

# Making Yoga a Habit

Applying Ancient Roman  
Stoicism to Stay Consistent in  
Your Practice.

# Not just for the especially disciplined

It's too bad that knowing something is good for us usually isn't enough to make us do it. I could cite mountains of evidence but I doubt you need convincing that getting more exercise would be good for you. Unfortunately, knowing and doing seem to be governed by two entirely separate offices in the brain department. How many times have you resolved to start practicing yoga (or running, or going to the gym etc) only to lose commitment and give up?

I spent years starting over and was convinced that maintaining a regular yoga practice was only for the especially gifted and disciplined. Things changed for me when I stumbled onto a book about Ancient Roman Stoicism in a used bookstore. The stoics presented a beautiful and clean perspective on the nature of happiness and personal responsibility. But more importantly, it was full of practical wisdom and suggestions for how to live intentionally.

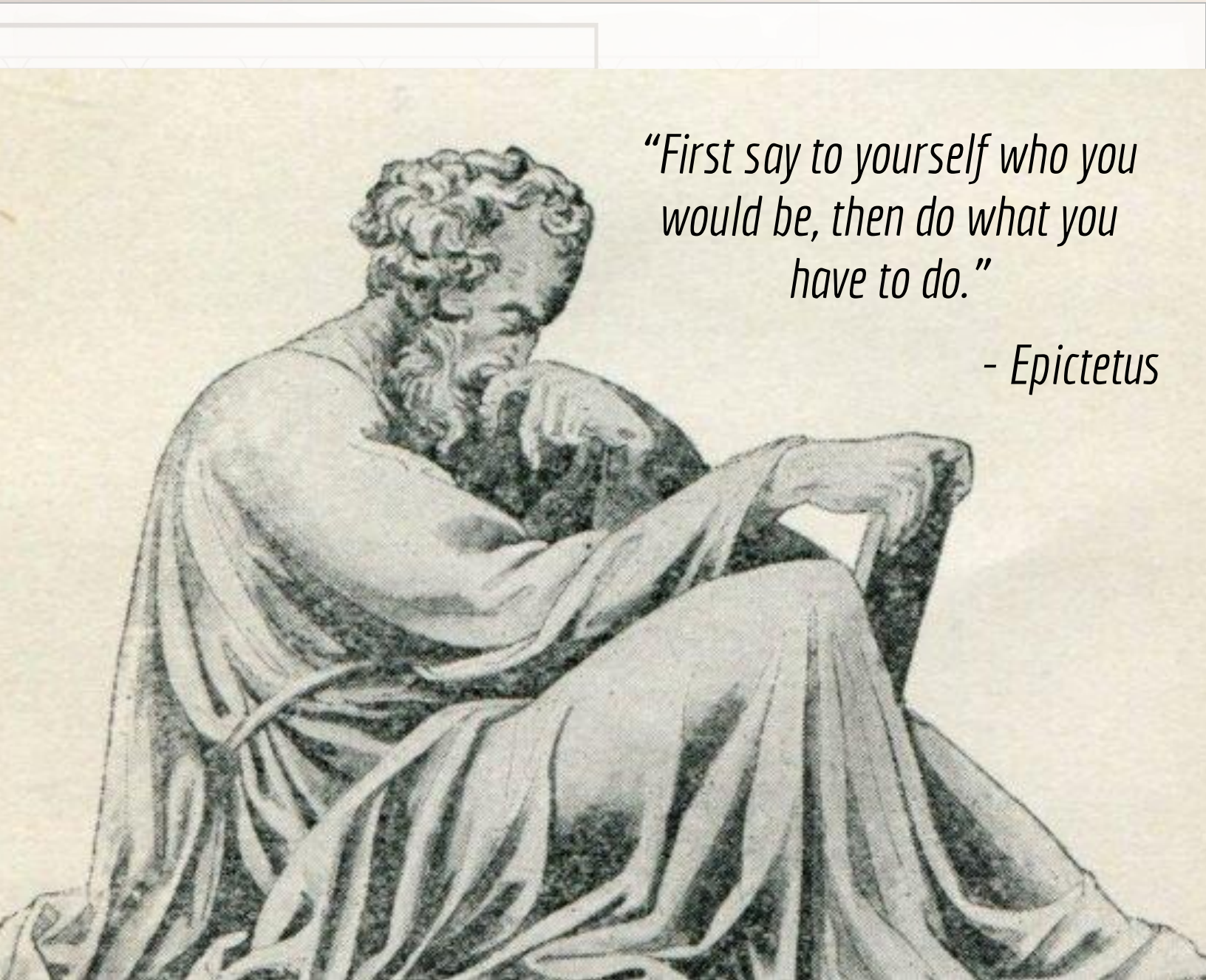
Applying the lessons of Stoicism, I was able to make my yoga practice a habit as familiar as brushing my teeth. More than ten years later, I'm still showing up everyday. If you want to find out how a bunch of Ancient Romans can help you stick to a practice from Ancient India keep reading.

