

Four ways in

Where to start, depending on why you picked the book up — with the chapter numbers, so you can use it with any edition.

If you have twenty minutes

Read the Enchiridion, chapters 1, 5, 8 and 27. That is the entire philosophy in about four hundred words. Chapter 8 is the one people copy out, and chapter 1 is the one everything else depends on. If you find yourself agreeing too easily, chapter 14 is the corrective — it applies the same doctrine to the people you love, and it is much harder to accept there.

If something has gone wrong

Part Six, and specifically the discourses on freedom from fear, on bearing sickness, and on those who fear want. Then Enchiridion 4 and 21, which are techniques rather than arguments. Epictetus is unusual among consoling authors in offering almost no comfort and a great deal of method, and readers in difficulty often find that this is the right way round.

If you want the argument, not the consolation

Part One, then Part Two in order. This is Epictetus as a technical philosopher — on preconceptions, on the four ways an appearance can relate to the truth, on why assent is the only thing we own — and it is the half that most modern selections cut. Without it the Enchiridion reads as good advice; with it, the good advice has reasons.

If you have read the Meditations

Start with the Concordance at the back, which lists the four passages in this book that Marcus Aurelius demonstrably read, and the two he cites that turned out not to be in Long's selection. Follow the four into the text. Then Part Four, where the two men's theology is closest, and Part Five, where their situations are furthest apart: Marcus was an emperor writing privately to himself, Epictetus a freed slave teaching in public, and the same doctrine sounds different in each mouth.

If you are going to read the whole thing

Front to back is fine, but do not read it quickly. It was spoken, it repeats itself, and the repetition is instructional rather than accidental — Epictetus is drilling a small number of moves into people who will need them under pressure. Long left the repetitions in. So have we.

The seven parts, and what is in them

Part 2 · What Is In Our Power

The distinction everything else rests on, and the four discourses that test it hardest.
D1, D54, D23, D31, D65, D59

Part 3 · Appearances and the Trained Mind

How impressions arrive, why assent is the only thing we own, and what philosophy is actually for.
D14, D17, D32, D33, D44, D27, D38, D28, D36, D5

Part 4 · Progress and Practice

Stoicism as training rather than doctrine: what to work on, in what order, and how to tell whether it is working.
D4, D10, D40, D41, D47, D67, D50, D25, D55

Part 5 · God, Providence and the Order of Things

Epictetus's theology, which is closer to physics than to piety, and the contentment he draws from it.
D3, D6, D7, D9, D52, D24, D8

Part 6 · Living Among Others

Duties read off relationships, anger at other people's faults, friendship, and the discipline of ordinary conversation.
D2, D26, D11, D18, D35, D51, D58, D61, D68, D48, D13, D37

Part 7 · Fear, Power and Freedom

The political core: tyrants, exile, poverty, illness, and the argument that a man who wants nothing cannot be governed.
D12, D57, D63, D19, D20, D56, D62, D46, D15, D16, D22, D21, D60

Part 8 · Portraits and Occasions

The discourses addressed to a person in the room — the Epicurean official, the rhetorician, the man who stopped caring — plus the character studies.
D29, D30, D43, D45, D53, D64, D39, D66, D34, D42, D49