Epistle XX, traditionally titled
“On Practicing What You Preach

Latin

[1] Si vales et te dignum putas qui aliquando fias tuus, gaudeo; mea enim gloria erit, si te istinc ubi sine spe exeundi fluctuaris extraxero. Illud autem te, mi Lucili, rogo atque hortor, ut philosophiam in praecordia ima demittas et experimentum profectus tui capias non oratione nec scripto, sed animi firmitate, cupiditatum deminutione: verba rebus proba.

English

1. If you are in good health and if you think yourself worthy of becoming at last your own master, I am glad. For the credit will be mine, if I can drag you from the floods in which you are being buffeted without hope of emerging. This, however, my dear Lucilius, I ask and beg of you, on your part, that you let wisdom sink into your soul, and test your progress, not by mere speech or writings, but by stoutness of heart and decrease of desire. Prove your words by your deeds.

[2] Aliud propositum est declamantibus et assensionem coronae captantibus, aliud his qui iuvenum et otiosorum aures disputatione varia aut volubili detinrent: facere docet philosophia, non dicere, et hoc exigit, ut ad legem suam quisque vivat, ne orationi vita dissentiat, ut ipsa intra se vita unius sit omnium actionum sine dissensione coloris. Maximum hoc est et officium sapientiae et indicium, ut verbis opera concordent, ut ipse ubique par sibi idemque sit.

2. Far different is the purpose of those who are speech-making and trying to win the approbation of a throng of hearers, far different that of those who allure the ears of young men and idlers by many-sided or fluent argumentation; philosophy teaches us to act, not to speak; it exacts of every man that he should live according to his own standards, that his life should not be out of harmony with his words, and that, further, his inner life should be of one hue and not out of harmony with all his activities. This, I say, is the highest duty and the highest proof of wisdom, – that deed and word should be in accord, that a man should be equal to himself under all conditions, and always the same.

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1 All works herein, both Latin and English, by Seneca the Younger, also known as Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C.–65 A.D.), are available in the public domain. Texts prepared by Matthew Mehan, Ph.D. The English translation, from the 1917 Loeb edition, is by Richard M. Gummere.

"But," you reply, "who can maintain this standard?" Very few, to be sure; but there are some. It is indeed a hard undertaking, and I do not say that the philosopher can always keep the same pace. But he can always travel the same path. 3. Observe yourself, then, and see whether your dress and your house are inconsistent, whether you treat yourself lavishly and your family meanly, whether you eat frugal dinners and yet build luxurious houses. You should lay hold, once for all, upon a single norm to live by, and should regulate your whole life according to this norm. Some men restrict themselves at home, but strut with swelling port before the public; such discordance is a fault, and it indicates a wavering mind which cannot yet keep its balance. 4. And I can tell you, further, whence arise this unsteadiness and disagreement of action and purpose; it is because no man resolves upon what he wishes, and, even if he has done so, he does not persist in it, but jumps the track; not only does he change, but he returns and slips back to the conduct which he has abandoned and abjured. 5. Therefore, to omit the ancient definitions of wisdom and to include the whole manner of human life, I can be satisfied with the following: "What is wisdom? Always desiring the same things, and always refusing the same things."[1] You may be excused from adding the little proviso, – that what you wish, should be right; since no man can always be satisfied with the same thing, unless it is right.

[6] Nesciunt ergo homines quid velint nisi illo momento quo volunt; in totum nulli velle aut nolle decretum est; variatur cotidie iudicium et in contrarium vertitur ac plerisque agitur vita per lusum. Preme ergo quod coepisti, et fortasse perduceris aut ad summum aut eo quod summum nondum esse solus intellegas.
[7] 'Quid fiet' inquis 'huic turbae familiarium sine re familiaris?' Turba ista cum a te pasci desierit, ipsa se pascet, aut quod tu beneficio tuo non potes scire, paupertatis scies: illa veros certosque amicos retinebit, discedet quisquis non te, sed aliud sequebatur. Non est autem vel ob hoc unum amanda paupertas, quod a quibus ameris ostendet? O quando ille veniet dies quo nemo in honorem tuum mentiatur!

[8] Huc ergo cogitationes tuae tendant, hoc cura, hoc opta, omnia alia vota deo remissurus, ut contentus sis temet ipso et ex te nascentibus bonis. Quae potest esse felicitas propior? Redige te ad parva ex quibus cadere non possis, idque ut libenter facias, ad hoc pertinebit tributum huius epistulae, quod statim conferam.

