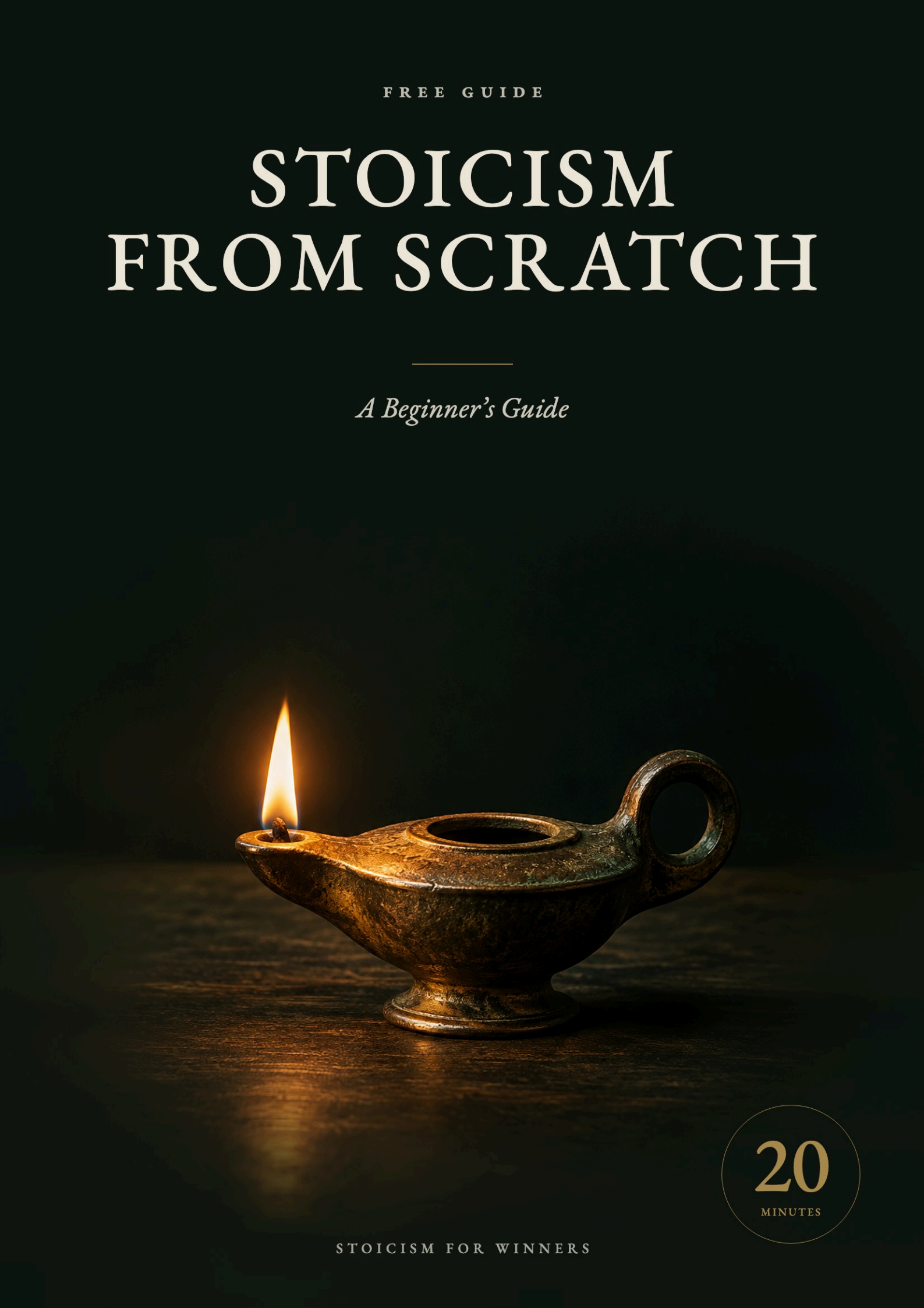
FREE GUIDE

STOICISM FROM SCRATCH

A Beginner's Guide



20 MINUTES

STOICISM FOR WINNERS

"Of the things that exist, some are up to us and others are not."

