

## The Handbook (*Encheiridion*) of Epictetus<sup>1</sup>

1. Some things are up to us and some are not. Things up to us are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not up to us are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.

The things in our control are by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered; but those not in our control are weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others. Remember, then, that if you suppose that things which are slavish by nature are also free, and that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered. You will lament, you will be disturbed, and you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you suppose that the only thing which is yours is that which truly is yours, and that what belongs to others really does belong to others, then no one will ever compel you or restrain you. Further, you will find fault with no one or accuse no one. You will do nothing against your will. No one will hurt you, you will have no enemies, and you not be harmed.

Aiming therefore at great things such as this, remembering that you must not allow yourself to be carried, even with a slight tendency, towards the attainment of lesser things. Instead, you must entirely quit some things and for the present postpone the rest. But if you try to have these great things, in addition to power and riches, then you will not gain the latter, because you aim at the former too: and you will absolutely fail at gaining the former, by which alone happiness and freedom are achieved.

Work, therefore to be able to say to every harsh appearance, "You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be." And then examine it by those rules which you have, and first, and chiefly, by this: whether it concerns the things which are in our own control, or those which are not; and, if it concerns anything not in our control, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.

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3. With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a ceramic cup you have, remind yourself that it is a ceramic cup, and could break. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you are kissing things which are human, because then you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Elizabeth Carter, edited with notes by Benjamin Keoseyan

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."<sup>2</sup> 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 in that state if I am bothered at things that happen.

5. Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the beliefs and judgements which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our belief about death that it is terrible. When therefore we are hindered, or disturbed, or grieved, let us never attribute it to others, but to ourselves; that is, to our own judgements. An uneducated person will lay the fault of his own bad condition upon others. Someone just starting education will lay the fault on himself. Some who is perfectly educated will place blame neither on others nor on himself.

6. Don't be prideful about any excellence that is not your own. If a horse should be prideful and say, "I am handsome," that would be acceptable. But when you are prideful, and say, "I have a handsome horse," know that you are proud of what is, in fact, only the good belonging to the horse. What, then, is your own? Only your reaction to the appearances of things. Thus, when you behave conformably to nature in reaction to how things appear, that is reason to be proud; for you will take pride in a good thing that is actually up to you.

7. Consider when, on a voyage, your ship is anchored; if you go on shore to get water you may along the way amuse yourself with picking up a shellfish, or a wild onion. However, your thoughts and continual attention ought to be bent towards the ship, waiting for the captain to call on board; you must be ready to immediately leave all these things, otherwise you will be thrown into the ship, bound neck and feet like a sheep.<sup>3</sup> So it is with life. If, instead of an onion or a shellfish, you are given a wife or child, that is fine. But if the captain calls, you must run to the ship, leaving them, and pay them no mind. But if you are old, never go far from the ship: lest, when you are called, you should be unable to come in time.

8. Don't hope that things happen as you wish them to, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well.

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<sup>2</sup> To Epictetus, nature is both God and the totality of the divinely ordered universe, and it is our task as humans to align our wills with that order.

<sup>3</sup> It seems that Epictetus is referring to the fact that the sheep were the last to be loaded onto a ship, hoisted aboard after the gangplank (by which human passengers would board) was removed.

**9.** Sickness is a hindrance to the body, but not to your ability to choose how to act, unless you let it be. Lameness is a hindrance to the leg, but not to your ability to choose how to act. Say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens, then you will see such obstacles as hindrances to something else, but not hindrances to yourself.

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**11.** Never say of anything, "I have lost it"; but, "I have returned it." Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned. Is your estate taken away? Well, and is not that likewise returned? "*But he who took it away is a bad man!*" What difference is it to *you* who the giver assigns to take it back? While he gives it to you to possess, take care of it; but don't view it as your own; instead view it as travelers view a hotel.

**12.** If you want to improve, reject such reasonings as these: "If I neglect my affairs, I'll have no income; if I don't correct my servant, he will be bad." For it is better to die with hunger, exempt from grief and fear, than to live in affluence with perturbation; and it is better your servant should be bad, than you unhappy.

Begin therefore from little things. Is a little oil spilt? A little wine stolen? Say to yourself, "This is the price paid for equanimity, for tranquillity, and nothing is free." When you call your servant, it is possible that he may not come; or, if he does, he may not do what you want. But he is by no means of such importance that it should be in *his* power to give *you* any disturbance.

**13.** If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid with regard to external things. Don't wish to be thought to know anything; and even if you appear to be somebody important to others, distrust yourself. For, it is difficult to both keep your faculty of choice in a state conformable to nature, and at the same time acquire external things. But while you are careful about the one, you must of necessity neglect the other.

**14.** If you wish your children, and your wife, and your friends to live for ever, you are stupid; for you wish to be in control of things which you are not in control of, you wish for things that belong to others to be your own. So likewise, if you wish your servant to be without fault, you are a fool; for you wish vice not to be vice, but something else. But, if you wish to get what you desire, this is in your own control. Focus, therefore, on what you can control.

