

# In The Trenches\_ Interview with Dr. William Irvine

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## SPEAKERS

Steve Divitkos, William Irvine

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**W** William Irvine 00:00

Dr. William Irvine, welcome to the show. Oh, it's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

**S** Steve Divitkos 00:06

As we discussed before we hit the record button. I was, and continue to be a huge fan of all of your books. But one book in particular that really caught my attention was called A Guide to the Good Life. And it was just a fantastic encapsulation of what we're going to talk about today, which is stoic philosophy. And in fact, as you know, Dr. Irvine This is a podcast dedicated to serving the personal and professional interests of entrepreneurs and CEOs. So there may be many entrepreneurs and CEOs listening to this, who read the title and asked what a esoteric 1000 year old philosophy has anything to do with managing a business or managing themselves as a leader. But my hope is that by the end of this conversation, they will understand why I thought this was a topic worth mentioning. So before we get into the details, I suspect many people listening to this will be completely unfamiliar with stoic philosophy. So maybe a logical starting point for us would be for you to just please explain to us what stoicism is, and perhaps what stoicism is not.

**W** William Irvine 01:17

Okay, let me start by addressing the comments you just made. First of all, it would be bad enough, if it were 1000 year old thing, but it's actually 2000 years old, which makes it twice as bad. Do the math on that. And then you might wonder, well, what could they possibly. And I have to say that it's still of interest in the upside on that is that we humans have an evolutionary past. We're wired with certain traits with certain responses, and the wiring changes, but it changes over a period of 100,000 years, you know, roughly. So he's still got the

wiring that they dealt with. So they're my concern with the stoics is primarily with their psychological insights. And human psychology has not changed in that time. I'll also throw in some more comments there. And one is that Seneca, who is currently my favorite of the Roman Stoics, was himself a businessman. In fact, he was the first century AD equivalent of a billionaire one of the earliest of his times. So it's possible to be a successful businessman and to be a stoic. And then another thing is in conjunction with another project I'm working on. So the connection with stoicism and with life in the business world, and in particular managerial life, there actually is a quite interesting tie in and that's why when you invited me, you know, the question was, okay, is this really something I'm suited to discuss? I can always discuss stoicism, I can do that for hours and hours and hours. But is this something where I'd have some special insight in I would say, this is a kind of a sub group of stoic ideas. That is how it applies to the business world, how it applies to management. So there actually is a really nice tie in and I'll let listeners judge for themselves, the usefulness of that tie in. So as far as the stoics go, there's a good chance that if this is the first time, you're hearing about stoicism, that everything you know about it is wrong. And if you went to the dictionary and looked up stoic, you'll find that it's a person who grimly takes whatever life has to throw at him, and who stands there and simply stifles his emotion, who never smiles, who's always grimacing. And that's what it means to be stoical. Except if you look at ancient stoics themselves, they were not that. So they were not anti emotion. See, here's the first key thing they were not anti emotion. They were anti negative emotions. So we can divide motions into two categories. Negative emotions are things like anger, like envy, like grief, like regret. What makes them negative? Well, they don't feel good. They don't feel good. If you've got those. It's gonna feel bad. And in the other category, we've got positive emotions. So we've got feelings of delight. We've got feelings of joy. We've got a sense of awe about the universe that we find ourselves in. We have feelings of hope. We have a bunch of feelings that when you have them, it's a good thing. It feels good. I know I'm a big fan of feelings of delight. And if you put your self in the right frame of mind, you can take delight in minor common things. You can be there delighted when many people are simply oblivious to what you're what you're seeing. So the stoics said, you know what, these positive emotions, the more of them the better. And in fact, they had a reputation in their time for being cheerful individuals, you know, and if I said the cheerful, stoic, you're gonna say, well, that's an oxymoron. Except that means you're using the wrong sense of stoicism. So I distinguish in my writings between lowercase s stoics. And those are the kind you find in the dictionary, right, and uppercase S Stoics. And that's people who are living in accordance with this ancient philosophy. And the uppercase stoics were emotional beings, they just said, we're going to come up with strategies that can maximize the number of positive emotions we experience and minimize the number of negative emotions. Now notice I said minimized, I didn't say eliminate, because it's impossible to eliminate them. We're wired to have them, it's just, it's hardwired into us. So we can't eliminate them in the stoics. Even though they didn't know about evolution, and wiring and so on, they intuitively recognize that. And you can look at yourself and watch yourself think and watch yourself react to things and you realize, wow, there are these reflexive things. So the stoics knew that they couldn't eliminate negative emotions. And then the next thing, so what they came up with strategies for suppressing the negative emotions, and that isn't even correct. Because they came up with strategies even better, for number one, not experiencing them. So there wouldn't be anything to suppress. So it's like one level deeper, we'll know we're working to fix it so that you don't have anything to suppress. And they also realize that there would be times when the attempts at avoiding would fail. And then they came up with strategies for mitigating the damage done by the negative emotion. They realized that what really hurts us is typically not the emotion, the negative emotion itself. But it's our response to the negative emotion. So suppose somebody said something mean to you, and you get angry as a result? Okay. So let's think about this, what they said was just words, and the words probably had little to do with anything, you know, maybe they were just having a

bad day. But what they said can haunt you for the rest of the day, can keep you awake, not only that night, but other nights. And it might be something you're still thinking about a decade ago. And if you think back on your life, you will realize there are things people said to you a decade ago, that are still causing you pain. And the stoic said yeah, now, that's kind of on you, if you're letting their little action, have that impact on your life, there are things you could do to avoid having that happen. And then the third thing on this I think I'm up to three now. Let me recapitulate. It's not that you're preventing yourself from having negative emotions. It's not that you're having them in suppressing them. It's that sometimes you're gonna have them. Number one is how to mitigate the harm they do to you. But another thing is, you can even harness the energy of those negative emotions, you can redirect it. So your anger, for instance, it's possible to redirect it. And so it's a curious thing. So it's not just that you're mitigating the harm it's doing to you, but you're actually harnessing it and using it to improve your situation. So that's what the stoics were about. And I think of them and they also had other interests. They had an interest for instance in physics in the way the world worked. They had an interest in logic, so they were experts in what we call properties. additional logic, which is the kind of logic that's used in computer programming. So if you really wanted to stretch things, you could say they were the inventors of the computer, which would be an incredible stretch, you know, but hey, it's good PR. But then the last thing, and this is, for me, the most important thing about them was their psychological insights. They were the most important psychologists of the first century AD and their insights were only rediscovered in an exploited late in the 20th Century by cognitive psychologists, who kind of realized, oh, here's something about how the human brain works. So whatever you thought stoics were, you're gonna learn different today.

