

Marcus Aurelius
Selections from *Meditations*

Marcus Aurelius (c. 121-180) ruled the Roman empire from 161 until his death, ruling jointly with Lucius Verus until Verus' death in 169. He spent a good part of his rule waging war against the empire's enemies, first the Parthians in the east, and then the Germans in the west. He is considered one of the last "good emperors." After his death, rule passed to his son, Commodus, whose rule was marked by scandal and ineffectual leadership. Marcus, as an old man, and Commodus, are depicted in the movie, *Gladiator*.

Marcus was a follower of the Greek Stoic philosopher Zeno, who taught that we must live naturally, rise above the emotions, and faithfully fulfill the duties of our station in life. See the accompanying section on [What is the Best Way to Live](#). His *Meditations* are considered the epitome of the Stoic approach to life, still relevant today. Translated by George Long (1800-1879).

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

Book Two

1. Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, the arrogant, the deceitful, the envious, and the unsocial. All these things happen to these by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I, who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, because he is kin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but he participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity. Thus I cannot be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him, for we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another, then, is contrary to nature, and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away.

5. Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, and do what comes to hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice. Give yourself relief from all other thoughts. You will gain this relief if you do every act of your life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to you. See how few the things, which, if a man lays hold of, he is able to live a life which flows quietly, like the existence of the gods; but observe these counsels, and the gods will require nothing more.

7. Do outward cares distract you? Give yourself time to learn something new and good, and cease to be whirled around. But you must also avoid being carried about the other way. For those too are triflers who weary themselves in life by their activity, and yet have no object to which to direct every movement, and, in a word, all their thoughts.

11. Since it is possible that you may depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly. But to go away from among men, if there are gods, is not a thing to be afraid of, for the gods will not involve you in evil; but if indeed they do not exist, or if they have no concern about human affairs, what is it to me to live in a universe devoid of gods or devoid of

Providence? But in truth they do exist, and they do care for human things, and they have put all the means in man's power to enable him not to fall into real evils. And as to the rest, if there was anything evil, they would have provided for this also, that it should be altogether in a man's power not to fall into it. Now that which does not make a man worse, how can it make a man's life worse? But neither through ignorance, nor having the knowledge, but not the power to guard against or correct these things, is it possible that the nature of the universe has overlooked them; nor is it possible that it has made so great a mistake, either through want of power or want of skill, that good and evil should happen indiscriminately to the good and the bad. But death certainly, and life, honor and dishonor, pain and pleasure, all these things equally happen to good men and bad, being things which make us neither better nor worse. Therefore, they are neither good nor evil.

17. Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgement. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapor, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion. What then is that which is able to conduct a man? One thing and only one, philosophy. But this consists in keeping the daemon within a man free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy, not feeling the need of another man's doing or not doing anything; and besides, accepting all that happens, and all that is allotted, as coming from thence, wherever it is, from whence he himself came; and, finally, waiting for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than a dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded. But if there is no harm to the elements themselves in each continually changing into another, why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements? For it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature.

Book III

5. Labor not unwillingly, nor without regard to the common interest, nor without due consideration, nor with distraction; do not let studied ornament set off your thoughts, and be not either a man of many words, or busy about too many things. And further, let the deity which is in you be the guardian of a living being, manly and of ripe age, a statesman, and a Roman, and a ruler, who has taken his post like a man waiting for the signal which summons him from life, ready to go, whose worth needs neither his own nor any man's testimony. Be cheerful also, and seek not external help nor the tranquility which others give. A man must stand erect, not be kept erect by others.

16. Body, soul, mind: to the body belong sensations, to the soul appetites, to the mind principles. To receive impressions of things by means of sense belongs even to animals; to be pulled by the strings of desire belongs both to wild beasts and to men, to a Phalaris [ruler of Agrigentum in Sicily, known for his cruelty], to a Nero. And to have the intelligence that guides us to the things which appear suitable belongs also to those who do not believe in the gods, to those who betray their country, and to those who do impure deeds when they have shut their doors. If then everything else is common to all those I have mentioned, there remains that which is peculiar to the good man: to be pleased and content with what happens and with the thread which is spun for him; not to defile the divinity which is planted in his breast, nor disturb it by a crowd of images, but to

preserve it tranquilly, following it obediently as a god, neither saying anything contrary to the truth, nor doing anything contrary to justice. And if all men refuse to believe that he lives a simple, modest, and contented life, he is neither angry with any of them, nor does he deviate from the way which leads to the end of life, to which a man ought to come pure, tranquil, ready to depart, and without any compulsion, perfectly reconciled to his lot.

