

Epictetus

THE MANUAL FOR LIVING

INTRODUCTION

Epictetus was a philosopher, a prominent figure of the Roman stoicism. A real name of this person was unknown because Epictetus was a nickname, translated as *bought*, that showed his status. Epictetus, while being a slave, was owned by one of the Nero's bodyguards and was brought to Rome with such a status. He was born in Phrygia (Minor Asia). Later, the owner granted him freedom.

When he was a slave, Epictetus together with his master went to lectures by Musonius Rufus, a representative of the stoicism. At that time this philosophical trend was very popular, and educated Romans considered it a sign of good manners to go to such lectures. Epictetus highly respected Musonius Rufus and joined himself this flow.

When Domitian came into power and ordered to close all the philosophical schools in Rome, Epictetus moved to Nicopolis and opened his own school. Advocated by him ideas did not contradict with the way of life: a philosopher was not bothered at all by an external side of life, he was satisfied with bare essentials, lived in poverty. The external side did not

affect him so much, that he even did not leave his real name for the descendants, not to mention other circumstances from his biography.

His studies were preserved thanks to other people. Just as Socrates, Epictetus did not note his ideas, and used individual messages for their expression, talked to people in the streets, sometimes participated in arguments. An important role in the maintaining of his philosophical heritage played his student Arrian Flavius, who wrote down his mentor's words and left them in the form of eight books, called *Discourses of Epictetus* and *Enchiridion of Epictetus*. Commentaries on *Enchiridion of Epictetus*, made by Simplicius, the last Greek philosopher banished from Athens in accordance with the Justinian's order, are also preserved.

The works by Arrian and Simplicius are the main sources of Epictetus's studies. According to him, the idea of the philosophy is to give a person freedom and help him gain happiness. In order to become happy, one should clearly understand what is within a person's power and what does not depend on him. Something external that does not depend on him, should not slave his spirit, a person should treat it indifferently. As Epictetus said, the recipe of happiness is the following: one should abandon the idea of submitting the events to his own wishes and adjust to the events.

Epictetus was a pagan; however, his ideas were in

many ways close to the Christian view of the world, that is why during the first centuries of a new age the thoughts of this philosopher were widely popular in monasteries.

Antic Renewal

THE GOLDEN SAYINGS OF EPICTETUS

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I

Are these the only works of Providence within us? What words suffice to praise or set them forth? Had we but understanding, should we ever cease hymning and blessing the Divine Power, both openly and in secret, and telling of His gracious gifts? Whether digging or ploughing or eating, should we not sing the hymn to God:-

Great is God, for that He hath given us such instruments to till the ground withal: Great is God, for that He hath given us hands and the power of swallowing and digesting; of unconsciously growing

and breathing while we sleep!

Thus should we ever have sung; yea and this, the grandest and divinest hymn of all:-

Great is God, for that He hath given us a mind to apprehend these things, and duly to use them!

What then! seeing that most of you are blinded, should there not be some one to fill this place, and sing the hymn to God on behalf of all men? What else can I that am old and lame do but sing to God? Were I a nightingale, I should do after the manner of a nightingale. Were I a swan, I should do after the manner of a swan. But now, since I am a reasonable being, I must sing to God: that is my work: I do it, nor will I desert this my post, as long as it is granted me to hold it; and upon you too I call to join in this self-same hymn.

II

How then do men act? As though one returning to his country who had sojourned for the night in a fair inn, should be so captivated thereby as to take up his abode there.

"Friend, thou hast forgotten thine intention! This was not thy destination, but only lay on the way thither."

"Nay, but it is a proper place."

"And how many more of the sort there may be;

only to pass through upon thy way! Thy purpose was to return to thy country; to relieve thy kinsmen's fears for thee; thyself to discharge the duties of a citizen; to marry a wife, to beget offspring, and to fill the appointed round of office. Thou didst not come to choose out what places are most pleasant; but rather to return to that wherein thou wast born and where wert appointed to be a citizen."

III

Try to enjoy the great festival of life with other men.

IV

But I have one whom I must please, to whom I must be subject, whom I must obey:-God, and those who come next to Him. He hath entrusted me with myself: He hath made my will subject to myself alone and given me rules for the right use thereof.

V

Rufus used to say, If you have leisure to praise me, what I say is naught. In truth he spoke in such wise, that each of us who sat there, though that some one had accused him to Rufus:-so surely did he lay his finger on

the very deeds we did: so surely display the faults of each before his very eyes.

