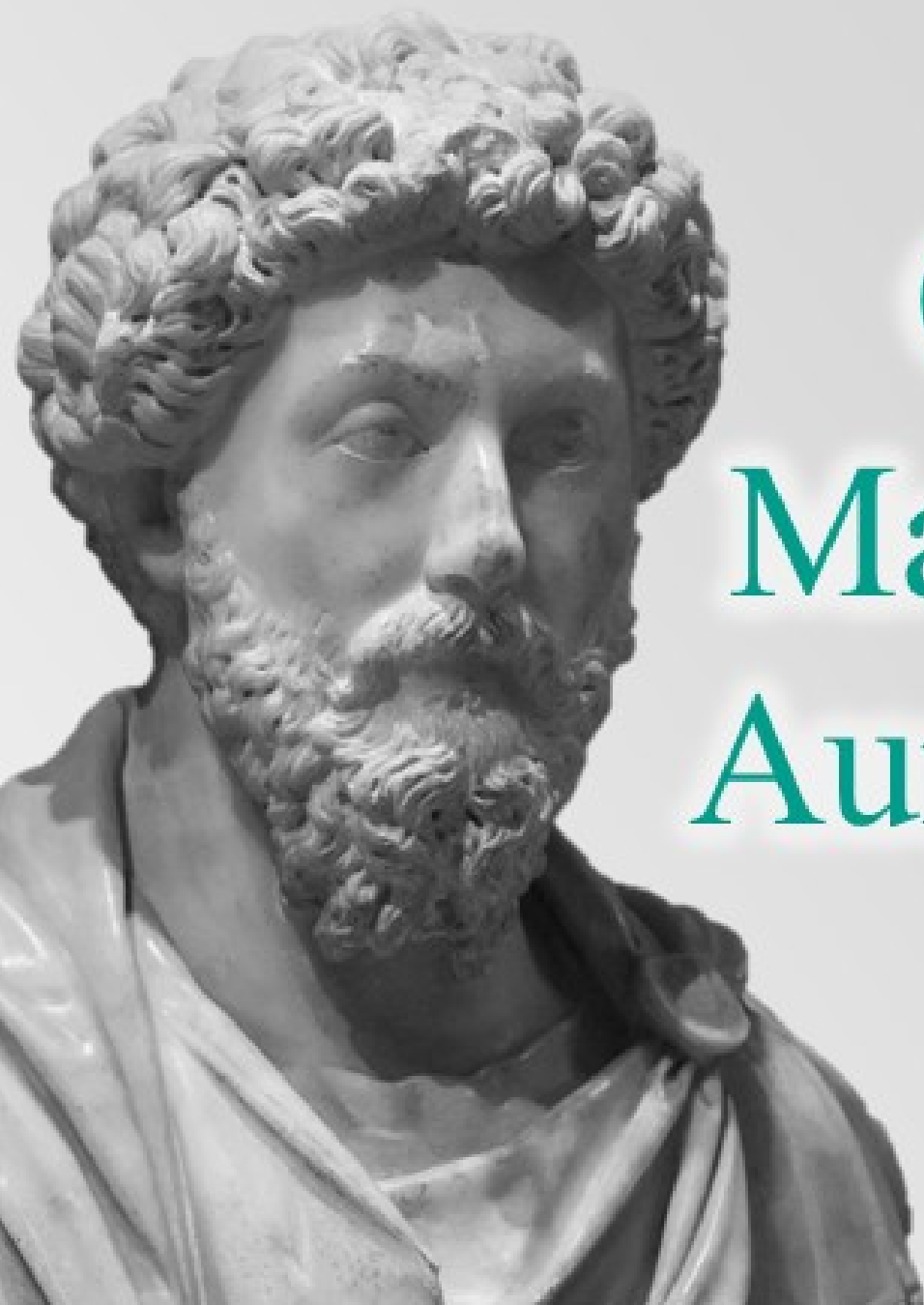


# The Concise Meditations

Of  
Marcus  
Aurelius



Written By: Robin Homer



# The Concise Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

By Robin Homer

*“You’ve wandered all over and finally realized that you never found what you were after: how to live. Not in syllogisms, not in money, or fame, or self-indulgence. Nowhere.”*

