TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

50

The GREATEST BOOKS DISTILLED

SELF-HELP CLASSICS

Your shortcut to the most important ideas on happiness and fulfilment

NEW UPDATED EDITION

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Preface
Second Edition

On many levels, *50 Self-Help Classics* is a special book for me. The self-help literature that I discovered in my twenties turned my life around and changed my thinking. I fell in love with it, reading every title I could get my hands on to boost my career and improve my relationships. But as I got deeper into the genre, and saw how amazing it is, I wondered: why there was no guide to it? Perhaps it was because self-help had a slightly low-brow reputation, but this seemed totally unjustified.

Despite a heritage going back to Samuel Smiles and Orison Swett Marden in the nineteenth century, in the late 1990s self-help books seemed like a new thing. A string of mega-selling titles, from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* to *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* to *Awaken The Giant Within*, had made self-help a "hot" publishing genre, yet it still lacked critical appreciation. *50 Self-Help Classics* was my attempt to fill this gap. The book sold extremely well, and ended up being translated into 20 languages. Though the majority of self-help authors were American, it was clearly a global phenomenon.

Though I had never planned to become a writer, self-help pulled me into its orbit, virtually demanding that I leave a successful career and devote myself to it full-time. True to the self-help mantra, so beautifully expressed in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, that one must "follow your dream," I was very happy to do so. It felt like a vocation.

As it happened, *50 Self-Help Classics* proved to be just the entry point to a larger exploration of personal development, and the foundation of a bestselling series. The book was followed by *50 Success Classics*, a survey of the success and motivational literature, and then *50 Spiritual Classics*. Later books in the series, such as *50 Psychology Classics*, *50 Philosophy Classics,*

and *50 Economics Classics* may seem to be about drier topics, but this isn't so; what drives every title is the *potential of the individual*. Success is always about expanding the mind and seeing new possibilities, and the *50 Classics* series is my contribution to that end.

Almost 15 years have passed since *50 Self-Help Classics* was published. What, if anything, has changed in the self-help field? Many would argue that the genre has been superseded by psychology and its more scientific approach to understanding why we think and act as we do. Indeed, when I wrote about Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* and Martin Seligman's *Learned Optimism*, such titles were a sign of things to come in terms of personal development becoming more grounded and scientific. A person who 20 years ago might have been happy to get a lift or a set of life pointers from a classic work such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, today might be drawn to a book by a distinguished psychologist instead. It should be no surprise that serious titles such as Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, which reveal how our brains work and which therefore help us change our behaviors, are now found at the top of bestseller lists.

Yet to say that self-help has been overtaken by psychology would be wrong. There is still a place for great self-help writing, although it is more likely to support its claims by reference to research. Charles Duhigg's *The Power of Habit* and Brené Brown's *Daring Greatly*, which I look at in the new edition, are good examples. Yet self-help books can offer something that goes beyond psychology. David Brooks' *The Road to Character* is really a work of ethical philosophy with a powerful message about personal change across a lifetime. Marie Kondo's deceptively simple *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* aims to transform the reader's life through changing our attitude to things and spaces; if our homes have the air of a Shinto shrine, peace, order, and happiness reign. What self-help books do really well is combine aspects of different areas, including psychology, philosophy, spirituality, motivation, and even business (see, for example, Clayton Christensen's *How Will You Measure Your Life?*), and the best ones create an intimate

connection with the reader. You really *can* change your life, the author tells us, and I will show you how.

This combination of education and inspiration is what originally drew me to the self-help genre, and as I put together this new edition of *50 Self-Help Classics*, with its new chapters on the books mentioned above, it is still what holds me in its thrall.

Tom Butler-Bowdon

Acknowledgments

50 Self-Help Classics was originally published by Simon & Schuster in Australia. Nicholas Brealey acquired rights to the book in 2003, which was then revised for UK and US publication.

This new, updated edition took shape at Nicholas Brealey Publishing, now part of Hachette UK. At Hachette I thank editorial director Holly Bennion, sales manager Ben Slight and editorial assistant Louise Richardson, the rights team headed by Joanna Kaliszewska, and designer Joanne Myler who came up with the great new cover. Thanks for your work championing the *50 Classics* series, along with Hachette offices in the United States, Australia, the Far East, and India.

I am grateful to the many people who have touched by the book and wrote to tell me so. Writing it was a personal, deeply inspiring experience. I'm grateful to the people who supported my efforts to be a writer at that time, including my parents Marion and Anthony, the Lucas family, and many friends and colleagues.

I salute all the writers and figures who created the self-help genre, and am grateful for the ideas of the living authors included in the book.