He who is able to confer or remove whatever someone wishes, either to have or to avoid, is that person's master. Whoever, then, would be free, let him wish nothing, let him decline nothing which depends on others, else he must necessarily be a slave.

**15.** Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party. Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take a moderate share. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you. Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches, and you will eventually be worthy to join the feasts of the gods. And if you don't even take the things which are set before you, but are able even to reject them, then you will not only be a partner at the feasts of the gods, but also a partner in their rule. For, it is by doing this that Diogenes, Heraclitus, and others like them became, and were rightly called, divine.<sup>4</sup>

**16.** When you see anyone weeping in grief because his child has departed, or because he has suffered in his affairs, be careful that the appearance may not carry you away. Instead, make the following distinction in your own mind, and be prepared to say, "It's not the *event* that distresses this person (since it doesn't distress everyone); rather it is the *judgment* which he makes about the event." As far as your words go, however, don't hesitate to reduce yourself to his level, and even to weep with him, if that is appropriate. But do not weep inwardly.

**17.** Remember that you are an actor in a play, of such a kind as the author pleases to make it. A short play, if he makes it short; a long one, if he makes it long. If it is his pleasure you should act a poor man, a cripple, a ruler, or a nobody, see that you act it naturally. For this is your business, to act well the part assigned to you; and to choose your part is not up to you.

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**19.** You can be unconquerable, if you enter into no combat in which it is not in your own control to conquer.

When, therefore, you see anyone eminent in honors, or power, or in high esteem on any other account, take heed not to be hurried away with the appearance, and to pronounce him happy; for, if the essence of good consists in things that are in our own control, there will be no room for envy or emulation. But, for your part, don't wish to be a general, or a senator, or a consul, but wish instead to be *free*; and the only way to freedom is to disregard the things not in our own control.

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**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.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that this idea of becoming divine will come up later in the course in a Christian context, when we read Boethius, a Christian author writing during the end of the Roman Empire just a few centuries later.

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**26.** The will of nature may be learned from those things in which we are no different from each other. For example, when our neighbor's boy breaks a cup, or the like, we are presently ready to say, "These things happen." Be assured, then, that when your *own* cup likewise is broken, you ought to be affected in just the same way, as when the boy's cup was broken. Apply this in like manner to greater things. Is the child or wife of another dead? There is no one who would not say, "Thus is the lot of a human." but then if his own child happens to die, immediately he says, "Alas I how wretched am I!" But it should be remembered how we are affected in hearing the same thing concerning others.

**27.** As a target is not set up for the sake of missing it, so neither does evil naturally exist in the world.

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**32.** When you have recourse to divination,<sup>5</sup> remember that while you don't know what the future will be, (that's why you've come to the diviner); but of what nature the future will be you already know before you come, at least if you are a philosopher. For since the future is among the things not in our own control, it can by no means be either good or bad.

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**33.** From now on, prescribe a character and form of conduct for yourself, which you will keep both alone and in company.

Be for the most part silent, or speak merely what is necessary, and in few words. We may, however, enter, though sparingly, into discourse sometimes when occasion calls for it, but not on any of the common subjects, of gladiators, or horse races, or athletic champions, or feasts, the vulgar topics of conversation; but above all do not speak of others, so as either to blame, or praise, or make comparisons. If you are able, then, by your own conversation bring over that of your company to proper subjects; but, if you happen to be taken among strangers, be silent.

Don't allow your laughter be much, nor too frequent, nor profuse.

Avoid swearing, if possible, altogether; if not, as far as you are able.

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. go to a fortune-teller, a common practice in Roman times, though unlike in our culture, fortune-telling was an activity normal and sanctioned by religious authorities.

Avoid the vulgar parties of normal people; but, if ever an occasion calls you to them, exert yourself that you may not imperceptibly slide into the vulgar behaviors of the uneducated. For be assured that even if a person be ever so sound himself, still, if his companion is dirty, he who brushes up against him will be dirty likewise.

Provide things relating to the body no further than necessary; as meat, drink, clothing, house, family. But strike off and reject everything relating to show and delicacy.

As far as possible, abstain from sex before marriage, and, if you indulge in it, do so within the limits provided by custom." But don't therefore be troublesome and full of reproofs to those who are sexually active, nor frequently boast that you yourself are not.

If anyone tells you that someone speaks ill of you, don't make excuses about what is said of you, but answer: " He must not know of my other faults, else he would not have mentioned only these."

It is not necessary for you to appear often at public games;<sup>6</sup> but if ever there is a proper occasion for you to be there, don't appear more solicitous for anyone than for yourself; that is, wish things to be only just as they are, and him only to conquer who is the conqueror, for thus you will meet with no hindrance. But abstain entirely from declamations and derision and violent emotions. And when you come away, don't talk a lot about what has passed, and about anything that does not contribute to your own moral growth. For it would appear by such talk that you were immoderately affected by the show.

