

# Preface

Why I Wrote this Book

This book is the result of a wisdom quest I engaged in after having lost one third of my fortune in an unlucky real estate investment.

During this time of great loss and financial difficulty, I partly remembered, partly learnt and applied some of the teachings of the ancient stoics, such as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and even Epicurus, and this helped me overcome the personal crisis and recover both emotionally and financially.

The intention behind this book is to share helpful and practically useful methods I applied to bring a new balance in my shaken life, and to live life more consciously, more happily, with more gratitude, and a stronger grounding in the present.

The main questions this book asks and answers are how to use the power of your subconscious mind

to steer your life in alignment with your higher purpose, and how to adjust your thinking process so as to attract harmonious conditions, success, and wealth.

Furthermore, I explain the creative process with many practical and biographical examples, and teach techniques such as creative writing, affirmative prayer, and spontaneous art. Besides, topics such as positive parenting, health, making friends, and success strategies are covered.

Before I lost a quarter of a million dollars in just a year on a real estate investment that I had not carefully enough chosen, I guess I was sleepwalking through my life. It was really a wake-up call! And in hindsight, practicing the stoic technique of 'negative visualization,' I came to the conclusion that the negative events had a silver lining for me.

Now, what is negative visualization? William B. Irvine, in his book *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (2009) puts it well when he writes that 'sometimes a catastrophe blasts ... people out of their jadedness.' I was thus visualizing to be on my death bed, eager to find out what it was that I had missed in life? And the shocking insight that came to me was

that I had missed to publish my books in a way they were *useful*. While I had self-published eighty books, after the sobering experience of that financial downfall, I came to realize that the language I had used in those books was by and large not appropriate, that I had been too judgmental in many ways, the proof of which was that I received rather bad comments on my books. The first drastic decision, then, I took with this new insight was to unpublish all of my books and to restart the whole process once again from scratch. While I was acutely aware that it would be an almost heroic task, I took it on, in that really fantastically sobering state of imagining being near death. This lucid state of mind, which I can't compare to anything I have ever experienced before, triggers an amazing awareness process which leads to a kind of inner purification from what Irvine calls 'hedonic adaptation.'

Hedonic adaptation has the power to extinguish our enjoyment of the world. Because of adaptation, we take our life and what we have for granted rather than delighting in them. Negative visualization, though, is a powerful antidote to hedonic adaptation. By consciously thinking about the loss of what we have, we can regain our appreciation of it, and with this regained

appreciation we can revitalize our capacity for joy.  
(Id., 74)

Indeed, before I had parted to another country to buy those pool villas, I had gone through major binges because of the stress that publishing eighty books in one year had caused. I paid that marathon dearly, and was dependent on sleeping pills that, together with the alcohol, put me in a state of inattention that proved to be fatal during the week I went to that country to choose the investments that I was going to acquire.

I should have followed the advice of Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor who was one of the most well-known stoics of ancient times:

Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book II.

Because of my exhaustion and the constant drug intake, I committed major oversights and failed to secure myself with legal advice, while the real estate agent betrayed me from one end to the other. While I

was out of that country again after one year, the sales of my properties took me entire two years, despite the fact that I had signed up with thirty local sales agents, and it was an agony without end, with losses around all corners.

I became aware that part of my problem had been legal oversight, lack of attention, and trusting the wrong people.

Thus the first decision I took was to definitely stop the sleep medication, the second thing was to drastically reduce my alcohol intake. The third thing was to invest my remaining funds in microfinance, in a trusted organization, and after having consulted a financial advisor.

As I continued the 'deathbed visualization' every night before falling asleep, an amazing abundance of new creative ideas came to me. It was a veritable explosion of new and attractive book projects, while my ambition for producing music was, compared to earlier years of my life, getting into the background of my attention. And for the first time in my life, I had been formulating *priorities*.