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Steve Divitkos 10:59

That's great. That's great. And that's a perfect segue into the next section. Because where I want to spend the bulk of our conversation today is to go through a number of core stoic ideals, or at least in my mind, what I view to be core stoic ideals. And in fact, for each ideal, I'm going to mention kind of what the core concept is. stoicism is also the most quotable philosophy that I'm aware of, and I'm a sucker for a good quote. So actually, for each ideal, I'm actually going to give a quote directly from one of the several books I own on the topic. And then lastly, I'll ask you a question. So let's dive into core ideal number one. And that idea is basically gratitude for what you have, and paying no mind to the things that you do not yet have. There are two quick, great quotes on this that I that I took note of. One is it is impossible, pardon me, it is quite impossible to unite happiness with a yearning for what we don't yet have. And the other quote is, don't set your mind on the things that you don't possess, as if they were yours, but count the blessings you actually possess and think how much you would desire them if they weren't already yours, which I love. So the question for you is, in your book, you talk a lot about desire, and how constantly striving and focusing on the things that you don't yet have is a very common trait among those who don't have particularly happy lives. But for an entrepreneur hearing that for the first time, they may think that stoic philosophy is incompatible with ambition and work ethic and perseverance. Because for them a focus on what they don't yet have is basically the fuel that drives their pursuit of you know, the next customer, the next sale, whatever the case may be. So what would you say to a skeptical listener who raised that concern? And more broadly, how compatible are the ideas of stoicism and ambition?

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William Irvine 12:51

Okay, so the stoics themselves were ambitious people. So I mean, right away, you know, we can break this idea that stoicism is an ambition killer. So let's see Marcus Aurelius. Oh, yeah, he was the emperor of Rome. He was one of the good Emperor's too of Rome. He got things done. He went on campaigns with the army. He tried to reform many different things. Seneca was also attempting to change the world that he saw through his teachings through his influence. So I told you, he was a first century billionaire. He was also the most prolific of the stoic writers. And back then, by the way, you did it. You had a scribe nearby or you wrote things yourself. You didn't have a keyboard. And so just imagine writing everything out longhand. Right? And with no spell checker. But he did it. Oh, and he was the leading playwright of his time. Okay. And he was counselor too, an Emperor himself another Roman Emperor. So is this a guy whose ambition has no ambition. Now he seems to have ambition. So here's the thing. It's one thing to be ambitious. In fact, we're wired to be ambitious. So I talked about wiring earlier on the savannahs of Africa. 200,000 years ago, a person who was easily satisfied was soon dead. And that is because it was a very challenging environment and you had to be constantly thinking about what is my next meal going to be. And how can I avoid becoming somebody, something else's meal, you know? And if you were the sort of person who said you know, life is good, I'm just going to sit on these rocks and soak in the sunlight, chances are you didn't last very long. So we're wired with that aggressive kinds of desire for more how much is enough? Well, there's never enough, you can always get that incremental something more. And the problem is, you end up on what modern psychologists call a hedonic treadmill. And on this treadmill, you know, you're running as fast as you can, but you're staying in the same spot relative to the rest of the room. So let's just think about how people formed desires and act on them. Let's think about how ambition works. So if you're just sitting there, and you've sort of feel that life is good to you, what happens is ideas are always floating into your mind, your mind has a mind of its own. And desires are constantly floating into your mind. And it's really interesting look around you or look at yourself, for that matter. And you can find examples of this. So I knew oh, woman was talking to her. And, you know, we're talking this would be mid COVID, you know, how the housing market was going crazy? And I said, do you have any interest in switching to buying a house or investing? And she said, No, no, no, not at all. And that next weekend, she bought a house, right? So it's puzzling behavior. And yet, she's normal. Because that's how it works. People who find themselves buying a very expensive wristwatch. Not even the kind that tells you how many steps you've taken, but the old fashioned kind, you know, how did that happen? What is that about exactly? So what happens is you find these desires, floating into your mind, sometimes they're consumer desires, you want to own something, and of course, their ambitions, you want to reach the next level in your career, or you want money, how much money is enough, more money, okay. And so you become dissatisfied, so you were satisfied. A new desire popped into your head, you became dissatisfied. And then the next thought is, what I've got to do is work really hard to get that thing I want, because then I will be happy. Okay. So you do that lots of time, lots of energy, lots of thought, you know, you're coming up with clever strategies for getting that thing you want. And then you get it. And are you happy? Of course, you're happy, you got the thing you want, except it doesn't last. And I've watched myself in these, you know, I have these career goals, watch myself, work very hard to get them get them. And sometimes in some cases, it's lasts. For example, the first time I got a publisher for a book, I was glowing for two days, then it fades. And other things, it's amazing. I have the glow has lasted like a matter of minutes, and then it fades. And then what happens next? Well, then you've got a new point to start from. And you're sitting there and you're saying, you know, I thought that was the thing that would do it, that would make me happy forevermore, and it didn't quite take, but you don't want this next thing. So you get a new desire. And you think if only I can get that I'll live happily ever after. So you set off in pursuit of it, and you get it. And now you be a few minutes, a few days, maybe a few months, you're back to where you were. It