Introduction

"The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes."
William James (1842–1910)

"Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think."
Martin Seligman, Learned Optimism

You will have heard many times that "you can change your life by changing your thoughts and your mental habits," but have you ever stopped to consider what that means? This book identifies some of the most useful ideas from writings specifically devoted to personal transformation—from the inside out.

I have called these books "self-help classics." You may already have an idea of what self-help is, but that understanding should be deepened by the range of authors and titles covered in these pages. If there is a thread running through the works, it is their refusal to accept "common unhappiness" or "quiet desperation" as the lot of humankind. They acknowledge life's difficulties and setbacks as real, but say that we cannot be defined by these. No matter how adverse the situation, we always have room to determine what it will mean to us, a lesson given us in two books covered here, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. To consciously decide what we will think, not allowing genes or environment or fate to determine our path—this is the essence of self-help.

A conventional view of self-help is that it deals with problems, but most of the self-help classics are about *possibilities*. They can help reveal your unique course in life, form a bridge between fear and happiness, or simply inspire you to be a better person.

Samuel Smiles wrote the original *Self-Help* in 1859. He feared that people would think his book a tribute to selfishness. In fact it preached reliance on one's own efforts, the never-say-die pursuit of a goal that did not wait on government help or any other kind of patronage. Smiles was originally a political reformer, but came to the conclusion that the real revolutions happened inside people's heads; he took the greatest idea of his century, "progress," and applied it to personal life. Through telling the life stories of some of the remarkable people of his era, he tried to show that anything was possible if you had the gall to try.

Abraham Lincoln is sometimes mentioned in self-help writing because he embodies the idea of "limitless" thinking. Yet his thoughts were not applied to himself—he considered himself an ungainly depressive—but to the potential he saw in a situation (saving the Union and freeing America of slavery). Lincoln's vision was not vainglorious; he lived for something larger.

At its best, self-help is not about the fantasies of the ego, but involves the identification of a project, goal, ideal, or way of being where you can make a big difference. In so doing, you can transform a piece of the world—and yourself along with it.

The self-help phenomenon

"… the symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum."
Philip K. Dick, Valis

The self-help book was one of the great success stories of the twentieth century. The exact number purchased is impossible to calculate, but this selection of 50 classics alone has sold over 150 million copies between them, and if we consider the thousands of other titles the final number would run to more than half a billion.

The idea of self-help is nothing new, but only in the twentieth century did it become a mass phenomenon. Books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) were bought by ordinary people desperate to make something of their lives and willing to believe that the secrets of success could be found in a paperback.

Maybe the genre took on its lowbrow image because the books were so readily available, promised so much, and contained ideas that you were unlikely to hear from a professor or a minister. Whatever the image, people obviously had a new source of life guidance and they loved it. For once, we were not being told what we couldn't do but only that we should shoot for the stars.

A self-help book can be your best friend and champion, expressing a faith in your essential greatness and beauty that is sometimes hard to get from another person. Because of its emphasis on following your star and believing that your thoughts can remake your world, a better name for self-help writing might be the "literature of possibility."

Many people are amazed that the self-help sections in bookstores are so huge. For the rest of us there is no mystery: Whatever recognizes our right to dream, then shows us how to make the dream a reality, is powerful and valuable.

The books

This list of classics is the result of my own reading and research, and might be quite different if another person were to undertake the same project. The focus is on twentieth-century self-help books, but much older works are also included because the self-help ethic has been with us through the ages. The Bible, The Bhagavad-Gita, and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are examples of works that may not have been thought of as self-help before, but I hope I can argue the case for their inclusion.

Most of the contemporary writers are American, and while this may seem like cultural imperialism, in reality self-help values are universal. There are a number of strands to self-help that offer specific guidance, for example on relationships, diet, selling, or self-esteem, but the books covered here relate to the broader personal development aims of self-knowledge and increasing happiness. Through the selections I try to give a sense of the huge diversity of the genre. Many of the titles were easily selected because they are both famous and influential. Others are included because they fill a niche through their ideas. Every book had to have a level of readability and "spark" that defies the time and place that it was written.

At the end of *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estés lists a great array of books that might be of interest to readers. She asks, “How do they go together? What can one lend the other? Compare, see what happens. Some combinations are bomb materials. Some create seed stock.”

The same could be said of the self-help classics. However, to help draw out some themes, below I have grouped the works into areas that may help you find what you are after. There is an additional list, “50 More Classics,” at the end of the book.

