

## **Stoicism : and well-being of the mind**

These unprecedented times certainly tax our mental resources. Whether anxious about the dreadful universal circumstances—or about our daily battle to keep ourselves thinking clearly; to actually gain something positive in how we now conduct ourselves in this new, extraordinary world. As older people isolating for an indeterminate period, suddenly there is a great deal of time for thought, deliberation, boredom, conflict, irrationality, even a time to revise attitudes or relationships. After all, we disseminate a barrage of thoughts all day long. We all seek mental well-being. Philosophers have striven to explore the mind, the inner conflict between emotion and reason and how human beings perceive the external world. Interestingly, we can look back to the Ancient Greeks for a particularly innovative adaption of a cognitive approach to life's trials and tribulations.

Within its long history the Greek city states consistently faced periods of war, pestilence, famine and slavery: their gods were clearly contentious and capricious. Perhaps the people felt as vulnerable and confused as we do today.

**Socrates (469- 399BC)** was the Athenian visionary ----the first psychologist perhaps----who was convinced that human beings should examine their own mental resources (psyche/soul), developing a method of control over the vagaries of careless, unproductive emotion. It was a matter of people interrogating themselves, questioning the very principles and morals they live by. Socrates was the first philosopher to practise and to teach it in the popular academies of the day. Stoicism as a discipline of living, lasted from about 400BC into the Roman Empire 200AD. A long time. **Marcus Aurelius**, Roman Emperor (161-180AD), actually wrote treatise on Stoicism.

The basic premise of Stoicism is to examine aspects of human nature and take it seriously. However, Aristotle stressed that we are by nature, social animals, dependent upon relationships with other people, forming a society of virtue--- political organisations will reflect this also.

The second major feature of Stoicism is for humans to develop a degree of **Reason**: the ability to assess your own personal responses, to apply a form of honest analysis, subsequently judging the best action or behaviour to suit the circumstances. This would require further self- knowledge and self- control.

**Aristotle(384-322BC)**, developing this concept of Stoicism, listed four cardinal virtues: Courage, Temperance, Justice and Wisdom, which can be developed during our lifetime. We all have elements of these qualities don't we?

The key Stoical virtue is detachment of character: if you are not in a position to influence events/circumstances that you encounter, then somehow distance it from your conscience to avoid it causing you anxiety or emotional distress; utilise this positivity to develop alternative ideas or actions. In short, Stoicism is about making use of any adversity in life:

"We must cultivate peace and strength of mind in the face of adversity. Let hardship and strife be your inspiration to improve your character." **Seneca** (60BC-37AD)

Let us be clear: this apparent adoption of a semblance of indifference does not mean that we do not care! The present dire circumstances cannot be ignored ; we can sympathise, co- operate and support other people,---but we can adopt a new attitude towards our own daily responses to our barrage of thoughts, perceptions, emotions and opinions ---using the Socratic *Reason*. What is truly worth being stressful about? We alone are responsible for how we feel: and we alone can change that.

Derren Brown the Illusionist is a convinced Stoic. In his book on philosophy he suggests a list of positive practices:

1. Each day find time to have a silent dialogue with yourself.
2. Take time to consider matters honestly.
3. Take a 3rd person distancing position: examine yourself from the outside looking in.
4. Consider the day as a separate or discrete project to be assessed.
5. Expect some inconsistency during the day to occur. Do not be deterred.
6. Consider any rewards of the day. Why did these happen?

In this strange period of isolationism, my own belief is that those who live alone, with no direct feedback on thoughts/concerns, might need a strategy more. Good old Greeks came up with some idealistic---but sensible--- ideas on mental wellbeing which in general form, might be worth a try.

Anyhow be positive, be safe and keep in touch. Regards, John.