

The greater stoic marcus aurelius



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Self-control, the basic teaching of the greatest stoics in history. The philosophy of stoicism emerged sometime around 300 B. C. Though stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium, the most influential stoics were Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, the Emperor and the slave. Even though both men were very influential, it is evident that Marcus Aurelius' philosophy of life had the greatest impact on his people, both the elite and underprivileged classes. His works and teachings, which were addressed to him, affected his society then and continues to impact peoples lives today. He not only spoke and wrote of stoicism, he lived by this philosophy. As Emperor of Rome, Marcus Aurelius faced many temptations and unfortunate events, but he stayed true to himself, accepted his destiny and mastered his emotions.

Marcus Aurelius was born in Rome about 121 A. D. He was born to a wealthy patrician family. As a young boy Marcus caught the attention of the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138). Soon after, Aurelius was appointed to priesthood in 129 A. D. by the Emperor. Hadrian also supervised his education and he was entrusted upon the best mentors in literature and philosophy of the time. At the young age of 11, Marcus Aurelius had discovered stoicism, and by the time he was 20 he left his other studies for Philosophy. Emperor Hadrian's son; Antoninus Pius, who succeeded him had adopted Aurelius as his son in 138A. D. About a year later Marcus Aurelius was appointed to marry the Emperor's daughter, Faustina. Emperor Antoninus Pius was very fond of Aurelius and in 147 he shared power with Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius was treated as a consultant and helper throughout his reign. Aurelius succeeded Antoninus Pius in 161A. D, at the age of 40, and shared his power with his adopted brother Lucius Aurelius Verus until his death in 169.

As Emperor, Marcus Aurelius' reign was a difficult one. His reign was one of famine, earthquakes, fires, and plague, but Aurelius stayed true to himself, stayed calm and ruled to the best of his abilities. In times of catastrophe Marcus Aurelius turned more and more towards the study of Stoicism. He stressed the idea that human beings belong to nature. He said that all elements are different parts of nature that are somehow connected in order for the whole to run smoothly. If we were to rid ourselves of nature and have individual things in the world, there would be many astounded changes because nature would no longer run evenly. These changes would occur in the world around us and not in the people that surround us, " Their influx took place yesterday, or the day before-from the food we ate, the air we breathed. And that's what changes-not the person your mother gave birth to."(Hays, 133)

In addition he also stood by the idea that the only individual a person can control, is them self. Staying true to yourself is the idea of putting your ethics and beliefs before those of another. No one can forcefully change who you are, without your consent. Though there were many slaves during his time, Aurelius believed that the master ruled over the slave, only with his approval because in the end no one can make a human being do something that goes against what they believe. A master could only make another human do physical labour but could not forcibly change his personality or how honest a man is, " The responsibility is all yours: no one can stop you from being honest or straightforward." (Hays, 140)

Though Marcus Aurelius never wished to be Emperor of Rome, he was and this led him to accept it. Being born in a wealthy family and then being

adopted by Emperor Antoninus Pius was part of his destiny as a human being. The Emperor confided in his writings, *Meditations* that his public duties stressed and depressed him. Aurelius wished to retire and live a simple life in the country side. He knew that part of who he was, had to do with his destiny, and in accepting his destiny he accepted himself, “ And instead be satisfied with what you have, and accept the present-all of it.”(Hays, 131) Marcus Aurelius had this idea that life needed to be accepted and endured, whether it was good or bad. For example, during his reign there were rumours that his wife was having affairs with other men. He accepted this and controlled his emotions towards these rumours. Instead of putting his wife to death, like any another Emperor would have done during the time, Marcus Aurelius promoted the men if they benefited Rome. He carried on with his duties as Emperor and didn't allow personal views to get in the way of ruling Rome well. Because nature determined one's destiny, his famous doctrine of acceptance was to keep one's will in harmony with nature.

Furthermore, Marcus Aurelius believed that a human beings destiny was already written down and waiting to happen. According to him, humans are so small and fragile compared to universe that surrounds us, that each and everyone's lives are written in the stars above our head, “ Whatever happens to you has been waiting to happen since the beginning of time. The twining strands of fate wove both of them together: your own existence and the things that happen to you.” (Hays, 132) According to Marcus Aurelius it was one's duty to accept his post in life and perform what is required to the best of one's abilities. Aurelius believed reason governed the universe;

therefore, the goal of human existence is to live in harmony with nature, which meant consistently with reason. His writings, named “ Ta eis heauton”, which meant “ Thoughts addressed to oneself” were a constant reminder on how to conduct himself on a daily basis and remind him of his destiny and duties as a part of Natural law. Human happiness consists in a life lived in accordance with both nature and reason. Natural law or divine order is the idea that the universe is governed by a higher power or law, this to many would be God. He believed in a rational lawgiver who governs or rules the universe and everything in it, including our destinies. For Marcus Aurelius, God was simply the essence that used reason to order the course of universal history.

Another important doctrine Marcus Aurelius lived his life by was endurance. In part, many of his ideas came from the freed slave Epictetus (55A. D.-135A. D.) Epictetus was a slave born in Hierapolis, whose main concerns were personal freedom and self control. His works were very influential to understand stoicism and for the future stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius. According to Aurelius human beings can endure anything they put their minds to, “ Just remember: you can endure anything your mind can make endure, by treating it as in your interest to do so. In your interest, or in your nature.” (Hays, 132) This quote tells us that as long as your mind believes it is the best a person can endure it all.

Marcus Aurelius’ main teaching was control over one’s emotions. We must first learn to determine what we have control over versus what we don’t have control over, “...many of us expend a great deal of effort trying to control things that we cannot control while nearly ignoring those areas over

which we do have control.” (Soccio, 216) The idea is that every being may not have control over their destinies, but does have control over themselves and their emotions. Having control over one’s emotions is not an easy task, but the message is that something cannot harm a person if they do not allow it. By controlling one’s emotions, a person has a clearer view of the things that happen around them. Marcus Aurelius stressed the fact that no harm can be done against a human beings will.

Control was very important for Marcus Aurelius because being Emperor was not an easy task. As Emperor, Aurelius could have had whatever he desired and could have done anything he wanted. For instance, as mentioned before Aurelius could have put to death his wife and the men she was rumoured to be sleeping with, but he successfully controlled his emotions. Controlling one’s emotions is a difficult thing to do; it takes discipline and the will to control your feelings towards a situation. Also, as the Emperor of Rome there must have been many temptations. Aurelius was most likely tempted with over indulgences of all sorts, including women, food, riches, land and more. It is because of this that Marcus Aurelius is the greater stoic. It is more difficult to stay true to his philosophy of life with so many temptations on a daily basis. Marcus Aurelius had successfully modeled his life according to stoicism, usually under the hardest situations. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius influenced his people with the way he lived many years ago and continues to inspire people today. Despite the fact that Zeno of Citium founded stoicism, people who want to learn more about this philosophy turn to the teachings of Marcus Aurelius. His life and the way he portrayed himself is a true model of stoic life. Though with much discipline, Marcus Aurelius successfully achieved

to stay true to himself, accept and recognize his destiny, and conquer his emotions.