can be with what you own, it can be with your position in the business world. It can be with your wife, your husband, your partner, right? Where you know, at first you think, oh, what a wonderful person if only that person would marry me. And you get married and you're thinking I'm the luckiest man or woman on the planet, and it fades and then you start thinking Oh, actually, there's this new person. And you can spend your life on that treadmill or another analogy as you're like a person on the Sahara Desert, and you're really hot, you're really thirsty. And over there. Look, look, it's water and you start crossing the desert to get to the water. And you get there only to realize it's a mirage. And so you stand up and look again in there off in the distance, there's water again. And it's another mirage. So there's a real danger that you spend your entire life in pursuit of mirages, and you get them. And not only do you not live happily ever after, but you realize that you are on this treadmill. So there's this one question of how do you get off? So be ambitious, but you know, always be monitoring, are you actually improving your circumstances? Or are you just stuck on this treadmill? I'm going to pause there and let you do a mid course correction on me. So where should I go from here?

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Steve Divitkos 20:43

Well, I mean, I feel like you and I could talk for hours about this one question alone. I think that for me, the big takeaway is always and this is something that we'll get to in a little bit. But this concept that I often say is, you know, play for the journey and not for the destination. Because if you're playing specifically for a destination, an outcome, a promotion, or raise an exit, whatever the case may be, you're likely to be less fulfilled than you might think, once you actually reach that destination. Because the first thing that we do as human beings, as you correctly point out, is just move the goal lines forward, the instant we reach that goal line. So I mean, this interview, could be four hours if I had my way. But of course, I don't want to take up that much of your time. So what I want to do is move to four, stone stoic ideal number two, and this is the idea, I'll summarize by encapsulating it in the following way, live in the present moment and don't, quote, suffer in advance. And the quote that I attached to this idea is perhaps my favorite of all, when Seneca said we suffer more in imagination than we do in reality. In fact, if I could distill the concept of anxiety down into a single sentence, that actually might be it. So this might sound self evident on the surface, but can you just share with us a little bit more about what you think he meant by that statement? And maybe why do we all seem to fall victim to this at times? And what might we be able to learn from Senecas take on the matter?

W

## William Irvine 22:18

Yeah, anxiety is a negative emotion. And so there's two different ways to think about this. One is anxiety can be caused by some kind of mental imbalance, in which case you don't need stoicism, you probably need medication or therapy, of some kind. So there's that thing, I get emails from people. And sometimes when they describe, to me the anxiety, I say, look, I'm not the right kind of doctor, I'm a Doctor of Philosophy. You need to find yourself a Doctor of Medicine, and get the proper treatment. But in other cases, we're anxious because we fail to pay attention to some very basic stoic advice. And this comes from the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus. And he said, very wisely, there are things we can control and things we can't control. And if we focus our attention on things we can't control, we're wasting our time, for the simple reason that we can't control them. Now, if we're sensible, what we'll do is focus our attention on things we can control. So what can you control, you can control the goals you set for yourself, you can control the ways in which you try to achieve those goals. You can devote a lot of attention into brainstorming to think about the different ways you reach those goals. So you'll come up with the optimal way of reaching those goals. That's where you want your energy and attention to go. So I use an analogy here of playing tennis. Suppose you were gonna play a tennis match against your arch rival, and it was going to be in a week's time, so you can spend your time worrying about what's going to happen at that mansion, who's going to win and are you going to win or lose. Or you can break it down the way Epictetus would, and you could say, well, there's things I can control. For instance, I can control how hard I trained, I can control the strategy I developed for playing the match. I can control what I eat the day before and the night before I can control not staying out all night the night before, drinking beer, which will hinder my performance. Now, I can't control how he plays, I can't control how he trains I can't control all of those aspects. So I'm not going to devote my attention to those. I'm going to focus on what I can do. Do things I can do. And you know what if I do that, and I end up doing the best I can, and I lose the game, then bottom line, he's a better tennis player than I am, right? So either I've got to reinvent what I'm doing or maybe this just isn't my game, okay. But to spend the time beating up on yourself or saying, you know, worrying about it, the anxiety is simply wasted emotion. Although there is a sense in which a degree of anxiety can also be beneficial. So for instance, I'm a competitive rower. And I know when I'm at the starting line, that anxiety there, it's just a precursor of adrenaline that will help me get through the first section of a race. But there's also pointless anxiety that detracts from your ability to do the things I described before. detracts from your ability to consider your options detracts from your ability to come up with the best strategy for going where you want to go. It's just a major distraction. So a stoic would say, don't do that. Don't do that focus on the things you can control. And then, you know, don't leave anything behind you, you do the best you can, because that's the best you can do. And if it comes up short, then it comes up short. You learn from the experience, and you go into the next experience, a more competent and confident individual as a result.

**S****Steve Divitkos 26:44**

So maybe that's a perfect segue for core stoic ideal number three, and frankly, maybe I should have put this as number one. Because if I had to encapsulate stoicism into one sentence, it might be exactly what you were referring to, which is we don't control what happens to us. But we do control how we respond to what happens to us. And one quote that comes to mind is from Marcus Aurelius, when you said external things are not the problem. It is 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. So of course, the basic idea here, of course, we don't control everything that happens to us. We control how we respond. And more specifically, we can control what we think. And it's that last part that I want to double click on. So somebody who might be battling something like anxiety or other sorts of challenges might push back on this and say, I'm not fully in control of what I think. And indeed, if thinking were entirely up to me, I wouldn't be suffering from anxiety in the first place. How might you respond to somebody who articulates that objection?

