**50 Life Lessons From Marcus Aurelius, Emperor Of Rome**



Many philosophers that you may have read about were incredibly intelligent and have written about mind-shattering topics. But that is all that they were, philosophers. Marcus Aurelius was emperor of Rome, and was the absolute ruler of his domain. He was educated by the finest scholars and teachers in the world at the time, and went through things that only a few men that have ever lived will experience.

[Meditations,](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0812968255/ref%3Das_li_qf_sp_asin_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=anabchef-20&linkCode=as2&camp=217145&creative=399369&creativeASIN=0812968255)despite its title, is a series of personal writings which embodies his ideas on Stoic Philosophy. It was split into 12 books and was his personal source of guidance and self improvement. Much of it was written in the last decade of his life, while he was leading the Roman army on campaigns against Germanic tribes encroaching Rome’s borders. His stoic ideas focus on
freeing men from the pains and pleasures of the material
world.

***The overall message is that the only way a man can be harmed
is to allow his reaction to overpower him.***

**1.**

Concentrate every minute like a Roman – like a man – on doing what’s in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. Yes, you can – if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable.

**2.**

How to act:

Never under compulsion, out of selfishness, without forethought, with misgivings.
Don’t gussy up your thoughts.
No surplus words or unnecessary actions.
Let the spirit in you represent a man, an adult, a citizen, a Roman, a ruler. Taking up his post like a soldier and patiently awaiting his recall from life. Needing no oath or witness. Cheerfulness. Without requiring other people’s help. Or serenity supplied by others. To stand up straight – not straightened.

**3.**

**Your ability to control your thoughts – treat it with respect. It’s all that protects your mind from false perceptions – false to your nature, and that of all rational beings. It’s what makes thoughtfulness possible, and affection for other people, and submission to the divine.**

**4.**

**Forget everything else. Keep hold of this alone and remember it: Each one of us lives only now, this brief instant. The rest has been lived already, or is impossible to see. The span we live is small – small as the corner of the earth in which we live it. Small as even the greatest renown, passed from mouth to mouth by short-lived stick figures, ignorant alike of themselves and those long dead.**

**5.**

Body. Soul. Mind.

Sensations: the body.
Desires: the soul.
Reasoning: the mind.

To experience sensations: even grazing beasts do that. To let your desires control you: even wild animals do that – and rutting humans, and tyrants.

To make your mind your guide to what seems best: even people who deny the gods do that. Even people who betray their country.

If all the rest is common coin, then what is unique to the good man?
To welcome with affection what is sent by fate. Not to stain or disturb the spirit within him with a mess of false beliefs. Instead, to preserve it faithfully, by calmly obeying God – saying nothing untrue, doing nothing unjust. And if the others don’t acknowledge it – this life lived in simplicity, humility, cheerfulness – he doesn’t resent them for it, and isn’t deterred from following the road where it leads: to the end of life. An end to be approached in purity, in serenity, in acceptance, in peaceful unity with what must be.

**6.**

**Our inward power, when it obeys nature, reacts to events by accommodating itself to what it faces – to what is possible. It needs no specific material. It pursues its own aims as circumstances allow; it turns obstacles into fuel. As a fire overwhelms what would have quenched a lamp. What’s thrown on top of the conflagration is absorbed, consumed by it – and makes it burn still higher.**

**7.**

Does your reputation bother you? But look at how soon we’re all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it. The emptiness of all those applauding hands. The people who praise us – how capricious they are, how arbitrary. And the tiny region in which it all takes place. The whole earth a point in space – and most of it uninhabited. How many people there will be to admire you, and who they are. “The world is nothing but change, our life is only perception.”

**8.**

Choose not to be harmed – and you won’t feel harmed.
Don’t feel harmed – and you haven’t been.

**9.**

That every event is the right one. Look closely and you’ll see. Not just the right one overall, but right. As if someone had weighed it out with scales. Keep looking closely like that, and embody it in your actions: goodness – what defines a good person. Keep to it in everything you do.

**10.**

Beautiful things of any kind are beautiful in themselves and sufficient to themselves. Praise is extraneous. The object of praise remains what it was – no better and no worse. This applies, I think, even to “beautiful” things in ordinary life – physical objects, artworks. Does anything genuinely beautiful need supplementing? No more than justice does – or truth, or kindness, or humility. Are any of those improved by being praised? Or damaged by contempt? Is an emerald suddenly flawed if no one admires it? Or gold, or ivory, or purple? Lyres? Knives? Flowers? Bushes?