EPICTETUS, ENCHIRIDION, 1

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide takes twenty minutes to read. What it asks of you takes seven days.

You don't need to know anything about philosophy to begin. You don't need to read the classics before you practice, either: the Stoics wrote for busy people with jobs, families and problems, not for academics. Marcus Aurelius ran an empire. Seneca managed a fortune and advised a dangerous emperor. Epictetus had been a slave. All three wrote things they meant to use.

The guide has three parts. The first explains what Stoicism is and who its three great masters were. The second gives you the central tool, the dichotomy of control, and the four virtues that serve as a compass. The third is pure practice: five exercises to start tomorrow, the seven mistakes worth avoiding, and a seven-day plan to print.

Three recommendations

I **Read with a pencil in your hand.** When a sentence hits you, mark it. The ones you mark today will become your first Stoic notebook.

II **Do the dichotomy-of-control exercise today.** It takes five minutes. It's the difference between having read about Stoicism and having tried it.

III **Print the seven-day plan** (near the end) and put it where you'll see it every morning. What stays in sight gets done; what goes into a folder gets forgotten.

Personal development grounded in Stoic philosophy. It is not a substitute for help from a mental health professional. If you are going through something serious, find someone who can be there for you in person.

PART ONE

I

THE ESSENTIALS

WHAT STOICISM IS

A school born on a porch in Athens that taught emperors and slaves the same thing: how to govern themselves.

THE PORCH PEOPLE

Around 300 BC, a merchant named Zeno was shipwrecked, lost his cargo and ended up in Athens, reading philosophy in a bookshop.

That, at least, is how tradition tells the beginning. Zeno stayed in the city, studied with several teachers and began teaching on his own in a public place: the Painted Porch, the *Stoa Poikile*, a colonnade beside the marketplace. The name comes from that porch, the *stoa*. The Stoics were, quite literally, "the porch people."

The school lasted five centuries and crossed from Greece to Rome. What survives almost intact is its Roman period: Seneca's letters and essays, the lectures of Epictetus as written down by his student Arrian, and the private notes of Marcus Aurelius. Those are the three we'll read in this guide.

The central idea, in one line

Stoicism holds that a good life doesn't depend on what happens to you, but on how you respond to what happens to you. And that this response, unlike almost everything else, really is in your hands.

Everything else follows from that: the line between what is up to you and what isn't, the four virtues, the daily exercises. It isn't a theory to admire. It's training for your judgment, the way an athlete trains the body.

> *"Philosophy is found not in words, but in deeds."*
>
> SENECA, LETTERS TO LUCILIUS, 16, 3

WHAT IT ISN'T (AND WHAT IT IS)

Today the word "stoic" describes someone who endures without complaining and doesn't show what he feels. There is some truth in that picture and a lot of error. It's worth clearing up before you start, because whoever comes to Stoicism with that idea ends up using it badly.

What Stoicism is not

- **It isn't coldness.** The Stoics never asked anyone to stop feeling. They knew that fear, anger or sadness arrive on their own, like a blow. What they trained was what comes next: whether that blow turns into a decision.
- **It isn't resignation.** Accepting what isn't up to you doesn't mean sitting on your hands. It means you stop spending strength on what you can't change so you can put all of it into what you can. Marcus Aurelius governed and spent years on campaign; Seneca wrote, managed and advised. They were not passive men.
- **It isn't suffering in silence.** A Stoic speaks up, sets limits, corrects and defends himself. What he doesn't do is speak from anger, or act to be applauded.
- **It isn't a religion or a club.** You don't have to believe anything to practice it, or ask anyone's permission. You have to do the exercises.

What it is

- **A method for separating** what is up to you from what isn't, and acting only on the first.
- **A four-point compass** (wisdom, justice, courage and temperance) for deciding what to do when it isn't clear.
- **A set of daily practices**: preparing the morning, reviewing the night, pausing before you react, remembering that life ends.

In short: Stoicism doesn't promise you a life without problems. It promises that no problem will make your decisions for you.