7. "But what," you say, "will become of my crowded household without a household income?" If you stop supporting that crowd, it will support itself; or perhaps you will learn by the bounty of poverty what you cannot learn by your own bounty. Poverty will keep for you your true and tried friends; you will be rid of the men who were not seeking you for yourself, but for something which you have. Is it not true, however, that you should love poverty, if only for this single reason, – that it will show you those by whom you are loved? O when will that time come, when no one shall tell lies to compliment you!

8. Accordingly, let your thoughts, your efforts, your desires, help to make you content with your own self and with the goods that spring from yourself; and commit all your other prayers to God's keeping! What happiness could come closer home to you? Bring yourself down to humble conditions, from which you cannot be ejected and in order that you may do so with greater alacrity, the contribution contained in this letter shall refer to that subject; I shall bestow it upon you forthwith.
[9] Invideas licet, etiam nunc libenter pro me dependet Epicurus. 'Magnificentior, mihi crede, sermo tuus in grabatto videbitur et in panno; non enim dicentur tantum illa sed probabuntur.' Ego certe aliter audio quae dicit Demetrius noster; cum illum vidi nudum, quanto minus quam [in] stramentis incubantem: non praeeptor veri sed testis est. 

[10] 'Quid ergo? non licet divitias in sinu positas contemnere?' Quidni liceat? Et ille ingentis animi est qui illas circumfusas sibi, multum duque miratus quod ad se venerint, ridet suasque audit magis esse quam sentit. Multum est non corrumpi divitiarum contubernio; magnus ille qui in divit’s pauper est. 

[11] 'Nescio' inquis 'quomodo paupertatem iste laturus sit, si in illam inciderit.' Nec ego, Epicure, an gulus [si] iste pauper contempturus sit divitias, si in illas inciderit; itaque in utroque mens aestimanda est inspiciendumque an ille paupertati indulgeat, an hic divitiis non indulgeat. Alioquin leve argumentum est bonae voluntatis grabattus aut pannus, nisi apparuit aliquem illa non necessitate pati sed malle.

9. Although you may look askance, Epicurus will once again be glad to settle my indebtedness: "Believe me, your words will be more imposing if you sleep on a cot and wear rags. For in that case you will not be merely saying them; you will be demonstrating their truth." I, at any rate, listen in a different spirit to the utterances of our friend Demetrius, after I have seen him reclining without even a cloak to cover him, and, more than this, without rugs to lie upon. He is not only a teacher of the truth, but a witness to the truth. 10. "May not a man, however, despise wealth when it lies in his very pocket?" Of course; he also is great-souled, who sees riches heaped up round him and, after wondering long and deeply because they have come into his possession, smiles, and hears rather than feels that they are his. It means much not to be spoiled by intimacy with riches; and he is truly great who is poor amidst riches. 11. "Yes, but I do not know," you say, "how the man you speak of will endure poverty, if he falls into it suddenly." Nor do I, Epicurus, know whether the poor man you speak of will despise riches, should he suddenly fall into them; accordingly, in the case of both, it is the mind that must be appraised, and we must investigate whether your man is pleased with his poverty, and whether my man is displeased with his riches. Otherwise, the cot-bed and the rags are slight proof of his good intentions, if it has not been made clear that the person concerned endures these trials not from necessity but from preference.
Ceterum magnae indolis est ad ista non properare tamquam meliora, sed praeparari tamquam ad facilia. Et sunt, Lucili, facilia; cum vero multum ante meditatus accesseris, iucunda quoque; inest enim illis, sine qua nihil est iucundum, securitas. Necessarium ergo iudico id quod tibi scripsi magnos viros saepe fecisse, aliquos dies interponere quibus nos imaginaria paupertate exerceamus ad veram; quod eo magis faciendum est quod deliciis permaduimus et omnia dura ac difficilia iudicamus. Potius excitandus e somno et vellicandus est animus admonendusque naturam nobis minimum constituisse. Nemo nascitur dives; quisquis exit in lucem iussus est lacte et panno esse contentus: ab his initiis nos regna non capiunt. Vale.

