

Finding Your Calm in the Noise: Stoic Wisdom for an Overloaded World

Timeless Wisdom to Nurture Inner Peace Amid Life's Constant Demands

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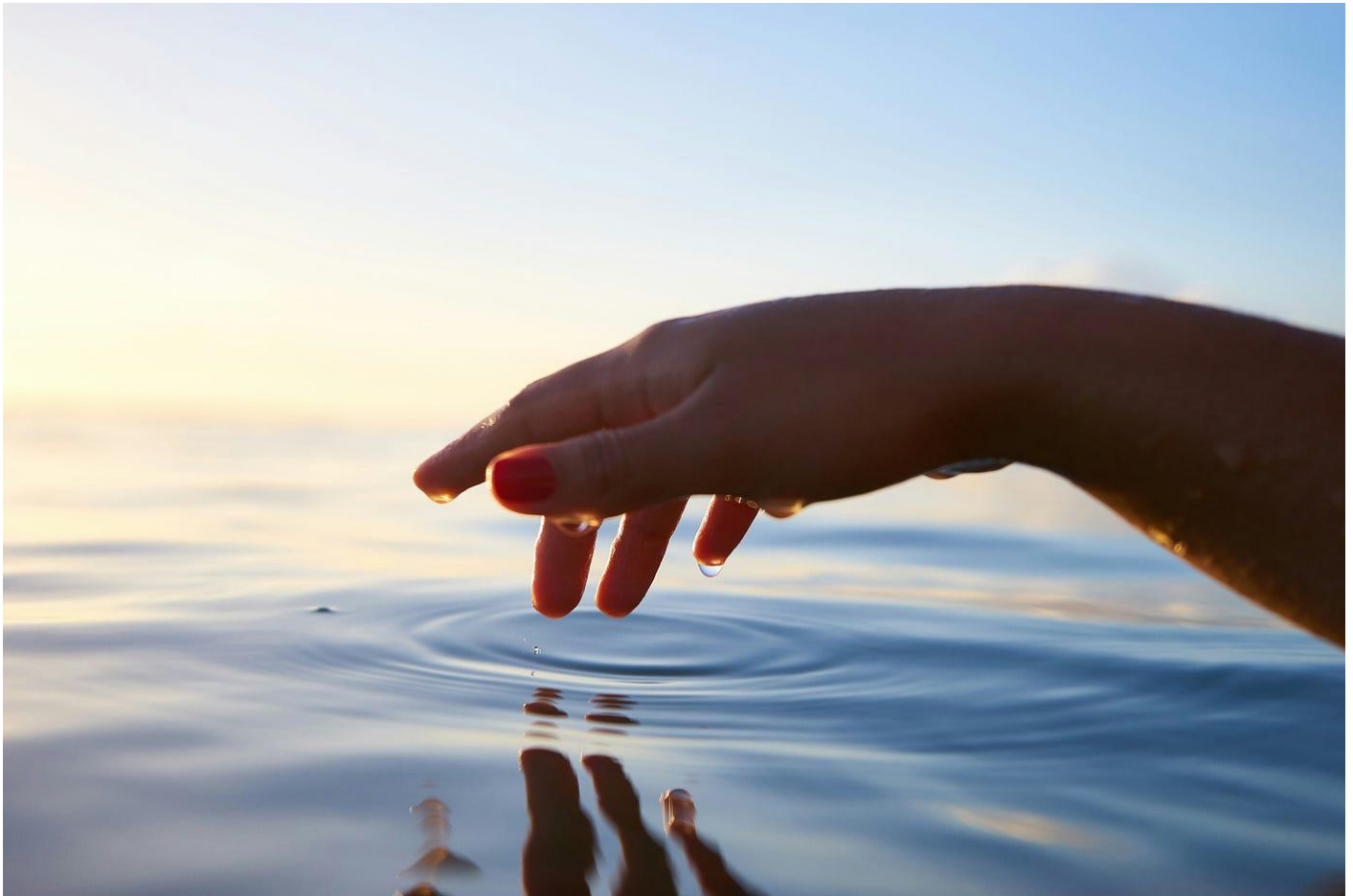


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Ever feel like technology and social media have completely taken over our lives? It's like we're a lot more linked than ever before yet in some way it really feels harder to run away the disorder. Are we actually in control, or have we end up being detainees of our very own electronic developments? And what happens to our sense of meaning and identity in a world where every moment is curated, filtered, and amplified? Turns out, this isn't a new problem — thinkers from decades ago saw it coming.

