

Prosochē:

illuminating the Path of the *Prokoptōn*

by Christopher Fisher

Prosochē (προσοχή) [*pro-soh-KHAY*]*—*the attitude and practice of *attention**—*is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude.¹ It is a state of continuous, vigilant, and unrelenting attentiveness to oneself—the *present* impressions, *present* desires, and *present* actions which shape one's moral character (*prohairesis*).²

When you relax your attention for a while, do not fancy you will recover it whenever you please; but remember this, that because of your fault of today your affairs must necessarily be in a worse condition in future occasions. (*Discourses* 4.12.1)

In this brief essay I will attempt to explain the meaning of *prosochē*, why it is a necessary element of Stoicism practiced as a way of life, and what benefits one can expect from consistent, vigilant attention to their assents, desires, and actions. Additionally, I will point to some specific exercises or practices to help the *prokoptōn* (one who is making progress)³ develop and deepen the attitude and practice of *prosochē*.

Prosochē is essential for the *prokoptōn* to practice the three Stoic disciplines⁴ prescribed by Epictetus (Discourse 3.2.1-5). Constant attention is necessary to live according to Nature. Once one embarks on the path of the *prokoptōn*, the attitude of *prosochē* serves as an ever-present, vigilant watchman to ensure one continues to make forward progress. As Epictetus warns, relaxing our attention (*prosochē*) is not only dangerous because of the faults which may be committed in the present, but “because of your fault today your affairs must be necessarily in a worse condition on future occasions” (*Discourses* 4.12.1). The attitude and practice of *prosochē* focuses our attention and provides the foundation for the Stoic disciplines, whose aim is a life of excellence (*aretē*) and flourishing (*eudaimonia*) lived in accordance with Nature.

Attention - Not Perfection

Before further analysis of the Stoic concept of *prosochē*, which can appear onerous at first glance, it is helpful to understand that Stoicism does not demand perfection. Epictetus is clear on this issue, “So is it possible to be altogether faultless? No, that is impracticable...” (*Discourses* 4.12.19). The practice of Stoicism requires attention, not perfection. The goal of the *prokoptōn* is continual progress toward the perfection of the sage, without the expectation that he will ever achieve it. The Stoic sage is an ideal which the *prokoptōn* attentively focuses his mind on as he practices the disciplines of assent, desire, and action. Again, according to Epictetus, the practicable goal of Stoicism is not perfection; instead, it is “to strive continuously not to commit faults” with the realistic hope that by “never relaxing our attention, we shall escape at least a few faults” (Ibid).

In daily self-examination and constant attention to oneself one must wage the battle against faulty inclinations and temptations to sin and anxiously guard against offenses, because through each offense the sinful *habitus* is again strengthened, yet without letting oneself be discouraged by possible failures and defeats.⁵

¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), p. 84

² Hadot, 1995, pp. 59 & 84; also see Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 138

³ **prokoptōn** (προκόπτων) [*pro-KOP-tone*] - Making progress. Even though one has not obtained the wisdom of a sage when appropriate actions are increasingly chosen fewer and fewer mistakes will be made and one will be prokoptōn, making progress. Greg Wasson, *College of Stoic Philosophers: Stoic Glossary & Pronunciation Guide*, (2012), p. 6

⁴ This essay assumes the reader has a general grasp of the three Stoic disciplines—the discipline of assent, the discipline of desire, and the discipline of action. See Hadot 1998, Wiegardt 2011a, Buzare 2011, and Fisher 2013 for analysis of the Stoic disciplines.

⁵ Adolf Bonhöffer, *The Ethics of Epictetus: An English Translation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 191-192

What is *Prosochē*?

The brief definition offered above provides some insight into the Stoic concept of *prosochē*; however, I do not think it draws out its full meaning and richness. My own understanding of the concept was furthered by the following descriptions of *prosochē* from various authors:

- A “fundamental attitude” of “continuous attention, which means constant tension and consciousness, as well as vigilance exercised at every moment.”⁶
- Being “perfectly aware not only of what [one] is doing, but also of what he is thinking... and of what he is—in other words, of his place within the cosmos.” (Ibid)
- “self-consciousness [which] is, above all, moral consciousness, which seeks at every moment to purify and rectify our intentions. At every instant, it is careful to allow no other motive for action than the will to do good.” (Ibid)
- “Self-control... fundamentally being attentive to oneself... unrelaxing vigilance...”⁷
- “the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit” (Ibid., p. 84)
- Remaining “fully aware of what [one] does at each instant” (Ibid)
- *Willing* one's own actions fully. (Ibid)
- “attention to oneself”, which can also be translated as “mindfulness” or “self-awareness”⁸
- “the exercise of self-attention or mindfulness. It is a form of mental development by which we progressively learn to be attentive to every single sensation we may have or feel at the very time they appear”⁹
- “the foundation needed for the practice of all the spiritual exercises.”¹⁰
- “self-interrogations, including the practice of asking [oneself], last thing at night and first thing in the morning, whether they had responded, or would respond, rightly during the day.”¹¹
- “superintendency and care of self”¹²
- “introspective supervision of one's own thoughts and actions”¹³
- “The attentiveness or mindfulness that Stoics should apply to every impression and situation they face as they determine the proper judgement they need to make in order to maintain their *eudaimonia*.”¹⁴

Obviously, the attitude and practice of *prosochē* is not easy. To use a old, worn-out adage, “If it was easy, everyone would be doing it.” The adjectives used to describe *prosochē* (tension, vigilance, self-consciousness, etc.) are enough to deter mere mortals. However, it's not as daunting as it first appears if we remember Epictetus taught us that perfection is “impracticable.” Our goal is the continuous practice of attention, not perfection. Moreover, Marcus Aurelius offered some practical advice which further reduces the perceived burden of *prosochē* by limiting the span of our attention to the present.

