

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 134: The Tao of Seneca

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Tim Ferriss: Hello, boys and girls. This is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the Tim Ferriss show. I am so excited for this episode. You have no idea, but I'll try to give you an idea. It's full of announcements and full of cool projects that I've been working on for a very long time. Announcement No. 1: *The Tim Ferris Experiment*, which was an entire season of television, 13 episodes that was Exec Produced and hosted by yours truly alongside the Emmy Award winning team behind *No Reservations*, *Mind of a Chef*, etc., is now available in, not only the U.S., but also pretty much every country in the world. There are a couple of exceptions, but check it out. There are all sorts of shenanigans, adventures, injuries, cataclysms, etc. fourhourworkweek.com/tv. So, just go to fourhourworkweek.com/tv; all spelled out, and you can check that out. You can also see a trailer that shows you highlights of all 13 episodes.

Next, we have *The Tao of Seneca*. What is *The Tao of Seneca*? Well, there is a collection of letters called the *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, and I have read this entire collection of letters and other letters of Seneca, the author, probably more than 100 times. It is my constant companion for the last 10 to 20 years, and I have given various forms of these letters to more friends than I can even count and several hundred acquaintances. I feel that strongly about it. So, when people ask me what my favorite book is of all time, I say this collection of letters. The problem has been there is no good audio addition. That was the objective. So, I, for many months now, in collaboration with a fan actually, a listener and a reader, John Robinson, have been collaborating to put together *The Tao of Seneca: Practical Letters from a Stoic Master*; 3 volumes, and it covers them all.

Here's the description: *The Tao of Seneca* is an introduction to Stoic philosophy through the words of Seneca. Thought leaders in Silicon Valley tout the benefits of Stoicism, and I'm not just referring to me there...I'm not referring to me at all actually; many others. And, NFL management, coaches, and players alike have embraced it because the principles make them better competitors. Stoicism is a no-nonsense philosophical system designed to produce dramatic real-world effects. Think of it as an ideal

operating system for thriving in high-stress environments. This is your guide, and you can find this on audible; audible.com/timsbooks. That will take you to my book club where I acquire audio rights and produce books that have had a huge impact on my life. This is at the top of the list. *The Tao of Seneca*, No. 1 most impactful collection of writing on my life...period. So, please check it out; audible.com/timsbooks.

And, there is a sample in this episode. That is what this episode consists of, Letter 13 specifically; *On Groundless Fears*. It is a 12 minute letter. I think you'll enjoy it greatly. Give it a few minutes to get warmed up. Seneca sometimes has a bit of a preamble at the beginning of his letters. And, I'll also give you the preface to the book that I put together, which will give you a lot more context. But, on this letter specifically, *On Groundless Fears*, give it a couple of minutes. And, also for the women listening, this is 2000 years old and Seneca makes comments like, "Manliness gains much strength from...." Right? You can just substitute humans, and it is as applicable to women as it is to men certainly. And, at the end of the preface I list off some of my favorite letters, so you can jump around and pick and choose. I encourage you to treat *The Tao of Seneca* as a buffet of letters you can choose from and revisit often.

And, if you do decide to get the Volume 1, for instance, Volume 2, Volume 3, I do have a very long version, an essay version, of *On the Shortness of Life* to start off with. That is a long one. That is about an hour, hour and a half. You can skip over that if it's too long. That is where I'll leave things. I'm so excited to bring this to you, and so excited for you if you haven't heard Seneca before. You will hear the preface. You can skip through that if you want, which I read, and then Letter 13, *On Groundless Fears*. Check it out...*The Tao of Seneca*; audible.com/timsbooks. Enjoy.

This is Tim Ferris speaking, the producer of this audio book. I am an author, perhaps best known for books with titles that sound like infomercial products; *The 4-Hour Work Week* and *The 4-Hour Body*, which were published in about 45 languages or so. And, I am a tech investor and I have been involved early stage in companies like Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Alibaba and perhaps 30 others.

I only bring up with background because I credit my successes, whatever they might be, in many fields, including those Tango, etc., to Stoicism and to reading the writing of specifically Seneca, and that is why I have put so much time into assembling and

compiling this book and, with the help of John, bringing it to you. That is the narrator, John Robinson. Few of us consider ourselves philosophers, of course, and this is usually for very good reasons. Most of us can recall at least one very irritating pseudo intellectual, probably in college, who dedicated countless hours to some type of philosophical tail chasing. And, so we associate philosophy with this type of behavior. For what? Well, maybe this person was debating what is is, but somehow posturing as a superior intellect at meal time or over drinks. It's very irritating. It's very useless, and not unlike the bar scene in *Good Will Hunting* perhaps, but it is for academics, and I think it is for theory.