# Discipline of Desire - Beyond SMART goals

Getting clear about what you want is the foundation for growth. For many coaches, guidance counselors and self-help gurus this means setting a SMART goal. That's a goal that is **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound** (S.M.A.R.T.) It's an objective, clearly defined target to aim for and it definitely has its place. After all, *"I want to be strong and flexible enough to hold a backbend for five breaths by the end of the year"* is a much more useful goal than, *"I want to be stronger and more flexible."*

But, the Stoics point out that the only things we have complete control over are our opinions, intentions and judgements. **SMART goals, no matter how well articulated, are ultimately beyond our control.** We are like archers aiming for a target. We control everything up until we release the arrow, but then must accept that actually hitting the target is outside our power. Perhaps the target moves unexpectedly. Perhaps a gust of wind blows our arrow off course. SMART goals may help us aim to be healthier, stronger and more flexible, but the only goals 100% within our power to achieve are PROCESS goals.

PROCESS goals are the actions we plan to take to get closer to our objective. If your SMART goal is a spot on a map, then your PROCESS goal is how you plan to get there. **The discipline of desire means moving our attention away from a destination that we may or may not reach and focusing instead on putting one foot in front of the other.**



*"First say to yourself who you would be, then do what you have to do."*

*- Epictetus*

*Second century philosopher, Epictetus, emphasized that happiness and satisfaction in life are found by focusing on what is in your control. He encouraged his students to do the best with what they have and accept the rest as it comes.*

# Exercise #1: Taking Aim

Follow the prompts to define your SMART goal

Specific:	What exactly will you accomplish?	
Measurable	How many? How much? How will you know you are making progress?	
Achievable	Can this really happen? Can you imagine yourself doing this?	
Relevant	Is this something I want for myself? Does this really matter to me?	
Time-Bound	When will you be able to do this?	

# Exercise #2: Embracing the Journey

Follow the prompts to define your PROCESS Goal.

## 1. What will you practice?

Save yourself the burden of making decisions right before you step onto your mat. If you are following videos, decide beforehand which videos you will be using.

## 2. When will you practice?

Set aside the same time everyday for practice. If you live by your calendar then block the time off and treat it the same way you would an important job interview or special event.

## 3. How long will you practice?

Don't overcommit yourself. You can always practice more. Consistency beats intensity. It would be better to practice 20 minutes a day than two hours once a week.

I intend to practice ***(the name of the series or video)***

on ***(the days of the week you intend to practice)***

at ***(the time you intend to practice)***

for ***(how long you intend to practice)***.

