

Don't Defend Your Reputation or Intentions



Don't be afraid of verbal abuse or criticism.

Only the morally weak feel compelled to defend or explain themselves to others. Let the quality of your deeds speak on your behalf. We can't control the impressions others form about us, and the effort to do so only debases our character.

So, if anyone should tell you that a particular person has spoken critically of you, don't bother with excuses or defenses. Just smile and reply, "I guess that person doesn't know about all my other faults. Otherwise, he wouldn't have mentioned only these."

Conduct Yourself with Dignity



No matter where you find yourself, comport yourself as if you were a distinguished person.

While the behavior of many people is dictated by what is going on around them, hold yourself to a higher standard. Take care to avoid parties or games where thoughtless revelry and carousing are the norm. If you find yourself at a public event, remain rooted in your own purposes and ideals.

Emulate Worthy Role Models



One of the best ways to elevate your character immediately is to find worthy role models to emulate. If you have the opportunity to meet with an important person, don't be nervous. Invoke the characteristics of the people you admire most and adopt their manners, speech, and behavior as your own. There is nothing false in this. We all carry the seeds of greatness within us, but we need an image as a point of focus in order that they may sprout.

At the same time, just because you are meeting a person of great merit doesn't mean you should be overly awed. People are just people, regardless of their talent or influence.

Exercise Discretion When Conversing



Self-importance is not the way of the true philosopher. Nobody enjoys the company of a braggart. Don't oppress people with dramatic stories of your own exploits. Nobody cares that much about your war stories and dramatic adventures, though they might indulge you for a while to appear polite. To speak frequently and excessively of your own achievements is tiresome and pompous.

You don't need to be the class clown. Nor do you need to resort to other indelicate methods in order to convince others you are clever, sophisticated, or affable.

Aggressive, glib, or showy talk should be completely avoided. It just lowers you in the esteem of your acquaintances.

Many people casually pepper their speech with obscenities in an attempt to bring force and intensity to their speech or to embarrass others. Refuse to go along with such talk. When people around you start to slip into indecent, pointless speech, leave if you can, or at least be silent and let your look of seriousness show that you are offended by such coarse talk.

Prefer Enduring Satisfaction to Immediate Gratification



Let your reason be supreme.

Inculcate the habit of deliberation.

Practice the art of testing whether particular things are actually good or not. Learn to wait and assess instead of always reacting from untrained instinct. Spontaneity is not a virtue in and of itself.

If some pleasure is promised to you and it seductively calls to you, step back and give yourself some time before mindlessly jumping at it. Dispassionately turn the matter over in your mind: Will this pleasure bring but a momentary delight, or real, lasting satisfaction? It makes a difference in the quality of our life and the kind of person we become when we learn how to distinguish between cheap thrills and meaningful, lasting rewards.

If, in calmly considering this pleasure, you realize that if you indulge in it you will regret it, abstain and rejoice in your forbearance. Reinforce the triumph of your character and you will be strengthened.

Take a Stand



Once you have deliberated and determined that a course of action is wise, never discredit your judgment. Stand squarely behind your decision. Chances are there may indeed be people who misunderstand your intentions and who may even condemn you. But if, according to your best judgment, you are acting rightly, you have nothing to fear. Take a stand. Don't be cravenly noncommittal.

Courtesy and Logic Each Have Their Place



Propriety and logic are different things, and each has its appropriate application.

The proposition "Either it is day or it is night" works well in a disjunctive argument, but not as well in a friendly conversation. Likewise, at a banquet it may make sense to take the largest share of food if you are really hungry, but it would be bad manners to do so.

When you dine with others, be aware not only how much your body appreciates the delicacies offered, but also how important good manners and personal refinement are.

Self-Mastery Depends on Self-Honesty



Know first who you are and what you're capable of. Just as nothing great is created instantly, the same goes for the perfecting of our talents and aptitudes. We are always learning, always growing. It is right to accept challenges. This is how we progress to the next level of intellectual, physical, or moral development. Still, don't kid yourself: If you try to be something or someone you are not, you belittle your true self and end up not developing in those areas that you would have excelled at quite naturally.

Within the divine order, we each have our own special calling. Listen to yours and follow it faithfully.

Safeguard Your Reason



Just as when you walk you are careful not to step on a nail or injure your foot, you should similarly take the utmost care not to in any way impair the highest faculty of your mind. The virtuous life depends on reason first and foremost. If you safeguard your reason, it will safeguard you.

Observe Proper Proportion and Moderation



Through vigilance, we can forestall the tendency to excess. Your possessions should be proportionate to the needs of your body, just as the shoe should fit the foot.

Without moral training, we can be induced to excess. In the case of shoes, for instance, many people are tempted to buy fancy, exotic shoes when all that is needed is comfortable, well-fitting, durable footwear.

Once we fall, however slightly, into immoderation, momentum gathers and we can be lost to whim.

Inner Excellence Matters More Than Outer Appearance



Females are especially burdened by the attention they receive for their pleasing appearance. From the time they are young, they are flattered by males or evaluated only in terms of their outward appearance.

Unfortunately, this can make a woman feel suited only to give men pleasure, and her true inner gifts sadly atrophy. She may feel compelled to put great effort and time into enhancing her outer beauty and distorting her natural self to please others.

Sadly, many people—both men and women—place all their emphasis on managing their physical appearance and the impression they make on others.

Those who seek wisdom come to understand that even though the world may reward us for wrong or superficial reasons, such as our physical appearance, the family we come from, and so on, what really matters is who we are inside and who we are becoming.

Care About Your Mind More Than Your Body



Those who are morally untrained spend an inordinate amount of time on their bodies. Carry out your animal functions incidentally. Your main attention should be given to the care and development of your reason. For through your reason, you are able to understand nature's laws.