These are beliefs that many of us have about philosophy. It's something that you do over wine for fun, but it doesn't apply to real life. Fortunately, there are a few no-nonsense philosophical systems that can produce dramatic real-world effects and results. These were forged and refined in actions; sometimes war. Stoicism is, to me, perhaps one of the best examples of that, and that's what we'll focus on. Think of it as an ideal operating system for thriving in high-stress environments, and that is certainly why it's gained a huge foot hold in Silicon Valley, as one example, and professional sports. So, if you study Stoicism, you'll be in very good company. It's a rule book for making better decisions. It was popular with the educated elite of the Greco-Roman Empire, but Thomas Jefferson also had Seneca on his bedside table.

Montaigne had a quote from Epictetus carved into the ceiling of his house where he would see it constantly. Bill Clinton reads meditations by Marcus Aurelius every year. In the NFL, and this has become big news with the article in *Sports Illustrated*, management, coaches, and players alike, including teams like the Patriots and Seahawks, have embraced Stoicism because it makes them better competitors. Other proponents include John Stuart Mill and Tom Wolfe. As I record this, you might hear that my voice is a little hoarse. I just finished a 10-day water only fast, and I don't necessarily recommend doing that, but it's part of a practice that comes directly from the writing of Seneca, specifically Letter 18, which you'll hear, *On Festivals and Fasting*. And, here is an excerpt to give you a flavor. "Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest of fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself all the while: "Is this the condition I so feared?" It is precisely in times of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress, and it is while Fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence."

And, it goes on and on, but that particular passage – and there's a lot more context to it – led me to the practice of taking a few days per month to eat the cheapest of food – so, for instance, rice and beans...every meal. Rice and beans costs \$1.00 to \$2.00 a day if you break it down; wearing the same clothing – so, the same white t-shirt and pair of jeans; remaining unshaven – asking myself all the while, "Is this the condition I so feared?" What does that mean? It means that you're inoculating yourself against unfounded fears because when I find myself defensive – fearful of losing whatever success, or money, or prestige, or status I might have, whatever that is, or it could be any number of other types of fears. They're usually nebulous. You worry that your quality of life will drop. You'll be very unhappy, but if you rehearse that condition, the worst case scenario, you realize that it's not that bad, and that is tremendously empowering. It allows you to make better investment decisions. It allows you to take the steps to start your own company, quit your job, start a relationship, and end a relationship because you are rehearsing the worst case scenarios instead of letting them bounce around in your skull in a very unformed, nebulous way.

So, that is one of dozens of examples that I could give you. The principles are timeless and incredibly practical. And, I particularly like Seneca. I love Marcus Aurelius. I love Epictetus, but I particularly love Seneca because it's easy to read, it's pithy, and the practices can be applied directly to your life now. If you were to take some of these letters and replace the names Lucilius and other Roman sounding names, with John, Mary, Edward, they would read like letters from one of your contemporary friends to another. "Hey John, so sorry to hear that you're dealing with that frivolous lawsuit. Let me tell you how I handled this and how I deal with backstabbing in the Senate, and give you a few tips." "Hey Mary. I'm so sorry to hear that your friend's mother passed away. Here's how you might console her", etc., etc. They are extremely memorable and that is because Seneca was one of the most famous playwrights of his day.

And, that leads to another point. His principles, his philosophies were used on the front lines. He was one of the wealthiest people in Rome as, in effect, an investment banker – I suppose you could think of him as such. He was also an advisor to the Emperor. That didn't always work out all too well for him, but that's part of Stoicism. The point being, that he was world class in several fields. He had to deal with uncooperative, powerful in many cases, human beings all the time, and he was able to do well. And, I think that's what separates the philosopher, so to speak, who actually can put

rubber to the road and make things happen, and philosophologists, as many other people have said – those people who speculate; the arm chair quarterbacks.

Seneca was not one of these people. He was getting his hands dirty and doing big things. And, the way that I suggest you approach this, and this is certainly the way I have approached it, and many people have, is making Seneca part of your daily practice. And, the way that you do that is set aside 10 to 15 minutes a day. For me, it is often walking to get my morning cup of coffee, and I will listen to one letter a day. And, this is highly therapeutic. It is highly effective as a habit if you want to be more successful in any area – personal or professional. Stoic principles are often practiced in rehabilitation clinics, for instance. With alcoholics, they don't succumb to impulses. In the most practical sense, I suppose, it does share a lot in common with cognitive behavioral therapy.

In a sense, you could think of it as putting the first portion of the Serenity Prayer into action, which reads, there are many translations of course, as "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Stoicism is the training ground for putting this into action, so you have to digest it, just like good nutrition...a little bit every day; put in the time – one letter; five to 15 minutes. It might have been born on the porch of Zeno, but it can be used everywhere in the concrete jungle. And, I'll recommend a few letters to start with if you want to bounce around. I suggest you listen to all of them. They will apply to you in your life at different points. Three of my favorites are: 13, 18 and 27 – so, Letter 13: *On Groundless Fears*; Letter 18: *On Festivals and Fasting*; Letter 27: *On the Good Which Abides*, which is also hilarious.