**11.**

**Love the discipline you know, and let it support you. Entrust everything willingly to the gods, and then make your way through life – no one’s master and no one’s slave.**

**12.**

Nothing that goes on in anyone else’s mind can harm you. Nor can the shifts and changes in the world around you. – Then where is harm to be found? In your capacity to see it. Let the part of you that makes that judgment keep quiet even if the body it’s attached to is stabbed or burnt, or stinking with pus, or consumed by cancer.

**13.**

**It’s unfortunate that this has happened. No. It’s fortunate that this has happened and I’ve remained unharmed by it – not shattered by the present or frightened of the future. It could have happened to anyone. But not everyone could have remained unharmed by it. Why treat the one as a misfortune rather than the other as fortunate?**

**14.**

Take refuge in these two things:
I. Nothing that can happen to me that isn’t natural.
II. I can keep from doing anything that God and my own spirit don’t approve. No one can force me to.

**15.**

The things you think about determine the quality of your mind. Your soul takes on the color of your thoughts. Color it with a run of thoughts like these:
I. Anywhere you can lead your life, you can lead a good one.
II. Things gravitate toward what they were intended for. What things gravitate toward is their goal.

**16.**

Nothing happens to anyone that he can’t endure. The same things happen to other people, and they weather it unharmed – out of sheer obliviousness or because they want to display “character.” Is wisdom really so much weaker than ignorance and vanity?

**17.**

Things have no hold on the soul. They have no access to it, cannot move or direct it. It is moved and directed by itself alone. It takes the things before it and interprets them as it sees fit.

**18.**

Keep in mind how fast things pass by and are gone – those that are now, and those to come. Existence flows past us like a river: the “what” is in constant flux, the “why” has a thousand variations. Nothing is stable, not even what’s right here. The infinity of past and future gapes before us – a chasm whose depths we cannot see. So it would take an idiot to feel self-importance or distress. Or any indignation, either. As if things that irritate us lasted.

**19.**

The mind is the ruler of the soul. It should remain unstirred by agitations of the flesh – gentle and violent ones alike. Not mingling with them, but fencing itself off and keeping those feelings in their place. When they make their way into your thoughts, through the sympathetic link between the mind and body, don’t try to resist the temptation. The sensation is natural. But don’t let the mind start in with judgments calling it “good” or “bad.”

**20.**

**When jarred, unavoidably, by circumstances, revert at once to yourself, and don’t lose the rhythm more than you can help. You’ll have a better grasp of the harmony if you keep on going back to it.**

**21.**

**Not to assume it’s impossible because you find it hard. But to recognize that if it’s humanly possible, you can do it too.**

**22.**

I am composed of a body and a soul. Things that happen to the body are meaningless. It cannot be discriminate among them. Nothing has meaning to my mind except its own actions. Which are within its own control. And it’s only the immediate ones that matter. Its past and future actions are too meaningless.

**23.**

You take things you don’t control and define them as “good” or “bad.” And so of course when the “bad” things happen, or the “good” ones don’t, you blame the gods and feel hatred for the people responsible – or those you decide to make responsible.

**24.**

**When you need encouragement, think of the qualities the people around you have: this one’s energy, that one’s modesty, another’s generosity, and so on. Nothing is as encouraging as when virtues are visibly embodied in the people around us, when we’re practically showered with them. It’s good to keep this in mind.**

**25.**

**I can control my thoughts as necessary; then how can I be troubled? What is outside my mind means nothing to it. Absorb that lesson and your feet stand firm.**

**26.**

No matter what anyone says or does, my task is to be good. Like gold or emerald or purple repeating to itself, “No matter what anyone says or does, my task is to be emerald, my color undiminished.”

**27.**

The mind doesn’t get in its own way. It doesn’t frighten itself into desires. If other things can scare or hurt it, let them; it won’t go down that road on the basis of its own perceptions. Let the body avoid discomfort, and if it feels it, say so. But the soul is what feels fear and pain, and what conceives of them in the first place, and it suffers nothing. Because it will never conclude that it has. The mind itself has no needs, except for those it creates itself. It is undisturbed, except for its own disturbances. Knows no obstructions, except those from within.