⁶ Hadot, 2002, p. 138

⁷ Hadot, 1995, p. 59

⁸ Donald Robertson, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)*. (London: Karnac Books, 2010), p. 152

⁹ Elen Buzaré, *Stoic Spiritual Exercises*. (www.lulu.com, 2011), p. 27

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 30

¹¹ Richard Sorabji, Epictetus on *proairesis* and Self., *The Philosophy of Epictetus*. (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2010), pp. 87-98

¹² B. Rand, *The life, unpublished letters and philosophical regimen of Antony, Earl of Shaftesbury*. (London: Adamant, 2005), p. 231

¹³ Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation*. (New York: Oxford, 2000), p. 13

¹⁴ Wasson, *Stoic Glossary & Pronunciation Guide*, p. 6

Attention to the Present

As Pierre Hadot points out, Marcus Aurelius' prescription for the practice of the Stoic disciplines is distinct from the teachings of Epictetus in one way—Marcus Aurelius focuses on the present. Throughout his *Meditations*, he teaches us to narrow the focus of our attention to the present—our *present* representations, *present* impulses, and *present* actions. Hadot refers to this practice as, “circumscribing the present.”¹⁵ We find within the *Meditations* that only our present thoughts and actions are within our control (2.14), and the past and future are indifferent (6.32). As Epictetus would say, “Things outside the sphere of choice are nothing to me” (*Discourses* 1.30.3). Yet, most people struggle to relinquish their compulsion to fret over the past and worry about the future. Donald Robertson, psychologist, offers this advise,

Modern CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy] has attempted to dispute irrational self-blame or unhealthy obsessions with past events in a similar manner, by drawing attention to our inability to change the past. If guilt serves a purpose, it is surely to motivate us to change today, in order to prepare for tomorrow, but not to condemn ourselves to endless complaining about yesterday... The true locus of our control, and therefore our primary concern, is the here and now, from moment to moment. It is in the present moment that lessons are learned from the past, and preparation is made for the future.¹⁶

Thus, the *prokoptōn* benefits by relinquishing his concern about the past and future, over which he has no control, and focusing his attention (*prosochē*) exclusively on the present. Hadot suggests that circumscribing the present has two additional benefits. First, by facing difficulties and hardships one moment at a time, they become more bearable. Second, it clears our mind of unnecessary concerns and increases our attention (*prosochē*) on present thoughts and actions.¹⁷

The scattered, constantly distracted, and transient attention most of us give to the events of our lives epitomizes the attitude of mindlessness—not *prosochē*. The *prokoptōn* must constantly apply the fundamental rule of life—the distinction between what is in our control and what is not—to determine what to pay attention to. By doing so she limits her attention to that which is within her control at the *present* moment:

- *present* representations—proper discernment of the impressions which press themselves on our psyche.
- *present* impulses—the desires and aversions which define our moral will (*prohairesis*).
- *present* actions—the present acts inspired by one's moral will.

Vigilant focus on the present moment, often referred to as mindfulness, is most frequently associated with Buddhism in contemporary times. This is due primarily to the popularization of Eastern mindfulness practices in the West during later part of the twentieth century. However, as Donald Robertson suggests, the Buddhist concept of mindfulness “bears comparison to certain European philosophical concepts.” The practice of mindfulness is not unique to Buddhism or even to Eastern thought. The “here and now” aspect of Stoicism was “common to many different schools of thought throughout the ages...”¹⁸ The West lost touch with Hellenistic philosophy and its practices for a while; however, as Christopher Gowans points out, this was an anomaly,

Throughout most of the history of Western philosophy, from late antiquity through medieval times, the renaissance and the modern period, many of the Hellenistic philosophers were well-known and often highly regarded (sometimes more so than Plato and Aristotle). In the twentieth century, the tendency was to believe that these philosophers were less important, but this century was an historical exception, and in recent decades there has been a substantial renewal of interest in them. To the extent that the teaching of the Buddha resembles Hellenistic philosophy we have prima facie reason to regard this teaching as a kind of philosophy familiar in the West.¹⁹

¹⁵ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 131-137

¹⁶ Robertson, 2010, p. 37

¹⁷ Hadot, 1998, p. 132

¹⁸ Robertson, 2010, p. 153

¹⁹ Christopher Gowans, *Philosophy of the Buddha: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 43

As Donald Robertson writes, many overlook the fact that “here and now” is a concept “native to European philosophy, and a characteristic feature of Stoicism is its emphasis upon the here and now and learning to live more in the present moment. It is the reason we have the English phrase 'here and now'.”²⁰ The reintroduction of mindfulness to the West, via Eastern thought, creates some issues. “The exotic appeal of Oriental meditation is often mitigated by the fact that much of the symbolism and terminology surrounding Buddhist and Taoist practices must be relatively inscrutable to Westerners with a superficial knowledge of the history of the tradition and the language in which it is formulated.”²¹ Thus, unknowingly, when we read about Buddhist mindfulness we automatically view it through the tradition of Western philosophical thought where the concept of “here and now” was common among many schools.²²