**W****William Irvine 27:52**

Okay, I'm backing up to what you said earlier. And then we'll talk about that objection. So my favorite stoic motto, and it wasn't uttered by a stoic, but anyway, it's to do what you can, with what you've got where you are. I don't have any tattoos, but if I did, that would be a great candidate for the first tattoo, do what you can with what you've got where you are, because that's all you can do, you know. And there's a whole bunch of ways you can fall short of doing even that. And that's the trouble. Now, the question about the anxiety and about controlling your own minds. You know, like I said, Your mind has a mind of its own. And one of the most important insights for you to gain about your world and your place in it is to investigate your own mind. So for instance, there's a meditation, there's what's called the Zazen Meditation. By the way, stoicism is compatible with doing various forms of meditation. But anyway, this most basic kind is for you to find a fairly quiet place, you don't have to lie down, you can sit comfortably if you want, and close your eyes and let your mind go blank. And you do that for five minutes. You could set a timer if you wanted. And what you will quickly discover is that you can't let your mind go blank because new ideas are floating in. And at first, you know, one floats in and you think oh, well, you know, I just gotta let it I gotta try harder. Of course once you're trying, you're not letting your mind go blank. But you'll find your thoughts drifting. When am I going to have for dinner tonight? Oh, darn, I'm supposed to let my mind go blank or you're gonna think about something somebody said Do you two days ago and it was real be annoying, ah, supposed to let it go blank. That's the human condition you spend, you aren't in control of your own thoughts, you're in control of many of them. But some of the most annoying ones just drift in, and desires also just drift in. So that's just part of being alive in in the stoic Insight was well, okay, so that's what we got to work with. So what are we going to do with those, and then they came up with various strategies for dealing with them.

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Steve Divitkos 30:35

Another core ideal that I love is with regards to the value of, you know, undergoing difficult experiences in one's life. And the quote that comes to mind here is also from Seneca perhaps the most quotable of all. He said, I judge you unfortunate because you have never lived through misfortune, you've passed through life without an opponent. No one can ever know what you're capable of, not even you. And so the question for you is, at a high level, what can we learn from the stoics about the power and importance of navigating ourselves through difficult periods or circumstances? And the reason why I want to ask this question, specifically to you is that entrepreneurs and CEOs face a seemingly never ending avalanche of difficult periods and circumstances and problems that they need to solve. So can you talk to us about what we can learn from the stoics about the value and the importance of navigating ourselves through these types of periods?

W

William Irvine 31:37

Yeah, I'll start by giving your listeners a really precious piece of advice, I'm going to tell them how never ever to fail in what they do. And it's just never do anything difficult. And you will never fail, right? So you know, just stay in bed, just kind of hang out, and you're never gonna fail. And each night, you'll fall asleep saying another good day, except, of course, you'll be you won't be a terribly functional human being. So the stoics said, what you should do is you need to develop your ability to do difficult things. And that means you need to do things where a failure is a possibility. And now you're not going to do something where failure is a sure thing, but you're going to do risky things. Because you're going to learn important lessons from doing them. So you set out to do something that's risky, and you fail. Now, fail is an interesting word, because what's the metric for whether you failed? One is does the world perceive you as having failed? And the Stoics would say, that's the one that doesn't matter. What really does matter is whether two things, whether you did what you could with what you had, right? And if you did, and you failed, well, then it just wasn't for you, a doable thing. Second thing is, what did you learn from it? You know, there's something worse than failing and then is not learning from the failure. A few days ago, we had actually, a few weeks ago, now we had the launch of Elon Musk's giant rocket, and it kind of turned sideways kind of blew up. Bad things happen. And yet, all around, their space control room, there were high fives, you know, they were saying, this is success. Well, wait a minute, it blew up. Didn't make it into orbit. It blew up. Yeah. But from their point of view, you know, it didn't take out the the gantry. It actually did substantial damage to the concrete below the gantry. But that's a separate issue. And they learned a lot from it. And I guess if you look at the early launches, they had a number of failures. So failure is what? Oh, yeah, it's the price for doing something really difficult. And each time you fail, you learn and you move on to do more, better failures, until you finally reach success. And so the outside world is going to be snipping away at you, you failed, you failed, you failed. And then but if you really kind of know what the game is, yeah, that's what you got to do to achieve success. If you start reading the biographies of the most successful people in history. They're remarkable for the number of times they failed. There are some exceptions, but otherwise, they're remarkable for how much they failed. What made them special. Well, on failing, they didn't break. They bounced, and they came away more competent, and more confident. Those are the two C's. More competent, because now they know something they didn't know before, and more confident, because they know they can do something really hard, fail, and come back to try again. A lot of people don't fail, how come because they're afraid of failing. And that is failing in the public sense. So they never try anything difficult. So they're doomed to a life of mediocrity, because they never try anything difficult. Now, one thing just to show you that there's a second thing and we can pursue it or not. But the stoics actually thought, besides doing risky things where failure was possible, doing things that made you uncomfortable. So they have this whole stoic training program, things that make you physically uncomfortable things that make you mentally uncomfortable, just as part of stoic practice, but we can head which direction you're interested in at this point.

**S****Steve Divitkos 36:05**

I would love to go there where I want to quickly jump on before we get there, because my plan is to get there is actually to touch on the idea of time, because this is another part of stoic philosophy that I think is well, it's relevant to substantially everybody. But I think particularly in this context, speaking with leaders of small businesses, I can say from firsthand experience that, like so many of us they are perpetually time starved, both in their personal and professional lives. So the next two core stoic ideals revolve around time. The first it being time is our most valuable asset. And the second is time is our most finite asset. So let's start with time being our most valuable asset. And this is another Seneca quote, he said, no person would give up even an inch of their estate, yet we easily let others encroach upon our lives. No person hands out their money to passers by, but to how many do each of us hand out our lives? We are tight fisted with property and money that we think too little of wasting time. The one thing about which we should all be the toughest misers. He had a way with words, that was pretty incredible. So I guess this is more of kind of a personal question for you. What are some of the ways that you personally have manifested or operationalize this concept in your own life? And how do you ensure that you're deliberate about using your finite time and not wasting it or allow others to control it?