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## Introduction

This is a summary of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations. Meditations is essentially a scrapbook of thoughts written over a 19-year period, it's not ordered and it repeats itself frequently as ideas reoccurred to the author at different times. For this reason, it can be hard for a casual reader to extract the myriad messages contained within, I have made this summary to help with that.

Meditations is a combination of philosophical thoughts about the world as well as mental techniques and crutches to use to live a more tranquil and fulfilling life. It was the notebook of a man with the weight of the Roman world on his shoulders, a man struggling to be good and leaving himself notes and reminders on how to be so.

While I have interpreted and reordered what he says, I've done my best not to embellish it. Since I've summarized 50,000 words down to 4,000, I expect some of the subtlety and most of the poetry has been lost. If you ever wish to read the original, I recommend the modern **Gregory Hays** translation. However, two good public domain versions are:

[A. S. L. Farquharson, 1944](#) (good for readability):

And

[George Long, 1862](#) (a classic but with more archaic language which can be harder to read)

Most quotations in this summary have been taken from these three sources. On the odd occasion where I have paraphrased passages for comprehension, I have indicated it with square brackets [ ].

With all that said, what follows are the key themes running through the book...

## 1) Do Not Let Unkindness Disturb You

- ❖ When receiving bad treatment or criticism from someone tell yourself that either the other person is right in which case you've no right to complain, or they're wrong, in which case they're misguided and have just made a mistake. Remind yourself how many mistakes you've made in life and allow yourself to feel pity for them.
- ❖ By all means point out to them where they've gone wrong, but do so affectionately, not meanly, with hatred in your heart, or to impress onlookers, speak directly to them.
- ❖ If this doesn't work, ask yourself what qualities Nature has given us to counter the defect? For example, as an antidote to unkindness it gave us kindness. Put that to use and see what happens, very few people can continually act unkindly to you if you show continued kindness to them.

*"No matter what anyone says or does, my task is to be good." VII.15*

- ❖ If you've mistakenly trusted an untrustworthy person, then turn the reproach on yourself, the fault is yours. Recognize that untrustworthy, bad and even evil people exist in the world – to expect not to encounter them is foolish. Say to yourself "I have encountered one of them, this it to be expected from time to time"
- ❖ Then remember that any evil that men do you only harms your soul if you do evil in return. It is your job to be good and not allow their evil to change that.

*"The noblest kind of retribution is not to become like your enemy." VI.6*

With that in mind, recognize that...

## 2) Everything Depends on How You Interpret it

- ❖ "Everything is interpretation" is a quote Marcus Aurelius cites from a Cynic philosopher. He notes that obviously this is not literally true, but that it is a useful mental crutch. If you take it for what it's worth you can apply it to everyday life with amazing results.
- ❖ With that in mind, remind yourself that how things affect you is determined by your mind's interpretation of them, not the external things themselves. Whatever happens you can choose how to interpret it, so choose not to feel harmed and you haven't been.
- ❖ If it rains, you can choose to feel angry at the weather and pained by the sensation of the water on your clothes and body, or you can choose to feel grateful at being alive and able to feel such sensations.

*"How easy it is to repel and to wipe away every impression which is troublesome or unsuitable, and immediately to be in all tranquility." V.2*

- ❖ So work on gaining control of your mind to frame things positively.

- ❖ Ultimately, you are what you continually think, so take care which thoughts you allow to exist in your own head.

*"Your mind will take the shape of what you frequently hold in thought, for the human spirit is colored by such impressions." V.16*

On that point...

