

Great Books Discussion Questions
***Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius**

1. Aurelius mentions several times in the text that he is grateful for his upbringing, family, the gods and friends. Why does he believe that gratitude is important in life? Do you agree with him; why or why not?
2. Aurelius writes in Book One: "I received the idea of a polity in which there is the same law for all, a polity administered with regard to equal rights and equal freedom of speech, and the idea of a kingly government which respects most of all the freedom of the governed. . . ." Does this remark remind you of the "Bill of Rights" in the *Constitution*? If so, how? How does this quotation relate to the current political environment?
3. In Book Two, Marcus writes: "Since it is possible that thou mayest depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly." Do you believe this is good advice? Why or why not? How can we reconcile this advice with the fact that Aurelius wrote much of the *Meditations* during a war that he fought (and led) against Rome's enemies?
4. Aurelius posed several questions about the nature of time in the *Meditations*. In Book Two he writes: "For the present is the same to all, though that which perishes is not the same; and so that which is lost appears to be a mere moment. For a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for what a man has not, how can anyone take this from him"? Does this seem to be good advice? Why or why not? How is this similar to the teachings of other philosophers or religious leaders?
5. In Book Three, Aurelius writes: "Never value anything as profitable to thyself which shall compel thee to break thy promise, to lose thy self-respect, to hate any man, to suspect, to curse, to act the hypocrite, to desire anything which needs walls and curtains; for he who has preferred to everything his own intelligence and daemon and the worship of its excellence, acts no tragic part, does not groan, will not need either solitude or much company; and what is chief of all, he will live without either pursuing or flying from death; but whether for a longer or a shorter time he shall have the soul inclosed in the body, he cares not at all: for even if he must depart immediately, he will go as readily as if he were going to do anything else which can be done with decency and order; taking care of this only all through life, that his thoughts turn not away from anything which belongs to an intelligent animal and a member of a civil community." These are noble sentiments; do you believe it is possible to live them? Why or why not? Does it seem possible that the leader of an Empire can live according to these dictates? Why or why not?
6. Aurelius writes about the desire for praise and glory in Book Four: "But perhaps the desire of the thing called fame will torment thee.—See how soon everything is forgotten, and look at the chaos of infinite time on each side of the present, and the emptiness of applause, and the changeableness and want of judgment in those who pretend to give praise, and the narrowness of the space within which it is circumscribed, and be quiet at last." How is this sentiment reconciled with the seeming need today for people to seek "fifteen minutes of fame"? What does this say for a person who is constantly in need of attention and praise?
7. In Book Four, Aurelius writes: "He is an abscess on the universe who withdraws and separates himself from the reason of our common nature through being displeased with the things which happen, for the same nature produces this, and has produced thee too: he is a piece rent asunder from the state, who tears his own soul from that of reasonable animals, which is one."

What does he mean by this quote? Is this quotation applicable to the present time? What does this say about the need for men to live together socially?

8. In Book Five, Marcus writes: "As a horse when he has run, a dog when he has tracked the game, a bee when it has made the honey, so a man when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act, as a vine goes on to produce again the grapes in season." What does this quotation say about braggarts? How should a person act after doing a good deed? Do you agree with this sentiment; why or why not?
9. Also, in Book Five, he writes: "It is a shame then that ignorance and conceit should be stronger than wisdom." How does this apply in the current day? Do you agree with this sentiment; why or why not?
10. In Book Six, he writes: "The best way of avenging thyself is to not become like the wrong doer." Is this good advice? If so, why is it so hard to undertake in practice?
11. In Book Six he writes: "But he is injured who abides in his error and ignorance." What does he mean by this? How is someone injured who "abides in error and ignorance"?
12. In Book Seven, Aurelius writes: "When thou hast done a good act and another has received it, why dost thou look for a third thing besides these, as fools do, either to have the reputation of having done a good act or to obtain a return?" Does this seem to be good advice? Why do people look to be rewarded for a good deed? Isn't the deed good enough in itself? Do you think people practice this advice; why or why not?