Intoday's evolving world of communication, the involvement of technology and social media has become a necessity for many people. This is supported by the context described by the Frankfurt School, which addresses the situation of modern society. Humanity's attempts to free itself from irrational power through rational efforts ironically end up generating an even more pervasive form of irrationality. Franz Magnis-Suseno, a Professor of Philosophy from Indonesia, in explaining the Frankfurt School's critical theory, states that “*the*

laws of the market economy are total — so total, in fact, that even attempts to break them are tamed and turned into commodities.”

Production in a market-based economy, which should ideally cater to human needs, is now manipulated to create new needs that serve the interests of production itself. Just over a dozen years ago, cell phones were a luxury item used only by certain groups of people. Nowadays, it's considered odd if someone doesn't have a mobile phone. Meanwhile, internet data, as the “*lifeblood*” for communication and social media, has become an everyday necessity that must be continually consumed. That's why social media has evolved into a practical, unavoidable part of life — especially as the world entered the Covid-19 pandemic era.

The presence of social media doesn't just support human life; it also comes with negative impacts. One of the pressing issues in this information era is how to sift through what's true amid the *massive flood of data* pouring into our daily lives. The rapid development of technology and social media has created a “*space*” for quick information access — so much so that technology users are passively bombarded by a never-ending stream of information. Hoaxes, reproduced again and again, become part of the public's everyday diet. This endless “*ocean*” of information also has the power to move people. Many rushed and crowded together to buy as many tissue supplies as they could. This didn't only happen in European countries, but also in Asian nations like Singapore. There's been research conducted on this phenomenon in Singapore, and based on interviews and data collected in the field, it turns out that tissue companies could still meet market demand during the pandemic.

In a discussion event at *Bukalapak*, Henry Manampiring explained that social media communities are extremely sensitive to the news stimuli spreading around their online world. Because of this, people become more easily angered, offended, and worried. Comments on photos posted on Facebook or Instagram, election and regional election results, sudden Twitter rants in response to local happenings, daily updates of rising Covid-19 cases, rumors of price hikes on basic necessities, and the increasing number of layoffs — all these continuously fuel people's emotional turbulence.

This kind of social climate makes Stoic philosophy feel especially relevant. In this philosophy, happiness is defined as *freeing oneself from emotions and unsettling feelings*. Stoicism isn't just a theoretical system of thought; it puts heavy emphasis on a way of life. Many life problems end up wrecking a person's well-being simply because of that individual's attitude toward their problems. Troubles will always exist, reappearing in a sort of “recycle” pattern, just like issues that have come and gone in the past. Yet, the

depression and anxiety that arise within a person are actually their own responses to existing challenges. It's not the "*facts*" themselves, but a person's interpretation of those facts that affects their life. The Stoics assert quite sharply that negative emotions aren't just wild or irrational feelings that defy explanation. Emotions are rooted in rational processes, meaning *negative emotions stem from a person's negative opinions about something*. This is why Stoic philosophy provides an important key to managing emotions in an era that so strongly influences how we feel.

In this article, I will outline the cosmological and ethical aspects of Stoicism, then focus on the control dichotomy that's so relevant during the Covid-19 outbreak. I'll then move on to discuss how to apply it in real life, and finally wrap up with a conclusion that includes the breakthroughs Stoic philosophy offers, along with a few final notes on the philosophy itself.