### 3) Your Mind Should Sit Superior to Your Body and its Sensations

- ❖ You have a body and a mind. Your mind, your rational faculty is the advantage you have over other animals, to follow Nature means to recognize this and make use of what Nature has given you.
- ❖ Deep down you already know the things you should be doing and yet you are not doing them. That's because you do not have control over your mind, whenever you determine to do something and don't do it, it's because your body has given you some reason not to:

*"Do not allow pain, drowsiness, fever, loss of appetite [to alter your behavior]...  
When you're bothered by things like that, remind yourself: I'm giving in to pain."  
V.64*

- ❖ When you give in to these sensations you make your mind the slave of the body which leads to unhappiness.

*"Endless suffering—all from not allowing the mind to do its job. Enough" IX.26*

- ❖ Gain control of your mind. It's only by gaining control that you can begin to act virtuously, and it's only by acting virtuously that true happiness, eudaimonia, will be reached.
- ❖ Once you start to follow reason the difference will be night and day

*"Within ten days you will appear a god even to those to whom to-day you seem a  
beast or a baboon, if you return to your principles and the worship of reason"  
IV.16*

With that in mind...

### 4) Stay Mindful and Take Deliberate Actions

- ❖ Frequently we go through life on autopilot, most of the things we do we don't even think about. Enough of this.

*"No random actions, none not based on underlying principles" IV.2*

- ❖ Do not wander without a purpose. Act deliberately.



- ❖ Observe your own mind critically, as if observing someone else's. In every case ask yourself to what you are currently employing your mind. What sort of soul are you displaying, are you acting like a child, a tyrant, an animal? What's causing you to act that way?
- ❖ If you can control your actions and think and act systematically you will have an untroubled life.
- ❖ If you do not observe the movements of your own mind, then you will be unhappy.
- ❖ Further, you can find peace from external events at any time by going within your own mind.

But do so briefly...

## 5) Don't Retreat from the World

- ❖ Humanity is born for cooperation and we are constituted for one another. Do not allow yourself to become angry with those around you, fall into hatred or give up on trying to make a positive difference in society.
- ❖ If you conceive of all rational beings as constituted for one cooperation, then helping other people becomes a joy and not just the "right" thing to do.

*"...you're not really embracing other people. Helping them isn't yet its own reward. You're still seeing it only as "The Right Thing To Do". You don't yet realize who you're really helping" VII.13*

- ❖ Learn to feel affection for other people even when they make mistakes. You can do so by recognizing they're human too and we all make mistakes, and that before long they will die just like you and that we're all in this together. What's more, regardless of what they've done they haven't really hurt you.

*"You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they're human too, that they act out of ignorance, against their will, and that you'll both be dead before long. And, above all, that they haven't really hurt you. They haven't diminished your ability to choose" VII.22*

- ❖ Another mental crutch he offers is to contemplate the positive qualities of those around you. We all have different abilities and talents, and keeping theirs in mind will make you think better of them

*"When you need encouragement, think of the qualities the people around you have, the energy of one, the modesty of another, the generosity of a third. Keep the thought of them ready to hand." VI.48*

## 6) Your Opinion of Yourself Matters More Than the Opinion of a Stranger

*"It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinion than our own" XII.4*

- ❖ This is not an exhortation to arrogance; it's reminding you to do what you know is best regardless of people's reactions. You know what you're about and you know the reason why you're doing what you're doing, you don't need to explain yourself to everyone.
- ❖ Even worse is when we fawn over and seek the praise of people we don't even respect. Think about that, seeking the praise of those who are worthy of contempt.
- ❖ As a crutch to avoid being too concerned with praise Marcus Aurelius suggests contemplating what difference it really makes, and considering the insignificance of it in the grand scheme of things.

*"...fame in a world like this is worthless." X.33*

- ❖ His conclusion from all this is that we should be honest and straightforward. We shouldn't prance about, keep airs or try to portray ourselves as something we're not. We should abstain from rhetoric and trying to pander or curry favor.