**W****William Irvine 37:39**

Okay. So time is indeed a precious, there are people who will waste your time, if you give them half a chance. So there are conversations that are simply pointless, and there are people with whom it's very difficult to have a meaningful conversation. So you avoid those circumstances. I'm getting older, I think I turned 71 recently, and, you know, I've noticed as I get older, that I become more aware of time being wasted. You know, it's sort of like, if somebody is doing something, really and competently, it's sort of like, come on, you know, time's a wasting here. Practical sorts of things, I become aware that my attention span is, is reduced. Now, I'm not sure whether that's a process part of the process of getting older, or whether it's just exposure to the internet and to social media, which I tried to limit to, but still in a in a broader sense, half. So I've tried to make a point of mono tasking, instead of multitasking. There's a lot of people, it's a productivity thing. There's a lot of people who think if you're multitasking, then you're doing two, three or four things at once. And so you increase your productivity. Now you're doing two, three or four things badly. So the idea is to set aside chunks of time, where you are focused laser like on one thing, and I found that, so I'm using this Pomodoro timer technique is one of the things. And I set aside these periods and I'm really ruthless with myself. I can't cheat, but it's amazing how I find it easy to cheat, and to come up with plausible reasons for not being doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I shut down all the other screens, I turn off the phone. And that seems to be useful. We're living in difficult times in that they're just so many distractions. So as far as time goes, you know, watch who you talk to, and then just just set aside time to get a task done. And then finish it in that time. And don't try to multitask.

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Steve Divitkos 40:19

I'm not sure if Warren Buffett is a practicing stoic or not, probably not. But the one quote that comes to mind from him, as he said, time is the one thing I can't buy, which I thought was a really interesting one, you know, two things come to mind in response to your answer. The first is the power of saying no. There's this great framework used by Shane Parrish, who hosts another podcast called The Knowledge project. And he basically breaks things down into three buckets. Things I want to do, things I have to do, and things other people want me to do. And just being aware of those three categories has made me commit to fewer and fewer obligations that fall into bucket number three, if I want to do it, or if I have to do it, I'm going to do it. If it's simply a matter of someone else wanting me to do it. The power of saying no, I found is to be very freeing, like the power of the gracious, no thanks. And then the second from a more practical tactical perspective, is the most valuable part of my day is the first five minutes of every day where I decide what I'm going to do that day. So I'll say I have task A, I'm going to spend an hour on that task B, I'm going to spend two hours on that. Task C, I'll spend half an hour and that's it, that those are the only things I want to do today. So for anyone listening, those are two kind of tactical thoughts that may be may be a value. Let's move on to idea number six, which is time is our most finite asset, and specifically, how focusing on the finite nature of our time helps us make the most of it. In my experience another I don't know, misconception about stoicism is that it's in a way, it's morbid because they always talk about death. But in fact, that's not at all the case. So I'm going to read another quote from Seneca this one's a bit of a long one, so hang with me, but it's so well said that I felt as if I had to say it. He said you live as if you were destined to live forever. No thought of your frailty ever enters your head of how much time has already gone, you take no heed. You squander time as if you drew full from a full and abundant supply, though all the while that day which you bestow upon some other person or thing is perhaps your your last. This this next line is just ridiculously well said. He said, you have all of the fears of mortals and all of the desires of immortals. You will hear many men saying after my 50th year I shall retire in the leisure after my 60th year that she'll release me from public duties. And what guarantee pray have you that your life will last longer? That's a mouthful. But my goodness, well said. So I guess my question for you is in saying this. I presume he's not saying something to the effect of like, live each day as if it was your last. I've always found that quote to be honestly, cliché and not particularly realistic or not particularly helpful. So I guess if Seneca isn't saying that, what exactly is he saying here?

W

## William Irvine 43:25

Yeah. So live each day as if it were your last is terrible advice, because I know what I would do if it was my last night. Head for Las Vegas. Yeah, I don't think I would. But actually, if it were my last, I would probably do approximately what I'm already doing. So but here's my way of putting it. This is the equation, the stoic equation for life.  $X$  equals the number of days you have left to live. So you don't know the value of  $X$ . So it could be zero, meaning this is your last day to live. It could be one meaning live as if you were going to die tomorrow. Could be 1000. Could be 10,000. Depends on where you are in life. But there is some number there and your it's your time is going to be up. Now, if you dwell on that, and you're going to be miserable, but it's certainly something worth keeping in the back of your mind. So to see why a good way is to imagine the opposite. Imagine that there were no  $X$  number there. I mentioned that it was infinite. I don't know if you've seen or if you have if you remember the movie Groundhog Day where Bill Murray keeps waking up and it's Groundhog Day once again. And he goes through the process of just degenerated get out until finally he's he's waking up early. in the morning, and staying in his pajamas, drinking hard liquor all through the day, you know, watching television, the thing is that if you know, there's  $X$  number of days, then you know today represents one over  $X$  of that. You're spending it, you're spending that day doing something, and it makes it a lot more likely that you're not going to waste that day. Because if you had infinite number of days, you could always put off today what you could do tomorrow. Because you could do it again, I mean, it would be an infinite supply. Now, here's a nice saying for you imagine an infinite vessel, it could never be full, right? Infinite capacity vessel could never be full. Same could be said of a life with infinite capacity, you could never fill it, you could never have a fulfilling life. I'm stretching the meaning words, a little bit there. But if you knew you're going to live forever, then waste today and waste tomorrow and waste after that. So it gives meaning, it gives significance to your daily existence. And now as a kind of a tag on to that. So I often in audiences had them, you know, ask how many of you want to go to heaven? You know, most hands go up. I said, How long does heaven last forever? And then the question, is, there actually two questions. Number one, do you take your personality with you? If you get to heaven? And if the answer is yes, then you're probably going to be as miserable in heaven as you are on earth, you're going to be envious. You're going to be angry, you're going to go through all of these. But the other thing is, if you were in heaven, it lasts forever. And a lot of people would say and that's a good thing. And I'm inclined to think no, that would be an awful thing. Because just think of all the time you would waste. And people said well, no, I wouldn't waste it. If I was in heaven. Well, great. Don't waste it while you're on Earth, right? Maybe there's heaven, maybe there isn't. But for sure there's Earth. So, don't waste it here. Yeah, so they focus on that, but it's not a kind of a dark thought. It's a life affirming thought that the days are numbered. So take full advantage of them.