VI

But what saith God? - "Had it been possible, Epictetus, I would have made both that body of thine and thy possessions free and unimpeded, but as it is, be not deceived:-it is not thine own; it is but finely tempered clay. Since then this I could not do, I have given thee a portion of Myself, in the power of desiring and declining and of pursuing and avoiding, and in a word the power of dealing with the things of sense. And if thou neglect not this, but place all that thou hast therein, thou shalt never be let or hindered; thou shalt never lament; thou shalt not blame or flatter any. What then? Seemth this to thee a little thing?"-God forbid!-"Be content then therewith!"

And so I pray the Gods.

VII

What saith Antisthenes? Hast thou never heard?- It is a kingly thing, O Cyrus, to do well and to be evil spoken of.

VIII

"Aye, but to debase myself thus were unworthy of me."

"That," said Epictetus, "is for you to consider, not for me. You know yourself what you are worth in your own eyes; and at what price you will sell yourself. For men sell themselves at various prices. This was why, when Florus was deliberating whether he should appear at Nero's shows, taking part in the performance himself, Agrippinus replied, 'But why do not you appear?' he answered, 'Because I do not even consider the question.' For the man who has once stooped to consider such questions, and to reckon up the value of external things, is not far from forgetting what manner of man he is. Why, what is it that you ask me? Is death preferable, or life? I reply, Life. Pain or pleasure? I reply, Pleasure."

"Well, but if I do not act, I shall lose my head."

"Then go and act! But for my part I will not act."

"Why?"

"Because you think yourself but one among the many threads which make up the texture of the doublet. You should aim at being like men in general-just as your thread has no ambition either to be anything distinguished compared with the other threads. But I desire to be the purple-that small and shining part which makes the rest seem fair and beautiful. Why then do you bid me become even as the multitude? Then were I no longer the purple."

IX

If a man could be throughly penetrated, as he ought, with this thought, that we are all in an especial manner sprung from God, and that God is the Father of men as well as of Gods, full surely he would never conceive aught ignoble or base of himself. Whereas if Cæsar were to adopt you, your haughty looks would be intolerable; will you not be elated at knowing that you are the son of God? Now however it is not so with us: but seeing that in our birth these two things are commingled—the body which we share with the animals, and the Reason and Thought which we share with the Gods, many decline towards this unhappy kinship with the dead, few rise to the blessed kinship with the Divine. Since then every one must deal with each thing according to the view which he forms about it, those few who hold that they are born for fidelity, modesty, and unerring sureness in dealing with the things of sense, never conceive aught base or ignoble of themselves: but the multitude the contrary. Why, what am I?—A wretched human creature; with this miserable flesh of mine. Miserable indeed! but you have something better than that paltry flesh of yours. Why then cling to the one, and neglect the other?

X

Thou art but a poor soul laden with a lifeless body.

XI

The other day I had an iron lamp placed beside my household gods. I heard a noise at the door and on hastening down found my lamp carried off. I reflected that the culprit was in no very strange case. "Tomorrow, my friend," I said, "you will find an earthenware lamp; for a man can only lose what he has."

XII

The reason why I lost my lamp was that the thief was superior to me in vigilance. He paid however this price for the lamp, that in exchange for it he consented to become a thief: in exchange for it, to become faithless.

XIII

But God hath introduced Man to be a spectator of Himself and of His works; and not a spectator only, but also an interpreter of them. Wherefore it is a shame for man to begin and to leave off where the brutes do.

Rather he should begin there, and leave off where Nature leaves off in us: and that is at contemplation, and understanding, and a manner of life that is in harmony with herself.

See then that ye die not without being spectators of these things.

XIV

You journey to Olympia to see the work of Phidias; and each of you holds it a misfortune not to have beheld these things before you die. Whereas when there is no need even to take a journey, but you are on the spot, with the works before you, have you no care to contemplate and study these?

Will you not then perceive either who you are or unto what end you were born: or for what purpose the power of contemplation has been bestowed on you?

"Well, but in life there are some things disagreeable and hard to bear."

And are there none at Olympia? Are you not scorched by the heat? Are you not cramped for room? Have you not to bathe with discomfort? Are you not drenched when it rains? Have you not to endure the clamor and shouting and such annoyances as these? Well, I suppose you set all this over against the splendour of the spectacle and bear it patiently. What then? have you not received greatness of heart, received

courage, received fortitude? What care I, if I am great of heart, for aught that can come to pass? What shall cast me down or disturb me? What shall seem painful? Shall I not use the power to the end for which I received it, instead of moaning and wailing over what comes to pass?