The Power of Thought
Change your thoughts, change your life

James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh*
David Brooks, *The Road to Character*
David D. Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*
Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*
Louise Hay, *You Can Heal Your Life*
Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness: Choice and Control in Everyday Life*
Joseph Murphy, *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*
Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*
Florence Scovell Shinn, *The Game of Life and How to Play It*
Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism*

Following Your Dream
Achievement and goal setting

Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*
Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*
Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*
Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*
Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*
Shakti Gawain, *Creative Visualization*
Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*
Maxwell Maltz, *Psycho-Cybernetics*
Anthony Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*

Secrets of Happiness
Doing what you love, doing what works

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*
The Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*

The Dhammapada (Buddha's teachings)
Wayne Dyer, *Real Magic: Creating Miracles in Everyday Life*
John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*
Richard Koch, *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More with Less*
Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*
Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*

The Bigger Picture
Keeping it in perspective

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*
Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*
Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*
William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*
Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff … And It's All Small Stuff*
Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*
Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Soul and mystery
Appreciating your depth

Robert Bly, *Iron John*
Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*
Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*
James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*
M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Making a Difference
Transforming yourself, transforming the world

The Bhagavad-Gita
The Bible
Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*
Clayton Christensen, *How Will You Measure Your Life?*
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*
Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help*
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*

Over to you

"In the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately springs as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals."
Carl Gustav Jung

Once upon a time we lived in tribal groups that guided our lives and supplied us with our physical, social, and spiritual needs. As "civilization" emerged it may have been the Church or the State that assumed these roles; today, you may depend on the company for which you work for material security and a sense of belonging.

Yet history shows that every kind of institution and community eventually crumbles, and when it does the individual is exposed. This is forced change, and as the world speeds up the likelihood of its happening to you increases. Therefore you need to know more about yourself, be aware of how to manage change better, and have a plan for your life that does not depend on an institution. Whether you want to change the world or just change yourself, you are right in suspecting that no one is going to do it for you. In the end, it is all up to you.

The other key pressure on us, strange as it may seem, is the expansion of choice. Most of us cherish freedom, but when we actually get the opportunity to make our own way it can be terrifying. Many of the works covered in this book deal with the paradox that the more choices we have, the greater our need for focus. Anyone can get a job, but do you have a purpose?

The twentieth century was about fitting in to large organizational structures—by conforming well you became successful. Yet Richard Koch shows us in *The 80/20 Principle* that success now and in the future comes from being more yourself; if you are willing to express your uniqueness, you will inevitably contribute something of real value to the world. This

has a moral dimension to it (Teilhard de Chardin referred to "the incommunicable singularity that each of us possess"), but also makes economic and scientific sense: Evolution happens by differentiation, not by matching up to some general standard, and therefore the rewards of life will always go to those who are not simply excellent but outstanding.

The future of self-help

"I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes."
Walt Whitman

At the heart of the self-help literature are two basic conceptions of how we should see ourselves. Titles like Wayne Dyer's *Real Magic*, Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul*, and Deepak Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* assume the existence of a changeless core inside us (called variously the soul or the higher self) that guides us and helps us to fulfill a purpose unique to us. In this conception, self-knowledge is the path to maturity.

Then there are titles such as Anthony Robbins' *Awaken the Giant Within* and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, which assume that the self is a blank slate on which you can write the story of your life. There is no one better than Friedrich Nietzsche to sum up this attitude:

"Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum 'know thyself', but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self."

The self-knowing and the self-creating person are, of course, only abstractions; a person will always be an interesting combination of the two. Both viewpoints, nevertheless, contain the assumption that the self is independent and unitary ("one"). Yet in the twenty-first century we have multiple roles, are members of many communities, and express a variety of personas, so our experience is of complexity. Where does self-help fit into such a context?

In his book *The Saturated Self*, Kenneth Gergen suggested that the old idea of the unitary self has had to evolve to take account of our many-mindedness, or what he called the "multiphrenic personality." Another writer, Robert Jay Lifton in

The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation, says that to prevent the feeling of being pulled in all directions we have to develop a tougher and more sophisticated self, aware of all its many dimensions; only this "protean self" will cope with a vastly complicated world. For Lifton, the unitary self is not dead but in a time of challenge.

However, will even this more evolved understanding of the self be able to cope with technological advance? What sort of people will emerge from a twenty-first century that can use genetic and other technologies to alter the personality and increase intelligence? If we will have the ability to change the self to such an extent, what is "self-knowledge" as Plato imagined it?

Scientists are confident that many children born now will have a life expectancy of well over 100 years, even 140 or 150. Will living that long make your sense of identity more coherent, or will 15 decades of change—relationships, families, careers, world events—shatter any feelings of continuity and security? Scarier still is the possibility that we may be able to keep alive the "software" of our brain long after our body has given up, then perhaps have it transplanted into a new corpus.