Stoic Philosophy: Cosmology and Ethics

In various sources discussing Stoic Philosophy, there are several terms commonly associated with these ideas, such as "*the serenity of the wise*," "*front-porch philosophy for mental resilience*," and "*happiness according to Stoicism*." These terms highlight the emphasis that Stoic Philosophy is essentially a way of life. This school of thought was founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC. He was a student of a Cynic philosopher. Other influential figures include Cleanthes, Panaetius, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, all of whom contributed significantly to Stoic thought. As a school of philosophy, Stoicism isn't just a theoretical explanation or a schematic model describing reality, humanity, and theories about truth. Stoicism is, first and foremost, a way of life, closely tied to how one ought to live.

From a cosmological standpoint, Stoic philosophy views the divine and nature as united, hence this perspective is sometimes called *monism*. Reality is material, divine, and rational all at once. Although this is a homogeneous unity, there is an underlying order referred to as the Logos — "divine reason." The cosmos is thoroughly infused by this Logos, but the Logos isn't something existing outside the universe. Instead, it represents a universal natural law that underlies the motion and purpose of the universe. For this reason, the universe is governed by absolute determinism. Humans, including their thoughts, are not exempt from this absolute determinism. It could be said that we live under "*fate*." This fundamental cosmological view reveals the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. The universe is like an immense web, encompassing even the events of daily life. Everything that happens forms a deterministic chain of events.

In contrast to Epicureans — who allow for some degree of freedom through their cosmological view of random atomic movements (*non-deterministic*) — the Stoics assert absolute determinism. Therefore, rather than attempting to change reality itself, it's a person's attitude toward reality that must adapt. The key to this adaptation lies in the use of reason. Here, we find a close connection between the Stoics' cosmological views and their ethical principles.

From an ethical perspective, the foundation of the Stoics lies in the lived experience of life itself. The Stoic art of living is based on the pursuit of happiness, which, in their view, is the natural outcome of a successful life. This success is achieved by aligning oneself with the laws of nature. That's why freedom, in the Stoic sense, doesn't mean freedom from "*fate*" but rather the conscious and willing *acceptance of those unchangeable natural laws*. Unlike the Epicureans, who place happiness as the motive and ultimate goal of moral action, the Stoic sense of happiness is closer to Aristotle's view — happiness emerges as a result of moral action that's in harmony with the universe. When this harmony is achieved, there's no outside force compelling the individual because their will and the laws of nature are in perfect sync. By submitting to nature's laws, one is essentially submitting to oneself. The Stoic ideal is wisdom — overcoming irrational impulses by aligning with the divine law that permeates the entire cosmos. As stated in the "Encheiridion (VIII)": "*Don't try to force events to go your way; instead, want them to unfold as they should, and you'll find happiness throughout your life.*"

As an example, Epictetus once responded to someone who struggled with his brother's anger. The problem wasn't how to stop the brother's anger (an external factor beyond one's control), but rather how to handle his own emotional reaction (an internal factor under his control). After all, only his brother can choose to stop being angry. Inner calm like this encourages a person to be actively involved in society. To accuse Stoic philosophy of making people apathetic is too hasty. The proper Stoic attitude frees individuals to take positive and responsible actions within their communities.

This ethical stance also emphasizes the role of the will. Stoicism doesn't merely seek a pleasant feeling of happiness; it locates true happiness in moral virtue itself. In this way, Stoic ethics closely aligns with the principles later outlined by Immanuel Kant. For the Stoics, virtue is essentially an awareness of duty, mirroring Kant's deontological ethics. Additionally, Stoic ethics does not rely on any promise of an afterlife, which means it's focused on selfless virtue, not driven by transactional rewards. It's no surprise, then, that Stoic philosophy — particularly its ethical dimensions — has long intrigued Christian thinkers.