12. It is the mark, however, of a noble spirit not to precipitate oneself into such things on the ground that they are better, but to practise for them on the ground that they are thus easy to endure. And they are easy to endure, Lucilius; when, however, you come to them after long rehearsal, they are even pleasant; for they contain a sense of freedom from care, – and without this nothing is pleasant. 13. I hold it essential, therefore, to do as I have told you in a letter that great men have often done: to reserve a few days in which we may prepare ourselves for real poverty by means of fancied poverty. There is all the more reason for doing this, because we have been steeped in luxury and regard all duties as hard and onerous. Rather let the soul be roused from its sleep and be prodded, and let it be reminded that nature has prescribed very little for us. No man is born rich. Every man, when he first sees light, is commanded to be content with milk and rags. Such is our beginning, and yet kingdoms are all too small for us!

Farewell.
Epistle XXIII, traditionally titled
"On the True Joy Which Comes from Philosophy"

[1] Putas me tibi scripturum quam humane
nobiscum hiemps gerit, quae et remissa fuit et
brevis, quam malignum ver sit, quam
praeposterum frigus, et alias ineptias verba
quaerentium? Ego vero aliquid quod et mihi
et tibi prodesse possit scribam. Quid autem id
erit nisi ut te exhorter ad bonam mentem?
Huius fundamentum quod sit quaeris? ne
gaudeas vanis. Fundamentum hoc esse dixi:
culmen est. Ad summa pervenit qui scit quo
gaudeat, qui felicitatem suam in aliena
potestate non posuit; sollicitus est et incertus
sui quem spes aliqua proritat, licet ad manum
sit, licet non ex difficili petatur, licet
ante omnia fac, mi Lucili: disce gaudere.

 Existimas nunc me detrahere tibi multas
voluptates qui fortuita summoveo, qui spes,
dulcissima oblectamenta, devitandas
existimo? immo contra nolo tibi umquam
deesse laetitiam. Volo illam tibi domi nasci:
nascitur si modo intra te ipsum fit. Ceterae
hilaritates non implent pectus; frontem
remittunt, leves sunt, nisi forte tu iudicas eum
gaudere qui ridet: animus esse debet alacer et
fidens et supra omnia erectus.

1. Do you suppose that I shall write you how
kindly the winter season has dealt with us, – a
short season and a mild one, – or what a nasty
spring we are having, – cold weather out of
season, – and all the other trivialities which
people write when they are at a loss for topics
of conversation? No; I shall communicate
something which may help both you and
myself. And what shall this "something" be, if
not an exhortation to soundness of mind? Do
you ask what is the foundation of a sound
mind? It is, not to find joy in useless things. I
said that it was the foundation; it is really the
pinnacle. 2. We have reached the heights if
we know what it is that we find joy in and if
we have not placed our happiness in the
control of externals. The man who is goaded
ahead by hope of anything, though it be
within reach, though it be easy of access, and
though his ambitions have never played him
false, is troubled and unsure of himself. 3.
Above all, my dear Lucilius, make this your
business: learn how to feel joy.

Do you think that I am now robbing you of
many pleasures when I try to do away with
the gifts of chance, when I counsel the
avoidance of hope, the sweetest thing that
gladdens our hearts? Quite the contrary; I do
not wish you ever to be deprived of gladness.
I would have it born in your house; and it is
born there, if only it be inside of you. Other
objects of cheer do not fill a man's bosom;
they merely smooth his brow and are
inconstant, – unless perhaps you believe that
he who laughs has joy. The very soul must be
happy and confident, lifted above every
circumstance.
4. Mihi crede, verum gaudium res severa est. An tu existimas quemquam soluto vultu et, ut isti delicati loquentur, hilariculo mortem contemnere, paupertati domum aperire, voluptates tenere sub freno, meditari dolorum patientiam? Haec qui apud se versat in magno gaudio est, sed parum blando. In huius gaudii possessione esse te volo: numquam deficiet, cum semel unde petatur inveneris. 5. Levium metallorum fructus in summo est: illa opulentissima sunt quorum in alto latet vena assidue plenius responsura fodienti. Haec quibus delectatur vulgus tenuem habent ac perfusoriam voluptatem, et quodcumque invecticum gaudium est fundamento caret: hoc de quo loquor, ad quod te conor perducere, solidum est et quod plus pateat introrsus. 6. Fac, oro te, Lucili carissime, quod unum potest praestare felicem: dissice et conculca ista quae extrinsecus splendent, quae tibi promittuntur ab alio vel ex alio; ad verum bonum specta et de tuo gaude. Quid est autem hoc 'de tuo'? te ipso et tui optima parte. Corpusculum quoque etiam si nihil fieri sine illo potest, magis necessariam rem crede quam magnum; vanas suggerit voluptates, breves, paenitendas ac, nisi magna moderatione, temperentur, in contrarium abituras. Ita dico: In praecepi voluptas ad dolorem vergit, nisi modum tenuit.
Modum autem tenere in eo difficile est, quod bonu esse credideris: veri boni aviditas tuta est.[7] Quod sit istud interroagas, aut unde subeat? Dicam: ex bona conscientia, ex honestis consiliis, ex rectis actionibus, ex contemptu fortuitorum, ex placido vitae et continuo tenore unam prementis viam. Nam illi qui ex aliis propositis in alia transiliunt aut ne transiliunt quidem sed casu quodam transmittuntur, quomodo habere quicquam certum mansurumve possunt suspensi et vagi? [8] Pauci sunt qui consilio se suaque disponant: ceteri, eorum more quae fluminibus innatant, non eunt sed feruntur; ex quibus alia lenior unda detinuit ac mollius vexit, alia vehementior rapuit, alia proxima ripae cursu languescente deposuit, alia torrens impetus in mare eiecit. Ideo constituendum est quid velimus et in eo perseverandum.