Additionally, while there are many parallels, there are also significant differences between the goals and aims of Stoicism and Buddhism. Western thought has benefited greatly from exposure to and, in some cases, synthesis with Eastern ideas. Nevertheless, at a foundational level there are fundamental differences between Eastern and Western thought in general, and between Buddhism and Stoicism in particular.²³ I am not proposing one should ignore Eastern teachings. Quite the opposite; I believe Stoics can benefit greatly from the study of Eastern philosophy. However, I am leery of much of the “new age” enthusiasm to uncritically accept Eastern ideas simply because they are novel, mystical, and easily misinterpreted to promise personal prosperity, bodily health, and global peace via instantaneous and effortless shifts in consciousness.

In the next section I will focus on the over-arching purpose of paying attention to oneself. As noted, the practice of paying attention—of being mindful—is a historical aspect of both Eastern and Western philosophies and religions. Within the Western philosophical tradition it is most famously known by the aphorism carved into the wall of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi:

ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ

“Know Thyself”

Indeed, man is so constituted that he then only excels other things when he knows himself; but he is brought lower than the beasts if he lose his self-knowledge. For that other creatures should be ignorant of themselves is natural; in man it shows a defect. (Boethius)²⁴

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates)²⁵

A necessary component of any plan to modify one's thinking and behavior is a willingness to honestly look into one's own thoughts, motives, and actions. The attitude of *prosochē*—constant attention to one's assents, desires, and actions—provides the controlling faculty (*hēgemonikon*) with the insight and feedback necessary to effectively oversee and practice the three Stoic disciplines. Before anyone can change the way they think and act, they must seek to understand the assents (judgments) and desires which constitute their moral character.

Moral character (*prohairesis*) is a central theme in the teaching of Epictetus. Accordingly, we see *prohairesis* presented as equivalent to the modern concept of “self.”²⁶

²⁰ Robertson, 2010, p. 37

²¹ Ibid., p. 152

²² Ibid., p. 152-3

²³ The Buddhist concepts of “suffering” and the “non-self” appear philosophically incompatible with Stoicism. See Siderits (2007) and Gowans (2003) for introductions to these Buddhist concepts.

²⁴ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. (East Bridgeport, MA: World Publications, 2008), p. 50

²⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 38a

²⁶ See Stephans 2007, Long 1991, and Sorabji 2010

As William O. Stephans writes,

The concept of *prohairesis* is central to Epictetus' ethics because he regards this faculty of choice, this decision-maker, this locus of moral agency and self-determiner, as the very essence of the person... Exercising total authority within it, each person has, as it were, absolute sovereignty within her *prohairesis* realm. This distinguishes it as the factor of agency of the individual, and Consequently Epictetus even goes so far as to identify one's *prohairesis* with one's inner self.²⁷

In this context, the Delphic dictum to “Know Thyself” directs the true seeker of wisdom on a journey into the inner realm of her own soul—her moral character. It is a quest to understand 'why' one does 'what' one does—to peel back the veneer of persona and discover the 'self' which holds onto judgments, generates impulses, and justifies behaviors. To know the 'why' of one's moral character (*prohairesis*) is to “Know Thyself.”

Unfortunately, knowing thyself is no easy endeavor. For a variety of reasons, most people remain strangers to themselves²⁸ for the duration of their lives. It is much easier to continue living unconsciously. One can go about life, as most people do, focusing on the attainment of temporal pleasures and the avoidance of pain without much thought. Simply turn on the television, pick up the newspaper, or surf the “web” or “social media” and avoid any uncomfortable introspection. It is easy to unquestioningly absorb the thoughts, values, and desires of the current popular culture—to drown out or tune out the cry for of one's own soul for meaning, connection, genuineness, and congruence. Juxtapose those methods of “checking out” with the Stoic practice of *prosochē*—constant, vigilant, and focused attention to one judgments and actions—and it's no wonder the vast major of people choose the former path of mindlessness.

However, the soul does not cease to crave connection with its source. Eventually, it cries out as it intuitively senses the gulf between its own human nature and universal Nature. Then, in the midst of the inevitable psychological crisis created by living mindlessly, most people will seek ways to dull the angst they feel. Suppression or avoidance of emotional angst via drugs, alcohol, sex, or other distractions is common. Only a few will courageously and honestly look beyond the veneer of their persona, into their own soul, and ask themselves, “Who am I?”, “Why do I act this way?”, “What have I become?”, “Is this how I want to live?”, “Is this how I should live?” If they continue to ask those questions and honestly seek a solution they discover the need to “Know Thyself” via a life-long adventure of examined living.

The *prokoptōn's* inner world of beliefs—their moral character (*prohairesis*)—is a causal force in their outer world of actions. The inner world of thought is linked to the outer world of action by one's moral character—his faculty of choice. Thus, one's actions are the result of a causal web (or chain), where his faculty of choice—moral character—plays a causal role. His assents shape his desires, which mold his character, and then generate the impulses of the will that move him to act.

Diligent attention (*prosochē*) to *present* representations, *present* impulses, and *present* acts allows one's own rational faculty (*hēgemonikon*), through the practice of the three Stoic disciplines, to be a causal agent in the ongoing formation of one's own moral character (*prohairesis*). Both Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius assert that the controlling faculty (*hēgemonikon*) is the only thing which can modify itself (*Meditations* 5.19 & 6.8; *Discourses* 1.1.4).