The ever more sophisticated application of technology to the human body and brain is clearly going to make the question "What is the self?" even more significant. In this *Blade Runner* future, the idea of self-knowledge will get ever more interesting.

Self-help books emerged from the evaporation of certainty and the collapse of tradition. But the literature always assumed that we knew what the self was. As this assumption is questioned, future self-help books will have to be guides to the self itself.

Reader bonus

Readers are invited to receive a bonus commentary on Srikumar Rao's excellent *Happiness at Work*. Just send an email to tombutlerbowdon@gmail.com with "Self-Help Bonus" as the subject.

As a Man Thinketh

1902

“Of all the beautiful truths pertaining to the soul that have been restored and brought to light in this age, none is more gladdening or fruitful of divine promise and confidence than this —that you are the master of your thought, the molder of your character, and the maker and shaper of your condition, environment and destiny.”

“Good thoughts and actions can never produce bad results; bad thoughts and actions can never produce good results … We understand this law in the natural world, and work with it; but few understand it in the mental and moral world—although its operation there is just as simple and undeviating—and they, therefore, do not cooperate with it.”

“Law, not confusion, is the dominating principle in the universe; justice, not injustice, is the soul and substance of life; and righteousness, not corruption, is the molding and moving force in the spiritual government of the world. This being so, we have to but right ourselves to find that the universe is right.”

In a nutshell

We don’t attract what we want, but what we are. Only by changing your thoughts will you change your life.

In a similar vein

Joseph Murphy, *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind* (p248)
Florence Scovell Shinn, *The Game of Life and How to Play It* (p272)

CHAPTER 1

James Allen

With its theme that "mind is the master weaver," creating our inner character and outer circumstances, *As a Man Thinketh* is an in-depth exploration of the central idea of self-help writing. James Allen's contribution was to take an assumption we all share—that because we are not robots we therefore control our thoughts—and reveal its fallacy. Because most of us believe that mind is separate from matter, we think that thoughts can be hidden and made powerless; this allows us to think one way and act another. However, Allen believed that the unconscious mind generates as much action as the conscious mind, and while we may be able to sustain the illusion of control through the conscious mind alone, in reality we are continually faced with a question: "Why cannot I make myself do this or achieve that?"

In noting that desire and will are sabotaged by the presence of thoughts that do not accord with desire, Allen was led to the startling conclusion: "We do not attract what we want, but what we are." Achievement happens because you as a person embody the external achievement; you don't "get" success but become it. There is no gap between mind and matter.

We are the sum of our thoughts

The logic of the book is unassailable: Noble thoughts make a noble person, negative thoughts hammer out a miserable one. To a person mired in negativity, the world looks as if it is made of confusion and fear. On the other hand, Allen noted, when we curtail our negative and destructive thoughts, "All the world softens towards us, and is ready to help us."

We attract not only what we love, but also what we fear. His explanation for why this happens is simple: Those thoughts that receive our attention, good or bad, go into the unconscious to

become the fuel for later events in the real world. As Emerson commented, “A person is what he thinks about all day long.”

Our circumstances are us

Part of the fame of Allen’s book is its contention that “Circumstances do not make a person, they reveal him.” This seems an exceedingly heartless comment, a justification for neglect of those in need, and a rationalization of exploitation and abuse, of the superiority of those at the top of the pile and the inferiority of those at the bottom.

This, however, would be a knee-jerk reaction to a subtle argument. Each set of circumstances, however bad, offers a unique opportunity for growth. If circumstances always determined the life and prospects of people, then humanity would never have progressed. In fact, circumstances seem to be designed to bring out the best in us, and if we make the decision that we have been “wronged” then we are unlikely to begin a conscious effort to escape from our situation. Nevertheless, as any biographer knows, a person’s early life and its conditions are often the greatest gift to an individual.

The sobering aspect of Allen’s book is that we have no one else to blame for our present condition except ourselves. The upside is the possibilities contained in knowing that everything is up to us; where before we were experts in the array and fearsomeness of limitations, now we become connoisseurs of what is possible.

Change your world by changing your mind

While Allen did not deny that poverty can happen to a person or a people, what he tried to make clear is that defensive actions such as blaming the perpetrator will only run the wheels further into the rut. What measures us, what reveals us, is how we use those circumstances as an aid or spur to progress. A successful person or community, in short, is one who is most efficient at processing failure.

Allen observed, “Most of us are anxious to improve our circumstances, but are unwilling to improve ourselves—and we therefore remain bound.” Prosperity and happiness cannot happen when the old self is still stuck in its old ways. People are nearly always the unconscious cause of their own lack of prosperity.