Among the books that spontaneously came to my mind was the present one, and the title was really

hitting the eye of the beholder. It stood there in bold letters in front of my inner mind. And while I previously have written self-help books, I hadn't experienced a real creative urge to do so. It was now after the dreadfully sobering financial catastrophe I had been through that I got that desire to share: not the details of the negative events that unfolded so dramatically during that fatal year, but positively what I had learnt and what others could possibly take from that as a practical and spiritual nourishment.

One year later, and coinciding with the drafting of this book, I chose stoicism as my life philosophy, after having been for many years a Zen Buddhist and Western Taoist.

Having practiced Zen meditation for so many years, I now became painfully aware that this long-term practice had not prevented me from falling in the trap of alcohol abuse because of exorbitant ambitions. What had been my motives for that first publishing cycle? As a retired lawyer, who had throughout his life a critical view of traditional legal systems, I had a residue of contempt within me that I tried to unleash in my books. I married my ambition with sometimes harsh criticism and this negative mood had an impact on my psyche. It created fears

and worries that I had not known previously in life. It led to emotional stress that in turn led to major oversights in managing my life and my fortune.

Now, I found very down-to-earth and practical advice about managing life in the various books I bought about stoicism as a life philosophy that is pragmatic and that focuses upon mastering our daily life and duties. As long as I had stayed with Zen meditation, it was easy to escape reality through the ‘thoughtless state,’ which I was able to realize after those many years of practice: to be without a single thought for more than an hour, and even longer. While this is a refreshing and even blissful experience, if you do it while neglecting your daily duties, it has no positive practical use.

But the change of my *overall mindset* through the sobering experience of financial collapse had even deeper implications. For I became suddenly aware that I was not really rooted in those philosophies from the East, that the whole endeavor was like putting a hat that had the wrong color.

Suddenly the question came to my mind in which way I was *culturally connected* to those teachings and the technique of meditation that is a part of them?

And I had to admit that there simply was no such cultural connection and that I had taken on that lifestyle because it had been fashionable in the 70s and 80s, when I first discovered it.

Now, reading stoic literature, I strongly felt that I was well culturally connected to those teachings, while they have unfortunately not shaped our civilization in any significant manner, for it followed the teachings of Plato and Aristotle.

After all, for me personally, rediscovering stoicism was a *déjà vu* experience for I had well studied it generally in high school, after I was able to unchoose religion and opt for the philosophy class. And already during that year, at the age of 16, I had not been fond of Plato and Aristotle. My favorite philosopher was Epicure, and while Epicurism is formally different from Stoicism, this is the case only on the surface. In fact, both philosophies are branches of the same tree in that both focus on the private life, and our overall attitudes toward life, toward desire, toward ambitions, and the way we master our daily existence.

Until the sales of those unfortunate villas, and thus for two years, I was living a shadow existence. My motivation for writing and even for practicing the



piano had reached a long-time bottom. I did not get out of bed in the morning and I badly neglected my creative duties. Through the lack of movement and exercise, and the wrong diet, I attracted gout/arthritis, a problem that had manifested first back in 2007, and while at that time it was paralyzing my left knee, I was now taking immediate action, researched the medical situation myself and vigorously changed my diet from acidic to alkaline.

The need for exercise had become obvious; in addition, the stoic lifestyle advise was eventually having a positive impact upon me, and I was following the precepts of those philosophers, changing my schedule entirely. I got used to get up at 5 am and go to sleep at 10 pm, do regular exercise, instead of stiff-legged meditation, and cook a simple and yet delicious vegetarian cuisine.

And this was, then, a first success: I was able to avoid an acute and painful gout attack, got a plant-based medication and continued with an alkaline diet.

In hindsight, I became aware that the main trigger of the new and healthy orientation of my daily life and food was the result of the stoic teaching I was

slowly assimilating. Eventually I was heeding Marcus Aurelius' advice:

Remember how often you have received an opportunity from the gods, and yet do not use it. You must now at least perceive of what universe you are a part, and from what administrator of the universe your existence flows, and that a limit of time is fixed for you, which if you do not use for clearing away the clouds from your mind, it will go and you will go, and it will never return. (Id.)