AD 121–180 · EMPEROR OF ROME

MARCUS AURELIUS

He was the most powerful man of his time, and even so he wrote to himself so as not to lose his way. He ruled from 161 until his death, facing wars on the Danube frontier, a plague that emptied cities and the betrayal of one of his most trusted generals.

Over those years he filled twelve books with private notes he never meant to publish. We know them today as the *Meditations*, though the Greek title they carry is usually rendered "To Himself." They are not a treatise: they are the notes of a man correcting himself every night.

> *"Whenever you like, you can withdraw into yourself. Nowhere does a man retreat to greater quiet or more freedom from trouble than into his own soul."*
>
> MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS, IV, 3

The lesson

You don't need to head for the mountains to find calm. Calm is available right where you are, if you learn to return to it. Marcus Aurelius didn't look for it outside: he trained it inside, in the middle of a war.

Where to start reading him: *Meditations*, Books II and IV. Read them slowly, one note a day.

C. 4 BC – AD 65 · WRITER, SENATOR AND ADVISER

SENECA

Born in Córdoba, in Hispania, he became one of the richest and most influential men in Rome. He was exiled to Corsica, came back, and ended up as tutor and adviser to the young Nero. When Nero turned on him, he ordered Seneca to take his own life, and Seneca did so with a composure his contemporaries recorded in writing.

He is the easiest Stoic to read. His *Letters to Lucilius*, one hundred and twenty-four letters to a friend, deal with time, fear, friendship, money and death with a clarity that hasn't aged.

> *"Claim your right to yourself. The time that until now was being taken from you, stolen from you or simply slipping away, gather it up and guard it."*
>
> SENECA, LETTERS TO LUCILIUS, 1, 1

The lesson

The resource you waste most isn't money: it's time, because you don't see it go. Seneca asks you to count it the way you count what you spend. The man who knows where his day goes starts to take command of his life.

Where to start reading him: *Letters to Lucilius* 1, 2, 7 and 13, and the essay *On the Shortness of Life*.

C. AD 50 – C. 135 · TEACHER, ONCE A SLAVE

EPICTETUS

He was born a slave in Hierapolis, in Phrygia, and walked with a limp. His master allowed him to study with the Stoic Musonius Rufus; once free, he taught in Rome until the emperor Domitian banished the philosophers, and then founded a school in Nicopolis, in Greece.

He wrote nothing. What we have are his lectures, written down by his student Arrian: the *Discourses* and a short digest, the *Enchiridion*, which means "something kept at hand," like a dagger or a handbook. He is the most direct of the three.

> *"It is not things that disturb people, but their judgments about things."*
>
> EPICTETUS, ENCHIRIDION, 5

The lesson

Between what happens and what you feel there is a judgment, a sentence you say to yourself. You almost never notice it, but it's the sentence that wounds you. Epictetus tells how someone stole his iron lamp, and how he thought: the thief paid dearly for it, because for a lamp he became a thief (*Discourses*, I, 18). The fact was the same; the judgment changed everything.

Where to start reading him: The whole *Enchiridion*. Fifty-three short chapters; you can read it in an afternoon.

II

THE TOOL

WHAT IS UP TO YOU

The idea that opens Epictetus's handbook, and the four questions that serve as a compass.

THE DICHOTOMY OF CONTROL

If you keep only one idea from this guide, make it this one. Epictetus's Enchiridion opens with it, without preamble:

> *"Of the things that exist, some are up to us and others are not. Up to us are judgment, impulse, desire and aversion; in a word, everything that is our own doing. Not up to us are the body, property, reputation and office; in a word, everything that is not our own doing."*
>
> EPICTETUS, ENCHIRIDION, 1

Look at the second list: your body, your money, what people think of you, your position. Epictetus doesn't say they don't matter. He says they aren't entirely up to you. You can look after your health and still fall ill, work well and lose your job, be honest and still be talked about.

What is up to you is a shorter list, but it's truly yours: what you judge, what you decide, what you pursue and what you refuse. Your effort, your word, your response.