Tranquillity = success

The influence of Buddhism on Allen's thought is obvious in his emphasis on "right thinking," but it is also apparent in his suggestion that the best path to success is calmness of mind. People who are calm, relaxed, and purposeful appear as if that is their natural state, but nearly always it is the fruit of self-control.

These people have advanced knowledge of how thought works, coming from years of literally "thinking about thought." According to Allen, they have a magnet-like attraction because they are not swept up by every little wind of happenstance. We turn to them because they are masters of themselves. "Tempest-tossed" souls battle to gain success, but success avoids the unstable.

Final comments

Some 100 years after its first publication, *As a Man Thinketh* continues to get rave reviews from readers. The plain prose and absence of hype are appealing within a genre that contains sensational claims and personalities, and the fact that we know so little about the author makes the work somehow more intriguing.

To bring its message to a wider audience, two updated versions of the work that correct the gender specificity of the original have been published: *As You Think*, edited by Marc Allen (no relation), and *As a Woman Thinketh*, edited by Dorothy Hulst.

James Allen

Allen was born in Leicester, England, in 1864. At 15 he was forced to leave school and go out to work; his father, who had left for the United States following the failure of the family business, had been robbed and murdered. Allen was employed with several British manufacturing firms until 1902, when he began to write full time. Moving to Ilfracombe on the south-west coast of England, he settled down to a quiet life of reading, writing, gardening, and meditation.

As a Man Thinketh *was the second of 19 books that Allen wrote in a decade. Although considered his best work, it was*

only published at his wife's urging. Other books include From Poverty to Power*,* Byways of Blessedness*,* The Life Triumphant *and* Eight Pillars of Prosperity*. Allen died in 1912.*

Meditations

2nd century

“Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will and selfishness—all of them due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good or evil. But for my part I have long perceived the nature of good and its nobility, the nature of evil and its meanness, and also the nature of the culprit himself, who is my brother (not in the physical sense, but as a fellow-creature similarly endowed with reason and a share of the divine); therefore none of those things can injure me, for nobody can implicate me in what is degrading.”

“Love nothing but that which comes to you woven in the pattern of your destiny. For what could more aptly fit your needs?”

“Everything—a horse, a vine—is created for some duty. This is nothing to wonder at: even the sun-god himself will tell you, ‘This is a work I am here to do,’ and so will all the other sky-dwellers. For what task, then, were you yourself created? For pleasure? Can such a thought be tolerated?”

In a nutshell

Don’t get caught up in trivia or pettiness; appreciate your life within a larger context.

In a similar vein

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (p34)
Richard Carlson, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* (p78)

CHAPTER 2

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was emperor of Rome from 161AD until his death 19 years later. By the time he came to power, Rome was under threat: constant warring with "barbarians" on the frontier, disease brought back by soldiers, pestilence, and even earthquakes. Try to imagine the President of the United States being so philosophical in the midst of such crises. Yet despite the circumstances, after his death Marcus Aurelius would come to be idealized by the Romans as the perfect emperor, a genuine philosopher-king who provided the last real nobility of rule before the savagery of his son Commodus' reign and the anarchy of the third century.

A student of Stoic philosophy, Marcus Aurelius refused to be made miserable by the difficulties of life. Stoicism was a Greek school of thought originating around 300BC. In simple terms, it taught that submission to the law of the universe was how human beings should live, and emphasized duty, avoidance of pleasure, reason, and fearlessness of death. Stoics would also have full responsibility for their actions, independence of mind, and pursue the greater good over their own. The emperor would have been comfortable with today's United Nations and other world bodies that stand for cooperative effort: Stoics had an international outlook and believed in universal brotherhood.

As well as the world, the thoughts of the Stoics spanned time, as this excerpt from the *Meditations* demonstrates:

"All things fade into the storied past, and in a little while are shrouded in oblivion. Even to men whose lives were a blaze of glory this comes to pass; as to the rest, the breath is hardly out of them before, in Homer's words, they are 'lost to sight alike and hearsay'. What, after all, is immortal fame? An empty, hollow thing. To what, then, must we aspire? This, and this

alone: the just thought, the unselfish act, the tongue that utters no falsehood, the temper that greets each passing event as something predestined, expected, and emanating from the One source and origin."

This was written over 19 centuries ago, yet it is somehow even more relevant when we know how ancient it is. Marcus Aurelius' life itself bears the statement out; not many now will have cause to remember his skill or otherwise as a leader, but his *Meditations*, quiet thoughts written by firelight in the midst of campaigns, live on in hearts and minds.