However, with that said

## 7) Be Open to Correction

- ❖ Being corrected is better than remaining in self-deceit.
- ❖ You shouldn't view changing your mind as "losing" or that you're being coerced, it is still a free and noble action on your part to change your mind if the evidence turns against you. Just don't change it because of peer pressure or to ingratiate yourself with others.

*"Remember that to change your mind and to accept correction are free acts too. The action is yours, based on your own will, your own decision—and your own mind" VIII.16*

With that in mind...

## 8) Cherish the Freedom and Liberty of Everyone

- ❖ Learn to endure the freedom of speech of others, you cannot control them so learn to control your reaction instead.
- ❖ Learn to hear unwelcome truths.
- ❖ Listen attentively to people and seek to place yourself in their shoes

*"Habituate yourself not to be inattentive to what another has to say and, so far as possible, be in the mind of the speaker." VI.53*

- ❖ Uphold the rights of everyone as equal under the law

*"It was from [my brother] that I conceived of a society of equal laws, governed by equality of status and of speech, and of rulers who respect the liberty of their subjects above all else." I.14*

- ❖ Recognize that power corrupts.

*"recognize the malice, cunning, and hypocrisy that power produces, and the peculiar ruthlessness often shown by people from 'good families'." I.11*

- ❖ If you ever find yourself in a position of power remember this and check yourself, resist becoming despotic

*"Take care not to be transformed into a Caesar, not to be dyed with this dye; for such things happen...Fight to be the person philosophy tried to make you." VI.30*

With that in mind...

## 9) Have Some Self Respect

- ❖ With every act ask if you are respecting yourself with it and if you will regret it inside.
- ❖ Watch for and erase any impulse to express things you don't truly believe.
- ❖ Do not view anything as beneficial which causes you to break a promise, lose your self-respect or hate anyone.
- ❖ When roused to anger, remember there's nothing manly about giving in to emotion. It's courtesy and kindness that define a human being— and a man. He who possesses these qualities possesses strength, nerves, and courage, not the man who is subject to fits of passion and discontent.
- ❖ Make yourself neither the tyrant nor slave of any man

And whatever happens

## 10) Avoid Complaining

*"Do your job without whining" I.15*

- ❖ If you can do the job in front of you, then do it and don't complain. And if you can't, then seek someone to help you and don't feel ashamed. But still don't complain, not even inwardly to yourself.

*"Don't be overheard complaining, not even to yourself" VIII.9*

Frequently in life...

## 11) The Obstacle is the Way

- ❖ If something bad happens, just say “Good, what new opportunities does this open up?”
- ❖ In the same vein as recognizing how your interpretation of an event can affect whether it hurts you, you can go one step further and ask how your interpretation of it can even benefit you.

*“The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”*

V.20

- ❖ Of course, this is still very much a mental crutch because had you wanted your car to break down say, you would have broken it yourself, but now that it has, ask yourself what good can you make come from it?  
“The obstacle becomes the way” is a recognition that every event creates new possibilities and that saying to yourself “Good” when something bad happens and looking for the new opportunity is a far healthier way of living than complaining about it.
- ❖ Marcus Aurelius used such crutches a lot, The Meditations can be viewed as a series of practical psychological tricks to make life smoother. Such mental habits allow you to smile and remain happy even when things that would otherwise upset you have occurred.

With that in mind recognize that...

## 12) Adversity is Part of Nature

- ❖ The universe is indifferent to your existence, it will throw things at you that will rock your world. Accept this for what it is, difficulties, setbacks and even tragedies are part of life, they are even part of what it means to be alive, everyone will experience them.
- ❖ Marcus Aurelius reiterates that since these events are in God or fate’s hands, you should not hope and pray for them not to occur, but rather hope and pray that you have the strength of character to endure them when they do.

*“why not rather pray for the gift to fear none of these things, to desire none of them, to sorrow for none of them, rather than that any one of them should be present or absent?” IX.40*

- ❖ This puts your focus on something in your control, namely forging the strength of character to endure all onslaughts, rather than that which is in fate’s control: the unfortunate events.
- ❖ And when they do occur?

