



By Joe Byerly

Recently, I finished [\*The Lives of the Stoics: The Art of Living from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius\*](#) by Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman. This book is a profile of twenty-six Stoics, from the founder of the philosophy to Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

For those interested in learning about Stoicism, it's a great starting point. Holiday and Hanselman are excellent writers and they weave the Stoic teachings into their biographical sketches. I was excited when I had the chance to catch up with Stephen and talk about Stoicism and the book. Keep reading to learn why Stoicism appeals to leaders in the military, why the Stoics weren't perfect people, and how we can learn more about this practical philosophy.

**Joe: It seems that Stoicism is starting to gain greater traction among military readers. Why is that?**

Stephen: There is a natural tie between the military and Stoicism. In today's hedonistic culture, there's a lot of value placed on material things and chasing after whatever feels good to us. In contrast, the whole Stoic system is focused on the pursuit of virtue and the development of character. There are four Stoic virtues: wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control. I think the virtue of *sophrosyne* or self-control resonates with members of the military because that is what is required to have the discipline to prepare one's mind and body for service in war.

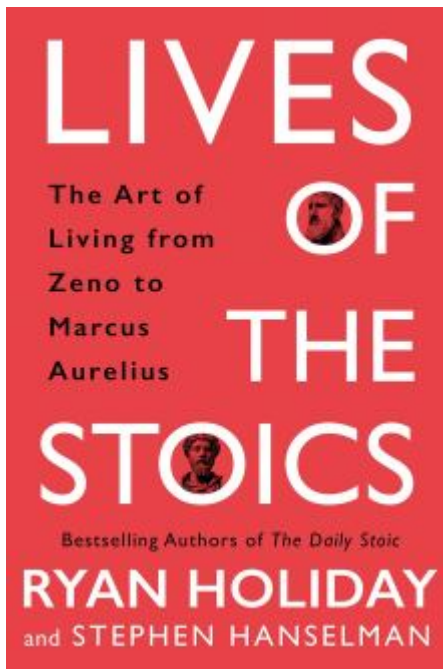
The Stoics believed that life is about more than having more, eating more, and drinking more. They believed there is something that happens within our souls as we take the time to redirect our efforts towards a vocation that serves something greater than ourselves. Members of the military also set aside many of those things that modern society values in service of something greater. They are pursuing a similar path that the Stoics pursued, and that is virtue.

**Joe: One of my favorite aspects of the book is that many of the Stoics you write about weren't perfect people. For instance, Cicero struggled with the temptations of success and ambition. Seneca wrestled with the power that came with being in the court of Emperor Nero. And you write about how Marcus Aurelius, as virtuous as he was, had to work hard at achieving *apatheia* (the absence of passions -greed, lust, envy). Did you highlight their weaknesses on purpose?**

Stephen: We did.

What's great about the Stoics is they believed in progress, not perfection.

The Stoics had an optimistic view of human nature, they believed we are given the inner resources we need and that we have the seeds of virtue within us. But, we have to work at it.



They argued that we have to take our souls and scrub away all the external corrupting influences we've encountered throughout life and return to the basics. We have these internal resources -the virtues- but we are all in different places with our temperaments, our character strengths, and our character flaws. So everyone's path towards leading a virtuous life will be different. What matters is that we continually strive to cultivate those virtues within us.

One of the lessons we highlight in the book comes from Seneca. He wrote about the importance of doing a nightly review. He taught that at the end of each day we need to put our actions up for examination. After we review the areas where we fell short, make a plan to improve them the next day. As readers will find out, Seneca was accused of a lot of failings in the court of Nero, so this exercise would have been important to him.

Many of us, like the Stoics, get bogged down in the politics of daily life, and just like them, we fail. So, the figures we write about in the book provide us with examples of people who can inspire us because they weren't focused on perfection, they were focused on progress.

**Joe: One of the themes that emerges through the study of history is the negative effect of power on individuals. It's almost if we have a good and bad side, and power pulls the bad to the surface. But, I'm finding that Stoicism can keep us anchored. What would the Stoics in your book think about that?**

Stephen: One of the figures we cover in the book is Panaetius. He was a member of General

Scipio Aemilianus's Scipionic Circle. This was a group of philosophers, poets, and leaders who met at the General's house. They came together to share ideas and help political leaders think through ways to benefit the people of Rome.

So, Paneatius understood power -he was close to it. He developed a unique metaphor based on the Greek sport Pankration (similar to our modern MMA). He likened the challenge of pursuing the Stoic life in Roman society to the experience of a fighter in this sport. He said we have to be prepared for sudden and unexpected blows. He said that life is a battle. If we don't take the time to prepare ourselves and train the resources we were given (the virtues), we won't do well.

Other figures we highlighted in the book used this metaphor as well. Musonius Rufus used it. Epictetus said we have to go through a hard winter training if we want to be prepared. Even Emperor Marcus Auerilus said that this struggle in life is more akin to wrestling than a dance.

I'd like to return to Epictetus for a moment. He said there are three levels of discipline we have to go through to prepare ourselves for the negative influences of political life. First, he said we have to study, we have to know the basics.

For the Stoics, the basics were physics, logic, and ethics. They likened physics to a fertile field and said we have to know how the world works, to include human nature. Next, they said logic or reason was essential to understanding truth, and was similar to having a protective fence in that field. And when we combine those two, and get them right, we get the fruit of ethics. Epictetus said we have to read and learn the basics so that we may put them into practice.

So the second level is practice. We need to put what we learn into action. And in doing so, examine where we did well and where we failed.

The third level is the hardest. This level of discipline focuses on our efforts to work on those areas we know are our weakest. It's focusing on our character flaws, so that we may find what Zeno called the "smooth flow of life".

The Stoics would tell us that if we want to remain grounded, we're going to have to work for it. And it's going to be hard work.

**Joe: If I haven't read anything else on Stoicism before picking up this book, what should I read next?**

Stephen: One of the most accessible books [\*The Art of Living\*](#) by Sharon Lebell is a modern translation of Epictetus' *Encheiridion* or Handbook. The word means "small thing in hand." It also refers to a hand-knife or dagger. It suggests that the work can protect us from the things life throws at us.

I also think your military audience would enjoy [\*That One Should Disdain Hardships: The Teachings of a Roman Stoic\*](#) by Musonius Rufus

I'd also recommend Donald Robertson's [\*How to Think Like a Roman Emperor\*](#) and [\*Stoicism and the Art of Happiness\*](#). These two great books provide a framework for understanding Stoicism and incorporate Donald's work with cognitive behavioral therapy.

Finally, I'd like to recommend the other book I wrote with Ryan Holiday: [\*The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living\*](#). In this book we tried to whittle down all the best teachings from the Stoics and put in a page-a-day format that you could use to develop a great habit.

**Follow [Stephen Hanselman](#) and [Ryan Holiday](#) on Twitter and pick up a copy of [\*The Lives of the Stoics: The Art of Living from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius\*](#) today.**

Want to learn about more books like this one? Sign up for my [monthly reading list email](#) where you can learn about titles you won't find on military reading lists! Also, be sure to subscribe to [The Sunday Email](#). Each week we send out a quote and a short insight to get you thinking. So don't miss out!

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)