

Living Philosophy: How Words of Plato and Marcus Aurelius are Relevant Today



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As we begin to step out after almost two years of being largely confined to our homes, the occasion of World Philosophy Day today offers an opportunity to reflect on the challenges we faced, and the value and need of philosophy in these unprecedented times.

The word Philosophy comes from the Greek words *Philo* (love) and *Sophos* (wisdom). To be a philosopher, therefore, is to yearn for wisdom, to always aspire to follow truth. The contemporary idea of philosophy as an intellectual pursuit then, seems to have lost the very essence of what philosophy stood for. If we look at the greatest philosophers of all time, those who dare to live for their ideals, even at times at the cost of their own lives, we see that their words, far from being abstract or theoretical, are possibly even more relevant today. This is because wisdom encompasses universal principles, which, unlike knowledge or technology, can never become outdated. So what can we learn from these courageous men and women, who opened a path in order to help us live better today?

In times of uncertainty and continuous flux, where entire systems and ways of life that we took for granted have been completely shaken, Philosophy can direct us towards stability. The famous stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius said “You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.”

In the wake of challenges, we usually tend to devote most of our time and energy trying to change what is out of our control – be it situations, circumstances, or the opinions of others. But the simplicity of Stoicism is a strong reminder to recognise and accept what is not in our control, and to dedicate our efforts towards what we can change.

Today, with our gaze so fixated on the external, we tend to look for inner peace in outer comforts. But externalities, by their nature, will always change. Real inner peace comes not from unchanging circumstances, but in learning to count on the stable aspect within us.

As Plato says, “The first and greatest victory is to conquer yourself”. The path of philosophy is a path that can direct us inwards, to recognise that our real battles, and therefore the source of our solutions, are always internal.

Paradoxically, it was our enforced isolation over the last two years, that taught us how inherently interconnected we are. Never before has it been so apparent how individual actions in one

corner of the globe can have an undeniable impact on the collective. Our actions impact not just each other, but all beings on our planet, even planet Earth itself.

Philosophers through the ages have constantly reminded us of this underlying universal principle that we are a small but integral part of this web of life. “That which isn’t good for the hive, isn’t good for the bee,” said Marcus Aurelius. Just as each organ in our body has its own individual function, but always towards the wellbeing of the whole, each of us has a role, and any action that is not in the benefit of the collective, ultimately cannot benefit the individual. Only when we truly learn to recognise that we are not separate from nature but a part of this one life, can we positively alter the way we consume, interact and live. In a world of increasing divisiveness, where we tend to define ourselves by our external differences rather than our common inner humanity, this is perhaps one of the biggest lessons that we can take.

And finally, philosophy can teach us what it means to be human: one who strives to live in the light of ideals.

Aurelius, even as emperor of the powerful Roman empire, regardless of his circumstances, wrote daily reflections on how to use his role, responsibilities, obligations and every action as opportunities to better himself. Plato implied that what defines us as human beings is the higher potential within us. In his famous Chariot Allegory, Plato presents the human soul as a charioteer with two horses: one tending upwards to the divine, and one inclined downwards to matter, and suggests that the purpose of living is for the soul to grow wings and conquer its true nature.

As human beings we are constantly waging an inner battle between our strengths and weaknesses, our vices and virtues. But the glory of the human condition lies in our freedom to choose to continually strive towards the good, not only for ourselves but as a contribution towards a better world.

Perhaps, to be truly human is to be a philosopher: to love wisdom and to live in accordance with its principles. Philosophy is not a field of study, nor is it a profession. It is a way of life: to live with a deeper understanding of the nature of things, and a sense of responsibility, joy and wonder for life.