

## Stoicism as A Way of Life

**Sharma GN\***

Department of Philosophy, Institute of Career Development, India

**\*Corresponding author:** GN Sharma, Department of Philosophy, Institute of Career Development, Aurangabad-431001, India, Tel: +919850141001; Email: gnsharma1951@rediffmail.com

**Research Article**

Volume 1 Issue 1

**Received Date:** March 12, 2018

**Published Date:** March 29, 2018

### Abstract

Scores of philosophies have emerged in past and also in recent years but only a few notable are frequently referred to for seeking guidance to lead life successfully. Many of the philosophies had been beyond the level of comprehension of a common man because they fail to provide practical applications. Nonetheless they definitely have contributed to the academics of the subject. However when put to the test of validity in the actual mart of life most of them miserably fail and seem to be absolutely futile. It should be acknowledged as a proven fact even with regard to many scientific theories or approaches. Early philosophers indeed strived hard and ingeniously to reveal variety shades of Nature and its secrets. Later on somehow much emphasis had been laid down upon human life and its intricacies or problems. Most of the behavioral sciences restricted themselves to a narrow arena owing to which they sounded to be pursuing extremities and condemning the other contemporary streams of thought. Stoicism has accepted the physical or existing facts of life and has managed to maintain a balanced outlook providing a track leading to contentment and happiness without bringing in complex ways of dealing with the problems of life for the humanity as a whole. Therefore it can lead to complacency in true sense. This paper aims to bring forth the main postulates of this workable philosophy and highlight those that are necessary for modern life.

**Keywords:** Stoicism; Practical applications; Main postulates

### Introduction

Stretching back to Third century BC we realize that though centuries have rolled down since the advent of Stoicism still it could withstand the rigours of the changing mart of the world. It had various challenging terrains to pass through. Nonetheless it could manage to tread on with its steadfast convictions and emerge as an easily workable and livable philosophy of life. In fact if we look at the development of some of the philosophies they seem to have managed to remain secured by seeking shelter under some extreme academic idealism which

always felt short of the much desired pragmatic shade. Therefore, there could be contribution to the academics of the subject but its practical application serving the humanity was far from the sight. When we examine various philosophies which emerged in pre-Socratic period it is self-evident that the philosophers were totally involved in the study of Nature to solve the riddles. It goes without dispute that there had been indeed genuine contribution to the subject as well as it could be reckoned as service to humanity. Socratic period shows philosophers taking great pride in solving the mundane problems which continuously plagued one and all.

Therefore it has been mentioned that "Pre-Socratic Philosophy begins.. with the discovery of Nature; Socratic philosophy begins with the discovery of man's soul" [1]. These philosophies guided the masses with utmost simplicity without using any of the academic jargons.

Ancient Greco-Roman school which originated as Hellenistic philosophy-Stoicism-was founded by Zeno of Citium in Athens also known as Zenoism. Literally speaking the name is related to an open market place in Athens where the philosophers could frequent freely and maintain the tradition of gathering and tutoring the disciples. Stoicism grew in phases as Early, Middle and Late Stoa. In the modern age usually the propounders of this philosophy referred to particularly for the study of all shades, are Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca, Musonius etc. In all their writings there is clearly an effortful impetus on self-control for the followers. Life without emotions is unimaginable. Accepting the existing reality needs courage and obviously wisdom too. Anytime improvisation has definitely its own scope but then usually it meets with considerable limitations. Similarly free-will is essential and it encompasses sizeable area. Despite this we all face extremities of human moods which dominate and swing to positive and negative poles causing constructive and destructive emotions. At times there could be an admixture of such propensities also. Stoicism always maintains its stance of pursuing happiness as the major aim of life but at the same time insists on sticking to the virtuous path of life. Therefore it can be safely concluded that it is ever tending towards Eudaimonia. It also lays a lot of emphasis on living with an unstudied manner. Simplicity is the shortest route granted by Nature to live happily. Unfortunately we fail to grasp it. The heavy luggage of unchecked desires makes us weak because we cannot transform them totally into a reality. Human beings are fortunate because they are endowed with the reasoning power. This faculty is utilized to carry rational thinking whereas the other living beings have only an instinctual way of judging and then responding or reacting. One needs to have in his custody the passions under control so that the functioning is totally on the righteous path. The opposite of this may lead to a total devastating state and would end up with no possibility of a recovery. External circumstances need not be bracketed into worthy and unworthy slots. Other way around a safe distance should be maintained. It is quite surprising that this practical judgement and wisdom was surmised way back in third to second century BC which is so befitting even today.

In defense of simple living, Diogenes observed that "the gods had given to men the means of living easily, but this had been put out of sight, because we require honeyed

cakes, unguents and the like. Such is the madness of men, he said, that they choose to be miserable when they have it in their power to be content. The problem is bad men obey their lusts as servants obey their masters and because they cannot control their desires, they can never find contentment" [2].