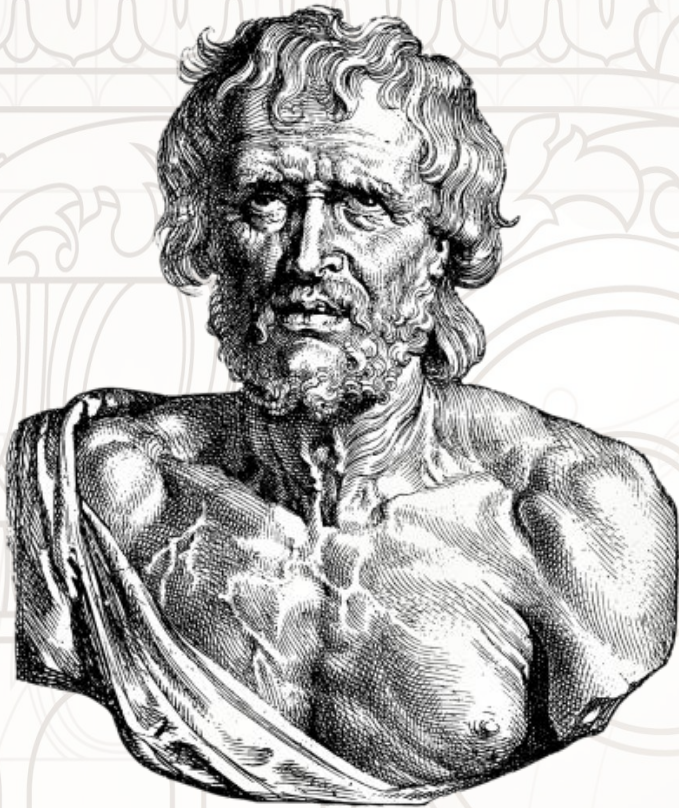
# Discipline of Action

We are social creatures by nature and in trying to act upon our PROCESS goals we will necessarily be navigating our relationship with others and the social pressures and responsibilities that entails. Have you ever felt too busy or worn out from dealing with other people to find the time to practice? Work, family and friends all make demands of our time and can leave us feeling like we have very little time to take care of ourselves and pursue our goals.

The discipline of action, at its essence, is about acting intentionally. It means cutting away useless demands on our time and resources and cultivating ones that bring us closer to our goals. It means making choices about what our priorities in life are and if necessary removing ourselves from relationships that don't serve us.

One of the best ways to stay consistent in your practice is to make a visible representation of the habit you're trying to develop. For every day that you meet your goal of practicing when you said you would and for as long as you intended, mark the day off in your calendar. Seeing a long chain of stars in a row will encourage you to keep adding more.

Your time is your most precious resource. You would hesitate to lend money to a stranger, but money can be replaced. The time you spend idly browsing social media or socializing with people you really don't care about is gone forever. The discipline of action encourages us to be stingier with our time and to only spend it on the people and activities that REALLY matter to us.



'The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily.'

-Seneca

*Practicing Stoicism doesn't mean withdrawing from the world like an ascetic. Seneca pursued a variety of goals including banking, writing and politics. In his many letters to his young friend Lucilius, he emphasized how precious little time we have to live and admonished him to live everyday with intention.*



# Exercise #3 Keep Track of Your Practice

Review your actions at the end of every day and keep a record of how well you stuck to your goals. For every day that you practiced give yourself a star.

Consistency is more important than intensity. Even the days you show up and do less than you planned count.

	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							
Week 7							
Week 8							
Week 9							
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							

# Exercise #4: Learn from Mistakes

You're not going to hit your goal everyday and holding yourself to unreasonable expectations will just cause you unnecessary grief. Use the days that you miss your practice as opportunities to hone in on habits, activities or relationships that are holding you back.

If you miss a day of practice spend time at the end of the day examining your actions.

## **Did other obligations get in the way?**

1. What was it? Was it a true emergency or did you use it as an excuse to skip practice?
2. Is this an obligation you have regularly?
3. Were there other, non-essential tasks you could have put off in order to find time to practice?
4. What is your plan to avoid a conflict for the next time?

## **Are other people a bad influence on you?**

1. Who is the negative influence?
2. What specific behavior, mood or pattern would you like to avoid?
3. Can you eliminate exposure to this person without shirking responsibility?
4. What is your plan to reduce contact with this person or stay true to your goal if you must deal with them?

# Discipline of Assent

In our day to day lives we often react unconsciously to our environment. We receive impressions from our senses and instantly jump from those impressions to reactions with very little by way of judgement. Think about a trip that you take regularly like driving to work or walking to school. You see landmarks, make turns and arrive at your destination almost without thinking. It's so deeply ingrained you can do it automatically. Our ability to jump from sense impressions to judgements to actions on autopilot can be either a useful tool or our greatest obstacle.

The Discipline of Assent is the process of pulling apart our unconscious reactions and examining our judgements about the impressions we receive from the world. When we examine our automatic habits and understand what triggers us, we are able to take steps to interrupt our reactions and act intentionally.