Do not go to the public readings of any authors carelessly or without a purpose. But, if you do go, keep your nobility and a quiet seriousness, and at the same time avoid being morose.

When you are going to confer with anyone, and particularly of those in a superior station, imagine how Socrates or Zeno would behave in such a case, and you will not be at a loss as to how you can make a proper use of whatever may occur.

When you are going to any of the people in power, represent to yourself that you will not find him at home; that you will not be admitted; that the doors will not be opened to you; that he will take no notice of you. If, with all this, it is your duty to go, bear what happens, and never say to yourself, " It was not worth so much." For this is vulgar, and like a man dazed by external things.

In parties of conversation, avoid a frequent and excessive mention of your own actions and dangers. For, however agreeable it may be to yourself to mention the risks you have run, it is not equally agreeable to others to hear of your adventures. Avoid, likewise, trying to make others

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<sup>6</sup> e.g. the brutally violent gladiatorial games popular among the Romans in this period.

laugh. For this is a slippery slope, which may throw you into vulgar behavior, and, besides, may lessen you in the esteem of your acquaintances. Approaches to lewd discourse are likewise dangerous. Whenever, therefore, anything of this sort happens, if there be a proper opportunity, rebuke him who makes speaks about such things; or, at least, by silence and blushing and a forbidding look, show yourself to be displeased by such talk.

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**48.** The condition and characteristic of a normal person is that he never expects either benefit or hurt from himself, but from things external to him. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is that he expects all hurt and benefit to come from himself. The marks of someone making progress towards wisdom are that he censures no one, praises no one, blames no one, accuses no one, says nothing concerning himself as being anybody, or knowing anything: when he is, in any instance, hindered or restrained, he accuses himself; and, if he is praised, he secretly laughs at the person who praises him; and, if he is censured, he makes no defense. But he goes about with the caution of sick or injured people, dreading to move anything that is set right, before it is perfectly fixed. He suppresses all desire in himself; he transfers his aversion to those things only which thwart the proper use of our own faculty of choice; the exertion of his active powers towards anything is very gentle; if he appears stupid or ignorant, he does not care, and, in a word, he watches himself as an enemy, and one in ambush.

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**50.** Whatever moral rules you have deliberately proposed to yourself, abide by them as if they were laws, and as if you would be guilty of impiety by violating any of them. Don't regard what anyone says of you, for this, after all, is no concern of yours.

How long, then, will you put off thinking yourself worthy of the highest improvements, and put off following right reason? You have accepted the philosophical theorems, with which you ought to be familiar, and you have been familiar with them. What other master, then, do you wait for, and put off becoming better until he'll do it for you? You are no longer a boy, but a grown man. If, therefore, you will be negligent and slothful, and always add procrastination to procrastination, purpose to purpose, and keep making future dates in which you will finally start to attend to yourself, you will insensibly continue without progress, and, living and dying, persevere in being one of the vulgar masses. This instant, then, think yourself worthy of living as a man grown up, and making progress. Let whatever appears to be the best be to you an inviolable law. And if any instance of pain or pleasure, or glory or disgrace, is set before you, remember that now is the combat, now the Olympiad comes on, and it cannot be put off any longer. If you lose now, all progress is lost, or to win means to preserve your progress. In this way Socrates became perfect, improving himself by everything, and attending to nothing but

reason. And though you are not yet a Socrates, you ought, however, to live as one desirous of becoming a Socrates.

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**52.** Upon all occasions we ought to have these maxims<sup>7</sup> ready at hand:

"Conduct me, Jove, and you, O Destiny,  
Wherever your decrees have fixed my station."

"I follow cheerfully; and, did I not,  
Wicked and wretched, I must follow still  
Whoever yields properly to Fate, is deemed  
Wise among men, and knows the laws of heaven."

And these:

"O Crito, if it thus pleases the gods, thus let it be."  
"Anytus and Melitus may kill me indeed, but they cannot hurt me."

Prosecutors in his trial (Anytus and Melitus, who sought to have the death penalty imposed upon him) could actually hurt him.

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<sup>7</sup> These three quotes are favorites of Epictetus. The first comes from the second leader of the Stoic school, Cleanthes, and shows the right attitude we should have to our divinely ordained destiny. The second one is from a lost play by Euripides, the Greek tragedian, and expresses a similar idea to the first. The third quote is from Plato's *Crito*, spoken by the character Socrates as he awaits his execution. The last is a paraphrase of a section of Plato's *Apology*, spoken by Socrates. Socrates, according to Plato, believed that we were ultimately identical with our souls, not our bodies, and that our souls were immortal. Accordingly, he did not think that the prosecutors in his trial (Anytus and Melitus, who sought to have the death penalty imposed upon him) could actually hurt him.