Book IV

3. Men seek retreats for themselves, in houses in the country, on sea-shores, and on mountains; and you too desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in your power, whenever you choose, to retire into yourself. For nowhere, either with more quiet or more freedom from trouble, does a man retire than into his own soul, particularly when he has within him such thoughts that by looking into them he is immediately in perfect tranquility; and I affirm that tranquility is nothing else than the good ordering of the mind. Constantly, then, give to yourself this retreat, and renew yourself; and let your principles be brief and fundamental, which, as soon as you recur to them, will be sufficient to cleanse the soul completely, and to send you back free from all discontent with the things to which you must return.

For with what are you discontented? With the badness of men? Recall to mind that rational animals exist for one another, and that to endure is a part of justice, and that men do wrong involuntarily; remember how many already—after mutual enmity, suspicion, hatred, and fighting—have been stretched dead, reduced to ashes, and be quiet at last. But perhaps you are dissatisfied with what has been given to you by the universe? Remember this alternative: either there is providence or atoms, the fortuitous concurrence of things; or remember the arguments by which it has been proved that the world is a kind of political community, and be quiet at last. But perhaps corporeal things will still trouble you. Consider then further that the mind mingles not with the breath, whether moving gently or violently, when it has once drawn itself apart and discovered its own power, and think also of all you have heard and assented to about pain and pleasure, and be quiet at last.

But perhaps the desire of the thing called fame will torment you. See how soon everything is forgotten, and look at the chaos of infinite time on each side of the present, and the emptiness of applause, and the changeableness and want of judgement in those who pretend to give praise, and the narrowness of the time within which it is circumscribed, and be quiet at last. For the whole earth is a point, and how small a part of it is this your dwelling, and how few are there in it with you, and what kind of people are they who will praise you.

Remember to retire into the small territory of self, and above all do not distract or strain yourself, but be free and look at things as a man, as a human being, as a citizen, as a mortal. But among the things ready to hand to which you can turn, let there be these, which are two: One is that things do not touch the soul, for they are external and remain immovable; our perturbations come only from the opinion which is within. The other is that all these things which you worry about change immediately, and will no longer be; constantly bear in mind how many of these changes you have already witnessed. The universe is change; life is what you make of it.

35. Everything is only for a day, both that which remembers and that which is remembered.

43. Time is like a river made up of all the events that happen, and it is sometimes a violent stream; but as soon as a thing has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and this too will be carried away.

Book V

6. One man, when he has done a service to another, is ready to set it down to his account as a favor conferred. Another is not ready to do this, but still in his own mind he thinks of the man as his debtor, and he knows what he has done. A third in a manner does not even know what he has done, but he is like a vine which has produced grapes, and seeks for nothing more after it has once produced its proper fruit. As a horse when he has run, a dog when he has tracked the game, a bee when it has made the honey, so a man when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act, as a vine goes on to produce again the grapes in season. . . .

10. As to truth, things are so obscure that they have seemed to philosophers, not a few, nor those common philosophers, altogether unintelligible; even to the Stoics themselves they seem difficult to understand. And all our assent is changeable; for where is the man who never changes? Carry your thoughts then to the objects themselves, and consider how short-lived they are and worthless; they may even be in the possession of a filthy wretch or a whore or a robber. Then turn to the morals of those who live with you, and sometimes it is hardly possible to endure even the most agreeable of them, to say nothing of a man being hardly able to endure himself. In such darkness then, and dirt, and in so constant a flux both of substance and time and motion and things moved, what is there worth being highly prized, or even an object of serious pursuit? I cannot imagine. But on the contrary, it is a man's duty to comfort himself, and to wait for the natural dissolution and not to be vexed at the delay, but to rest in these principles only: the one, that nothing will happen to me which is not conformable to the nature of the universe; and the other, that it is in my power never to act contrary to my god and divine spirit, for there is no man who can compel me to this.

24. Think of substance, of which you have a very small portion, and of time, of which a short and indivisible interval has been assigned to you; and of that which is fixed by destiny, and how small a part of it you are.

Book VI

10. The universe is either a confusion, a random mixture and dispersion of things, or it is unity and order of providence. If it is the former, why do I desire to survive in a fortuitous combination of things and in such a disorder? And why do I care about anything else than how I shall at last become earth? Why am I disturbed, for the dispersion of my elements will happen whatever I do. But if the other supposition is true, I am firm, and I trust in him who governs.

18. How strangely men act! They will not praise those who are living at the same time as themselves; yet to be praised themselves by posterity, by those whom they have never seen or ever will see, this they set much value on. But this is very much the same as if you should be grieved because those who have lived before you did not praise you.

