

## Tips for Staying Calm and Cultivating Poise

Extracted from "Calm Yourself"

Marcus Aurelius practiced psychotherapy in the more pretentious and stilted style appropriate, perhaps, to his time and position. From this philosopher-emperor each of us will do well to absorb the following quotation: "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."

Why shouldn't we be prepared beforehand to view all these people with pity instead of resentment? Their attitude toward us and their abuse of us has really nothing to do with us, but means merely an exploitation of their peculiarities. To prepare ourselves in this way to meet ridicule, abuse, and the like means no more than for a sailor to be ready to put down the helm in a squall. If we should set about learning to sail a boat, this is one of the first things we should do, but we pay very little attention to learning how to run ourselves. On this point Epictetus says, "Cease to make yourselves slaves. Is there not some advantage to be gained from this man? From all: even a reviler. Does not the wrestler gain advantage from him with whom he exercises before the combat? The greatest. And just in the same manner I can exercise myself with this man - and the heavier he is the better for me; and it is surely an advantage to me when I am exercised in gentleness of temper. This is knowing how to gain an advantage from men."

The brief maxim should be constantly at command to clench such suggestions. Try keeping these in mind as you go about your daily live. "These are the annoyances incident to my business. To fret when they occur means that I cannot manage my business without friction." Another is this (for use when subordinates show stupidity), "If he had my brains he'd have my job". And finally (as a shield against everyday annoyances and resentments), "Never touched me."

I can think of no better illustration of the way such maxims should be ready for immediate use than the following instance, in which the laugh, by the way, was on me. I was walking with a friend one day when an automobile came up behind us, announcing its approach by one of those peculiar notes so far from the honk of a self-respecting goose that it can be described neither as a groan, grunt, growl, nor scream, but rather as possessing the discordant elements of all four. "Don't you hate those freak horns!" I exclaimed, rather petulantly. "I used to," he said, "but since reading your book I say to myself, 'Never touched me!'"

This incident marks the progress respectively of my friend and myself in mental training. For I have no hesitation in presenting myself, not as a past-master, but rather as a student-instructor in this branch of practical philosophy.

One of the principal depressing emotions we have to curb to preserve our poise are anger. And under anger we must include the moderate degree of anger known as fret. What makes us fret? We all know the expression "Mad as a wet hen". Suppose you were asked what makes the hen mad, you probably would answer, "Why, because she is wet"; but for the real reason we must go further back - she is mad because she insists on being dry. If she could forego that insistence she would remain unruffled, wet as well as dry.

Similarly, I think I am mad because so-and-so has called me a liar, a coward, or a what-not. But the underlying cause of my anger is that I can't stand being called such names. If I took a notion to practice philosophy to the extent of seeing how much instead of how little I could stand, I might finally be wishing some one would try it on, to see if I couldn't remain cool under the provocation,

and simply say to myself, "Never touched me." "Any one can stand what he likes; it takes the philosopher to stand what he doesn't like."

There is no sharp line of division between the legitimate airing of a grievance and going into a state of fret. Nor is it fretting quietly to go about the adjustment of the grievance. Fret means internal turmoil externalized, not by effective work, but by wailing and gnashing of teeth.

You can spot a fretter from the tone and pitch of his voice. This test is not infallible but as a rule you can spot a fretter by his voice. When someone frets, his vocal cords tighten and produces a high-pitched, disagreeable tone which merges into the whine of chronic discontent.

I heard such a high-pitched voice inquiring the waiter one morning at breakfast, "How many eggs are there in this bacon and eggs?" "I don't know, sir, I think two... that is the usual number." "Well, I wish you would go and see"; and the waiter did so, returning shortly to announce with beaming face, "There are three, sir; they generally put in two, but this time they put in three." But even this cheerful news produced no change in the expression or the voice of the fretter, who despondently observed, "I knew the proportions were wrong." If you ever find yourself getting into this state of mind try the experiment of saying to yourself, " Don't pitch your voice so high!"

I once knew a man who was so obsessed with dust. If you inquired about his health, he would answer, " Pretty bad, thank you, and the dust is something awful!" If you admired a picture, he would say, "The composition may be good, but the frame is the kind that catches the dust." If you mentioned the Arctic regions, he would wish himself there to be out of the dust. When we finally had a fall of snow that covered the dust, I expected to find him beaming, but no - with the same tried expression and the same high-pitched voice he said the dust would be as bad as ever in a little while.

It is surprising how many things we can't stand if we cultivate our "can't-standability." The degree of anger known as getting mad may be dismissed with an appeal to our vanity, thus: Consider the very angry woman. How unbecoming it is - how it lacks in dignity! Why, she is almost black in the face because her emotion interferes with her circulation, and causes a stasis of venous blood in the superficial vessels of her countenance! If she could look in the glass now, and if she knew enough physiology to realize that controlling the emotions also controls the circulation, she would wish never to be angry again.

It is worth while for us to profit by this observation; and if it chances that we are the object of her wrath, we shall do well to curb the natural reflex which will make our face as black as hers, and we shall maintain the role of spectator, disinterested and unaffected.

When real improvement has taken place in these directions there is not only a change in the manner of thinking, but a noticeable change of personality, which includes control of the body likewise. Indeed, to control the body or mind alone is to manage only one horse of a team.