

Some Smaller Daily Meditations

David Nowakowski

[https://davidnowakowski.net/meditation/
consulting.philosopher@gmail.com](https://davidnowakowski.net/meditation/consulting.philosopher@gmail.com)

Stoic Pre-Meditation

Epictetus discusses a version of this activity in *Discourses* 3.8 (pages 159–160 of Robin Hard’s translation); Marcus Aurelius has some encouragement in *Meditations* 2.1 and 10.13 (pages 17 & 136 of Gregory Hays’ translation).

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. During that time, consider one affectively intense thing which might happen to you. The ancient Stoics tended to focus on things which present themselves very negatively to most ordinary people: for example, Epictetus’ examples included the theft of a valued object (the lamp which stood at the shrine of his household Gods), and the death of one’s spouse or child.

Yet Stoic tranquility does not only apply to those parts of life. There is also the challenge of remaining fixed in ourselves, in the face of affectively positive things: the birth of a child, an unexpected windfall or promotion at work, the experience of falling in love. It seems to me that most of us are just as likely to be carried away by these affectively positive experiences, as by the affectively negative ones, and so I recommend alternating between apparent goods and apparent evils or harms, on different days, when using this technique.

Once you have made your selection, 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 (un)pleasant because it really is that way (for everyone, at all times), or is the sense of being (un)pleasant something which I add to it, through my own beliefs and judgments?
- If my beliefs and judgments are making the situation more (un)pleasant: 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 a way which preserves your freedom and integrity. Or you may see other ways of responding effectively.

Whatever response you have imagined, ask yourself, “Do I see how to maintain my integrity and freedom?”

Evening Recollection

Seneca offers a nice discussion of this activity in his treatise *On Anger (De Ira)*, book III, chapter 36 (trans. John Basore):

“Anger will cease and become more controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day. Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day? And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination—how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character! I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self. When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words. I conceal nothing from myself, I omit nothing. For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with myself?”

Of course, the benefits of this activity can apply not only to anger, but to other intense emotional states, and to many other parts of our intellectual, spiritual, and ethical lives.

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.

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. 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 habit or 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 caught up in praising or blaming yourself. (This is subtly, but importantly, different from the emphasis that Seneca gives in the quote above. He was writing prior to the neuroses that can arise from self-flagellation by “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” In his time and place, the concern was people who were too uncritical, not people who were over-critical.) 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.