



# THE FIFTH DIRECTION

turn inward.

## 8 LESSONS FROM SENECA - ANCIENT STOIC PHILOSOPHER

*Seneca (4 BC — 65 AD) was a Roman Stoic philosopher, statesman, dramatist, and humourist.*

**Where do you spend (yes, *spend*) the majority of your waking hours?  
Do these environments allow you to develop and express your ideals?**

Allocating substantial thought to these questions is essential if we are committed to moving towards our higher warrior, as the influences we expose ourselves to most frequently will undeniably shape our attitude, our demeanour, and our trajectory.

*“It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested.”  
— Seneca*

### Lesson #1:

**“People are delighted to accept pensions and gratuities, for which they hire out their labour or their support or their services. But nobody works out the value of time: men use it lavishly as if it cost nothing. And so [...] extract yourself from the crowd, and as you have been storm-tossed more than your age deserves, you must at last retire into a peaceful harbor.” — Seneca**

What Seneca is reminding us can be brought back to a familiar platitude: Time is precious. And instead of reserving application of this knowledge for the hours that we would typically label as “free,” we can choose to embed this philosophy into all our engagements, and thereby reclaim all hours as ours.

### Lesson #2:

**“When ample [...] wealth falls to a bad owner it is squandered in a moment, but wealth, however modest, if entrusted to a good custodian, increases with use, so our lifetime extends amply if you manage it properly.” — Seneca**

What does properly managing a lifetime entail? The principal elements of Seneca’s meditation suggest ample leisure time, prioritising an understanding of one’s own life, and not sequestering your most precious asset to anyone who is ignorant of its worth.

Inspired. Admirable, even. But not necessarily practical from the outset for those individuals who wish to be able to pay the bills and eat. Yes, modern life requires money, which brings us to the next valuable question. **Why Do We Work?** Once you’ve answered that one with your own set of particulars, we can move into the domain of *how* we can work. It’s important to first establish the *why*, so that we can always refer back to our bigger picture; we can always maintain a sense of the forest even when we’re immersed amongst the trees. With the *why* serving as our motivation, only then can we bring our attention to the *how*.

### Lesson #3:

**“Call to mind when [...] you were ever at your own disposal; when your face wore its natural expression; when your mind was undisturbed; [...] how many have plundered your life when you were unaware of**

**your losses; how much you have lost through [...] the seductions of society; how little of your own was left to you.”— Seneca**

We don't have to plunder our life, unaware of the losses, or forego our natural expressions—we can instead alter how we approach our work, and qualify time spent on it as 'at our own disposal' nonetheless. By employing Seneca's cautionary insights and applying them to the modern, practical life, we can infuse our working ethos with a sense of deep gratitude, vivid intention, and—even—wonder. **Make it work for you.**

#### **Lesson #4:**

**“Everyone hustles his life along, and is troubled by a longing for the future and weariness of the present. But the man who spends all his time on his own needs, who organises every day as though it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the next day. For what new pleasures can any hour now bring him?” — Seneca**

This is a game-changer. What needs of my own could I be simultaneously tending to with those hours? To begin with, it allows you to go to work with an entirely different perspective. Be mindful. Suddenly you are no longer handing over your day to seemingly meaningless pursuits, you will be *getting paid* to enrich your understanding of experience.

#### **Lesson #5:**

**“True happiness is to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future, not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is sufficient, for he that is so wants nothing. The greatest blessings of mankind are within us and within our reach. A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it may be, without wishing for what he has not.” — Seneca**

Eckhart Tolle touches on this idea when working with individuals who feel uninspired by their work. He suggests that in such a case, one's efforts may be better directed not towards an attempt to find usefulness in the work itself, but by using the working environment as a backdrop—an opportunity—to practice presence and alertness.

Some of you may currently be engaged with work that you already love. Work that makes you leap out of bed each morning in eager anticipation of “what new pleasures” any hour could bring. But for others, perhaps recurring stints of less-than-engaging work in order to fund the next project, pay for that transatlantic flight, or cover the rent, are a reality. This is where what David Foster Wallace calls “the work of choosing” (*This is Water*) comes into play. Choose what you pay attention to very carefully and make a conscious decision to make meaning from experience.

#### **Lesson #6:**

**“He used to beguile his labors with this consolation, sweet though false, that one day he would live to please himself.” — Seneca**

We can choose to feel pissed off or bored by our work, or we can choose to “live to please” ourselves immediately. Either way, it is a choice we must make consciously. What Seneca aims to impress upon us is the tragic loss of irreplaceable time that simply evaporates when we allow ourselves to procrastinate our own enjoyment (or lack of) in life.

### **Lesson #7:**

**“There will always be causes for anxiety, whether due to prosperity or to wretchedness. Life will be driven on through a succession of preoccupations: we shall always long for leisure, but never enjoy it.” —**

**Seneca**

By making the choice to employ every waking hour to our advantage, no matter our obligations, we can maximize on the precious time we have been allotted. How we do this will differ between individuals according to their personalised ideals and priorities.

### **Lesson #8:**

*“Living is the least important activity of the preoccupied man; yet there is nothing which is harder to learn. There are many instructors in the other arts to be found everywhere [...] But learning how to live takes a whole life.”— Seneca*

*On The Shortness Of Life* is handily available in pocket-size form. Don't let its feathery weight fool you—the prose is dense and, at times, gritty. But only in the way that truth often tends to be. Seneca's insights are alarmingly apt for life in today's world, and well worth the time taken for reflection.