Why *Prosoche*?

*For such a man, daily life, as it is organized and lived by other men, must necessarily appear abnormal, like a state of madness, unconsciousness, and ignorance of reality.*²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., p. 23

²⁸ Timothy Wilson, *Strangers to ourselves: discovering the adaptive unconscious*. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002) argues the unconscious is not the domain of boogeymen and repressed sexual impulses which Freud popularized a century ago. He suggests the unconscious may have an adaptive purpose. Wilson confirms our inability to access portions of our psyche through introspection; however, he suggests we can gain insight into our unconscious thoughts and impulses indirectly.

²⁹ Hadot, 1995, p. 58

At this point one can reasonably ask why? Why embark on an adventure of self-knowledge, which admittedly will be life-long, difficult, and will set me apart from the mass of humanity who mindlessly seek pleasure and avoid pain? One might feel the exalted promise of *eudaimonia* (happiness, flourishing) sounds appealing but still wonder if it is worth the effort. Can't a person reap the benefits of Stoicism by simply studying the *Discourses* of Epictetus, and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius? It's simply a matter of understanding Stoic logic, physics, and ethics—right? Not quite. Certainly, one can benefit from thoughtful reading of the *Enchiridion* and *Meditations* alone; historically many people have. The wisdom and insight within those writings will surely affect anyone who approaches them with an open and inquiring mind. However, to reap the benefits of Stoicism the philosophy must be lived. There are no short cuts to a flourishing life—one must live in accordance with Nature.

Prosochē—attention to oneself—is an essential element for practicing Stoicism as a way of life. However, it does not stand alone. It is impossible to isolate the practice of *prosochē* from the three Stoic disciplines (assent, desire, and action). *Prosochē* is the necessary foundation upon which the Stoic disciplines rely. Why *prosochē*? Below are a few good reasons:

- To help us “keep 'at hand' (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not.”³⁰
- To free us from the passions. (Ibid)
- To remain “fully aware of what [one] does at each instant” (Ibid)
- It enables us to will our actions fully. (Ibid)
- To help us know our place in the cosmos.³¹
- It develops a self-consciousness which is “not merely moral; it is also a cosmic and rational consciousness.” Which allows the attentive *prokoptōn* to “live in the constant presence of the universal Reason which is immanent within the cosmos. They see all things from the perspective of this Reason, and consent to its will.” (Ibid)
- It “allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness”³²
- To build a foundation for the Stoic spiritual exercises.³³
- To “wage the battle against faulty inclinations and temptations to sin and anxiously guard against offenses, because through each offense the sinful *habitus* is again strengthened, yet without letting oneself be discouraged by possible failures and defeats.”³⁴

By now you should understand that *prosochē* is the practice of paying constant, mindful attention to the assents, desires, and actions which defines your moral character at the present moment. *Prosochē* provides our rational faculty (*hēgemonikon*) with the knowledge necessary to affect change within itself. It is the essential foundation of the three Stoic disciplines and a necessary practice of the *prokoptōn*. Now, it's time to take a brief look at how to incorporate this mindfulness practice into a life lived in accordance with nature.

How to Practice *Prosochē*

The variety of ways one can practice *prosochē* is limited only by the imagination of the *prokoptōn*; however, it is commonly associated with three exercises I will refer to as meditation, memorization, and written

³⁰ Hadot, 1995, p. 84

³¹ Hadot, 2002, p. 138

³² Hadot, 1995, p. 85

³³ Buzaré, 2011, p. 30

³⁴ Bonhöffer, 1996, pp. 191-2

personalization. I will address each briefly and provide resources for further study since each topic would require its own essay, or book, to cover the material adequately.

Meditation

For most modern Westerners the word mediation immediately evokes images of robe-clad monks seated in positions which range in appearance from slightly uncomfortable to inhumanly painful. Some Stoics do adopt an Eastern meditation practices and consider it an essential part of their philosophical practice. However, one need not employ the bodily practices of Eastern meditation to reap the benefits of mindfulness training. As Pierre Hadot writes,

Unlike the Buddhist meditation practices of the Far East, Greco-Roman philosophical meditation is not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take extremely varied forms.³⁵

Hadot goes on to suggest meditation includes “the memorization and assimilation of the fundamental dogmas and rules of life”³⁶ and further suggest that,

Stoic contemplation of the rational and necessary unfolding of cosmic events, can lead to an exercise of the imagination in which human things appear of little importance in the immensity of space and time.³⁷

Elen Buzaré suggests the Ancient Stoics may have used mindfulness meditation practices similar to those of Buddhist Samantha-Vipassana therapy.³⁸ I highly recommend her book, *Stoic Spiritual Exercises*; it provides a great introduction to the theory and application of the Stoic disciplines.

Erik Wiegardt, founder of the New Stoa, has written an introduction to meditation which succinctly covers the historical background, physiology, and practice of meditation. Additionally, he introduces his own creation—*Pneuma Will Power Meditation*.³⁹ Wiegardt has written several essays on various meditations, including a form of mindfulness in action, which he calls *Stick Action Meditation*; all are worthy of considering. They are available for download from the *College of Stoic Philosophers* website.⁴⁰

Finally, Donald Robertson has written a script titled “View from Above”, which can be used for meditation or hypnotherapy. It is available in his book *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)*, (2010, p. 271). An audio version is available for download from the *Stoicism Today* blog.⁴¹

There are numerous varieties of contemplative meditation and the resources available for their study and practice are endless. See the references at the end of this essay for a good starting point.