*“Be like the headland against which the waves continually break. It stands firm and tames the fury of the water around it.” IV.49*

- ❖ But he takes it a step further again, and points out that...

### 13) It's Through Adversity That We Get Stronger.

*"It's unfortunate that this has happened. No. It's fortunate that this has happened and I've remained unharmed by it—" IV.49*

- ❖ There's an ironic beauty in life that it's these very hardships that give us the opportunity to test ourselves and grow stronger.

*"in every event which leads you to sorrow, remember to use this principle: that this is not a misfortune, but that to bear it like a brave man is good fortune." IV.49*

In any case he points out that for the most part,

### 14) Everything has happened before

- ❖ The Universe is in constant flux, but there's nothing new under the sun
- ❖ Whatever challenges you're facing, others have met them before.
- ❖ Obviously, society and technology has moved on, but the human condition remains the same, your partner cheats on you, your friend betrays you, you get passed over for promotion, all these things have been experienced by all of humanity for all of time.
- ❖ Instead of wailing against them, feeling outrage and shock and repeating the behaviors of those before you, let petty events wash off you and turn your attention to what really matters. Keep a sense of proportion and it will help you deal with such things.

*"In all that happens, keep before your eyes those who experienced it before you, and felt shock and outrage and resentment at it. And now where are they? Nowhere. Is that what you want to be like? Instead of avoiding all these distracting assaults—leaving the alarms and flight to others—and concentrating on what you can do with it all? Because you can use it, treat it as raw material. Just pay attention, and resolve to live up to your own expectations. In everything. And when faced with a choice, remember: our business is with things that really matter." VII.58*

"Our business is with things that really matter". With that in mind...

### 15) Stay Practical and Deal with What's in Front of You

- ❖ Stop being aimless and stop allowing yourself to be distracted, maintain an unwavering commitment and focus once a decision has been made.

*"If you seek tranquillity, do fewer things, better". IV.24*

*"Do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you" II.5*

- ❖ Rid yourself of unnecessary thoughts and stop letting your emotions project into the future, fabricating worries for yourself. Master them and focus them on the present, on doing the thing that is in front of you as if it were your last.

*"Wipe away the impress of imagination. Stop being jerked like a puppet. Limit yourself to the present." VII.29*

- ❖ Through hard practice you can learn even the things which you despair at learning now
- ❖ For any task at hand, ask yourself "Why can't I endure it?" You'll be embarrassed to answer.
- ❖ Don't focus on any physical characteristic which you cannot change and do not allow yourself to want or pursue what is impossible.
- ❖ Focus instead on the virtues that are in your power to bring forth: honesty, dignity, endurance, austerity, resignation, abstinence, patience, sincerity, moderation, seriousness, magnanimity.

With that in mind...

## 16) Focus on Doing What is Right and be Prepared to Face Resistance

*"If it is not right, do not do it, if it is not true, do not say it." XII.17*

- ❖ Say nothing untrue, do nothing unjust, and do not be concerned with whether people recognize you for doing so. If you choose to do a kind act, don't do it in expectation of a future reward. The acts themselves are their own rewards and what lead to a good life.

*"True delight and stillness is to move from one unselfish action to the next." VI.7*

- ❖ Since your job is to act with virtue, act well regardless of how people respond to it, and do not allow the bad actions of another to throw you off course.
- ❖ Do not expect a perfect outcome, be happy with the smallest progress, and in attempting the good act itself. In a sense if your aim is to always attempt to act well, then even if something immovable falls in your way you have still succeeded in that aim by attempting.

*"Ambition means tying your well-being to what other people say or do...Sanity means tying it to your own actions." VI.51*

- ❖ If you're in a position of authority you may even be hated for your good actions. The important thing is that you are not dissuaded from the right course in search of applause.