Book VII

3. The idle pleasures of the passing show: plays on the stage, flocks of sheep, herds, exercises with spears, a bone cast to little dogs, a bit of bread into fish-ponds, laborings of ants and burden-carrying, runnings about of frightened little mice, puppets pulled by strings—these are all alike. It is your duty, then, in the midst of such things to show good humor and not a proud air; to understand that every man is worth just so much as the things about which he busies himself.

9. All things are interwoven with one another, and the bond is holy; there is hardly anything unconnected to any other thing. For things are coordinated, and they combine to form the same universe (order). For there is one universe made up of all things, and one God who pervades all things, and one substance, and one law, one common reason in all intelligent animals, and one truth—if indeed there is also one perfection for all animals of the same kind, who share the same reason.

55. Look not around to discover the principles other men live by, but look instead directly at nature, both at the nature that surrounds you, through the things which happen to you, and at your own nature, through the actions which you take. Every being ought to do that which is according to its nature; all other things have been constituted for the sake of rational beings, just as among non-rational beings the inferior are for the sake of the superior. But rational beings are for the sake of one another. The first principle, then, in man's nature is his social obligations to others of his kind. And the second is not to yield to the impulses of the body, for it is the peculiar nature of the rational and intelligent being to control itself, and never be overpowered either by the motion of the senses or the appetites, for both are animal. The intelligent being claims superiority and does not permit itself to be overpowered by the others, and with good reason, for it is formed by nature to use all of them. The third principle of the rational nature is to be free from self-delusion and deception. Let then reason hold fast to these three principles and go straight forward, and it will fulfill its nature.

59. Look within. There is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up if you will only dig.

61. The art of living is more like the wrestler's art than the dancer's in that it should stand ready and firm to meet onsets, which are sudden and unexpected.

Book VIII

51. Do not be sluggish in your actions, nor without method in your conversation, nor wander in your thoughts, nor let there be in your soul inward conflict, nor be outwardly effusive, nor in life too busy to have leisure. Suppose that men kill you, cut you into pieces, curse you. What can these things do to prevent your mind from remaining pure, wise, sober, and just? For instance, if a man should stand by a limpid, pure spring and curse it, the spring never ceases sending up pure water; and if he should cast clay into it, or filth, it will speedily disperse them and wash them out, and it will not be at all polluted. How then can you possess such a perpetual fountain? By maintaining your composure every hour, by being content, simple, and modest.

Book IX

3. Do not despise death, but be well content with it, since this too is one of those things which nature wills. For such as it is to be young and to grow old, and to increase and to reach maturity, and to have teeth and beard and grey hairs, and to beget, and to be pregnant and to bring forth, and all the other natural operations which the seasons of your life bring, such also is dissolution. This, then, is consistent with the character of a reflecting man, to be neither careless nor impatient nor contemptuous with respect to death, but to wait for it as one of the operations of nature. As one now waits for the time when the child shall come out of his wife's womb, so be ready for the time when your soul shall fall out of this envelope. But if you require also a vulgar kind of comfort which shall reach your heart, you will be more reconciled to death by observing the objects from which you are going to be removed, and the morals of those with whom your soul will no longer be mingled. For it is no way right to be offended with men, but it is your duty to care for them and to bear with them gently; and yet to remember that your departure will be not from men who have the same principles as yourself. For this is the only thing, if there be any, which could draw us the contrary way and attach us to life: to be permitted to live with those who have the same principles as ourselves. But now you see how great is the trouble arising from the discordance of those who live together, so that you may say, "Come quick, O death, lest perchance I, too, should forget myself."

39. Either all things proceed from one intelligent source and come together as in one body, and the part ought not to find fault with what is done for the benefit of the whole; or there are only atoms, and nothing else but mixture and dispersion. Why, then, are you disturbed? Say to the ruling faculty, "Are you dead, are you corrupted, are you playing the hypocrite, are you become a beast, do you herd and feed with the rest?"

40. Either the gods have no power or they have power. If, then, they have no power, why do you pray to them? But if they have power, why do you not pray for them to give you the faculty of not fearing any of the things which you fear, or of not desiring any of the things which you desire, or not being pained at anything, rather than pray that any of these things should not happen? For certainly if the gods can co-operate with men, they can co-operate for these purposes. But perhaps you will say, the gods have placed them in your power. Well, then, is it not better to use what is in your power like a free man than to desire in a slavish and abject way what is not in your power? And who has told you that the gods do not aid us even in the things which are in our power? Begin, then, to pray for such things, and you will see. One man prays thus: "How shall I be able to lie with that woman?" Do you pray thus: "How shall I not desire to lie with her?" Another prays thus: "How shall I be released from this?" Another prays: "How shall I not desire to be released?" Another thus: "How shall I not lose my little son?" You thus: "How shall I not be afraid to lose him?" In fine, turn thy prayers this way, and see what comes.

