

Practicing Stoicism Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **John Baranello** (October 30, 2025)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "stoic" as a person who can endure pain or hardship without showing their feelings or complaining; or a member of the ancient philosophical school of Stoicism.

While many successful attorneys are regarded for their ability to accept and conquer stressful and hair-raising scenarios that only those in our profession can understand — think, for example, of a fire drill weekend preparing a preliminary injunction application — this article explores the other definition: It offers a brief overview of the ancient philosophical school of Stoicism, and explores how learning and practicing certain principles of Stoicism have helped me shape and strengthen my practice.



John Baranello

What Is Stoicism?

Stoicism, tradition says, began with a shipwreck in the fourth century B.C.E. Zeno of Citium, a young Phoenician merchant, lost a cargo of precious purple dye and was washed ashore near Athens a penniless stranger. Seeking direction, he consulted the Oracle at Delphi, who told him to "take on the color not of dead shellfish, but of dead men" — to pursue wisdom, not wealth.

Zeno immersed himself in Socratic dialogues, learned rigorous self-discipline from the Cynics, and studied at Plato's Academy and the Megarian school. Blending theory with practicality, he founded his own school in a colonnade overlooking the Athenian marketplace, the Stoa Poikile, or Painted Porch, from which the Stoics took their name.

After Zeno, three figures dominate Stoic philosophy: Seneca, the statesman-philosopher later forced to suicide by Emperor Nero; Epictetus, once a slave in Nero's household; and Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor whose private journal survives as meditations.

What the Stoics Believed

Essentially, the Stoics believed that the goal of a good Stoic life is to "live in agreement with Nature," synonymous with living wisely and living virtuously. The Stoics placed virtue, or, more specifically, wisdom, justice, courage and self-control as the path to true happiness and fulfillment. Within this lofty aspiration, the Stoics placed enormous importance on our ability to apply reason, or the so-called ruling faculty, to govern our decisions.

More specifically, this gift of reason allows us, in any situation, to evaluate our thoughts, feelings and urges — as if they are detached from us and neutral third-party objects — and

to decide if they are good, bad or indifferent.

The gift of reason also allows us to apply the same evaluation process to external objects, people and situations — think of a nasty Friday night email from an adversary — and instills in us a system to acknowledge and recognize that we truly cannot control such outside external forces. That is, to accept that one cannot exercise such control, but then — and here's the most important part — recognizing our initial feelings and reaction, analyzing them objectively, and working to control our reaction.

Applying These Principles to the Practice of Law

How does this ancient philosophical practice help me in the practice of law? The short answer is: in ways that I could not have even imagined before opening the ancient Stoic texts. Here are a few Stoic principles, with general application to my daily practice as an attorney.

What Type of Person You Want to Be

In Epictetus' Enchiridion, he offers a powerful checklist on how to live with integrity and character, bluntly directing his reader to "settle on the type of person who you want to be and stick to it, whether alone or in company." This chapter challenges and invites attorneys to confront any litigation or client problem, and all the stressors that come along, in a manner as entirely consistent with the best of who we are, and the best of who we can be.

The Stoics send reminders to beef up patience, reason and self-control in situations where it is tempting to do the opposite. Sticking to Stoic principles in difficult situations leads to more reasoned and effective decisions, and less impulsive reactions. For, as Epictetus wrote, "how long are you going to wait before you demand the best of yourself?"

Control What Can Be Controlled, Let Go of What Can't

Lawyers can't control an angry adversary who decides to file a counterclaim. We can't control a busy court's calendar, despite a client's wish for an earlier decision. And, of course, we can't control an adversary's response brief disagreeing with all the brilliant points in our client's brief.

This is not to say that a Stoic sits back and just takes whatever comes their way. Quite the contrary. Embracing Stoic philosophy helps answer the following questions with practical and reasonable advice: What can we control, and what are the best reactions and responses to achieve a favorable outcome for the client?

As Marcus Aurelius wrote: "You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this and you will find strength." To each of the above examples: Lawyers can't control an adversary's decision to file a counterclaim. What good will getting angry do? What we can do is check the rules for timing and service, focus objectively and without emotion on the legal arguments therein, and decide what is the best strategic response.

On calendaring, lawyers can accept — because we certainly cannot control — that courts are busy. What is the use of complaining about it? Why not accept this reality and proceed accordingly? What about using the downtime effectively? Is there additional discovery to be had — assuming the case is not stayed? Would it be productive to have conversations with an adversary about settlement or other case issues? Are there additional preparations and strategies to consider and implement for when the court does issue its decision?

And finally, when it comes to an adversary's response brief, of course, an adversary is going to disagree with the client's position. That's the job of the adversary! What's the use in allowing emotions to take over? In fact, if done correctly, a lawyer will have anticipated and expected each of an adversary's arguments in opposition, having considered and accepted them objectively, and will have advised the client of what to expect in advance.

Accepting what I cannot control, and focusing on what I can, has freed up significant mental and emotional bandwidth, so that I can focus on what's important for my clients — spending less time and energy mulling over what is simply out of my hands.

What Stands in the Way, Becomes the Way

Finally, Stoicism helps remind me that, particularly in our business as litigators and lawyers, what stands in the way of a matter, as the most challenging or problematic fact or issue, often converts itself into the pathway to victory.

Marcus Aurelius wrote, "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in your way becomes the way." Recognizing, acknowledging and attacking the biggest issue or weakness in a lawsuit or any other matter is, hands down, the best — and sometimes only — pathway to success.

Shying from your case's biggest issue, or pretending it does not exist, will not work. Lawyers, clients and courts are too sophisticated and seasoned to allow it any other way. "Staring the tiger in the eye," objectively and strategically, is the only way to bring your client to victory.

Whether it's a line of cases contrary to your client's position, an ugly email that muddies the waters of your case, or a witness who gives unexpected testimony that hurts your client's position — accept, analyze and apply reason to make the decision that is best for your client. Avoiding issues that hurt your client will only delay the inevitable.

Conclusion

Stumbling upon Stoic philosophy has been a meaningful experience for me, my family and my clients. It has enabled me to approach difficult and challenging situations in a seasoned, reflective and structured way. More specifically, practicing Stoicism allows me to identify and ignore my own emotions and self-interest in difficult situations, and to laser focus on what is best for the client.

While in some instances a client wants a so-called table-flipping lawyer, more often than not, clients appreciate a cool, composed and analytical approach. Stoic principles help clear the way to ultimately providing advice singularly devoted to a client's interest. Setting aside what I cannot control and focusing on the best reactions and decisions I can make to advance my client's position is a practice I recommend for all attorneys.

John Baranello is a partner and managing attorney at Moses & Singer LLP.

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