But it is hard to keep within bounds in that which you believe to be good. The real good may be coveted with safety. 7. Do you ask me what this real good is, and whence it derives? I will tell you: it comes from a good conscience, from honourable purposes, from right actions, from contempt of the gifts of chance, from an even and calm way of living which treads but one path. For men who leap from one purpose to another, or do not even leap but are carried over by a sort of hazard, – how can such wavering and unstable persons possess any good that is fixed and lasting? 8. There are only a few who control themselves and their affairs by a guiding purpose; the rest do not proceed; they are merely swept along, like objects afloat in a river. And of these objects, some are held back by sluggish waters and are transported gently; others are torn along by a more violent current; some, which are nearest the bank, are left there as the current slackens; and others are carried out to sea by the onrush of the stream. Therefore, we should decide what we wish, and abide by the decision.

9. Now is the time for me to pay my debt. I can give you a saying of your friend Epicurus and thus clear this letter of its obligation. "It is bothersome always to be beginning life." Or another, which will perhaps express the meaning better: "They live ill who are always beginning to live."

10. You are right in asking why; the saying certainly stands in need of a commentary. It is because the life of such persons is always incomplete. But a man cannot stand prepared for the approach of death if he has just begun to live. We must make it our aim already to have lived long enough. No one deems that he has done so, if he is just on the point of planning his life.

11. You need not think that there are few of this kind; practically everyone is of such a stamp. Some men, indeed, only begin to live when it is time for them to leave off living. And if this seems surprising to you, I shall add that which will surprise you still more: Some men have left off living before they have begun. Farewell.
Let us cease to desire that which we have been desiring. I, at least, am doing this: in my old age I have ceased to desire what I desired when a boy. To this single end my days and my nights are passed; this is my task, this the object of my thoughts, – to put an end to my chronic ills. I am endeavouring to live every day as if it were a complete life. I do not indeed snatch it up as if it were my last; I do regard it, however, as if it might even be my last.

The present letter is written to you with this in mind as if death were about to call me away in the very act of writing. I am ready to depart, and I shall enjoy life just because I am not over-anxious as to the future date of my departure.

Before I became old I tried to live well; now that I am old, I shall try to die well; but dying well means dying gladly. See to it that you never do anything unwillingly.

That which is bound to be a necessity if you rebel, is not a necessity if you desire it. This is what I mean: he who takes his orders gladly, escapes the bitterest part of slavery, – doing what one does not want to do. The man who does something under orders is not unhappy; he is unhappy who does something against his will. Let us therefore so set our minds in order that we may desire whatever is demanded of us by circumstances, and above all that we may reflect upon our end without sadness.

We must make ready for death before we make ready for life. Life is well enough furnished, but we are too greedy with regard to its furnishings; something always seems to us lacking, and will always seem lacking. To have lived long enough depends neither upon our years nor upon our days, but upon our minds. I have lived, my dear friend Lucilius, long enough. I have had my fill;[1] I await death. Farewell.