

Chapter 2

Stuff Happens – Get used to it

There's no escaping it, so let's jump in at the deep end...

In his philosophy of 'Inner Freedom and Resilience', Epictetus put everything in our lives into one of two buckets. Ok, so he actually called them 'spheres', but let's not get too hung up on the terminology, the point is he sorted everything into one of two groups.

In the first bucket went all those things that as individuals **We don't have complete control over**. And in the second bucket went all those things that as individuals **We do have complete control over**. So far, so good. And according to Epictetus, the 'secret of resilience' (the way to leading a good life) is in knowing what we have complete control over and what we don't have complete control over. The important word here is the word '**complete**'.

So let's look at some of the stuff that might go into those buckets ...

Stuff we don't have complete control over ...

The weather, the Government, the economy, the result of a football match or a horse race, or the traffic. You don't have complete control over whether the 14:57 train from Nottingham will be on time, whether your flight gets cancelled due to fog or whether you will get the grumpy bus driver or the nice bus driver, or regardless of which bus driver you get, whether they will have enough change to change a £20 note.

You might think you can control your central heating system, your dishwasher, washing machine and car, but if it is time for any of them to malfunction, there is little you can do about it.

You can't control whether your mobile phone will have a signal when it is switched on, how long it will stay charged for once it is switched on or whether it will break if you drop it. You don't have any control over how many 'likes', 're tweets' or 'shares' your latest Tweet or Facebook posting might get. You don't even have complete control over your own body, your relationships with your friends and family, your career ... and so it goes on... and on ... and on.

It has to be said, and I'm sure Epictetus would agree, that we might be able to have a large or small influence over some of those things, but no influence no matter how large would ever amount to complete control. And it is that which we must accept.

For example with regard your body, you can eat healthily, take regular exercise, get plenty of sleep, spurn alcohol and cigarettes and say "No" to drugs, but that won't prevent you from succumbing to an inherited illness, catching a hideous disease from the person sitting next to you on the bus or breaking a leg in a skiing accident. Similarly, you might study really hard, get a good nights' sleep and take your lucky gonk and lucky pencil case into an exam with you, but there is no guarantee that you will pass.

Stuff we do have complete control over ...

Epictetus came to the realisation that whilst there is an almost infinite number of things that we as individuals do not have complete control over, there are only two things that we do have complete control over. He describes them as the power of "*positive and negative impulse*" and the power of "*desire and aversion*". That's how they spoke nearly 2,000 years ago, but in modern parlance (*Parlance*: French word from the 1300's. *Parler*: French verb 'to speak') that

would simply be our 'Actions' and our 'Thoughts'. But what does that mean exactly? Well, it means in addition of being in control of what we do, we also get to be in control of; our choices, our decisions, our commitments, our opinions, our judgements, our desires and our aversions (things we try and avoid).

We do have complete control over our:

- Actions
- Choices,
- Decisions
- Commitments
- Opinions
- Judgements
- Desires
- Aversions

We don't have complete control over:

- Everything else!

So far, so good... ☺

Epictetus believed that in many cases an individual's emotional problems come from two mistakes that we commonly make.

First Mistake:

Thinking we have complete control over those things we do not have complete control over.

Second Mistake:

Attempting to exert complete control over the things that we cannot.

When we fail to control those things that we cannot control (which inevitably we will) we become upset, angry, frustrated, helpless, victimised, disillusioned ... (insert your chosen negative response here). We might feel that nothing ever goes right for us and eventually we might become anxious and depressed. This won't happen immediately, but like a sculptor chipping away at a block of marble, it will take many 'blows' with the hammer over a long period of time before the full consequences of the repeated blows emerge.

Epictetus tells us that what has happened has happened. It has become a 'fact' and you can't change facts. There is absolutely nothing you can do to make it 'un-happen', so what's the point of worrying about it? Why let it bother you? That's not to say that you shouldn't revise hard to pass an exam, but if, despite revising hard, you still fail the exam, don't be too upset. (No one is suggesting you shouldn't initially be a bit upset, but don't dwell on it). What's the point of going over it again and again in your head? It could be that you simply didn't know enough, the 'right' questions didn't come up or the person marking your paper had had a bad day and was being harsh with their marking. Beating yourself up over it isn't going to change your mark from a fail to a pass. Similarly, if your train is late, having a hissy fit on the platform in front of fellow passengers won't make the train arrive any sooner.