**28.**

Frightened of change? But what can exist without it? What’s closer to nature’s heart? Can you take a hot bath and leave the firewood as it was? Eat food without transforming it? Can any vital process take place without something being changed? Can’t you see? It’s just the same with you – and just as vital to nature.

**29.**

To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they’re human too, that they act out of ignorance, against their will, and that you’ll both be dead before long. And, above all, that they haven’t really hurt you. They haven’t diminished your ability to choose.

**30.**

**Look at the past – empire succeeding empire – and from that, extrapolate the future: the same thing. No escape from the rhythm or events. Which is why observing life for forty years is as good as a thousand. Would you really see anything new?**

**31.**

Don’t pay attention to other people’s minds. Look straight ahead, where nature is leading you – nature in general, through the things that happen to you; and your own nature, through your own actions.

**32.**

Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what’s left and live it properly.

**33.**

Either pain affects the body (which is the body’s problem) or it affects the soul. But the soul can choose not to be affected, preserving its own serenity, its own tranquility. All our decisions, urges, desires, aversions lie within. No evil can touch them.

**34.**

Don’t try to picture everything bad that could possibly happen. Stick with the situation at hand and ask, “Why is this so unbearable? Why can’t I endure it?” You’ll be embarrassed to answer. Then remind yourself that past and future have no power over you. Only the present.

**35.**

**Stop perceiving the pain you imagine and you’ll remain completely unaffected. External things are not the problem. It’s your assessment of them. Which you can erase right now. If the problem is something in your own character, who’s stopping you from setting your mind straight?**

**36.**

Remember that when it withdraws into itself and finds contentment there, the mind is invulnerable. It does nothing against its will, even if its resistance is irrational. The mind without passions is a fortress. No place is more secure. Once we take refuge there we are safe forever. Not to see this is ignorance. To see it and not seek safety means misery.

**37.**

Other people’s wills are as independent of mine as their breath and bodies. We may exist for the sake of one another, but our will rules its own domain.

**38.**

To privilege pleasure over pain – life over death, fame over anonymity – is clearly blasphemous.

**39.**

To do harm is to do yourself harm. To do an injustice is to do yourself an injustice – it degrades you.

**40.**

Objective judgment, now, at this very moment. Unselfish action, now, at this very moment. Willing acceptance – now, at this very moment – of all external events. That’s all you need.

**41.**

Today I escaped from anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions – not outside.

**42.**

**Enter their minds, and you’ll find the judges you’re so afraid of – and how judiciously they judge themselves.**

**43.**

Consider the lives led once by others, long ago, the lives to be led by others after you, the lives led even now, in foreign lands. How many people don’t even know your name. How many will soon have forgotten it. How many offer you praise now – and tomorrow, perhaps, contempt. That to be remembered is worthless. Like fame. Like everything.

**44.**

When you run up against someone else’s shamelessness, ask yourself this: Is a world without shamelessness possible? No. Then don’t ask the impossible. There have to be shameless people in the world. This is one of them. The same for someone vicious or untrustworthy, or with any other defect. Remembering that the whole world class has to exist will make you more tolerant of its members.

**45.**

Spiders are proud of catching flies, men of catching hares, fish in a net, boars, bears, etc. How they all change into one another – acquire the ability to see that. Apply it constantly; use it to train yourself. Nothing is as conducive to spiritual growth.

**46.**

To feel grief, anger or fear is to try to escape from something decreed by the ruler of all things, now or in the past or in the future. And that ruler is law, which governs what happens to each of us. To feel grief or anger is to become a fugitive – a fugitive from justice.

**47.**

Characteristics of the rational soul: Self perception, self-examination, and the power to make of itself whatever it wants. It reaps its own harvest, unlike plants, whose yield is gathered in by others. It reaches its intended goal, no matter where the limit of its life is set.

**48.**

**If you don’t have a consistent goal in life, you can’t live it in a consistent way.**

**49.**

Everything you’re trying to reach – by taking the low way round – you could have right now, this moment. If you’d only stop thwarting your own attempts. If you’d only let go of the past, entrust the future to Providence, and guide the present toward reverence and justice.

**50.**

**It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own.**