XV

If what philosophers say of the kinship of God and Man be true, what remains for men to do but as Socrates did:-never, when asked one's country, to answer, "I am an Athenian or a Corinthian," but "I am a citizen of the world."

XVI

He that hath grasped the administration of the World, who hath learned that this Community, which consists of God and men, is the foremost and mightiest and most comprehensive of all:-that from God have descended the germs of life, not to my father only and father's father, but to all things that are born and grow upon the earth, and in an especial manner to those endowed with Reason (for those only are by their nature fitted to hold communion with God, being by means of Reason conjoined with Him)-why should not such an one call himself a citizen of the world? Why

not a son of God? Why should he fear aught that comes to pass among men? Shall kinship with Cæsar, or any other of the great at Rome, be enough to hedge men around with safety and consideration, without a thought of apprehension: while to have God for our Maker, and Father, and Kinsman, shall not this set us free from sorrows and fears?

XVII

I do not think that an old fellow like me need have been sitting here to try and prevent your entertaining abject notions of yourselves, and talking of yourselves in an abject and ignoble way: but to prevent there being by chance among you any such young men as, after recognising their kindred to the Gods, and their bondage in these chains of the body and its manifold necessities, should desire to cast them off as burdens too grievous to be borne, and depart their true kindred. This is the struggle in which your Master and Teacher, were he worthy of the name, should be engaged. You would come to me and say: "Epictetus, we can no longer endure being chained to this wretched body, giving food and drink and rest and purification: aye, and for its sake forced to be subservient to this man and that. Are these not things indifferent and nothing to us? Is it not true that death is no evil? Are we not in a manner kinsmen of the Gods, and have we not come

from them? Let us depart thither, whence we came: let us be freed from these chains that confine and press us down. Here are thieves and robbers and tribunals: and they that are called tyrants, who deem that they have after a fashion power over us, because of the miserable body and what appertains to it. Let us show them that they have power over none."

XVIII

And to this I reply:-

"Friends, wait for God. When He gives the signal, and releases you from this service, then depart to Him. But for the present, endure to dwell in the place wherein He hath assigned you your post. Short indeed is the time of your habitation therein, and easy to those that are minded. What tyrant, what robber, what tribunals have any terrors for those who thus esteem the body and all that belong to it as of no account? Stay; depart not rashly hence!"

XIX

Something like that is what should pass between a teacher and ingenuous youths. As it is, what does pass? The teacher is a lifeless body, and you are lifeless bodies yourselves. When you have had enough to eat today, you sit down and weep about tomorrow's food.

Slave! if you have it, well and good; if not, you will depart: the door is open-why lament? What further room is there for tears? What further occasion for flattery? Why should one envy another? Why should you stand in awe of them that have much or are placed in power, especially if they be also strong and passionate? Why, what should they do to us? What they can do, we will not regard: what does concern us, that they cannot do. Who then shall rule one that is thus minded?

XX

Seeing this then, and noting well the faculties which you have, you should say,—"Send now, O God, any trial that Thou wilt; lo, I have means and powers given me by Thee to acquit myself with honour through whatever comes to pass!"-No; but there you sit, trembling for fear certain things should come to pass, and moaning and groaning and lamenting over what does come to pass. And then you upbraid the Gods. Such meanness of spirit can have but one result-impiety.

Yet God has not only given us these faculties by means of which we may bear everything that comes to pass without being crushed or depressed thereby; but like a good King and Father, He has given us this without let or hindrance, placed wholly at our own

disposition, without reserving to Himself any power of impediment or restraint. Though possessing all these things free and all you own, you do not use them! you do not perceive what it is you have received nor whence it comes, but sit moaning and groaning; some of you blind to the Giver, making no acknowledgment to your Benefactor; others basely giving themselves to complaints and accusations against God.

Yet what faculties and powers you possess for attaining courage and greatness of heart, I can easily show you; what you have for upbraiding and accusation, it is for you to show me!

XXI

How did Socrates bear himself in this regard? How else than as became one who was fully assured that he was the kinsman of Gods?

XXII

If God had made that part of His own nature which He severed from Himself and gave to us, liable to be hindered or constrained either by Himself or any other, He would not have been God, nor would He have been taking care of us as He ought... If you choose, you are free; if you choose, you need blame no man-accuse no man. All things will be at once

according to your mind and according to the Mind of God.