*"A King's part: to do good and to be reviled." VII.36*

- ❖ Teach yourself to desire only to act virtuously, and do not let others hold you back

With that in mind...

## 17) Do Your Duty and Despise Cowardice

- ❖ Stand up straight in life, don't be propped up by others, and do your duty without fear.

*"It's like this, gentlemen of the jury: The spot where a person decides to station himself, or wherever his commanding officer stations him—well, I think that's where he ought to take his stand and face the enemy, and not worry about being killed, or about anything but doing his duty." VII.45*

- ❖ Focus more on whether what you're doing is right or wrong, than on the risk it brings you.

*"You are much mistaken, my friend, if you think that any man worth his salt cares about the risk of death and doesn't concentrate on this alone: whether what he's doing is right or wrong, and his behavior a good man's or a bad one's." VII.44*

Understand that...

## 18) Life is Short and Death Comes to us All, That Means the Time for Action is Now

*[Decide once and for all to pursue justice, honesty, courage, self-control and rational action above all else] III.6*

- ❖ Remind yourself how often you have put things off and procrastinated. How many chances you've been given and yet have wasted. Remember your time here is limited, you have one chance and it's running out. Stop seeking approval from others, stop putting things off, decide today to start taking action.

*"Not to live as if you had endless years ahead of you. Death overshadows you. While you're alive and able—be good." IV.17*

- ❖ Once you make such a choice you will cease your internal suffering.

*"[You suffer justly, because] you choose to be good tomorrow rather than today"  
VIII.22*

- ❖ A mental crutch Aurelius suggested was thinking of the life behind you as already dead, and that from today you're living a new shorter life. Take this new life and live it properly

*"Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what's left and live it properly." VII.56*

- ❖ Also, it is disgraceful for your soul to give up while your body is still going strong. As you age the chances that you're going to be the next protégé decrease, when young you may have imagined yourself as a future savant, that you were going to turn pro, win the Olympics or change the world with your discoveries. Don't let the fact that all that never really panned out dishearten you, you can still focus on building your character and on doing good in the world.

*“Just because you’ve abandoned your hopes of becoming a great thinker or scientist, don’t give up on attaining freedom, achieving humility, serving others, obeying God” VII.67*

- ❖ And just as you accept the limits placed on your height, accept the limits placed on your life. Death will eventually come for everyone, and fearing the future does nothing but stop us acting bravely today.

With all that in mind...

## 19) Practice Getting Back on Track

- ❖ Life is an obstacle course and no matter how wise you are there will be things that throw you off balance. When this happens, make a point of centering yourself at once before proceeding. The more you practice this the better you will get.

*“When jarred, unavoidably, by circumstances, revert at once to yourself, and don’t lose the rhythm more than you can help. You’ll have a better grasp of the harmony if you keep on going back to it” VI.11*

- ❖ In other words, whatever negative compulsions you’ve overcome there will come a time when you fall off the wagon and revert to your old ways. Recognize when this happens and practice pulling yourself back. Do not listen to the voice that tells you to give up because “today is a write off”.

*“Not to feel exasperated, or defeated, or despondent because your days aren’t packed with wise and moral actions. But to get back up when you fail, to celebrate behaving like a human—however imperfectly—and fully embrace the pursuit that you’ve embarked on.” V.9*

- ❖ Avoid getting distracted with pride and showing off. Not only does it detract from what you’re doing but the applause you receive is worthless anyway.

*“Pride and outward show is an arch-seducer of reason, when you think you’re occupied in the weightiest business, that’s when it has you its spell.” VI.13*

As such in all cases...

## 20) Look Beneath to See Things for What They Truly Are

- ❖ A method of lessening the hold things have over you is to look at them for what they really are. Expensive wine is just fancy grape juice. Purple robes (those worn by the emperor) are just wool dyed with shellfish blood.
- ❖ This applies not only to material things but to actions and behaviors.