Sometimes we have no real reason to skip practice, but we find ourselves skipping anyway. When the time comes to step onto the mat...we just don't. We do something else instead.

Getting into the habit of practicing everyday is often a matter of replacing an old automatic reaction with a new one. At first the new action takes a great deal of conscious effort and willpower, like taking a new route to a familiar destination. But with repetition it becomes as familiar as any other automatic process.

‘Your mind will be like its  
habitual thoughts; for the soul  
becomes dyed with the color of  
the thoughts’

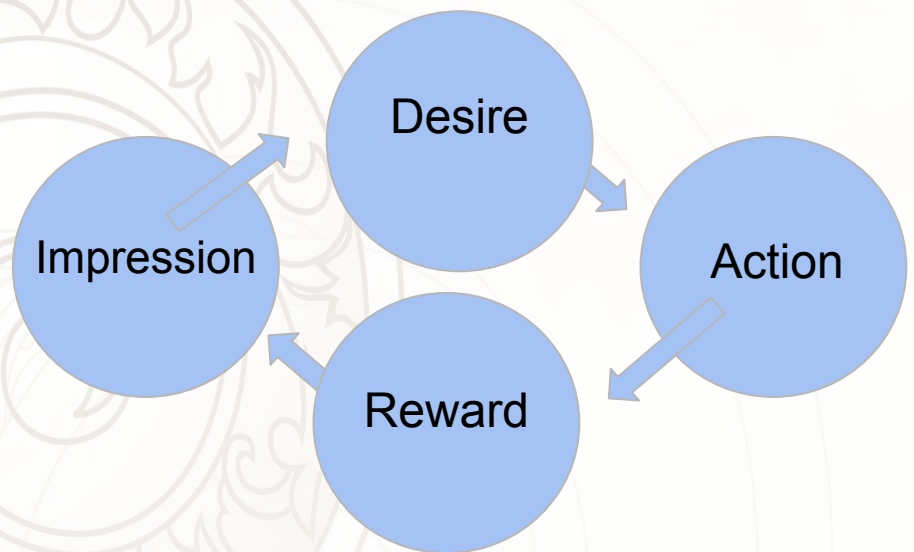
-Marcus Aurelius



Marcus Aurelius ruled the Roman Empire between 161-180 AD. He believed philosophy was meant to be practiced, not merely thought about. His success as emperor was thanks in large part to his ability to examine his reactions and intentionally develop his habits of mind.

# Exercise #5: Catching Automatic Behavior

Habits follow a regular cycle. We receive an impression which triggers a desire or judgement. We automatically act on that judgement and receive a reward.



Spend some time learning to recognize how various types of impressions in your life trigger automatic judgments and behaviors. For every behavior, remind yourself that this is a learned behavior and not outside your control.

Type of Impression	Impression	Judgment/ Desire	Habitual Action	Reward
Time of Day	<i>Eg. the morning</i>	<i>It would be nice to have coffee</i>	<i>Make coffee</i>	<i>Feeling stimulated</i>
Preceding Event				
Emotional State				
Location				
People you are with				

# Exercise #6: Make Yoga an Easy Habit

In order to make yoga practice a habit we have to work within the behavioral loop that governs all habits. Follow the prompts to make yoga an easier habit to maintain.

## **Make Yoga Practice Easier**

1. How can you make the impression that triggers you to practice more obvious?
2. How can you make your yoga practice more desirable?
3. How can you make starting your practice easy?
4. How can you make finishing your practice more rewarding?

## **Make Skipping More Difficult**

1. How can you make the impressions that trigger you to skip practice invisible?
2. How can you make skipping practice less desirable?
3. How can you make skipping practice more difficult?
4. How can you make skipping practice less rewarding?

# Final words of (borrowed) wisdom

- Consistency is more important than intensity. Start with a modest practice goal you can sustain.
- Let go of perfection. Measure yourself according to your intentions, not your results.
- When you slip up, get back on track quickly. Never skip twice in a row.
- Do the hardest thing first. If practicing feels like the most challenging thing for you day, get it out of the way first.
- Talk about your practice. Verbally commit to practicing by telling a friend about your intention.