Stoic ethics also champions a universal humanism. Marcus Aurelius, who took the throne in 161 AD, never met Epictetus in person. Yet Epictetus's teachings strongly influenced Aurelius's own work, "*Meditations*." This is a remarkable breakthrough in the world of ideas: the thoughts of a former Roman slave (Epictetus) influencing the mindset of the empire's highest authority (Marcus Aurelius). Such an exchange was possible because Stoicism stresses "*cosmopolitanism*" or universal brotherhood. It makes perfect sense that a Roman Emperor could adopt an egalitarian stance and see nothing wrong in learning from a former slave.

Control Dichotomy and Askesis

For Stoicism, philosophy functions as a method of therapy for negative emotions — a kind of clinic for the human soul. All forms of misfortune (negative emotions like anger, hatred, and envy) stem from human desires for things that are impossible to attain. These are wishes beyond one's control. For example, if someone longs never to die — despite the fact that every human being is inevitably mortal — this obsession will lead to a kind of mental illness. That's why our desires should be directed toward what is achievable: the good deeds we can perform and the misfortunes we can avoid. These "*achievable*" things belong to the realm of what's controllable. For matters that lie beyond our control, a person must learn to be "indifferent." Things outside our control are not our responsibility.

The key distinction in Stoic philosophy is between "what can be controlled" and "what cannot be controlled." The controllable category depends solely on the individual. This is internal and often referred to as the soul (the rational life principle). Meanwhile, what cannot be controlled does not depend on the person. It's external, "*foreign*" to one's core self.

From this dichotomy arises the Stoic recommendation of askesis — spiritual exercise or disciplined practice. Stoicism aims to guide individuals toward inner freedom (*Autarkeia*) by *living in harmony with nature*. The effort to align oneself with the Logos is known as askesis. To achieve this, the soul must be trained through disciplined action. The basic impulses in one's soul are guided so that they follow the direction of reason. Once one's desires are well-trained, they begin to evaluate situations in line with the Logos. Instead of seeing the world through a spontaneous, subjective lens, by maintaining disciplined opinions, a person places themselves within the perspective of the Universal Logos. Through these exercises, states like *apatheia* and *ataraxia* — freedom from destructive emotions and inner tranquility — can be attained.

Applying Stoic Philosophy in Today's World

The information age and the pandemic era present a unique phase in human life. Intense exposure to social media and the lightning-fast exchange of information through the digital world have ramped up anxiety and psychological pressure on a global scale. According to statistics from three years ago, on average, a person touches their phone about 2,617 times a day. Cellphones were meant to connect individuals with the entire world. Yet now, a person isn't just connected to the world — they're becoming increasingly disconnected from themselves. Personal identity is getting lost in a vast sea of truth and lies. In the midst of this situation, I believe that Stoic philosophy remains highly relevant for modern life.

There's an anecdote about how Epictetus came to be lame. When his master twisted his leg, Epictetus could feel pain and fear that his leg might break. He might have then worried about becoming disabled and the high cost of treatment. But Epictetus only thought, "*If my leg is twisted, it will break — just like anything else.*" Nothing more. And when his leg did break, Epictetus simply said, "*I told you that if you kept twisting it, it would break. And now it's broken.*" Even though he was left with a limp, this event didn't bother him in the slightest. From this anecdote, we can apply a practical lesson to today's pandemic era by critically examining how we interpret events. When someone is overly afraid of the coronavirus, the first thing they need to "shepherd" is their own mind. When excessive anxiety begins to disrupt one's life, it's time to apply disciplined thinking. Such mental discipline needs to be nurtured so that it leads to inner calm. We must be aware of *what and how we think* about an event.