Book X

15. Short is the little which remains to you of life. Live as on a mountain. For it makes no difference whether a man lives there or here, if he lives everywhere in the world as in a city. Let men see, let

them know a real man who lives according to nature. If they cannot endure him, let them kill him. For that is better than to live thus as men do.

25. He who flies from his master is a runaway; but the law is a master, and he who breaks the law is a runaway. And he also who is grieved or angry or afraid, is dissatisfied because something has been or is or shall be of the things which are appointed by him who rules all things, and He is Law, and assigns to every man what is fit. He then who fears or is grieved or is angry is a runaway.

Book XI

1. These are the properties of the rational soul: it sees itself, analyses itself, and makes itself such as it chooses; the fruit that it bears itself it enjoys, for the fruits of plants—and those in animals that correspond to fruit—others enjoy, but it obtains its own end, wherever the limit of life may be fixed. Not as in a dance and in a play and in such like things, where the whole action is incomplete if anything cuts it short; but in every part and wherever it may be stopped, it makes what has been set before it full and complete, so that it can say, I have what is my own. And further, it traverses the whole universe, and the surrounding vacuum, and surveys its form, and it extends itself into the infinity of time, and embraces and comprehends the periodical renovation of all things, and it comprehends that those who come after us will see nothing new, nor have those before us seen anything more, but in a manner he who is forty years old, if he has any understanding at all, has seen, by virtue of the uniformity that prevails, all things which have been and all that will be. This too is a property of the rational soul, love of one's neighbor, and truth and modesty, and to value nothing more than itself, which is also the property of Law. Thus then right reason differs not at all from the reason of justice.

Book XII

1. All those things which you wish to obtain by a circuitous road you can have now, if you do not refuse them to yourself. And this means, if you will take no notice at all of the past, and trust the future to providence, you can direct the present to piety and justice. Conformable to piety, you may be content with the lot which is assigned to you, for nature designed it for you and you for it. Conformable to justice, you should always speak the truth freely and without disguise, and do the things which are agreeable to law and according to the worth of each. And let not another man's wickedness hinder you, nor his opinion nor voice, nor yet the sensations of the poor flesh which has grown about you; for the passive part will look to this. If then, whenever the time comes when you will be near to your departure, neglecting everything else you should respect only your ruling faculty and the divinity within you, and if you are afraid, not because you must some time cease to live, but if you fear never to have begun to live according to nature—then you will be a man worthy of the universe which has produced you, and you will cease to be a stranger in your native land, or to wonder at things which happen daily as if they were something unexpected, and so be dependent on this or that.

4. I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinion of himself than on the opinion of others. If then a god or a wise teacher should present himself to a man and bid him to think of nothing and to design nothing which he would not express as soon as he conceived it, he could not endure it even for a single

day. So much more respect have we to what our neighbors think of us than to what we think of ourselves.

14. Either there is a fatal necessity and invincible order, a kind Providence, or a confusion without a purpose and without a director. If then there is an invincible necessity, why do you resist? If there is a Providence which allows itself to be propitiated, make yourself worthy of the help of the divinity. But if there is a confusion without governor, be content that in such a tempest you have in yourself a certain ruling intelligence. And even if the tempest carries you away, let it carry away the poor flesh, the poor breath, everything else; for the intelligence, at least, it will not carry away.

Note: The last entry in the *Meditations* is not included in the Long translation. The following is by Gregory Hays (2002).

36. You've lived as a citizen in a great city. Five years or a hundred—what's the difference? The laws make no distinction. And to be sent away from it, not by a tyrant or a dishonest judge, but by Nature, who first invited you in—why is that so terrible? Like the impresario ringing down the curtain on an actor: "But I've only gotten through three acts . . . !" Yes. This will be a drama in three acts, the length fixed by the power that directed your creation, and now directs your dissolution. Neither was yours to determine. So make your exit with grace—the same grace shown to you.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Marcus' meditations are, like diary entries, quite personal, yet at the same time, like more modern examples, we can not only see into his own life but find material that we can apply to our own experiences. The meditations reflect his sense of duty, a very old Roman virtue, and one he absorbed from the teaching of the Stoics. Take one of the entries and write a personal essay about how it applies, or has applied, to your own life.

2. After reading all, or a number, of the meditations, do you think that the attitudes expressed here by Marcus are positive, or negative? Upbeat, or gloomy? Realistic, or depressing? Write a short evaluation of the philosophy of life expressed in them.