The *Meditations* are alive with perceptiveness about the basic unity of all things in the universe, including its people. They tell us that the effort to see through another's eyes is nothing less than an expansion of one's world—and a unifying of it. To despise, avoid, or judge a person is simply an obstruction of Nature's law. The realization that to move human relations to a higher level we must do the opposite of these things formed the basis of the emperor's thought.

On every page of the *Meditations* is this theme of accepting things and people how they are, not how we would like them to be. There is sadness in this view, as the following brief comment suggests: "You may break your heart, but men still go on as before." One does get the impression of reading the thoughts of a lonely man, but then Marcus Aurelius' ability to see life objectively saved him from any real disillusionment:

"Be like the headland against which the waves break and break: it stands firm, until presently the watery tumult around it subsides once more to rest. 'How unlucky I am, that this should have happened to me!' By no means; say, rather, 'How lucky I am that this has left me with no bitterness; unshaken by the present, and undismayed by the future.'"

The great worth of Stoic philosophy is its ability to help put things into perspective so you can remember the things that matter; the *Meditations* is, if you like, an ancient and noble *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. The person who can see the world as it really is also carries the ability to see beyond that world. We are here and we have a job to do, but there is a feeling that we came from

another place, and will eventually go back to it. Life can be sad and lonely, seemingly one thing after another, but this should never dull our basic wonder at our existence in the universe:

"Survey the circling stars, as though you yourself were mid-course with them. Often picture the changing and rechanging dance of the elements. Visions of this kind purge away the dross of our earth-bound life."

Final comments

What can we make of the fact that Marcus Aurelius was the father of Commodus, whose accession and brutal reign broke the tradition of non-hereditary kingship? If the philosopher was such a great man, how could he have fathered such a brute?

The *Meditations* is not just another self-help book with easy answers—its very theme is imperfection. We can never know exactly why things happen, why people act the way they do, but it is not up to us to judge anyway; there is a larger meaning to events and lives that escapes us. This knowledge itself is a comfort.

This is a short book that is a source of sanity in a mad world, and today's reader will also love the beautiful prose that makes it stand out against modern philosophical and self-help writings (Maxwell Staniforth's translation is particularly good). Buy a copy and you will make use of it for life.

Marcus Aurelius

When Hadrian, one of Rome's most successful emperors, died in 138AD, he appointed as his successor Antoninus Pius, who in turn, on Hadrian's instructions, adopted the 17-year-old Marcus Aurelius as his successor. The young man's future was confirmed when he was married to Faustina, a daughter of Antoninus Pius. As well as carrying out courtly duties, he devoted himself to the study of law and philosophy. Taking power at age 40, Aurelius voluntarily divided rule with his brother Lucius Verus, who was to die eight years later.

Though peaceful by nature, Aurelius was forced continually to defend the Empire's territories against the Germanic tribes, including the Marcomanni and the Quadi. A single manuscript,

now lost, is the source of the Meditations*. Marcus Aurelius had never intended that it be published. The year 1559 saw its first printing, almost 14 centuries after the emperor's death in 180. While Ridley Scott's film* Gladiator *portrays the emperor being murdered by Commodus, there is no historical evidence for this.*

The Bhagavad-Gita

"We are born into the world of nature; our second birth is into the world of spirit."

"But he who, with strong body serving mind,
Gives up his power to worthy work,
Not seeking gain, Arjuna! Such an one
Is honourable. Do thine alloted task!"

"He whose peace is not shaken by others, and before whom other people find peace, beyond excitement and anger and fear—he is dear to me."

"If thou wilt not fight thy battle of life because in selfishness thou art afraid of the battle, thy resolution is in vain: nature will compel thee."

"I have given thee words of vision and wisdom more secret than hidden mysteries. Ponder them in the silence of thy soul, and then in freedom do thy will."

In a nutshell

Seek peace inside yourself, do the work that is yours, and wonder at the mysteries of the universe.

In a similar vein

Deepak Chopra, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (p90)
The Dhammapada (p128)

it all, but you can't. Because we are alive, we can't avoid action or its effects—this is *karma*.

If we must throw ourselves into life, what should be our guide? There is action motivated by desire, and action undertaken out of a sense of purpose.

The first type seems easier, because it allows you to live without questioning and requires little self-knowledge. In fact it goes against the grain of universal law, usually leading to the departure of spirit from our lives. Purposeful action seems more complicated and obscure, but is in fact the most natural way; it is the salvation of our existence and even the source of joy. The word for this is *dharma*.

Reason

The Bhagavad-Gita is a great book because it embodies the reasoning mind, capable of choosing the way of purpose over the automaticity of a life led by desire. If Arjuna simply follows his desire not to fight, he learns nothing. Instead, Krishna tells him to "fight the good fight"—this is his duty, his purpose, his *dharma*.