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Steve Divitkos 47:26

Yeah, it's a perspective generating thought, and from certainly a more recent standpoint, there's a great blog post for people who want to get a bit of additional perspective on you know, time and the finitude of our lives. Tim Urban, published a great blog post called The Tail End. So if you just Google Tim Urban, The Tail End, I'm sure it'll be the first result. It's like a five minute read, but five minutes well spent. So we talked about the hedonic treadmill earlier, we talked about this idea of what I'll loosely call contingent happiness, which basically says, you know, subconsciously, we tend to say, I'll be happy when, I'll be happy when I get the promotion. I'll be happy when I buy a nice car, etcetera. So the seventh core stoic ideal is what I've loosely, kind of described his play for the journey and not for the destination because the destination may not be as fulfilling as wonderful as you've been thinking. So I have yet another very long quote, but it's so good that I have to say it, and then I'll get to the question. So yet again, from Seneca. He said, all the greatest blessings are source of anxiety, and at no time is fortune less wisely trusted than when it is best. To maintain prosperity, there is need of other prosperity, and in behalf of the prayers that have turned out well, we must make still other prayers. For everything that comes to us from chances unstable, and the higher it rises, the more liable it is to fall. Very wretched therefore, and not merely short must the life of those who work hard to gain what they must work harder to keep. By great toil, they attain what they wish and with anxiety hold what they have attained. Meanwhile, they take no account of time that will never more return. New and Grossman's take the place of the old hope leads to new hope, ambition to new ambition, they do not seek an end to their wretchedness, but change the cause. So that's a hard act to follow. However, the question for you is, it's actually I'm not sure if you're aware of this, Dr. Irvine, but it's actually been well documented that when an entrepreneur sells her business and achieves a life changing financial windfall, they're actually more likely to be depressed than they were while running their business. Which is counterintuitive to many people. And in fact, I think there's many studies that have come to similar conclusions with respect to lottery winners. So what might the stoics say about how predictable this outcome at actually is and what might we be able to learn from it?

**W****William Irvine 50:03**

Yeah, the I actually retired like a year and a half ago, or semi retired because I'm still still writing but retired from classroom teaching. And it really is an interesting life transition. So you think you know about the big life transitions going off to college, you know, leaving home. Getting on your first school bus, you know, you think about the transitions. This isn't an interesting and important one. And I guess I can see, I wake up every morning and realize I have nothing, I mean, unless I agree to do them like this. The day is mine to spend how I want and that can be a blessing. And that can be just the grounds for disaster because your your days become so unstructured. So I still, the day needs a backbone is the way I put it, I found a backbone for my days. I have two writing sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Lots of playtime. But you're absolutely right. There are people who retire in the first six months is like the best they can imagine. Because they're they've got all this freedom, but then they aren't sure what to do with it. And yes, I have known people who have fallen into depression. You talked about Warren Buffett, earlier, I'm a big Warren Buffett fan. And you know, one of the things that Berkshire Hathaway does, is they buy businesses from people who for various reasons, want to cash out, but who want to keep running the business, which is a paradox, except they love the business. They just don't love various of the hassles that come with running the business. And that's what Charlie Buffett and Charlie Munger and Warren Buffett are looking for when they buy companies. Are you still going to manage it for us? Are you still going to run it and apparently they pay very well, whoever that person is, besides the company, but pay them, keep them on the payroll. For those people, it isn't a job, you know, it's what they want to do. It's their creation. So they feel very attached to it. In a lot of companies, it's difficult for an employee to feel that way to feel, you know, am I just a cog in the wheel? Or is this my, my clay that I molding into some beautiful statue? Well, there are all sorts of challenges that come with retirement. And there are ways to get around because there are people who thrive and there are people who just find it a difficult difficult task. Stoics would say it's an old thing, what are you aiming at in life, you can still be ambitious in your retirement, you can still set goals for yourself. And it might be broadening out exploring new horizons, you know, like maybe I know, a few people who are retired who have new side projects, kind of social outreach projects, trying to help other people. And great because what they're going to do is take that passion and just pour it into a different thing. And instead of \$1 profit, they're going to see lives changed is going to be the profit. So it's a tough transition, but doable transition.

**S****Steve Divitkos 53:43**

I was listening to Morgan Housel is podcast, somebody who I have a great deal of respect for and I'm going to paraphrase here, but he he said something to the effect of this idea that humans basically require a baseline level of stress. And in situations where no obvious stressor exists, at a subconscious level, we either seek them out or we kind of create them in, in our own minds. How do you respond to that idea?

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William Irvine 54:12

Yeah, I like learning curves. Now learning curves are intrinsically stressful, but you just give me free rein and what I'll do is find some new learning curve to cope with and I suppose it introduces, I would call it not stress. See, that's a negative way to put it. It's a challenge. So for me to be challenged is a sign of growth. So lately, now that I'm retired, we have all of this stuff we've acquired and you know, some of it is like generational stuff where it was some ancestors collection, and I haven't looked at it since inheriting it. So I'm now getting rid of it. So I'm on eBay selling stuff which, okay, Learning Curve, very interesting learning curve. And yet I delight in that, you know, it's sort of like Oh, I get to be the shopkeeper now. I get to be the auctioneer now. I get to do this, and there's an element of stress, but there's an element of growth as well, I'm learning stuff I wouldn't have known about otherwise. I told you, I think I told you, I'm a competitive rower. Despite my age here, there's still a lot to learn there, and you get coached and you're learning new things. So you can say it's a stress level, I think it's just much more positive. It's a self imposed challenge. And why am I challenging myself so I can grow? So I can become more self confident, right? So I can become more assured that if life throws me a curve, I'll be ready. I'll be ready to nail it, you know, to hit it out of the park. So again, it's just a question of choice of words, a challenge rather than stress.