Memorization (*mneme*) [MNAY-may]

The purpose of memorization is to keep “at hand” (*procheiron*) the fundamental doctrines of Stoicism. The Greek word *procheiron*, used throughout the *Discourses*,⁴² and translated “at hand”, implies a state of readiness, like that of having a sword or knife—at hand—ready for use. The Oldfather translation of *Discourses* 1.27.6

³⁵ Hadot, 1995, p. 59

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Buzaré, 2011, pp. 77-8

³⁹ See Erik Wiegardt, *Pneuma: Will Power Meditation* (San Diego: Wordsmith, 2011a) for a wonderful and brief introduction to the practice and history of meditation. Erik is a practicing Stoic who has experience with various forms of mediation. He also created a Stoic “pneuma meditation” which he details in this free document which can be found at [The College of Stoic Philosophers](http://stoicmeditation.com/).

⁴⁰ <http://stoicmeditation.com/>

⁴¹ <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2012/12/31/your-favourite-stoic-exercises-2-the-view-from-above/>

⁴² See *Discourses* 1.1.21, 1.27.6, 2.1.29, 2.9.18, 3.10.1, 3.10.18, 3.11.5, 3.17.6, 3.18.1

reads, “we must have our preconceptions clear, polished like weapons, and ready at hand.”⁴³ Epictetus taught his students to apply their preconceptions in accordance with nature (*Discourses* 1.2.6) and to keep those preconceptions, along with the fundamental rule of life of life—what is within our control and what is not—“ready at hand.” It’s likely that Arrian created the *Handbook* for this purpose⁴⁴—to keep the principle doctrines of Stoicism “ready at hand” as “weapons of the mind... to fight against emotional disturbance.”⁴⁵

Erik Wiegardt, wrote *The Mneme Manual* as a guide to the practice of memorization and suggests one should test Stoic doctrines by living them,

One way to insure that you are not misled into believing our philosophy is some kind of distant, abstract, ancient world-view that doesn't have anything to do with the *real* world we live in is to begin to live like a Stoic right now. You can do that first by understanding and holding tightly to essential Stoic doctrine, then adding specific exercises that bring life and strength to what you know. The following is a summary of that Stoic doctrine condensed into the briefest possible language. This reference point in Stoic thought is the basis for the exercises that follow. If the theory is understood and the exercises are practiced with an open mind and sincerity, you will quickly acquire an insight into what it really means to think like and *be* a real Stoic.⁴⁶

Within *The Mneme Manual*, Wiegardt offers “The DOE” as an example of a Stoic *mneme*. When I first read “The DOE,” I did not fully appreciate its depth. The more I study Stoicism and attempt to live its principles, the more meaningful The DOE becomes for me. I find myself returning to it often and each time I do I find new depth within this short, yet powerfully profound *mneme*.

“The DOE”

One rule to unite us:

live in agreement with Nature.

Two maxims to guide us:

Good is virtue that evil lacks;

all the rest is indifferent.

Good and evil are in the will;

only will is in our power.

Three studies abide us:

Judgments and the inner discourse,

Desires and the rising passions,

Actions and the noble duties.

Hear the sage inside us:

*practice, practice, practice, practice.*⁴⁷

The DOE is a wonderful example of condensed Stoic dogma, which can be easily memorized and kept “ready at hand.”

The practice of *mneme* (memorization) will often draw from the practice of *hypomnemata* (written personalization, or journaling). Marcus Aurelius' practice of *hypomnemata*, codified in his *Meditations*, provides a rich mine for memorization. I think it's safe to assume he memorized portions of it himself.

⁴³ W. A. Oldfather, Epictetus, The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, Books I-II, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, repr. 1998), p. 169

⁴⁴ John Sellars, *The art of living: the Stoics on the nature and function of philosophy* (London: Bristol, 2009), p.132

⁴⁵ Robertson, 2010, p. 195

⁴⁶ Erik Wiegardt, *The Mneme Manual*, (San Diego: Wordsmith, 2011a), p. 3

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

Written Personalization (*hypomnemata*) [hyp-om-NAY-mah-tah]

I must admit when I first attempted *hypomnemata*, the concept escaped me. I understood the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius were an example *hypomnemata*. However, the thought of attempting anything remotely similar was far too intimidating; I simply could not get started. After a conversation with Erik Wiegardt, my tutor and mentor, I went back and read his short essay on *hypomnemata* where he wrote,

Pierre Hadot, one of the leading scholars in the study of the *Meditations* believes that they were actually Stoic exercises written by the emperor as notes to himself... Their purpose was to keep the Stoic doctrines he knew freshly in mind... Hadot points out that the often tedious repetition of certain themes one finds is evidence of his use of these *hypomnemata* as exercises, not as work in preparation for publication.⁴⁸

Finally, I got it. What previously escaped me was the fact that Marcus Aurelius did not write his *Meditations* for anyone other than himself. He was not attempting to write a timeless masterpiece. Marcus Aurelius was engaged in a frank yet encouraging conversation, on paper, with himself. *Hypomnemata* is the practice of personalizing the principles of Stoicism for one's own life. With that lesson in mind, I began to personalize the principles of Stoicism for myself and put them in writing.