However, while you have no control over how and when such events might occur, remember that you do have total control over your actions and thoughts and consequently you have total control of how you respond to such events.

Epictetus would have said that you are not upset because you failed the exam and that you are not angry because your train is late, but that you have chosen to be upset and angry in response to failing the exam or the train being late.

With regard the failed exam, you can simply be happy that you did your best (you can't ask more of yourself than that) and accept that it wasn't to be. You then have the choice of re-sitting the exam or deciding to move on to other goals. But whichever road you decide to go down, starting that journey with a head full of negative thoughts and emotions isn't going to get you far.

Similarly with your late train, just accept that it is late and enjoy the fact that you have been given 'extra time' to relax on a bench and watch the world go by, or to carry on reading your book or to have another cup of coffee. You can choose to sit and wait with either a smile on your face or a frown. Given that choice, why would you want to frown when you could smile? The train will come when it comes and arrive at its destination when it does. There is nothing you can do about it to intervene.

Epictetus, liked taking things to the extreme to make a point. In Chapter 1 of his 'Discourses', he wrote, "*I must die. But must I die bawling? I must be put in chains – but moaning and groaning too? I must be exiled; but is there anything to keep me going with a smile, calm and composed?*"

If being executed, tied in chains or being exiled can be endured without bawling, moaning and frowning then I'm sure enduring a failed exam or late train can be too.

Later on in his 'Discourses', Epictetus tells us of Agrippinus, a Roman Senator (and Stoic Philosopher) who was caught conspiring against Emperor Nero and was tried in the Senate for his misdeed. It would seem that committing treason ran in Agrippinus' family as his father had been condemned to death by Emperor Tiberius for treason. But I digress...

Agrippinus found out that his trial was underway at 11 O'Clock one morning, but chose not to attend as at that hour he was in the habit of going for a walk. On finishing his walk he was met by a friend who had news of the trial.

Friend: "You have been condemned"

Agrippinus: "To exile or death"

Friend: "To exile"

Agrippinus: "And my estate, what about that"

Friend: "It has not been confiscated"

Agrippinus: "Then let's go to my villa in Aricia and have lunch there."

Epictetus' interpretation of Agrippinus' attitude towards his fate, led him to write one of the most famous quotes in stoic philosophy:

"I have to die. If it is now, well then I die now; if later, then now I will take my lunch, since the hour for lunch has arrived – and dying I will tend to later."

Here was a man facing the possibility of being condemned to death (worst case scenario) or exiled (best case scenario) but he chose not to concern himself with either as the outcome of his trial was beyond his control and instead chose only to concern himself with those things he had control over; going for a walk and having lunch.

This might seem obvious or you may never have thought about life in this way before. But this thinking is one of the cornerstones of Stoic belief.

Although Epictetus was writing this over 2,000 years ago, this philosophy has stood the test of time.

Viktor E Frankl was a Austrian Psychologist (and I would also wager, philosopher) who was incarcerated in four prisoner of war camps over a three year period during the Second World War, during which time he witnessed at first hand the worst that humanity can inflict upon itself. He has written several accounts of his time spent in detention, one book in particular should be compulsory reading in all schools; *"Man's Search for Meaning."*

The ultimate freedom is always and remains always reserved to ourselves. That is the freedom to take a stand to whatever conditions might confront us. How we react to the unchanging conditions is up to ourselves, in other words, if we cannot change the situation, we always have the freedom to change our attitude to that situation.

The theme of only concerning oneself with the things one has total control over is a theme that Epictetus returns to again and again in his writings. His 'Enchiridion' (Handbook) is just one work where he gives many examples of this thinking. I won't go through all of them here (that's for your homework, should you be interested) but it would be rude not to take a little time out to discuss some of them. And Epictetus goes on to say, *"And yet, while there is only one thing we can care for and devote ourselves to (our actions and thoughts) we choose instead to care about and attach ourselves to a score of others; to our bodies, to our property, to our family and friends...and being attached to them we are weighed down and dragged along with them."*

Get in a reference to the analogy by Cicero about the archer, who practices, uses the best equipment , focuses and ... that is it. Whether he hits the target or not is not all up to him.