XXIII

Petrifaction is of two sorts. There is petrification of the understanding; and also of the sense of shame. This happens when a man obstinately refuses to acknowledge plain truths, and persists in maintaining what is self-contradictory. Most of us dread mortification of the body, and would spare no pains to escape anything of that kind. But of mortification of the soul we are utterly heedless. With regard, indeed, to the soul, if a man is in such a state as to be incapable of following or understanding anything, I grant you we do think him in a bad way. But mortification of the sense of shame and modesty we go so far as to dub strength of mind!

XXIV

If we were as intent upon our business as the old fellows at Rome are upon what interests them, we too might perhaps accomplish something. I know a man older than I am, now Superintendent of the Corn-market at Rome, and I remember when he passed through this place on his way back from exile, what an account he gave me of his former life, declaring that for

the future, once home again, his only care should be to pass his remaining years in quiet and tranquility. "For how few years have I left!" he cried. "That," I said, "you will not do; but the moment the scent of Rome is in your nostrils, you will forget it all; and if you can but gain admission to Court, you will be glad enough to elbow your way in, and thank God for it." "Epictetus," he replied, "if ever you find me setting as much as one foot within the Court, think what you will of me."

Well, as it was, what did he do? Ere ever he entered the city, he was met by a despatch from the Emperor. He took it, and forgot the whole of his resolutions. From that moment, he has been piling one thing upon another. I should like to be beside him to remind him of what he said when passing this way, and to add, How much better a prophet I am than you!

What then? do I say man is not made for an active life? Far from it!... But there is a great difference between other men's occupations and ours... A glance at theirs will make it clear to you. All day long they do nothing but calculate, contrive, consult how to wring their profit out of food-stuffs, farm-plots and the like... Whereas, I entreat you to learn what the administration of the World is, and what place a Being endowed with reason holds therein: to consider what you are yourself, and wherein your Good and Evil consists.

A man asked me to write to Rome on his behalf who, as most people thought, had met with misfortune; for having been before wealthy and distinguished, he had afterwards lost all and was living here. So I wrote about him in a humble style. He however on reading the letter returned it to me, with the words: "I asked for your help, not for your pity. No evil has happened unto me."

XXVI

True instruction is this:-to learn to wish that each thing should come to pass as it does. And how does it come to pass? As the Disposer has disposed it. Now He has disposed that there should be summer and winter, and plenty and dearth, and vice and virtue, and all such opposites, for the harmony of the whole.

XXVII

Have this thought ever present with thee, when thou lovest any outward thing, what thou gainest in its stead; and if this be the more precious, say not, I have suffered loss.

XXVIII

Concerning the Gods, there are who deny the very existence of the Godhead; others say that it exists, but neither bestirs nor concerns itself nor has forethought for anything. A third party attribute to it existence and forethought, but only for great and heavenly matters, not for anything that is on earth. A fourth party admit things on earth as well as in heaven, but only in general, and not with respect to each individual. A fifth, of whom were Ulysses and Socrates are those that cry:-

I move not without Thy knowledge!

XXIX

Considering all these things, the good and true man submits his judgement to Him that administers the Universe, even as good citizens to the law of the State. And he that is being instructed should come thus minded:-How may I in all things follow the Gods; and, How may I rest satisfied with the Divine Administration; and, How may I become free? For he is free for whom all things come to pass according to his will, and whom none can hinder. What then, is freedom madness? God forbid. For madness and freedom exist not together.

"But I wish all that I desire to come to pass and in the manner that I desire."

— You are mad, you are beside yourself. Know

you not that Freedom is a glorious thing and of great worth? But that what I desired at random I should wish at random to come to pass, so far from being noble, may well be exceeding base.

XXX

You must know that it is no easy thing for a principle to become a man's own, unless each day he maintain it and hear it maintained, as well as work it out in life.

XXXI

You are impatient and hard to please. If alone, you call it solitude: if in the company of men, you dub them conspirators and thieves, and find fault with your very parents, children, brothers, and neighbours. Whereas when by yourself you should have called it Tranquillity and Freedom: and herein deemed yourself like unto the Gods. And when in the company of many, you should not have called it a wearisome crowd and tumult, but an assembly and a tribunal; and thus accepted all with contentment.

XXXII

What then is the chastisement of those who