John Robinson, his favorites do not overlap. They will be very personal, but if you want a few recommendations to start with, start at the beginning of this audio book, Volume 1, because it features *On the Shortness of Life*, which I read and listen to at least once a quarter – usually once a month. And, then Letters 13, 18 and 27. And, I have to, before I part, give a heartfelt thanks to John Robinson. John Robinson I found on the internet. I was searching for an audio book of Seneca's letters and essays and I couldn't find it, and then one day, John Robinson's website pops up. It turns out he's a fan of mine and the *4-Hour Work Week* – heard me talking about Seneca in many different interviews; tried to find an audio book – also couldn't; decided to make it himself and put together, I think it was, 10 to 30 draft essay's.

I downloaded them when I was in Costa Rica. I needed some recalibration. I needed to address some unfounded fears of my own, and I was blown away. Whatever voice I had in my head for Seneca, it was John. It was perfect. And, I reached out to him. We started to collaborate. We put this entire thing together, and he has just been a superstar. So, thank you very much John. And, thank you to all of you for listening. I am so excited and envious of you, in a way, if you've never heard or been exposed to Seneca before. And, as he would say, "Take care."

John Robinson:

Letter 13: On Groundless Fears: I know that you have plenty of spirit. For even before you began to equip yourself with maxims which were wholesome and potent to overcome obstacles, you were taking pride in your contest with fortune. And, this is all the more true now that you have grappled with fortune and tested your powers.

For our powers can never inspire in us implicit faith in ourselves except when many difficulties have confronted us on this side, and on that, and have occasionally even come to close quarters with us. It is only in this way that the true spirit can be tested; the spirit that will never consent to come under the jurisdiction of things external to ourselves. This is the touchstone of such a spirit. No prizefighter can go with high spirits into the strife if he has never been beaten black and blue. The only contestant who can confidently enter the lists is the man who has seen his own blood, who has felt his teeth rattle beneath his opponent's fist, who has been tripped and felt the full force of his adversary's charge, who has been downed in body but not in spirit, one who, as often as he falls, rises again with greater defiance than ever.

So then, to keep up my figure, fortune has often in the past got the upper hand of you, and yet you have not surrendered, but have leaped up and stood your ground still more eagerly. For manliness gains much strength by being challenged. Nevertheless, if you approve, allow me to offer some additional safeguards by which you may fortify yourself. There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us. We suffer more often in imagination than in reality. I am not speaking with you in the Stoic strain, but in my milder style. For it is our Stoic fashion to speak of all those things, which provoke cries and groans, as unimportant and beneath notice; but you and I must drop such great-sounding words, although, heaven knows, they are true enough.

What I advise you to do is, not to be unhappy before the crisis

comes, since it may be that the dangers before which you paled as if they were threatening you, will never come upon you. They certainly have not yet come. Accordingly, some things torment us more than they ought, some torment us before they ought, and some torment us when they ought not to torment us at all. We are in the habit of exaggerating, or imagining, or anticipating, sorrow. The first of these three faults may be postponed for the present because the subject is under discussion and the case is still in court, so to speak. That which I should call trifling, you will maintain to be most serious. For of course I know that some men laugh while being flogged and that others wince at a box on the ear. We shall consider later whether these evils derive their power from their own strength or from our own weakness.

Do me the favor, when men surround you and try to talk you into believing that you are unhappy, to consider not what you hear but what you yourself feel, and to take counsel with your feelings and question yourself independently because you know your own affairs better than anyone else does. Ask, "Is there any reason why these persons should condole with me? Why should they be worried or even fear some infection from me, as if troubles could be transmitted? Is there any evil involved, or is it a matter merely of ill report, rather than an evil?" Put the question voluntarily to yourself, "Am I tormented without sufficient reason, am I morose, and do I convert what is not an evil into what is an evil?"

You may retort with the question, "How am I to know whether my sufferings are real or imaginary?" Here is the rule for such matters: we are tormented either by things present, or by things to come, or by both. As to things present, the decision is easy. Suppose that your person enjoys freedom and health, and that you do not suffer from any external injury. As to what may happen to it in the future, we shall see later on. Today there is nothing wrong with it. "But," you say, "something will happen to it." First of all, consider whether your proofs of future trouble are sure. For it is more often the case that we are troubled by our apprehensions, and that we are mocked by that mocker, rumor, which is wont to settle wars, but much more often settles individuals.

