

Three Activities

The Desire Map

Divide a piece of paper into four (or more) columns. Above the first column, write the question “What do I want?”, and in that column, list the whatever it is that you honestly want in life. Many people will have 10–15 things at this stage, but if you have more or less, that’s fine!

Above the other columns, write the question “What does that get me?” Now, draw arrows items from the items in the left-hand column(s) to the right, where you will write something more general, which that left-hand thing helps you to obtain. For example, someone might want to have their own house, in order to get comfort or security. Remember that this is just for you, as a tool for self-knowledge, so answer as honestly as you can!

As you have work your way across the page from left to right, you may find that several left-hand items all work together to produce the same thing on the right, so that your list gets shorter and shorter as you move to the right. In general, items further to the left will be instrumental goods, which are the means or tools for helping us achieve the ultimate or final goods listed on the right.

(This distinction between instrumental and final goods appears prominently in Plato’s *Gorgias* 499b–500a; pages 76–77 in Zeyl’s translation.)

Finally, consider whether there are other ways, not listed in your chart, to achieve the final goods you have mentioned near the right. Often (though not always) this reflection can help us to see alternative choices which will still help us to achieve what we want at the deepest levels.

Pre-Meditation

Epictetus discusses a version of this activity in *Discourses* 3.8 (pages 159–160); Marcus Aurelius has some encouragement in *Meditations* 2.1 (page 17) and 10.13 (page 136).

Set aside a few minutes in your day—perhaps first thing in the morning, as many of the ancient Stoics suggested, or perhaps at another time which better suits your schedule—consider one unpleasant thing which might happen to you. Imagine that thing, or that event, fully and vividly, as if you were experiencing it right now. Then step back mentally, and ask yourself:

- Is this something that is up to me (that is, within my sphere of choice)?
- Does it affect my power of choice, or only my body and possessions?
- Does this appear unpleasant because it really is that way (for everyone, at all times), or is the sense of being unpleasant something which I add to it, through my own beliefs and judgments?

- If my beliefs and judgments are making the situation more unpleasant: Why do I hold these beliefs, and what other judgments might I choose to make?
- What choices can I make, with regard to how I respond to this event?

Take as long as you need to reflect on these questions, then imagine yourself doing whatever is within your power, to respond to the situation in the best possible way. This might involve, like Epictetus, saying “That is outside the sphere of choice, so it is nothing bad,” or “You may seem bad, but you are only an impression, not under my control.” It may involve taking actions which *are* under your control, in the way which preserves your freedom and integrity. Or you may see other ways of responding effectively.

Whatever response you have imagined, ask yourself, “Does this make the situation less unpleasant?” and “Do I see how to maintain my integrity and freedom?”

Evening Recollection

As the last thing you do before falling asleep in the evening, recall the events and choices of the day, starting with the moment you got into bed, and continuing in reverse order from the end of the day to the beginning. As you go, note the places where events were outside your control, and the places where you had the opportunity to make choices about what to think, say, or do. Don’t worry if you fall asleep; just go as far back as you can, until you doze off.

Especially once you have been doing this for a while, you may find patterns emerging in the way that you often respond (or fail to respond) to certain people, events, feelings, places, or situations. Make note of these situations, and consider using them as starting points for the premeditation activity discussed above. Pay attention to which parts of your day are within your control, and which parts are not. With practice, you may find yourself with a greater ability to note challenging situations at the moment they arise, so that you can respond from a place of freedom rather than compulsion.

While it’s helpful to note which parts of your day were good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, conducive to flourishing (*eudaimonia*) or not, try not to get too caught up in praising or blaming yourself. Instead, focus on observing the patterns of your life, so that you can keep hold of the patterns which serve you well, and change the ones which do not. Once they are done, past actions are no longer under our control; but what is under our control is how we intend to act in the future.