Mistreatment Comes from False Impressions



If people treat you disrespectfully or speak unkindly about you, remember that they do so from their impression that it is right to do so.

It is unrealistic to expect people to see you as you see yourself. If people reach conclusions based on false impressions, they are the ones hurt rather than you, because it is they who are misguided. When someone interprets a true proposition as a false one, the proposition itself isn't hurt; only the person who holds the wrong view is deceived, and thus damaged. Once you clearly understand this, you will be less likely to feel affronted by others, even if they revile you. You can say to yourself, "It seemed so to that person, but that is only his impression."

Everything Has Two Handles



Everything has two handles: one by which it may be carried, the other by which it can't.

If, for example, your brother or sister treats you poorly, don't grasp the situation by the handle of hurt or injustice, or you won't be able to bear it and you will become bitter. Do the opposite. Grasp the situation by the handle of familial ties. In other words, focus on the fact that this is your brother or sister, that you were brought up together, and thus have an enduring, unbreakable bond. Viewing the situation that way, you understand it correctly and preserve your equilibrium.

Clear Thinking Is Vital



The life of wisdom is a life of reason. It is important to learn how to think clearly. Clear thinking is not a haphazard enterprise. It requires proper training. It is through clear thinking that we are able to properly direct our will, stick with our true purpose, and discover the connections we have to others and the duties that follow from those relationships. Every person should learn how to identify mushy and fallacious thinking. Study how inferences are legitimately derived, so that you avoid drawing unfounded conclusions.

For instance, note the following examples of faulty logic: "I am richer than you; therefore, I am better than you." One encounters such absurd assertions as this all the time, but they are completely fallacious. The valid inference that can be drawn is this: "I am richer than you; therefore I have more possessions or money than you do."

Another example: "I speak more persuasively than you; therefore, I am better than you." From this we can only conclude, "I speak more persuasively than you; therefore my speech carries more effect than yours."

But remember: Your character is independent of property or persuasive speech.

Take the time to assiduously study clear thinking and you won't be hoodwinked. Strong education in logic and the rules of effective argument will serve you well.

Call Things by Their Right Names



When we name things correctly, we comprehend them correctly, without adding information or judgments that aren't there. Does someone bathe quickly? Don't say he bathes poorly, but quickly. Name the situation as it is; don't filter it through your judgments.

Does someone drink a lot of wine? Don't say she is a drunk but that she drinks a lot. Unless you possess a comprehensive understanding of her life, how do you know if she is a drunk?

Do not risk being beguiled by appearances and constructing theories and interpretations based on distortions through misnaming. Give your assent only to what is actually true.

Wisdom Is Revealed Through Action, Not Talk



Don't declare yourself to be a wise person or discuss your spiritual aspirations with people who won't appreciate them. Show your character and your commitment to personal nobility through your actions.

Live Simply for Your Own Sake



Don't be puffed up with pride if you are able to provide for your needs with very little cost. The first task of the person who wishes to live wisely is to free himself or herself from the confines of self-absorption.

Consider how much more frugal the poor are than we, how much better they forebear hardship. If you want to develop your ability to live simply, do it for yourself, do it quietly, and don't do it to impress others.

Wisdom Depends on Vigilance



Most people don't realize that both help and harm come from within ourselves. Instead they look to externals, mesmerized by appearances.

Wise people, on the other hand, realize that we are the source of everything good or bad for us. They therefore don't resort to blaming and accusing others. They aren't driven to convince people they are worthy or special or distinguished.

If wise people experience challenges, they look to themselves; if they are commended by others, they quietly smile to themselves, unmoved; if they are slandered, they don't feel the need to defend their name.

But they go about their actions with vigilance, assuming that all is well, yet not perfectly secure. They harmonize their desires with life as it is, and seek to avoid only the things that would prevent their ability to exercise their will properly. They exercise moderation in all their affairs. And if they seem ignorant or unsophisticated, it is of no concern to them. They know that they only have to watch out for themselves and the direction of their own desires.

Living Wisdom Is More Important Than Knowing About It



If someone tries to impress you, claiming to understand the writings and ideas of a great thinker such as Chrysippus, think to yourself, the important thing is not to be able merely to speak fluently about abstruse subjects. What is essential is to understand nature and align your intentions and actions with the way things are. The person who truly understands Chrysippus's writings or the precepts of any great mind is the person who actually applies the philosopher's teachings. There is a big difference between saying valuable things and doing valuable things.

Don't give too much weight to erudition alone. Look to the example of people whose actions are consistent with their professed principles.

Practicing Principles Matters More Than Proving Them



The life of wisdom begins with learning how to put principles, such as “We ought not to lie,” into practice. The second step is to demonstrate the truth of the principles, such as why it is that we ought not to lie. The third step, which connects the first two, is to indicate why the explanations suffice to justify the principles. While the second and third steps are valuable, it is the first step that matters most. For it is all too easy and common to lie while cleverly demonstrating that lying is wrong.

Start Living Your Ideals



Now is the time to get serious about living your ideals. Once you have determined the spiritual principles you wish to exemplify, abide by these rules as if they were laws, as if it were indeed sinful to compromise them.

Don't mind if others don't share your convictions. How long can you afford to put off who you really want to be? Your nobler self cannot wait any longer.

Put your principles into practice—now. Stop the excuses and the procrastination. This is your life! You aren't a child anymore. The sooner you set yourself to your spiritual program, the happier you will be. The longer you wait, the more you will be vulnerable to mediocrity and feel filled with shame and regret, because you know you are capable of better.

From this instant on, vow to stop disappointing yourself. Separate yourself from the mob. Decide to be extraordinary and do what you need to do—now.