

New Home Page Video: How Can The Wise Epicurean Always Be Happy?

Post by “Cassius” of November 17, 2025 at 3:27 PM

My plan is to update this video over time with improved text and graphics. Therefore the following text will no doubt change, but here's the version as of launch on 11/17/25.

It's written in shorter sentences than I would ordinarily use but the TTS engine gets excited if you write long sentences like Cicero does:

How Can The Wise Epicurean Always Be Happy?

There are as many opinions about happiness as there are people. Everyone has their own idea of what happiness is or should be. Some say that we should look to God for happiness. Others say that there are no hard and fast rules, so if it feels good do it. But most people say that the key to happiness is virtue - being a "good" person.

In the history of the West, there was one leader—Epicurus—who taught something dramatically different. The teachings of Epicurus were once widely popular. At the time of Julius Caesar most leading Romans were at least partly Epicurean. Even an opponent like Cicero admitted that Epicurus had "taken the Roman world by storm."

Epicurus was popular because he taught a common-sense approach to being happy. He did not look to supernatural gods or high-sounding ideals. Instead, Epicurus taught that we should look to Nature. Nature herself leads us through pleasure and pain. A happy life is simply a life in which we experience more pleasure than pain.

What exactly is pleasure?

Today there is much debate over what Epicurus meant when he talked about pleasure and happiness. Some say that Epicurus was a slacker who had no ambition and avoided all work and effort. They allege that he fled from social responsibility and ran straight into the arms of wine, women, and song. Others say the opposite. These people say that Epicurus taught self-denial. They allege that Epicurus advised us to seek only the most simple and necessary of pleasures.

Most of what Epicurus himself wrote is now lost. In one letter that survives, however, Epicurus wrote that pleasure is the beginning and the end of the happy life. That seems clear enough. However in the same letter Epicurus also wrote that by pleasure we mean the absence of pain.

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Based on this statement, some people argue that Epicurus was actually more like a Buddhist or Stoic. These people say that absence of pain does not mean what we normally think of as pleasure. So what did Epicurus really teach when he spoke of absence of pain? Unless we have more information, saying that something is absent tells us nothing about what is present.

Today we cannot ask Epicurus what he meant. Fortunately many Greek and Roman writers of the time tell us what they understood Epicurus to be saying. These writers were very clear. Epicurus included within the word pleasure the same kinds of bodily and mental stimulation that we think of today.

One of Epicurus' most famous sayings was that he would not know what good is without the pleasures of taste, of sex, of sound, and the pleasures of beautiful form. Epicurus also spoke often about the joy and delight that we obtain through friendship, philosophy, and the study of nature. These too come within the meaning of the word pleasure. We can therefore be sure that Epicurus endorsed the same kinds of activities that we normally think of as pleasure. But calling these activities pleasure does not mean that Epicurus was a party animal.

Almost everyone agrees that Epicurus himself led a very sober and self-disciplined life. The statues of Epicurus that survive from the ancient world are all very similar. Each one shows Epicurus with an intense and serious look in his eyes. Epicurus definitely took pleasure seriously, but he did not chase it through fast and loose living.

Epicurus taught that the key to pleasure is in how we pursue it. He did not tell us to restrict pleasure to include only those that are necessary to remove bodily pain. In fact he did the opposite. Epicurus told us to expand our view of pleasure.

He pointed out that humans are much more than passive receivers of outside stimulation. Once we understand our place in Nature our minds are well equipped to generate pleasure on their own.

Epicurus pointed out that we experience as pleasure everything in life that we consider to be desirable. There are many different types of mental and physical pleasures and pains. Everything that we feel to be desirable we call pleasure. Everything we feel to be undesirable we call pain. In the end, all feelings resolve down into pleasure or pain.

Whenever there are only two possibilities, the absence of one means the other is present. That's exactly what Epicurus said about pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain in any part of the body or mind are mutually exclusive. Wherever pleasure is present, that part of the mind or body is not feeling pain. The phrase absence of pain therefore means nothing more or less than the word pleasure itself.

But here is an important question. Does talking about absence of pain tell us what specific pleasure is present?

The answer is no, not any more than the word pleasure alone tells us what specific pleasure we are feeling. Pleasures and pains differ widely in intensity, in duration, and in the parts of the

mind or body they affect. Every pleasure and pain is different. Only by listening to the feelings given to us by Nature can we know what is pleasant and what is painful.