Why it changes everything

Almost all useless suffering comes from mixing up the two lists. You agonize over what your boss thinks, which is on the second list, and neglect your work, which is on the first. News you can't change keeps you up at night, and you skip the call you could make.

The Stoic does the opposite: he puts all his strength into the first list and lets go of the second. Not out of indifference, but out of economy. A man's energy is limited, and whatever he spends on what isn't his, he takes from what is.

A useful nuance: many things are only partly up to you. You don't control the outcome of a job interview; you control how you prepare and answer. There, the Stoic sets his goal on his own part: "prepare well for the interview," not "get the job."

THE TWO COLUMNS

Take whatever is weighing on you most this week. Write it at the top, in one line. Then sort everything connected to it into two columns. On the left, what is up to you: what you can decide, say or do. On the right, what isn't: what other people do, what already happened, what hasn't happened yet.

WHAT WEIGHS ON ME MOST THIS WEEK

UP TO ME	NOT UP TO ME

Circle one single thing in the left column and do it today. To the right column, say quietly: "This isn't mine." Repeat the exercise whenever something keeps you up at night.

THE FOUR VIRTUES

Knowing what is up to you isn't enough: you also have to know what to do with it. To decide, the Stoics used four virtues they inherited from Greek philosophy. They aren't distant ideals: they are four questions you can ask yourself before any decision.

Seeing things as they are

WISDOM

Telling what is good, what is bad and what is indifferent; separating the fact from the judgment.

The question: What is really going on here, without what my fear or my pride adds?

Giving each his due

JUSTICE

Treating others well, keeping your word, acting for the common good and not only your own.

The question: What do I owe the other person here?

Doing what's right even when it costs

COURAGE

Facing fear, pain, discomfort or what people will say when duty calls for it.

The question: What would I do if I weren't afraid?

The right measure

TEMPERANCE

Governing your impulses: eating, spending, speaking, getting angry and wanting in the right measure.

The question: Is this what I need, or what the impulse is asking for?

Marcus Aurelius names them together when he asks what he could find in life better than "justice, truth, self-control, courage" (*Meditations*, III, 6). For the Stoics, these four are the only true good: the only thing no one can take from you, and that you can always exercise, whatever happens outside.

Use them as a compass. When you don't know what to do, ask yourself the four questions. Almost always, one of them shows you the way.

III

THE PRACTICE

FIVE PRACTICES TO START TOMORROW

Each one takes between one and five minutes. Don't do them all at once: the seven-day plan introduces them one at a time.

I
THE MORNING REHEARSAL

> *"At daybreak, say to yourself: today I will meet a meddler, an ingrate, a bully, a traitor, an envious man, an unsociable one."*
>
> MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS, II, 1

It sounds pessimistic, but it's the opposite. Marcus Aurelius wasn't preparing to suffer: he was preparing not to be surprised. The man who leaves home expecting everything to go well falls apart at the first stumble. The man who has already thought about the stumble takes it calmly, because he saw it coming.

How to do it

I Before you look at your phone, sit on the edge of the bed or by a window.

II Run through your day: who will you see? What could go wrong?

III For each thing, decide in one sentence how you'll respond. "If he interrupts me in the meeting, I'll wait and pick up again calmly."

The common mistake: Turning it into a list of disasters. The point isn't to imagine the worst for half an hour, but to anticipate the likely and choose your response.

WRITE IT DOWN *Tomorrow, before the phone: what could go wrong, and how I'll respond.*

II

THE PAUSE BEFORE YOU REACT

> *"Wait for me a little, impression. Let me see who you are and what you are about; let me put you to the test."*
>
> EPICTETUS, DISCOURSES, II, 18

Epictetus used the word "impression" for the first thing that shows up in your mind in front of something: the insult that burns, the temptation that calls, the fear that grips. His advice isn't to deny it, but to make it wait. In those seconds of waiting it is decided whether the impression governs you or you govern it.

How to do it

I Pick a braking phrase, always the same one: "Not yet."

II When you feel the hit (heat in your face, the urge to answer back, the itch to buy), say it to yourself.

