on behavior, rather than words. That we don't control and cannot rely on external events, [only ourselves and our responses](#).

But at the very root of the thinking, there is a very simple, though not easy, way of living. Take obstacles in your life and [turn them into your advantage](#), control what you can and accept what you can't.

In the words of Epictetus:

“In life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, but the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find good and bad? In me, in my choices.”

Amazingly we still have access to these ideas, despite the fact that many of the greatest Stoics never wrote anything down for publication. Cato definitely didn't. Marcus Aurelius never intended for [Meditations](#) to be anything but personal. Seneca's letters were, well, letters and Epictetus' thoughts come to us by way of a note-taking student.

And so it was from their example, their *actions*, we find real philosophy.

Because other than their common study of the philosophy, the Stoics were all men of action—and I don't think this is a coincidence. Marcus Aurelius was emperor of the most powerful empire in the history of the world. Cato, the moral example for many philosophers, defended the Roman republic with Stoic bravery until his defiant death. Even [Epictetus](#), the lecturer, had no cushy tenure—he was a former slave.

And this shouldn't really be that surprising...

The modern day philosopher and writer Nassim Nicholas Taleb defines a Stoic as someone who, “transforms fear into prudence, pain into transformation, mistakes into initiation and desire into undertaking.”

Using this definition as a model we can see that throughout the centuries Stoicism has been a common thread though some of history's [great leaders](#). It has been practiced by Kings, presidents, artists, writers and entrepreneurs. Both historical and modern men illustrate Stoicism as a way of life.

Prussian King, Frederick the Great, was said to ride with [the works of the Stoics](#) in his saddlebags because

they could, in his words, “sustain you in misfortune”.

Meanwhile, Montaigne, the politician and essayist, had a line from Epictetus carved into the beam above the study in which he spent most of his time.

The founding fathers were also inspired by the philosophy. George Washington was introduced to Stoicism by his neighbors at age seventeen, and afterwards, put on a play about Cato to inspire his men in that dark winter at Valley Forge. Whereas Thomas Jefferson had a copy of Seneca on his nightstand when he died.

The economist Adam Smith’s theories on the interconnectedness of the world—capitalism—were significantly influenced by the Stoicism that he studied as a schoolboy, under a teacher who had translated Marcus Aurelius’ works.

The political thinker, John Stuart Mill, wrote of Marcus Aurelius and Stoicism in his famous treatise *On Liberty*, calling it “the highest ethical product of the ancient mind.”

But those influenced by the Stoics goes on...

Eugène Delacroix, the renowned French Romantic artist (known best for his painting *Liberty Leading the People*) was an ardent Stoic, referring to it as his “consoling religion.”

Toussaint Louverture, himself a former slave who challenged an emperor by leading the Haitian revolution, read and was deeply influenced by the works of Epictetus.

Theodore Roosevelt, after his presidency, spent eight months exploring (and nearly dying in) the unknown jungles of the Amazon, and of the eight books he brought on the journey, two were Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*.

Indeed, Teddy seems to represent the temperance and self control of the philosophy beautifully when he said, “What such a man needs is not courage but nerve control, cool headedness. This he can get only by practice”. Likewise he expressed the necessity of action advocated by the Stoics when he famously remarked,

“We must all wear out or rust out, everyone of us. My choice is to wear out”.

Today’s leaders are no different, with many finding their inspiration from the ancient texts. Bill Clinton rereads [Marcus Aurelius](#) every single year, while Wen Jiabao, the former prime minister of China, claims that *Meditations* is one of two books he travels with and has read it more than one hundred times over the course of his life.

You see, Stoicism—and philosophy—are not the domains of idle professors. They are the succor of the

successful, and the men and women of action. As Thoreau put it: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school...it is to solve some of the problems of life not only theoretically, but practically.”

The mantle is ours to pick up and carry and do with what we can.

*This column originally appeared on [Classical Wisdom Weekly](#). Comments can be seen there. For more on Stoicism visit [The Daily Stoic](#).*

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41 RESPONSES TO *STOICISM: PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY YOU CAN ACTUALLY USE*



**Chad Grills** *June 17, 2014 at 1:04 pm*

Great points, enjoyed the article. I'm introducing this philosophy to more Veterans as we speak. One of the main reasons I left the military is the absence of a mental and moral operating system across the board. But, I think thanks to books like *The Obstacle is the Way* we'll start to see a resurgence of stoicism amongst the military and Veterans.

[Reply](#)



**Ryan Holiday** *June 21, 2014 at 9:57 am*

You might like the book *Stoic Warriors*

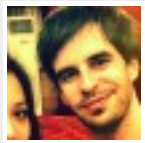
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**Mark** *June 17, 2014 at 10:28 pm*

Great article, I didn't realise so many though leaders were influenced by Stoicism. I really enjoyed *the obstacle is the way*. I'm reading the *Meditations* presently. I have never felt so calm at work & at home.