Yes, my dear Lucilius, we agree too quickly with what people say. We do not put to the test those things which cause our fear. We do not examine into them. We blench and retreat just like soldiers who are forced to abandon their camp because of a dust cloud raised by stampeding cattle, or are thrown into a panic by the spreading of some unauthenticated rumor. And somehow or other, it is the idle report that disturbs us most. For truth has its own

definite boundaries, but that which arises from uncertainty is delivered over to guesswork and the irresponsible license of a frightened mind. That is why no fear is so ruinous and so uncontrollable as panic fear. For other fears are groundless, but this fear is witless. Let us then look carefully into the matter.

It is likely that some troubles will befall us, but it is not a present fact. How often has the unexpected happened? How often has the expected never come to pass? And, even though it is ordained to be, what does it avail to run out to meet your suffering? You will suffer soon enough, when it arrives, so look forward meanwhile to better things. What shall you gain by doing this? Time. There will be many happenings meanwhile which will serve to postpone, or end, or pass on to another person, the trials which are near or even in your very presence. A fire has opened the way to flight. Men have been let down softly by a catastrophe. Sometimes the sword has been checked even at the victim's throat. Men have survived their own executioners. Even bad fortune is fickle. Perhaps it will come, perhaps not; in the meantime it is not, so look forward to better things.

The mind at times fashions for itself false shapes of evil when there are no signs that point to any evil. It twists into the worst construction some word of doubtful meaning or it fancies some personal grudge to be more serious than it really is, considering not how angry the enemy is, but to what lengths he may go if he is angry. But life is not worth living, and there is no limit to our sorrows, if we indulge our fears to the greatest possible extent. In this matter, let prudence help you, and contemn with a resolute spirit even when it is in plain sight. If you cannot do this, counter one weakness with another, and temper your fear with hope. There is nothing so certain among these objects of fear that it is not more certain still that things we dread sink into nothing and that things we hope for mock us.

Accordingly, weigh carefully your hopes as well as your fears, and whenever all the elements are in doubt, decide in your own favor; believe what you prefer. And, if fear wins a majority of the votes, incline in the other direction anyhow, and cease to harass your soul, reflecting continually that most mortals, even when no troubles are actually at hand, or are certainly to be expected in the future, become excited and disquieted. No one calls a halt on himself when he begins to be urged ahead, nor does he regulate his alarm according to the truth. No one says, "The author of the story is a fool, and he who has believed it is a fool, as well as he who fabricated it." We let ourselves drift with every breeze. We are

frightened at uncertainties, just as if they were certain. We observe no moderation. The slightest thing turns the scales and throws us forthwith into a panic.

But, I am ashamed either to admonish you sternly or to try to beguile you with such mild remedies. Let another say, "Perhaps the worst will not happen." You yourself must say, "Well, what if it does happen? Let us see who wins. Perhaps it happens for my best interests. It may be that such a death will shed credit upon my life." Socrates was ennobled by the hemlock draft. Wrench from Cato's hand his sword, the vindicator of liberty, and you deprive him of the greatest share of his glory. I am exhorting you far too long, since you need reminding rather than exhortation. The path on which I am leading you is not different from that on which your nature leads you. You were born to such conduct as I describe, hence there is all the more reason why you should increase and beautify the good that is in you.

But now, to close my letter, I have only to stamp the usual seal upon it. In other words, to commit thereto some noble message to be delivered to you: "The fool, with all his other faults, has this also, he is always getting ready to live." Reflect, my esteemed Lucilius, what this saying means, and you will see how revolting is the fickleness of men who lay down every day new foundations of life, and begin to build up fresh hopes even at the brink of the grave. Look within your own mind for individual instances. You will think of old men who are preparing themselves at that very hour for a political career, or for travel, or for business. And, what is baser than getting ready to live when you are already old? I should not name the author of this motto, except that it is somewhat unknown to fame and is not one of those popular sayings of Epicurus, which I have allowed myself to praise and to appropriate. Farewell.

Tim Ferris:

Hey guys. This is Tim again. Just a few more things before you take off. No. 1.) This is 5-Bullet Friday. Do you want to get a short email from me? Would you enjoy getting a short email from me every Friday that provides a little morsel of fun before the weekend? And, 5-Bullet Friday is a very short email where I share the coolest things I've found, or that I've been pondering over the week. That could include favorite new albums that I've discovered. It could include gizmos and gadgets, and all sorts of weird shit that I've somehow dug up in the world of the esoteric, as I do. It could include favorite articles that I have read, and that I have shared with my close friends, for instance, and it's very short. It's just a little tiny bite of goodness before you head off for the weekend.

So, if you want to receive that and check it out, just go to fourhourworkweek.com. That's fourhourworkweek.com; all spelled out, and just drop in your email and you will get the very next one. And, if you sign up, I hope you enjoy it.