I had indeed been given the opportunity to keep my money in the bank and would not have lost so much of it through a precarious real estate investment in a country I barely knew and where, years before, a man had stolen me two thousand dollars from my bag when I was on my way to buy a laptop. I clearly had 'clouds in my mind' to leave a country that had done me well for more than ten years, and engage in an adventure without thorough preparation and a critical mind.

The final blow of this unfortunate journey was that I had to store my furniture away with the moving company in that country for two years, because I lacked the money for both insurance and for shipping the container. Having had no insurance for a load that

had a value of more than fifty thousand dollars, when the container arrived here, I was facing another shock. Many of the antiques and heirlooms were missing, including works of art, many books were in such a dirty condition that I had to trash them, and entire collections of musical scores, which had been very expensive, were missing.

Finally understanding that this was a major lesson the universe was teaching me, I was asking myself:

—Have I really deserved this?

And I spent days in prayer, asking the universe why this happened, and then to my surprise realized that I did not miss those items at all! One of the armchairs that was missing would not have fit in my apartment after all, while the items I was really dependent upon, my computer, my digital piano, kitchen equipment, and most of my books were there. So abandoned the cause of grief, thinking to myself that I had been taught a lesson that affirms that less is more, or can be more if one is more appreciative and grateful! Then, my ongoing practice of ‘negative visualization’ taught me that it all could have been much worse after all, that I could have lost more, and more vital items at that, and that my attitude had

been refreshed in that ordeal, leading to a new joy of life.

Marcus Aurelius writes in his *Meditations*:

And you will give yourself relief, if you do every act of your life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness, passionate aversion from the commands of reason, hypocrisy, self-love, and discontent with the portion that has been given to you. You see how few the things are, which if possessed by a man, enable him to live a life that flows in quiet ... (Id.)

With a renewed positive spirit, I really wanted to know it, I really wanted to find out what I had done wrong, and ordered the books of Donald Trump, Dolf DeRoos and Robert Kiyosaki.

And I was dumbfounded to read that Trump only buys a property after having scrutinized *ninety-nine similar investments*. And I had bought those villas virtually from the website of the agent, without investigating many similar objects—and there were many in fact, in that market.

After all, I had to admit toward myself that I was not entirely responsible for my losses for there was a market factor in play that I could not have accounted for at the time of purchase. Suddenly, the condo

business was getting into a boom while my sector of high-end private pool villas which target a corporate clientèle, went very quiet. That was the reason it took me so long to sell the houses again, while I had bought them much too quickly. This was of course a factor that I had no power over, thus I followed Epictetus' advice to not bother and put the past behind me:

Take away then aversion from all things which are not in your power, and transfer it to the things contrary to nature which are in your power.

—Epictetus, Enchiridion, Section II.

While my situation had been aggravated through the fact that the landlord of my rented house together with the maid (that he had taken to me) were stealing me money on a consistent basis, amounting to almost *thirty thousand dollars*, in fact all my savings, I did not blame them. Instead, I drew a line and blamed myself to have been overly trusting and naïve, and out of touch with reality. And I found an important advice in Epictetus' Enchiridion:

When then we are impeded or disturbed or grieved, let us never blame others, but ourselves, that is, our opinions. It is the act of an

ill-instructed man to blame others for his own bad condition; it is the act of one who has begun to be instructed, to lay the blame on himself; and of one whose instruction is completed, neither to blame another nor himself. (Id., Section V)

This passage made me aware that I was still in the dark as long as I was blaming myself, which actually kept me chained to those past events in a negative, and painful manner. After having understood that, I used positive affirmations to forgive myself and clear my mind of the 'clouds.' It was very important to have done that for I saw that this was the key for finding inner peace once again.