Hypomnemata can be written in many forms, poems, koans, a few brief words, or a few paragraphs. I offer a few examples of my own *hypomnemata*:

[Two examples of short *hypomnemata*. Sometimes short sentences can be quite effective at capturing a concept and they are easy to memorize.]

Pay attention or pay a price.

Attention, not perfection.

[The next *hypomnemata* requires introduction. I'm a law enforcement detective who deals with criminals on a daily basis. I wrote this to remind myself to remain true to my Stoic principles while in that capacity. Although it is law enforcement centric, I think the principle can be applied by anyone.]

When you are face-to-face with a criminal, remind yourself that his vice inclined moral character is not entirely of his making. He is morally responsible for his actions; however, the web of antecedent causes which formed his moral character includes many causal agents—the actions of his parents, the culture of his community, tragedies he did not cause, pervasive social injustice, and the zeitgeist of a society which fills his soul with anger toward others and tells him they are his enemy. Temporarily remove him from society—your oath requires that of you. However, remember, he is a human being also; he's simply ignorant of the true nature of virtue and vice. He is both a perpetrator and a victim of the vice-inclined moral character which drives his behavior. Do not judge him as evil; he cannot touch your soul.

[Here is an example of poetic *hypomnemata*. The following two stanzas are part of a larger poem. They serve as an example of how simple poetry can be used to personalize Stoic concepts.]

Prosochē

*Only the present do I possess,
A fleeting moment within my control.
Wisely, I attend to that before me,
So only virtue may enter my soul*

Melete

*Be still my heart and quiet my mind.
Psuche in communion with the whole,
Impressions rays unimpeded shine,
Through still waters of my tranquil soul.*

Hypomnemata is quite easy once you get started. Write for your eyes only. It need not be eloquent or worthy of publication; the only requirement for *hypomnemata* is that it has meaning for you—the writer.

⁴⁸ Erik Wiegardt, *Emperor's Journal: Classical Meditation*, (San Diego: Wordsmith, 2011c), p. 3

In his book, *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)*, Donald Robertson provides “An example of Stoic therapeutic regime”⁴⁹ for daily practice. He has modified this regime since publication of the book and it is available on his blog.⁵⁰ It incorporates *prosochē* into a daily regime. In a newly added section, he suggests the following as a practice of *prosochē* to be performed throughout the day:

Identify with your essential nature as a rational being, and learn to prize wisdom and the other virtues as the chief good in life. Continually bring your attention back to your character, actions, and judgements, in the here and now, during any given situation... All of your attention should focus on the care of your mind (*Enchiridion*, 41). In response to every situation in life, ask yourself what faculty or virtue nature has given you to best deal with it, e.g., courage, restraint, etc., and continually seek opportunities to exercise these virtues (*Enchiridion*, 10).⁵¹

Although Robertson suggests his regime is “only an attempt to reconstruct the Stoic regime for discussion”, I think it is worthy of serious consideration for one's daily practice. It provides an excellent starting point and it can be modified and personalized to meet individual needs.

The Path of the *Prokoptōn*

Stoicism can be distilled to one fundamental rule of life—the distinction between what is in our control and what is not (*Handbook* 1). However, the ability to make such distinctions in daily life rests upon a basic understanding of Stoic dogma and the practice of living in accordance with Nature.

Almost everyone who approaches Stoicism as a curious seeker has the same question, “How can I attain happiness?” Stoicism informs the seeker that happiness can only be achieved through the acquisition of virtue. Once the seeker accepts that virtue is the only good and decides it is worthy of their effort, they ask the next logical question, “How do I become virtuous?” The seeker has now taken the first step on the approach to *prosochē* (illustration 1). Here, the seeker learns that Stoicism is a way of life, not a purely academic endeavor, and here he encounters the Stoic maxim—live in accordance with Nature. Faced with the realization that Stoicism requires the practice of three disciplines, the seeker then acquires a basic understanding of Stoic theory (*dogmata*) and begins practicing the three disciplines—the seeker is now a *prokoptōn*.

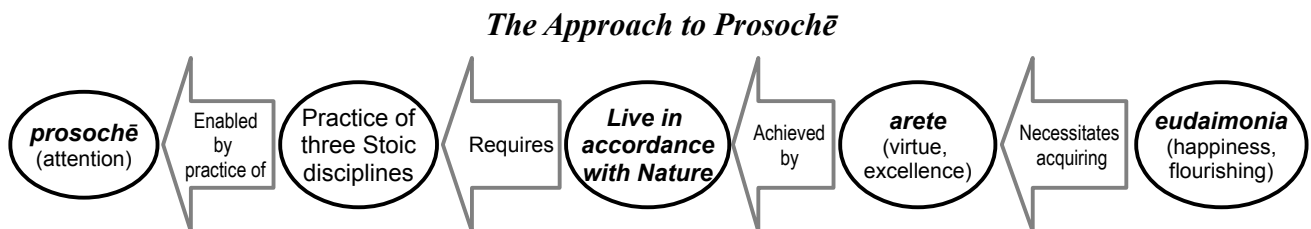


Illustration 1

Practice of the three Stoic disciplines alone will bear fruit in the life of the *prokoptōn*—lived logic, lived physics, and lived ethics⁵² will affect change. However, without the attitude and practice of *prosochē*, the *prokoptōn* is likely to experience stagnation and frustration along the path toward *eudaimonia*. *Prosochē*—the essential spiritual attitude for Stoic practice is needed to illuminate the path of the *prokoptōn*. The continuous, vigilant, and unrelenting attention to one's *present* impressions, *present* desires, and *present* actions is necessary to penetrate the veil of one's own *psyche*. Thus, *prosochē* is indispensable to illuminate and then modify moral character. Without *prosochē*, the *prokoptōn's* practice will likely remain shallow and predominantly intellectual. As such, it will become a thin veneer over what remains of the passion driven *psyche* of a largely uneducated