What evidence do we have that Epicurus viewed absence of pain the same as pleasure? The famous Roman Senator Cicero disliked Epicurus so much that he wrote lengthy books against him. Cicero denounced the pursuit of pleasure as unworthy, and he praised suffering and virtue as noble. Years later the books of Cicero found favor with the Judeo-Christians. These religious authorities preserved Cicero's books and destroyed most of what was left of what Epicurus had written.

Cicero may have opposed Epicurus, but he had many friends who were Epicureans. One such friend was Torquatus, a military and political leader from a distinguished Roman family. Torquatus was a strong follower of Epicurus. Torquatus explained what Epicurus taught in this way:

Anyone who totally and permanently loses all feeling is the same as dead. From this we can conclude that Nature herself, through the feelings she gives us, is the true judge of what is agreeable or disagreeable. Everything we feel is either pleasurable or painful. If we are aware of our condition at all, what we are feeling is pleasure or pain. There is no middle ground and no third alternative. Since pleasures are desirable and pains are not, our goal should be to fill as much of our life as possible with pleasures.

From this point of view it is easy to understand what Epicurus meant by absence of pain. Whenever we remove any pain of mind or body, whatever replaces it is pleasure. For Epicurus the word pleasure never changes its meaning. Pleasure always refers to something that we find to be desirable. The specific mental or bodily activity that we find to be pleasurable will depend entirely on our personal circumstances and feelings. Whether we call the goal of life pleasure or absence of pain is of no consequence.

But if we think of the goal as absence of pain, does this mean that we must be entirely free from pain before we can consider ourselves to be happy? Of course not, and Epicurus was very clear about this.

At the time of his death, Epicurus was in severe pain due to kidney disease. Nevertheless Epicurus wrote that these days were among the happiest of his life. How could Epicurus be happy even while in severe pain? Because happiness does not require complete absence of all pain. In fact, we often choose things that are painful when that choice leads to greater pleasure or less pain later. Epicurus' physical pain did not prevent him from being happy. Even while in pain, Epicurus was still able to feel the pleasures of friendship and of philosophical insight. Pleasures in one part of life can outweigh pains in other parts of life when we realize that the perfect is not the enemy of the good.

Opposing philosophers argued that viewing happiness this way makes no sense because happiness is an all-or-nothing proposition. They argued that we can never reach complete pleasure because the desire for pleasure can never be satisfied. They also argued that bodily

pleasure is beyond our control and that we can never be free of the fear of losing it.

Epicurus rejected those arguments. He pointed out that the desire for pleasure can in fact be satisfied. There is a limit to the number of things any single person can experience in life. It is impossible to fill our experience beyond that limit. Once we fill our experience with pleasure, it is impossible to experience any additional pleasure. Of course over time we can pursue new pleasures, but variety does not make what is already full more full. Variety adds no new intensity to our feeling, no new parts to our body, no more hours to our day. If we view pleasure wisely, no matter how long we live, we do not gain a level of pleasure beyond what we can experience here and now.

Epicurus also rejected the idea that we must live in fear of suffering more pain than pleasure. The wise Epicurean can find more pleasure than pain in almost any situation. No matter how severe it is, pain never has the power to hold us in its grip permanently.

Torquatus illustrated this view of pleasure by repeating a story once told by his father. As the story went, a Stoic philosopher held up his hand and asked, "Does a hand in its normal condition feel pleasure?" The Stoic expected his listeners to say "No," because people tend to think that pleasure requires stimulation from the outside. The Stoic claimed that everyone who answered "No" was proving that Nature does not establish pleasure as the goal of life. He argued that if Nature wished us to pursue pleasure, Nature herself would complain whenever we are not feeling stimulation.

Torquatus pointed out that this argument is false and in no way undercuts Epicurus. So long as we are not feeling pain, our bodies do not complain about lack of stimulation. Nature herself recognizes that a healthy and normal life without pain is pleasurable.

Was Epicurus right to expand his view of pleasure in this way? Yes, but to understand this fully we must first know what Epicurus taught about the universe and our place in it.

Epicurus taught that the most important issues in life depend for their answers on one question: Is the universe natural, or is the universe designed, created, and managed by supernatural forces? Unless we can answer that question with confidence, we can never be confident about anything else.