Freed from indecision, Arjuna is subsequently told that his opponents "have it coming to them" anyway; Arjuna is merely the instrument of divine *karma*.

The reader should not dwell too long on why God is recommending war. The point of the story is that the young warrior, in questioning his own action and existence, displays reason. Nowadays we tend to equate reason with intelligence. This is lazy thinking, because it means that a mouse or a computer, displaying the ability to "work something out," is at our level.

Reason is actually the process by which we discover our place in the larger scheme of things, specifically the work or actions by which our existence is justified and fulfilled. It is what makes us human beings.

The Gita is no flight into the mystical; in showing the path to reason, it reveals our highest faculty and greatest asset.

Work

The Bhagavad-Gita draws attention to the three "constituents of nature," Tamas (darkness), Rajas (fire), and Sattva (light). A

Rajas style of life is full of action and endless business, with fingers in too many pies, hunger for more, lack of rest, and lust for things and people. It is about gaining and attaining, a life focused on "what is mine and what is not yet mine."

Sound familiar? This is living according to "outcome," and while it may be of a higher order than Tamas (inertia, dullness, lack of care, ignorance), it is still one of mediocrity. And the life of light, Sattva? You will know you are living it when your intentions are noble and you feel peace in your actions. Your work is your sanctuary and you would do it even for no reward at all.

This holy book's key point about work is that unless you are doing the work you love, you are darkening your soul. If this seems impossible, love what you are doing. Freedom—from fear and anxious worry over "results"—will follow. The wise always have an outcome or result in mind, yet their detachment from it makes them all the more effective.

The Gita says that higher even than the peace of meditation is the peace that comes from surrender of the fruit of one's actions; in this state we are free from the rigidity of set expectations, allowing the unexpected and remarkable to emerge.

The steady self

You may be relaxing in front of the television when a report comes on about the year's Academy Awards, telling of the glitter and glory of the Oscars and exclusive post-ceremony parties. Someone remarks, "This is where the rest of the world would like to be." Beneath the superficial enjoyment of the report, suddenly you get a sense of inferiority. "Who cares if people say it's shallow, I want to be there! What have I done with my life that I am not on the list for that party? Am I really going back to my job on Monday morning?"

There is a phrase in psychology for this thinking: "object referral." This means having a focus on others and seeking their approval. Hollywood is famously a shrine to external valuations of worth, where you are always wondering what people will think of your next audition, performance, or deal. This is basically a life of fear and, when things don't turn out as you had hoped, of desperation. The Gita teaches that you can achieve a state where you don't need any external commendation to make you feel right; you know you are of real worth.

One of the main routes to this level of being is meditation, which brings detachment from emotions like fear and greed. Through it we discover a self that is not subject to change, that is, in Deepak Chopra's words, "immune to criticism … unfearful of any challenge, and feels beneath no-one." This surely is real power, compared to what we can acquire in the world of action.

In your baser conscious desires you are just like everyone else; in the meditative state you grasp your uniqueness. What we do following meditation does not normally generate negative *karma*, because we are emerging from a zone of purity and perfect knowledge. "With perfect meditation comes perfect act," says The Bhagavad-Gita.

The book repeatedly comments that the enlightened person is the same in success or failure, is not swayed by the winds of event or emotion. It is a manual on how to achieve steadiness, which ironically comes from appreciating the ephemeral nature of life and the relentless movement of time. Though the universe may be in a constant state of flux, we can train our mind to be a rare fixed point. The book is a brilliant antidote to the feelings of smallness and insignificance that can swamp even the most confident in modern life.

Final comments

Those prejudiced against religious books as "mystical rubbish" may be shocked to discover that The Bhagavad-Gita is one of the great works on the sovereignty of the mind.

God tells Arjuna:

"I have given thee words of vision and wisdom more secret than hidden mysteries.
Ponder them in the silence of thy soul, and then in freedom do thy will."

Even though God is all powerful, man has free will. The Gita has delivered this message with force across the ages because, perhaps ironically, it is done through poetry, the language of the heart.

This is a perfect self-help book because it is not scholarly or complicated but remains a source of the most profound wisdom, offering a path to steadiness of mind and joy in one's work that

could not be more relevant amid the speed and pressure of life in the twenty-first century.

The Bible

“Thou shalt decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways.” (Job 22:28)

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” (Psalm 23)

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” (Philippians 4:8)

“I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.” (Philippians 4:13)

“He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.” (Isaiah 40:29)

“If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

“What things soever ye desire, when ye pray believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.” (Mark 11.24)

In a nutshell

Love, faith, hope, the glory of God, the perfectibility of man.

was the God who led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, who would work through history in order to create his own ends—the God of progress.