When facing a certain event, it's crucial to carefully analyze which parts you can control and which parts are out of your hands. Making this distinction is important, because trying to control something that's not controllable is pointless and only stirs up negative emotions. After sharply separating which events can be influenced and which are beyond reach, you can start managing what you actually can control — especially your way of thinking about the event. You still have the freedom to respond positively to life's happenings. That's what we need to tap into so that happiness is achievable. It's easy for anyone to be pushed toward negative thoughts: believing there's no hope in life today, that the economy is in tatters, jobs are lost, family conflicts remain unsolved under mounting pressures, and there's a high possibility of infection by Covid-19 — possibly even death. All these things are largely beyond our control or very hard to manage. Instead of getting stuck in disappointment, heartbreak, and excessive worry, we can focus on managing what is controllable. If you're afraid of dying from the coronavirus, then do what you can: strictly follow the 3M protocols (wear a mask, keep your

distance, wash your hands, etc.). If there's no urgent need, don't go out. Good protocol adherence is proven to help prevent infection.

That's why it's futile — and even harmful — to remain fixated on our problems. If we think about it more deeply, isn't death something every human being will face? The difference is only in whether it comes sooner or later. Death is unavoidable. The key lies in one's attitude and interpretation of the issue. Happiness isn't hard to find, but we often bury the path to happiness ourselves with excessive actions and thoughts.

Conclusion: The Breakthrough of Stoic Philosophy and a Few Minor Notes

The influence of Stoic thought has been enormous in Europe, leading Dilthey to assert that "*Stoicism is the most powerful influence ever achieved in philosophical ethics.*" Even Christian thought has been impacted by Stoic ethics, and these ideas continue to resonate in the modern era. Stoic philosophy has succeeded in developing noble ethical values and has introduced an extraordinary sense of humanism. In his work, Franz Magnis-Suseno suggests that Stoicism is an *ethic for individuals with broad horizons*, individuals who free themselves from the allure of external things and the shocks of passion, who can "*relativize*" themselves and see the whole picture, remaining skeptical toward fanatic efforts.

Stoic philosophy offers valuable guidance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. With everyone cooped up at home to stay healthy, our reliance on internet technology grows more intense. This situation fuels anxiety, worry, confusion, and a heightened sense of threat due to muddled information and unstable social, economic, and political conditions. These stresses lead many to react more "*responsively*" than "*reflectively*" before making decisions or taking action. Anger, sadness, shouting, insults, and slurs abound in the public comment sections of social media. The relevance of Stoic ethics here lies in its invitation to pause, to critically analyze which aspects are under our control and which are not. This reality-interpretation therapy helps shepherd our emotions so that external circumstances don't rob us of our happiness.

Still, there are a few small notes worth considering. Stoic ethics raises some unanswered questions. Will a person be happy merely knowing that they are fulfilling their duties? After all, happiness is a concrete experience, not just an awareness of being on the right path. Moreover, the idea of being free from shock and suffering deserves deeper scrutiny. When we witness injustice in society, is it really justifiable to stay perfectly calm? Don't we have a responsibility to oppose wrongdoing — something that surely includes a form

of anger against evil? Furthermore, doesn't love itself lead us to feel others' suffering? And what about the Stoic notion that suicide is an acceptable way out? Couldn't this be seen as escaping one's responsibilities to others? Stoic ethics has yet to fully accommodate noble love, sacrifice, empathy, and solidarity in suffering. Even so, these unanswered questions do not invalidate the beauty of Stoic ethics.

There's still much to explore in Stoic philosophy. For now, I've limited myself to examining one aspect — the dichotomy of control — as a path to inner peace during the Covid-19 pandemic. This short piece isn't meant to provide detailed steps for solving pandemic-related problems, but rather to offer a brief illustration of how Stoic thought can be highly relevant to our lives. In fact, our exploration of Stoicism can extend into many areas, as the relevance of Stoic philosophy persists as long as human beings face existential tensions in this world. One example of these existential struggles can be found in Seneca's letters, which offer an important and novel breakthrough in the history of autobiography. Seneca recognized that being Stoic means leaving room to test oneself. When a philosopher pursues a life of integrity and fails, they must remind themselves of that failure. As Michel Foucault put it:

“The act of self-examination, of checking oneself, of watching oneself step by step as a way of life, makes the question of truth — truth about who one is and what one can do — central in forming an ethic.”