- ❖ Examine men's ruling principles, even those of the wise. What kind of things do they avoid or pursue?
- ❖ Imagine someone's soul stripped bare, what evokes their love and admiration, their vanity etc. Now try to imagine whether their disdain can really harm anyone, or their praise help anyone.

*"Do you wish to be praised by a man who curses himself three times every hour?  
Do you wish to please a man who doesn't please himself?" VIII.53*

- ❖ When facing their insults, hatred or whatever, look at what sort of person they are. You'll see you don't need to strain to impress them. But, you should still treat them well as they are still human.
- ❖ In all cases, speak the truth as you see it, but with kindness and humility

With all that in mind...

## 21) Recognize Material Wealth is Neither a Good nor an Evil

- ❖ Wealth in and of itself is not a good or bad thing, it's how you use it.
- ❖ The term "goods" is a misnomer when used to refer to possessions. It's possible that possessing too many things can make life worse so they are not in every case "goods", your only true goods are your virtues.
- ❖ Respect your own mind and prize that. Be satisfied in yourself. If you can't stop prizing other things then you'll never be free, you'll always be envious, jealous or afraid that someone might come and take things away from you.
- ❖ That said, while those who crave wealth are misguided so are those who despise it or feel guilt at possessing it, as it has just as strong a hold over them.
- ❖ Better is to learn to not let it have any hold over you. Learn to make use of it when have it but be absolutely prepared to let it go. Use it unapologetically but also without any arrogance.

*"Treat what you don't have as nonexistent. Look at what you have, the things you value most, and think of how much you'd crave them if you didn't have them. But be careful. Don't feel such satisfaction that you start to overvalue them —that it would upset you to lose them" VII.27*

With that in mind...

## 22) Express Gratitude

Marcus Aurelius spends the entire first chapter of Meditations listing the things he's grateful for learning whilst young. Some of the things which stand out to me and which I haven't already mentioned elsewhere are:

- ❖ That I needed to work on my own character.

- ❖ The government of my temper, development of a strong character, generosity, charity and a sense of humor
- ❖ The value of investing in education, enduring labor, working with my own hands and learning to want little.
- ❖ Not to meddle in the affairs of others and not to have time for slanderers.
- ❖ Not to busy myself with trifling things or waste time on frivolous matters.
- ❖ To write simply and directly.
- ❖ To endure freedom of speech and make peace with people I've fallen out with when they're ready.
- ❖ Steadiness of purpose, self-control in not being distracted and not letting emotion cloud judgement.
- ❖ How to receive gifts graciously without losing self-respect or appearing ungrateful, and how to offer praise without making a display.
- ❖ Indifference to superficial honors.
- ❖ Not to use the excuse "I'm too busy" to get out of doing things
- ❖ To listen to friends' troubles, show teachers respect and children unfeigned love.
- ❖ To treat people as they deserve and possess a readiness to listen to those who have anything to propose for the common good.
- ❖ To refrain from nitpicking and constantly correcting people.
- ❖ To defer to experts when necessary.
- ❖ To display dignity without pretension

And finally:

*23) "To stop talking about what the good man is like, and just be one" X.16*

## About the Author

Robin Homer lives and works in London, UK. People say he looks like Jason Statham, if he'd been shrunk in the wash and then really let himself go. YouTube commenters believe he sounds like Rowan Atkinson, Douglas Murray, Alexander Armstrong, Daniel Hannan, "that guy from Games Workshop", Ramsay Bolton and pretty much every other English person they know. You can judge for yourself by looking up the audio version of this summary.

While he has taken it upon himself to write this summary, he is just one man doing his best to understand the world and claims no special credentials with regards to philosophy. He does have a degree in Theoretical Physics but can't for the life of him remember where he put it and so is consigned to creating videos and audiobooks on Stoicism instead. You can find most of his recordings on YouTube and Audible, and if you wish to contact him you can do so at [VoxStoica@gmail.com](mailto:VoxStoica@gmail.com)