[Reply](#)

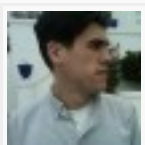


**Guill** *June 17, 2014 at 11:54 pm*

Heard about stoicism a couple of times now but haven't checked out yet. Any recommendation for a first approach? *Meditations* from Marcus Aurelius?

Thanks.

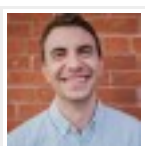
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**Ryan Holiday** *June 21, 2014 at 9:57 am*

Or my book!

[Reply](#)



**Chris** *July 3, 2014 at 2:45 pm*

I recently delved into Stoicism by reading Seneca's *Letters From A Stoic* which frankly is awesome.

P.S. I just saw that Aurelius statue at the Capitoline Museum!



[Reply](#)



**Ryan Holiday** *July 3, 2014 at 3:37 pm*

Yeah it's beautiful

[Reply](#)



**Mark Blasini** *June 19, 2014 at 7:31 am*

Very interesting perspective. I definitely agree that philosophy should be considered a life-practice, and not intellectual masturbation.

At the same time, I believe it is crucial to question the tools we use to put that practice into play, which is why critical thinking is very important in the practice of philosophy. If we fail to question the concepts that we use to communicate ideas and enact social procedures and institutions, then we may end up inadvertently creating and re-creating the same problems that have occurred throughout history.

Philosophy definitely starts with the individual, but I don't believe that it should end with him.

[Reply](#)



**João Alexandre** *June 22, 2014 at 7:29 am*

The article sums it pretty well your views that you put on the book as a summary of the reading list you have at the end of the book.

You mention having read different versions of Meditations and that you prefer Gregory Hays. Have you read Maxwell Staniforth 1964's translation? What did you thought of it?

[Reply](#)



**Justin** *June 23, 2014 at 4:45 pm*

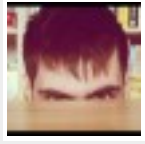
Hey Ryan,

this list of stoicism-influenced people is indeed impressive.

After reading The Meditations two times, i can definitely understand it though. They really contain lifechanging wisdom.

Thanks for opening eyes all around the world and giving Stoicism a modern “renaissance”.

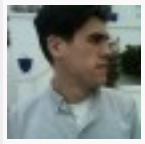
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**Stefano** *July 13, 2014 at 5:13 am*

Ryan, do you know if there is going to be an Italian translation for TOITW? I have heard a few friends in the last week talking about it. Also, do you need an Italian translation for GHM? 😊

[Reply](#)



**Ryan Holiday** *July 13, 2014 at 5:13 pm*

As soon as a publisher buys the rights!

[Reply](#)



**Marco Bronx** *May 11, 2016 at 11:24 am*

Good stuff Ryan. I also liked how Epictetus had a saying “pot and stone don’t belong together.”

By that he meant that something weak should not be placed against something stronger than itself, or it will break. Similarly, Seneca says hunger and thirst should be avoided because “weary men are quarrelsome.”

So there’s a balance needed between testing your strength and weaknesses and also practicing self-compassion. Stoicism is often remembered only for it’s toughness and strengthening your mind and body through austere measures but it’s forgotten how they also taught the importance of knowing your own weaknesses and supporting them. That way, your weaknesses won’t lead to thoughts and actions that stray from virtue.

Everyone is different so it’s not about austerity for the sake of austerity or self-punishment, but for the betterment of yourself in the service of others and society. It’s about starting where you are and knowing when to nurture yourself so that you can train better habits when the time comes for you to be tested.

I know a lot of influential pro-capitalist thinkers you mentioned studied Stoicism so I thought I should mention that Stoics would also be very approving of the ethical, compassionate side of economic policies where the

opportunity to help those in greater need is considered the highest of virtues.

Just a thought. 😊

[Reply](#)

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**Antonio Da Mota** *December 9, 2016 at 11:15 am*

What a great article Ryan. Love it. I am a big fan of stoicism myself and I wrote a guide on stoic techniques myself. I hope you guys find it useful.

Congrats Ryan for your last book on Stoicism, I am reading it right now.