### Main Tenets

Most of the times it is difficult to lay down the postulates of a philosophy point wise particularly when it is either having a religious overtone or strong background and subsequently influence or is narrowed down to a selective stratum of the society. To a large extent many philosophies seem to be stuck up with or stemming out of a composite type of outlook that covers almost all aspects of life. On the other hand there are philosophies which are not subjected to only the academic fervour or religious sentiments. They seem to be pursuing absolutely a pragmatic approach which is usable for all. Stoicism is one such philosophy which has genuinely served humanity by giving guidance to the routine problems. It has avoided the lofty theoretical ideas which are impressive but in theory only. There has been clarity in the outline of this philosophy which even a layman can easily follow. One does not require any special training in philosophy subject or scholarship to grasp it. The chief emphasis is on practical wisdom so that the followers can easily combat with self-feelings and the challenging surroundings on daily basis. Every decade poses new problems or same problems in different forms. New situations are bound to arise because of socio-economic factors or abrupt upheavals. Stoicism recognizes this and therefore instead of sidetracking or dismissing deliberately provides solutions to certain psychological problems that the humanity has to encounter. Philosopher Lawrence Becker opines "Stoic ethics is a species of eudaimonism. Its central, organizing concern is about what we ought to do or be to live well-to flourish" [3].

Let us try to understand Stoicism in brief. There are certain realities which in fact provide a complete and clear guidance to us but we fail to accept. Living in agreement with the dictates of Nature is the wisest thing. As Socrates repeatedly stressed upon the famous Delphic maxim, "Know Thyself" Stoicism probably slightly elongates the same by adding "Know Surroundings or Nature too!" Needless to say the goal of everyone's life is happiness and therefore the negativities must be eliminated. Good can be understood or cognized by knowing bad also. In the same vein things that can be repaired and those which are clearly irreparable should be impartially distinguished. The former may be concluded as possibly under our control while the latter

are not. This of course is not a process involving merely a single step or to be performed only once to be judged. It is always for everyone an ongoing process. Therefore slowly one gets tuned up to this method and it leads to happiness with intelligence. Stoicism however cautions us. It is not to be taken as any instant result oriented practice to be carried on. It has to be our goal of life. By virtue of this at least one can be assured of living healthily. This would lead us to gain knowledge of self or rather self-limitations. It also suggests the stoical outlook towards life to be imbibed which means we have to live without confrontation with Nature or circumstances in which we are living.

It is clear that Stoicism recommends acceptance of reality as the only way to lead to complacency. It goes further to speak about the nature of soul. With its limitations and our own uncontrolled way of dealing with reality, Stoics have concluded that Soul is restless. This is also because of our craving for the one which is transient. For example we seek fame, good fortune, emotions, wealth and so on but end up with frustration. Stoics do not recommend life free from emotions but rather expect the followers to banish negative or destructive emotions. These qualities take us away from happiness and virtuous path. As a metaphysician Schopenhauer who relates himself to Kant thinks Pessimism follows from the very nature of Will. Further he expresses, "All willing arises from want and so from deficiency and so from suffering. The satisfaction of a wish ends it, yet for one wish that is satisfied there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, the desire that lasts long, and demands are infinite....we can never having lasting happiness or peace" [4].

Stoicism might give us an impression that it strongly recommends pacifist outlook. To the contrary it lays much importance on dealing the world with intelligence. There are many instances wherein our paying attention thoroughly is not at all desirable. The negativities do attract us but further on they do continue to upset us. Others behaviour, response, and viewpoints may not be agreeable to our way of thinking always. Rarely we have to respond vigorously. Majority times it is better to admit the social fatalism, so that nothing can surprise or irritate us. It is therefore not at all sensible to wish or expect others behaviour to be remodelled to suit our temperament. There are bound to be always deviations from the standard or accredited Ethics in society. Therefore to forestall all the possible onslaught of the destructive emotions it is better to hold on to the quasi-pacifist viewpoint. Approach of stoical thinking in fact has numerous shades and that is why some of the psychologists feel that it has hedonic adaptation. In

general a large percentage of humanity seems to be uneasy and therefore very easily lose interest in all the pursued aims. The moment we achieve what we want it ceases to be an Ideal. We do not find consistency in our attachment to the desired object once it is in our custody. Rather the one which was earlier imagined as a perfect source of happiness or comfort looks like a picture of boredom. The same thing happens in our relationships also. Epictetus says, "Of things that are, some are good and some are bad and some are indifferent: the good then are virtues, and the things which precipitate in virtues; and the evil things the opposite; and the indifferent things are wealth, health, reputation"[5].

## Conclusion

No behavioural science can be considered as totally satisfying and faultless from all angles. Philosophies too have the same fate. They do initially work efficiently but later fail to continue the intensity for getting the desirable results. Actually both Eastern and Western philosophies have strived hard to develop a philosophy which could accommodate all the required shades. Unfortunately this approach has ended into contradictions, severe limitations, drawbacks and even escapism. Unless we have continuation in our efforts to not only achieve but also retain the projected principles, no philosophy can promise solace. Stoicism lays a large impetus on tranquility. It advises its followers to stop the race for fame and fortune. We need to be very wary in choosing our associates. There has to be a well drawn plan to handle vices or negativities in life like insults, grief, despondency, ill-temperament, old age problems etc. Managing relations is an art and therefore nothing should be taken for granted. No set of principles shall work forever. A revision is definitely required. In brief Stoicism expects the primary function is to be considered as rationality only. That is why, "the ideal human being, someone both perfectly good and rational, is called the 'Sage' or 'Wise man (sophos). Those who aspire to become Sages are therefore called 'Philosophers', lovers of wisdom".

## References

1. Macdonald CF (1962) Before and after Socrates. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, p: 5.
2. William B Irvine (2009) A Guide to the Good Life. Oxford University Press, pp: 31.
3. Becker Lawrence (1998) A New Stoicism. Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp: 20.

4. Rogers Arthur (1908) *A Student's History of Philosophy*. The Macmillan company, New York, pp: 428.
5. Robertson Donald (2017) *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness*. Hodder & Stoughton, London, pp: 28.