III Count ten breaths before you speak or act. Then decide.

The common mistake: Thinking the pause means swallowing what you feel. The pause doesn't cancel your response: it improves it. You may still say the same thing, but no longer on impulse.

WRITE IT DOWN *My braking phrase, and the moment today when I used it (or should have).*

III
NEGATIVE VISUALIZATION

> *"If you kiss your child or your wife, tell yourself that you are kissing a human being; then, if one of them dies, you will not be shaken."*
>
> EPICTETUS, ENCHIRIDION, 3

It sounds harsh, and it is. But the effect is the opposite of coldness. Remembering that what you love isn't forever doesn't push you away from it: it makes you value it today. The Stoics practiced this exercise so as to take nothing for granted, and so that loss, if it came, wouldn't find them unprepared.

How to do it

I Pick something you take for granted: your health, your job, a person.

II For a moment, without drama, imagine your life without it.

III Come back to the present and do something concrete to take care of it today: a phone call, a hug, an hour of good work.

The common mistake: Staying stuck in the imagined loss. The exercise lasts two minutes and always ends in gratitude and an action.

WRITE IT DOWN *What I take for granted, and what I'll do today to take care of it.*

IV
THE EVENING REVIEW

> *"I examine my whole day and go back over what I did and said; I hide nothing from myself, I pass over nothing."*
>
> SENECA, ON ANGER, III, 36

Seneca says he learned this habit from the philosopher Sextius, who asked himself every night which bad habit he had cured that day, which vice he had resisted, in what way he was better. Seneca adopted it: once the lamp was out and his wife, who knew the habit by then, had fallen silent, he went over his day like a fair judge.

How to do it

I With a notebook, answer three questions: What did I do well today? Where did I fall short? What did I leave undone?

II For each failure, write what you'll do differently next time. One line.

III Close the notebook. What's written down no longer needs to circle in your head.

The common mistake: Turning it into a court that only convicts. Seneca spoke to himself harshly, but he also forgave himself: "This time I'll let it go; don't do it again."

WRITE IT DOWN *Tonight: what I did well, where I fell short, what I left undone.*

V
MEMENTO MORI

> *"Do not live as if you had ten thousand years ahead of you. Death hangs over you. While you live, while you still can, become good."*
>
> MARCUS AURELIUS, MEDITATIONS, IV, 17

"Remember that you will die." It isn't a line to bring you down, but to wake you up. The man who remembers that his time is limited stops postponing what matters, drops small grudges and says what he has to say. Seneca put it another way elsewhere: it isn't that we have little time, but that we waste a great deal of it (*On the Shortness of Life*, 1).

How to do it

I Pick a fixed moment in the day: washing your hands, shutting down your computer.

II Ask yourself: if this were my last year, would I keep doing what I'm doing today?

III If the answer is no about something specific, change one single thing this week.

The common mistake: Using it as an excuse for excess ("life is short, enjoy it"). For the Stoic, the shortness of life is a reason to live better, not to live without measure.

WRITE IT DOWN *If this were my last year, the one thing I'd change this week.*

SEVEN BEGINNER'S MISTAKES

1 **Reading a lot and practicing little.** It's the most common mistake and the most comfortable one. Reading about Stoicism feels like progress, but Stoicism isn't in books: it's in what you do when someone provokes you. One page read and practiced is worth more than ten books underlined.

2 **Using Stoicism to repress.** Swallowing your anger or sadness and calling it "being stoic" is a misunderstanding. The Stoics acknowledged the blow; what they trained was the response. If something hurts, name it first. Then decide what to do.

3 **Using it to judge others.** Epictetus warned about this: the man who is making progress blames no one, accuses no one (*Enchiridion*, 48). Stoicism is a mirror, not a magnifying glass. You apply it to yourself.

4 **Wanting everything on day one.** Five practices, four virtues, three masters. If you try everything at once, by Thursday nothing is left. Start with one practice, hold it for a week, then add the next.