<http://riseandgrindpodcast.com/stoic-techniques/>

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1. [Epictetus on How to Think, and Live](#) - July 30, 2014  
[...] can be summarized in a few sentences, as Ryan Holiday shows [...]
2. [7 Scientifically Supported Health Benefits of Cold Showers](#) - December 8, 2014  
[...] to look at things objectively. Nothing is inherently good or bad, unless you label it to be. Obstacles aren't roadblocks, but rather opportunities to change, improve, and grow [...]
3. [101 Motivational Quotes To Help You Get Through Finals](#) - December 10, 2014  
[...] converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the becomes the way." – Marcus [...]
4. [10 Lessons I Learned in 2014](#) - December 31, 2014  
[...] is inherently good or bad, unless you label it to be. Obstacles aren't roadblocks, but rather opportunities to change, improve, and grow [...]
5. [An Interview on Stoicism with Massimo Pigliucci | RyanHoliday.net](#) - March 4, 2015  
[...] the original texts such as Marcus Aurelius' Meditations or Seneca's On The Shortness of Life. Here are two quick introductions I've done on stoicism, as well as a TEDx talk, and of course, [...]
6. [Man Drowning In Email Before Honeymoon Pens Epic Autoresponse | Thought Catalog](#) - March 9, 2015  
[...] I don't fancy myself a philosopher, I've studied enough of the stoics to know how absurdly we overestimate not only the importance of most things that happen, but our [...]
7. [The Beginner's Guide to Happiness | The Blog of Eric M. Ruiz](#) - March 13, 2015  
[...] about Epictetus that I'll probably butcher but nonetheless share. Epictetus was one of the great Stoic teachers. At his academy he had one pupil who refuted Epictetus and asked "how am I supposed to [...]
8. [Help Along the Way | roorblog](#) - April 26, 2015  
[...] book about Stoic philosophy is driven by Marcus Aurelius' maxim that "the impediment to action advances action. [...]
9. [Tools for the Road Ahead |](#) - April 26, 2015  
[...] book about Stoic philosophy is driven by Marcus Aurelius' maxim that "the impediment to action

advances action. [...]

10. [Anything Can Have Meaning If It Changes You For The Better | Thought Catalog](#) - May 26, 2015  
[...] the infinitely elastic formula of Stoic philosophy: Everything is a chance to practice virtue—especially the situations we'd have rather not have [...]
11. [Successful People Read - Perot Report](#) - June 26, 2015  
[...] Roosevelt carried a dozen books with him on his perilous exploration of the River of Doubt (including the Stoics). Lincoln read everything he could get his hands on (often recording passages he liked on spare [...])
12. [Amor Fati: Learning To Love And Accept Everything That Happens | Thought Catalog](#) - July 20, 2015  
[...] The solution to all of this is not to fight it with incredible amounts of energy. As Epictetus put it:  
[...]
13. [42 Books That Will Make You A Better Person, Described In One Sentence | Thought Catalog](#) - October 30, 2015  
[...] Philosophy As a Way of Life by Pierre Hadot: If you think ancient philosophy was the academic pursuit of arcane knowledge, you're totally missing the point. [...]
14. [21 Stoic Life Hacks For #Stoicweek - How to do everything!](#) - November 5, 2015  
[...] In Stoic philosophy we have something special. Stoicism is not so much a 'philosophy'—as one might think of an academic discipline—but a practical guide for living. [...]
15. [Stoicismus: Praktická filosofie, kterou vážně můžete použít | Mimoškolu.cz](#) - December 16, 2015  
[...] Původní článek napsal Ryan Holiday. [...]
16. [The Best Article of My Career | RyanHoliday.net](#)  
[The Best Article of My Career - RyanHoliday.net](#) - January 5, 2016  
[...] what I expected when I wrote the book. When I pitched Portfolio—a business imprint—a book about an obscure school of ancient philosophy, athletes and celebrities were not who I had in mind. I was thinking business folks, everyday [...]
17. [The Obstacle Really Is The Way | Thought Catalog](#) - March 11, 2016  
[...] that it would also be shaping my understanding of the material I would ultimately write about. The Stoics say that “the impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the  
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18. [The Obstacle Really Is The Way celeb Newz | celeb Newz](#) - March 15, 2016  
[...] that it would also be moulding my bargain of a element we would eventually write about. The Stoics contend that “the snag to movement advances action. What stands in a approach becomes a [...]