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Steve Divitkos 56:09

So let's transition. So we've covered seven core stoic ideals. And let's explore if it's okay with you your personal relationship with and your personal practice of stoic philosophy. So, I mean, we talked about this at the beginning of the discussion today that one of the appeals of stoicism is that it's a philosophy that's 2000 years old, yet it is as relevant to our lives today, as it was 1000s of years ago. I hope people listening to this, can think about the quotes that I have mentioned throughout the course of our discussion today. And my reflection of those quotes is, man, it feels as if someone could have written those last week, nevermind 2000 years ago. So with that said, in a hypothetical world, if you personally were given the chance to write the definitive book on stoic philosophy for 2023, would you add or subtract or change anything and why or why not?

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William Irvine 57:07

I'm happy with what I've got done, I'm ready to move on. In fact, I'm late in a project where I'm moving on to a different thing. But here's an interesting wrinkle. So guy did the good life came out in like 2006 ish, 2008, some time back, then. slow start got off to a slow start started picking up an audience and then in publishing they referred to as legs, it just sold very well, for a decade. It started falling off, and then COVID hit, right. And so for me, COVID had a silver lining, and that is the guide to the good life of sales increased dramatically. And now that COVID is going away, starting to trail off, and don't get me wrong, I'm not I'm not sort of cheering for a new plague or anything like that. But then you think about what happened during COVID, meaning we were talking about, you know, negative visualization, consciously thinking about bad things that could happen to you. And so one of the things is COVID, you didn't have to go through that exercise, bad things were happening to you. Right? So your favorite restaurant, you could no longer go there, you know, you could no longer see your relatives or your elderly relatives face to face, you would have to look through a window at them. And know they were confused about well, why were they looking through a window. So it did this big negative exercise for us. And now COVID is in decline. It's not gone. But it's in the background now. And so now guess what, we have to do it ourselves. So if times are hard, stoicism comes naturally, and people become more grateful for what they've got, because they've seen it snatched away. And so one thing I would add to my books is oh, by the way, if you haven't had that happen to you, then you need to be doing it on your own. It's kind of like a personal maintenance, you need to be engaged in this kind of activity. So I would throw that in and you know, if you've had a lucky life, or just bad things haven't happened to you and I suppose that's true of me. I've had difficult things but no truly horrible things, then stoicism you need to be doing it because you never know when things are going to change.

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Steve Divitkos 59:55

I mean to make this more, I don't know tangible, personal, since you began practicing stoicism yourself, are you comfortable sharing a particularly difficult or sad or disruptive event that you face personally? And what are some of the stoic tools that you use to help you persevere through that event?

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William Irvine 1:00:17

It's going to be difficult to do for the simple reason that I'm such an instinctive stoic, that I no longer know when I'm doing stoic practice. It isn't sort of like I reach into my tool bag and say, Ah, what do I need for this particular circumstance? I do it reflexively. Negative visualization is just an ongoing thing with me.

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Steve Divitkos 1:00:43

Actually, can you talk about that Dr. Irvine that that? Because that's one tool that I love that we actually haven't talked about today. So can you explain to folks what is negative visualization? And why is it something that we may consider doing?

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William Irvine 1:00:55

Sure. That's when we think about not having something we take for granted. We take almost everything for granted. You take your health for granted, you take your eyesight for granted, you take your hearing for granted, you take they're not being random gunshots in the night for granted, you take no incoming artillery for granted and the list can go on, you take antibiotics for granted. So we're some of the luckiest people in human history, even if you're living a very difficult life. So we take all of that for granted. And one of the ways to make things fresh and appreciated again, is to take a moment in which you imagine that you've lost them. Imagine. So you've got a spouse, imagine getting a phone call saying this is the police department. And we have bad news for you imagine that you don't want to dwell on that. But you want to allow yourself to have a flickering thought about that, or about losing your job, right? Or about getting a phone call from the doctor's office. And it's like magic. It's it sounds psychology, but it's like magic. After you do that, you will find yourself once again appreciating the thing you were taking for granted shortly before. So it's one of the most powerful and easy to use stoic techniques, anybody can do it. Again, you don't dwell on these things. But you do allow yourself to have thoughts about them. And the thing about the pandemic was it forced you to think about them because they were actually happening to you. But it makes your life better. Because you know, you don't feel quite as compelled to get you know, something new, something better, something different, because you appreciate what you've already got.

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Steve Divitkos 1:02:51

Yeah, yeah. And the subtle nuance there is like, you know, the uninitiated may view that as like a morbid exercise. But it's actually the complete opposite. It is a really simple and really profound exercise. Marcus Aurelius has this great quote, about how central a purpose ought to be in one's life. He said, People who labor all their lives, but have no purpose to direct every thought and impulse toward are wasting their time, even when they're hard at work. So finding one's life purpose. I mean, that sounds great. But it also sounds like a pretty lofty ideal. I guess the question to you is, do you think you found your own? And if you did, did you follow a particular process to arrive at that purpose, and how might others go about finding there's?

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William Irvine 1:03:45

I call it the grand goal in living, so a lot of people have goals, and then you look at their goals, and you realize a lot of times the goals are contradictory to each other, attaining one of their goals will make it harder for them to attain another one. And that is because they have never sat back and taken time to think, okay, but where is it all headed? What's the ultimate goal of all of my goals? And what they do is they simply go with the flow, they look around and see what other people are doing. And say, well, oh, gosh, surely somebody somewhere has done their homework. So if everybody wants a Rolex watch and a Mazaratti that I should do, and you know, what, if I don't get them, the world just isn't fair. Okay, that's one way to pursue it. But a different way is to sort of say, so what is it that I really am after? I want a house, I want food, you know, I want company I want, what am I actually after? So the stoics said, and Buddhists, by the way would say it too. I'm out for a state of equanimity, and that is this nice balance of your emotional existence. You can be the richest man on the planet but if you can't fall asleep because of negative thoughts going through your head. I wouldn't trade places with you for all your billions, right? So equanimity, tranquility is, is the goal and the ability to keep it despite all of the setbacks that life can throw you. That is my primary goal. Does that mean getting a certain income? Well, yeah. What else does that mean? Yes, social connections, we humans are social beings. I refer to people as vitamin P. Right, there is essential ingredient to our well being. And yeah, so that's where I came, came about to thinking. And that was, as a result of the book on desire writing that I came to that conclusion. But you look at people and they have no idea. They've never looked at the big picture. You know, they can divided into typically consumer goods of various kinds, that that's their goal. Well, that's one goal. But are the people who get those goals happier? I don't know.