⁴⁹ Robertson, 2010, p. 267

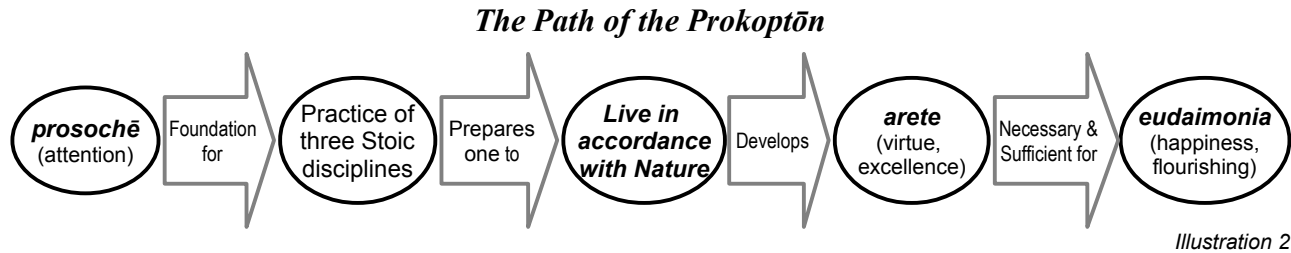
⁵⁰ <http://philosophy-of-cbt.com/2012/11/13/example-stoic-therapeutic-regime/>

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Fisher (2013), provides a detailed description of the three Stoic disciplines as lived logic, lived physics, and lived ethics.

person (*idiôtês*). Such a state may provide a little relief from psychological angst, and it may furnish the *prokoptôn* with a new persona based upon the common yet mistaken image of the Stoic as “austere, dispassionate, detached, tranquil, and virtually affectless.”⁵³ However, this nascent Stoic practice can easily inspire the attitude and behavior mocked by Epictetus: “as soon as they have put on a rough cloak and let their beard grow, they cry, 'I am a philosopher.'” (Discourses 4.8.15).

The final stop in the *The Approach to Prosochē* (illustration 1) is the first step on *The Path of the Prokoptôn* (illustration 2). Only with an attitude and practice of *prosochē*, is one adequately prepared to travel the path of the *prokoptôn*.



Prosochē illuminates the psyche, fuels the Stoic disciplines, and provides insights and feedback to the *prokoptôn's* rational faculty (*hēgemonikon*), which are essential to mold one's moral character (*prohairesis*). Without *prosochē*, the flourishing of *eudaimonia* will forever remain just beyond the *prokoptôn's* reach. Only with the power of attention fueling the three Stoic disciplines, can one make genuine progress toward excellence of character and a flourishing life.

Each step or stage along the path relies on the theory and practice of the previous stage—*eudaimonia* is not possible without *aretē*, which is not achievable unless one learns to *live in accordance with Nature*, etc., etc. The *prokoptôn* must learn enough theory, each step of the way, to appropriately and intelligently direct their practice toward the Stoic virtues which create *eudaimonia*. Progress requires perpetual education and consistent application. While the flow in illustration 1 is linear, the actual practice of Stoicism is an iterative process, with theory and practice synergistically enabling each other at every step. Theory is never “an end in itself” it must be “put in the service of practice.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, unless one becomes a Sage—an ideal state which no one can realistically expect to achieve—there is no intermediate resting place where the *prokoptôn* can stop and relax their attention without finding themselves “necessarily in a worse condition on future occasions” (*Discourses* 4.12.1). Stoicism, as a way of life, is not easy—it requires constant effort and vigilant attention. Epictetus compares the effort required to that which is needed to win at the Olympic games (*Handbook* 29).

The path of the *prokoptôn* relies on the spiritual attitude of *prosochē* to illuminate one's assents, desires, and actions. Upon this essential foundation, the *prokoptôn* can begin to practice the three Stoic disciplines. In turn, the Stoic disciplines enables the *prokoptôn* to live in accordance with Nature, in a state of self-coherence, where the *Self*—one's guiding principle or rational nature—is united with universal Reason, universal Nature, and humanity as a whole.⁵⁵ Finally, living in accordance with Nature develops virtue—excellence of character—which is both necessary and sufficient to attain *eudaimonia*—a state of happiness or flourishing.

Stoicism is not easy, neither is it a mystery—it is a way of life. The *prokoptôn* must utilize the Stoic disciplines and the penetrating rays of *prosochē* to illuminate the path toward *eudaimonia*.

⁵³ Lawrence Becker, Stoic Emotion., in *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations* (New York: Cambridge, 2004), pp. 250-251

⁵⁴ Hadot, 1995, p. 60

⁵⁵ Hadot (1998), Fisher (2013)

Appendix

Passages relevant to *prosochē*

Epictetus -

Discourses

3.12.16 For as Socrates said, "we ought not to live a life without examination," so we ought not to accept an appearance without examination, but we should say, "Wait, let me see what you are and whence you come"; like the watch at night, "Show me the pass." "Have you the signal from nature which the appearance that may be accepted ought to have?"