19. [What a Day In the Life of an Entrepreneur Actually Looks Like | Adavow](#) - June 1, 2016  
[...] Holiday, author of “The Obstacle is the Way” best describes stoicism as a philosophical way of thinking (and acting on those thoughts) in a way that allows you to “...take obstacles in your life and [...]
20. [What a Day In the Life of an Entrepreneur Actually Looks LikeWhat a Day In the Life of an Entrepreneur Actually Looks Like | wealthmogul](#) - July 24, 2016  
[...] Holiday, author of “The Obstacle is the Way” best describes stoicism as a philosophical way of thinking (and acting on those thoughts) in a way that allows you to “...take obstacles in your life [...]
21. [Almost Too Wild & Tough: Three Dawns at Hardrock 100 - Andrea Works](#) - July 25, 2016  
[...] just so that I could be cold out in the mountains after dark, falling asleep on my feet. If the Stoics lived now, they would surely say, “first world [...]
22. [What a Day In the Life of an Entrepreneur Actually Looks Like – Startup MGZN](#) - December 24, 2016  
[...] Holiday, author of “The Obstacle is the Way” best describes stoicism as a philosophical way of thinking (and acting on those thoughts) in a way that allows you to “...take obstacles in your life and [...]
23. [herrington.io](#) - January 24, 2017  
[...] some nirvana guru or selling products people don't need. Instead it's a book about applying philosophy to real-life. This book will change how you approach every day, every problem, every challenge; clarifying the [...]
24. [4 Books That Will Increase Your Value Regardless of Your Profession – herrington.io](#) - January 24, 2017  
[...] some nirvana guru or selling products people don't need. Instead it's a book about applying philosophy to real-life. This book will change how you approach every day, every problem, every challenge; clarifying the [...]
25. [The Single Factor That Determines Your Success and Happiness In Life \(Hint: It's Not What You Think\) | Daniel Cerescu](#) - February 5, 2017  
[...] in case you're not familiar with Stoicism, this is an ancient philosophy that encourages us to live a virtuous life, in accordance with [...]
26. [THE UNDEFINED AND UNKNOWN](#) - March 2, 2017  
[...] you add years to your life. • Journaling: No matter how hard it is, it can be written down. • Stoicism: The ultimate practical [...]
27. [The Obstacle Is The Way – by Ryan Holiday \(Book review\) – Last Hope Strategy](#) - April 15, 2017  
[...] was the first book that I ever bought that was written by Ryan Holiday and it threw me into the world of the stoics and how they handled their trials and [...]

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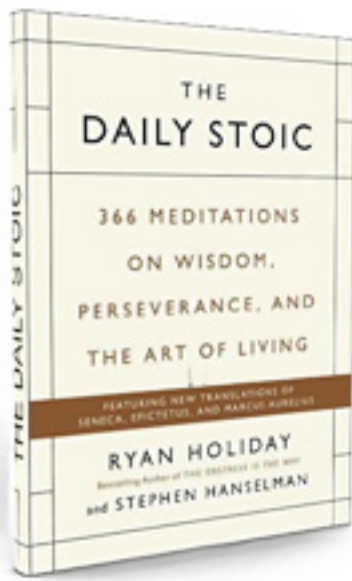
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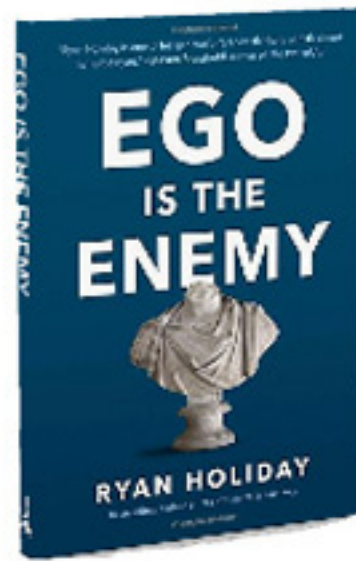
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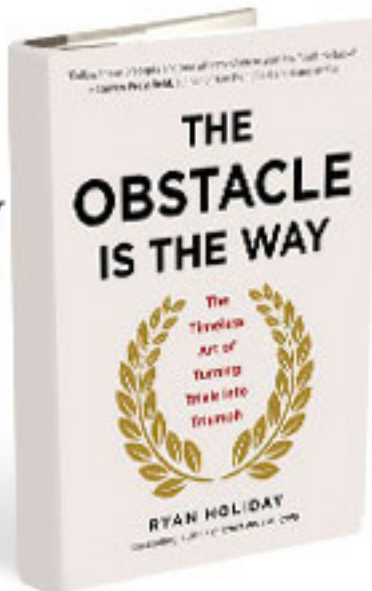
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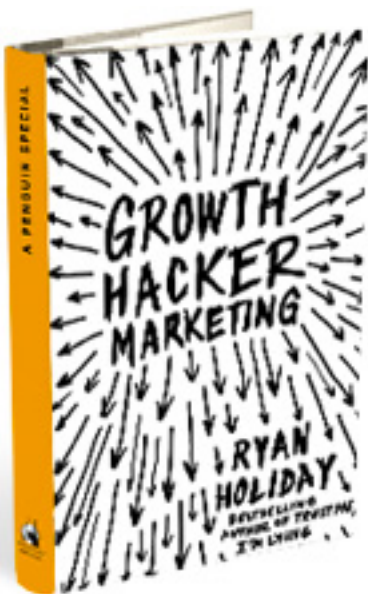
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