Epicurus told us to look for the answer in our own experience. We see around us that nothing ever comes from nothing or goes to nothing. From this simple starting point we can reason step by step to reach answers to the most important questions of life.

Since nothing comes from nothing or goes to nothing, the universe as a whole has always existed and will always exist. Nothing exists that is not a part of the universe, so the universe is infinite in size. Everything that we experience is a result of atoms moving naturally and forever through space. The universe was not created, nor is it governed, by supernatural forces.

Nature herself tells us through our senses what is real. Whatever is real is possible, and what is possible can happen over and over again, since Nature never creates only a single thing of a

kind. Just as there is life here on Earth, reason tells us that life exists throughout the universe.

Life on Earth is neither supernatural nor unique. The universe as a whole is both eternal in time and infinite in size, so nothing can exist outside of nature. Nature herself gives us all the evidence we need to live our lives happily. The evidence of nature tells us that there are no heavens, no hells, and no supernatural beings running things from behind the scenes.

Once we are confident of this big picture, we see that human birth and death are just as natural as anything else. There is no reason to be afraid of death. When we die we will no longer exist, and we will only be in the same condition as we were before we were born. Nothing harmful ever happened to us before we were born. For the same reason we can be confident that nothing harmful will happen to us after we die.

It is not sad or depressing to know that when we die we cease to exist. To the contrary, when we see that death is final we see how valuable life really is. Once we appreciate its true value, we realize that we are justified in holding that every moment of life that is not painful is pleasurable. People such as Epicurus, who love life, see this viewpoint as liberating and invigorating. All of us know how life becomes extremely valuable when someone is told that they have a fatal disease. In the same way, what can be more motivating than to know with confidence that we only live once?

But there is a common mistake that must be avoided at all costs. Some people believe that Stoicism and Asceticism are admirable. They think that there is nobility in suffering and disgrace in pleasure. These people argue that when Epicurus spoke of absence of pain he was agreeing with them and speaking of something very different from pleasure. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Epicurus taught that virtue leads to strength and independence. But Epicurus did not pursue virtue as a goal in itself. Epicurus taught that living virtuously is desirable for the pleasure that virtue brings, not because virtue is an end in itself. The ancients who wrote about him did not say that Epicurus ever abandoned normal pleasures for the sake of virtue. Instead, they attacked Epicurus for pursuing normal pleasures too much.

The best evidence of what Epicurus really taught is how he lived his own life. Epicurus was fully engaged with the world around him. By the time he died, Epicurus was surrounded with both mental and material pleasures. He was the owner of valuable properties and the leader of a thriving school. He was loved by friends and supporters too numerous to count.

Epicurus poured his life into both studying and teaching about Nature. He did this not only for himself, but so that he could live in pleasure with like-minded friends. Epicurus was so successful that his school lasted for hundreds of years after he died. The Epicureans would have continued to prosper much longer had they not been suppressed by the rise of the Judeo-Christians. Until that happened, as Nietzsche pointed out, "Epicurus had triumphed, and every respectable intellect in Rome was Epicurean."

Epicurus was successful because he taught a practical and common-sense way of living happily. Over and over the Epicureans emphasized the following path to happiness:

The wise Epicurean has a true conception of the nature of divinity. His life is untainted by the fear that anything supernatural exists or can cause him harm.

The wise Epicurean does not fear death. He knows that his condition after death is no different from his condition before he was born.

The wise Epicurean pursues desires that he can keep within bounds. He never allows himself to be caught up in desires that can never be satisfied.

The wise Epicurean has no fear of unendurable pain. He knows that pain cannot prevail over him, because long-lasting pain is usually slight and intense pain is usually of short duration. Even the most long-lasting and intense pains can be brought to an end by death, because the wise Epicurean need not fear departing from life if that would truly better his condition.

The wise Epicurean remembers the past with gratitude. He grasps the present with a full awareness of its pleasantness, and he looks forward to the future without being dependent upon it.

Equipped in this way, the wise Epicurean is always happy, because he knows that there is no moment when the pleasures he experiences do not outweigh his pains.

When the end of his life finally comes, the wise Epicurean can face death and say:

I have anticipated you Fortune and I have entrenched myself against all your secret attacks. I have not and will not give myself up as captive to you or to any other circumstance. When it is time for me to go, I will spit contempt upon those who vainly cling to life, and I will leave life crying aloud in glorious triumph that I have lived well.