5 **Confusing acceptance with passivity.** Accepting what isn't up to you doesn't mean you stop acting. It means acting harder on what is. The man who accepts that he can't control the weather still carries an umbrella.

6 **Collecting quotes.** Stoic quotes are everywhere, and many are made up. A quote without a source isn't from a Stoic; a sourced quote you don't apply won't help you either. Better three verified quotes you know by heart and use than three hundred saved ones.

7 **Quitting at the first slip.** You will blow up, put things off, overspend. The Stoics slipped too: that's why they did the evening review. A slip isn't the end of the training; it's part of it. The rule is simple: never miss two days in a row.

HOW TO TELL YOU'RE PROGRESSING

How do you know if you're making progress? Epictetus left a list of signs near the end of the *Enchiridion*. It doesn't measure how much you know, but how you live:

> *"Signs of one who is making progress: he censures no one, praises no one, blames no one, accuses no one; he says nothing about himself as though he were somebody or knew something."*
>
> EPICTETUS, ENCHIRIDION, 48

Six signs for your own review

- [ ] You still get angry, but you answer later and better.
- [ ] You worry less about what people think of you and more about what you do.
- [ ] You can spend some time alone, without a screen, without discomfort.
- [ ] When something goes wrong, your first question is "What is up to me?" and not "Whose fault is it?"
- [ ] You keep the promises you make to yourself, even small ones.
- [ ] You talk about Stoicism less and practice it more.

Don't expect to feel a big change in a week. Stoic progress is like an athlete's: you don't notice it from one day to the next, but one day you realize you're lifting what you couldn't before.

YOUR SEVEN-DAY PLAN

One practice a day. Check it off only if you did it. Put this sheet where you'll see it every morning.

DAY 1	**The dichotomy of control** Do the two-column exercise with what weighs on you most. Act on one thing in the left column.	☐
DAY 2	**The morning rehearsal** Before the phone, three minutes: what could go wrong today, and how you'll respond.	☐
DAY 3	**The pause** Use your braking phrase ("Not yet") at least once. Write down when.	☐
DAY 4	**Negative visualization** Two minutes with something you take for granted. End with an action to take care of it.	☐
DAY 5	**The four virtues** Facing a decision today, ask yourself the four questions. Note which one showed you the way.	☐
DAY 6	**Memento mori** If this were your last year, what would you change? Change one single thing this week.	☐
DAY 7	**The review** Five minutes: Which practice worked? Which didn't? Which one do you carry into next week?	☐

Do the evening review on all seven days as well: three questions, five minutes, before you sleep.

I STARTED ON _____

THE PRACTICE I'M KEEPING _____

THE BOOKS, ONE AT A TIME

You don't need to read them all. Start with the first and come back to this list when you finish it.

Epictetus, *Enchiridion*. The handbook. Fifty-three short chapters; the best way in. Robin Hard's translation (Oxford World's Classics, in *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*) is a sound choice.

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. Twelve books of private notes. Read one a day, not straight through. Gregory Hays's translation (Modern Library) reads like it was written today.

Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*. One hundred and twenty-four letters to a friend. Start with 1, 2, 7 and 13. *Letters from a Stoic* (Penguin Classics) is a good selection; Graver and Long's *Letters on Ethics* (University of Chicago Press) has them all.

Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*. A short essay on time and how we lose it. Any modern translation will do.

Epictetus, *Discourses*. The full lectures, as Arrian wrote them down. For when the *Enchiridion* is no longer enough.

Every quote in this guide is our own translation of the passage cited, checked against work and number. If you come across a line attributed to a Stoic with no work or passage, be suspicious: many of the ones circulating online were never written by them.

YOUR NEXT STEP

If this guide helped, you already have the essentials: one central idea, four questions and five practices.

If you want to turn it into a system, with a reading, an exercise and a log for every day, there is a complete path:

THE STOIC CODE

21 days with Marcus Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus: a short reading, an exercise and a log for each day, so the dichotomy of control becomes a habit.

stoiccode.netlify.app

And if you'd rather keep going on your own, the seven-day plan in this guide is a good start. What matters is to begin.