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Steve Divitkos 1:06:16

Yeah. You know, just as we look to conclude here, we talked about the concept of logic earlier on in our conversation. And I actually think that one of the reasons why stoicism has resonated with me is because at its heart, it strikes me as a very logical philosophy. Right? So for example, of course, we shouldn't bother worrying about the things that are outside of our control, because logically our worry does nothing to improve those things. Right. So it all strikes me as very, very logical. At the same time, though, for somebody listening to this, who finds themselves relating to some of the concepts that we've talked about, they may say, okay, I'm going to start implementing all of these things all of the time. And when I find myself being unstuck, that must mean a bad thing, or a failure on my part. So I guess the question for you is, how do you maintain your desire to exemplify stoic ideals as much as you can on one hand, but also not holding yourself to a standard of perfection and just allowing yourself to be a flawed human being every now and then, on the other hand?

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William Irvine 1:07:27

So I don't expect perfection from myself, I expect a great deal of of imperfection. Now, slight slide here. And that is I have a brand new daughter in law. My son just got married this last weekend. And she's a professional oboist. And so for the longest time, when they were engaged, you know, I would say, well, how is Lauren doing? And he would say, Oh, well, she's practicing her obo, you know. And then finally, a joke occurred to me, and I said, well, when is she going to stop practicing and learn the instrument, so she doesn't have to practice anymore. It was meant as a joke. And he took it as such. And he said, well, you know, if you are a professional oboist, you have to practice hard. It's partly about getting better. But it's partly about not losing what you've already got. So you practice forever, if you're going to do it seriously. I would say that I'm a practicing stoic. Am I a stoic? Well, that's an interesting question. But I'm certainly a practicing stoic in the sense that I make a conscious effort to apply stoic psychological principles to my everyday life. Do I ever do it in an inappropriate way? Or do it in a ineffective way? Yes. So Seneca came up with this thing, he called it the bedtime meditation, where the last thing you do is you're falling asleep as you review your day, and you think about the things you've done and said. And you think about whether you were actually playing a good stoic role when you said or did those things in question. And for me, that's really hard because I'm asleep within seconds after my head hits the pillow, so just not enough time. Well, I don't claim any special it's just me. It's just the way I'm wired. So I have to do it at a different time of the day, but it's really an interesting thing, because there will be times when I will look at the events that have taken place and I'll think, there was a chance to be kind and helpful to another human being. And I didn't take it or I took it, but I botched it. So you're always looking at your game. And you're always trying to think, Is there room for improvement. There'll be other times when I will pat myself on the back and think, ah, that's what Seneca that's what Seneca would say, I should have done and I did it. So there are people, Christians who say, if you're asking what should be done in a certain circumstance, and they say, well, what would Jesus do? Well, I'm like that, only towards stoicism. I say, what would Seneca do under those circumstances? So that's the standard against which I'm holding myself. There's always backsliding. There's always room for improvement. So I'm like an oboist in that sense. But I gotta try hard. And then I'm getting good, getting good. And each day I wake up, I got another chance to get it right. And I very much look forward to those opportunities.

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Steve Divitkos 1:11:03

I love that perspective. And you've certainly been kind and helpful to this human being today by virtue of taking the time to talk to me today. So when you put your head on the pillow tonight, you can tick the box of certainly exemplifying the best of the stoic ideals today, for people who use this conversation as an opportunity to kind of introduce themselves to stoic philosophy, and they are interested in learning more, certainly, I would direct them to your book, *A Guide to the Good Life*, which can be purchased basically, anywhere books can be purchased. Are there any other resources that they should pursue, or maybe some original texts that they would read that might serve as good introductory resources for them?

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William Irvine 1:11:46

So here's three ideas for you. First, is I have a website that has a lot of stoic stuff, a lot of free stuff, a lot of pointers to various podcasts that I've done. The website is WilliamBlrvine.com. That's B, as in boy, WilliamBlrvine.com. Second thing is Guide to the Good Life is an introduction to stoicism in general. But there has subsequently been a book called The Stoic Challenge from WW Norton. And it's a more kind of applied, it's how to deal with life's challenges. And the third thing that I've actually gotten quite good feedback from. So Sam Harris does two different podcasts one is called Making Sense and the other is called Waking Up. And I did an interview on on the Waking Up one, but he also subsequently asked me to create a string of talks. These are 10 to 15 minute talks on various stoic subjects. So those are available. I think I did 22 of them. They're available on his waking up app. Now it's behind a paywall. So you have to get in to it that way. But I've got I had quite a good response. And I basically pick off different things in stoicism. And then, you know, tell you kind of the inside story on them, and give advice on them. So those are our three places the website's entirely free. And there's more of me than any person should be exposed to there for the taking.

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Steve Divitkos 1:13:32

Well, you know, I'll second that I actually listened to your series, because I'm a subscriber to the Waking Up app. So I listened to your series on Sam Harris's app and I loved it. I went for a walk and, you know, just put on the headphones and listen to it and found it to be a really enriching experience, as was our conversation today. Certainly, for me, I hope and to some degree, it was for you as well. Thank you so much for being generous with your time and your insights today. We really appreciate it.

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William Irvine 1:14:00

And thank you for inviting me.