3.3.4-7 Very little is needed for everything to be upset and ruined, only a slight lapse in reason. It's much easier for a mariner to wreck his ship than it is for him to keep it sailing safely; all he has to do is head a little more upwind and disaster is instantaneous. In fact, he does not have to do anything: a momentary loss of attention will produce the same result. It's much the same in our case. If you doze off, all your progress up to that point will be negated. So keep a sharp eye on your impressions, and never fall asleep. It is no small thing that is being watched over, it equates

4.6.34-35 if indeed you have cared about nothing else except the proper use of appearances, as soon as you have risen in the morning reflect, "What do I want in order to be free from passion, and free from perturbation? What am I? Am I a poor body, a piece of property, a thing of which something is said? I am none of these. But what am I? I am a rational animal. What then is required of me?" Reflect on your acts. "Where have I omitted the things which conduce to happiness? What have I done which is either unfriendly or unsocial? what have I not done as to these things which I ought to have done?"

4.12.1 When you relax your attention for a while, do not fancy you will recover it whenever you please; but remember this, that because of your fault of today your affairs must necessarily be in a worse condition in future occasions.

4.12.19 So is it possible to be altogether faultless? No, that is impracticable; but it is possible to strive continuously not to commit faults. For we shall have cause to be satisfied if, by never relaxing our attention, we shall escape at least a few faults.

Handbook

#4 When you are going about any action, remind yourself what nature the action is. If you are going to bathe, picture to yourself the things which usually happen in the bath: some people splash the water, some push, some use abusive language, and others steal. Thus you will more safely go about this action if you say to yourself, "I will now go bathe, and keep my own mind in a state conformable to nature." And in the same manner with regard to every other action. For thus, if any hindrance arises in bathing, you will have it ready to say, "It was not only to bathe that I desired, but to keep my mind in a state conformable to nature; and I will not keep it if I am bothered at things that happen.

#10 With every accident, ask yourself what abilities you have for making a proper use of it. If you see an attractive person, you will find that self-restraint is the ability you have against your desire. If you are in pain, you will find fortitude. If you hear unpleasant language, you will find patience. And thus habituated, the appearances of things will not hurry you away along with them.

#21 Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible be daily before your eyes, but chiefly death, and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything.

#33 Avoid public and vulgar entertainments; but, if ever an occasion calls you to them, keep your attention upon the stretch, that you may not imperceptibly slide into vulgar manners. For be assured that if a person be ever so sound himself, yet, if his companion be infected, he who converses with him will be infected likewise.

#38 When walking, you are careful not to step on a nail or turn your foot; so likewise be careful not to hurt the ruling faculty of your mind. And, if we were to guard against this in every action, we should undertake the action with the greater safety.

#41 It is a mark of want of genius to spend much time in things relating to the body, as to be long in our exercises, in eating and drinking, and in the discharge of other animal functions. These should be done incidentally and slightly, and our whole attention be engaged in the care of the understanding.

Marcus Aurelius -

Meditations

2.8 Rarely is a person seen to be in a bad way because he has failed to attend to what is happening in someone else's soul, but those who fail to pay careful attention to the motions of their own souls are bound to be in a wretched state.

2.11 Let your every action, word, and thought be those of one who could depart from life at any moment.

3.4 Do not waste what remains of your life in forming impressions about others, unless you are doing so with reference to the common good. For you are depriving yourself of the opportunity for some other action which may be of real benefit, to imagine instead what so-and-so is doing and to what end, and what he is saying or thinking or planning, and give yourself over to other impressions of that kind which serve only to divert you from paying proper attention to your own ruling centre. Rather, you must exclude from the sequence of your thoughts all that is aimless and random, and, above all, idle curiosity and malice; and you must train yourself only to think such thoughts that if somebody were suddenly to ask you, 'What are you thinking of?' you could reply in all honesty and without hesitation, of this thing or that, and so make it clear at once from your reply that all within you is simple and benevolent, and worthy of a social being who has no thought for pleasure, or luxury in general, or contentiousness of any kind, or envy, or suspicion, or anything else that you would blush to admit if you had it in your mind.

5.11 To what purpose, then, am I presently using my soul? Ask yourself this question at every moment, and examine yourself as follows: what is presently to be found in that part of me which is called the ruling centre? And whose soul do I have at present? That of a child? That of an adolescent? That of a woman, of a tyrant, of a domestic animal, of a wild beast?

6.53 Acquire the habit of attending carefully to what is being said by another, and of entering, so far as possible, into the mind of the speaker.

7.29 Wipe out vain imagination. No longer allow your passions to pull you around like a puppet. Confine your attention to the present time. Learn to recognize what is happening to yourself or another. Divide and analyse every given object into the material and the causal. Give thought to your last hour. Let the wrong committed by another remain where it first arose.

7.54 Everywhere and all the time it lies within your power to be reverently contented with your present lot, to behave justly to such people as are presently at hand, and to deal skilfully with your present impressions so that nothing may steal into your mind which you have not adequately grasped.

7.69 Perfection of character requires this, that you should live each day as though it were your last, and be neither agitated, nor lethargic, nor act a part.

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