Though we take it for granted today, this progressive worldview has defined western culture and been adopted by nearly all non-western cultures too. It is, as Cahill says above, the force behind all the great emancipation movements that, often employing the language of the Book of Exodus, grew out of the thought that "it does not have to be this way." This thought is also the light that guides most of the self-help literature.

The power of love

If the Old Testament has been the inspiration for groups through the millennia, the New Testament became a symbol of personal salvation. The Old was revolutionary because it put fresh emphasis on the individual, but the New took this to its logical extreme by saying that individuals could not only change the world, but had a duty to do so. Its challenge to transform the world in God's image, using Jesus as the example, made it a manual for active love. Again, a love that heals and creates—like progress—is something totally taken for granted now. But as Andrew Welburn put it in *The Beginnings of Christianity*: "Love is the revelation of God to the individualised, self-conscious man, just as power and wise order were the revelation of God to ancient, pre-self-conscious humanity."

The Bible's theme of the power of love marked a new era of humankind. On his way to Damascus to help suppress the Christians, Saul of Tarsus (who later became St. Paul) was "blinded by the light." This wonderful story of personal transformation illustrated the strange new idea that love could be stronger than position or power.

Faith

The collections of deities that preceded the Judaic concept of one god were mostly reflections of human desire. If you didn't get what you wanted, it was obvious that the gods were displeased with you. Moses' God was more complicated, requiring the worshipper to have faith in order to fashion His ends and demonstrate omnipotence. The Judaic and Christian God became one not simply of creation and destruction, but of co-creation.

Look at the story of Abraham: Told by God to go to a mountain to make a sacrifice, he does so but realizes that the sacrifice will be his only son. Amazingly, he is willing to go through with it. At the last minute God has him replace the boy with a ram caught in a nearby bush. Abraham's success at this incredible test of faith is rewarded by generations of his descendants living in prosperity.

Yet this was not simply a test of allegiance to God, and not just about Abraham. Humanity itself had passed a test: we could choose no longer to be animals quivering with fear, tied to the physical world, but could reflect God in becoming beings with calm faith.

The Bible and individuality

Other religions and philosophies had seen the world either as an illusion or a drama in which we played a role, but Christianity, by making the individual the unit through which the world would develop and fulfill its potential, made history important—it became the story of humankind's efforts to create heaven on earth.

Above all, Christianity freed believers from having to accept their lot in life. It was profoundly egalitarian: Human beings were no longer captive to other humans, nor to capricious gods, the "fates," or the "stars." This emphasis gave people the groundbreaking idea that they could no longer be defined by factors such as class, ethnicity, or lack of money.

The revolutionary opportunity of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, was to see and understand the "incommunicable singularity of being which all possess" (Teilhard de Chardin). While the broader vision of the Bible is the creation of a community of humankind, it can only be one in which each person has the opportunity to express this singularity to the full. Whatever you think of him, this belief is what fired Pope John Paul II to be so strongly anti-communist—he saw a system that was willing to sacrifice a person's uniqueness to some larger community.

Final comments

The Bible deserves to be seen with new eyes. We no longer have to see it as being about original sin and sacrifice, or as spawning a heavy church hierarchy and holy wars. We should

be reminded of its simpler messages of compassion and fulfillment and refinement of ourselves, a morality requiring no imposition on others. Though fascinating as a historical book with great stories, we should do the Bible justice by remembering that it was the original manual for personal transformation.

Iron John

1990

“The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has not become more free. He’s a nice boy who pleases not only his mother but also the young woman he is living with.”

“The word special is important to the naïve man, and he has special relationships with certain people. We all have some special relationships, but he surrounds the special person with a cloying kind of goodwill. The relationship is so special that he never examines the dark side of a person.”

“The Iron John story retains memories of initiation ceremonies for men that go back ten or twenty thousand years in northern Europe. The Wild Man’s job is to teach the young man how abundant, various, and manysided his manhood is. The boy’s body inherits physical abilities developed by long-dead ancestors, and his mind inherits spiritual and soul powers developed centuries ago.”

In a nutshell

Through old stories we can resurrect the ancient and deep power of the masculine.

In a similar vein

Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (p72)

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (p156)
Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (p242)

Re-awakening the warrior

Warrior energy, if not honored or channeled, ends up being expressed as teen gang warfare, wife beating, paedophilia, and feelings of shame. If used rightly, it can become a source of delight to everyone in its refinement. How else, Bly asks, can we explain the unconscious admiration for a glorious knight or a man in a starched white uniform and medals? This image represents the civilization of warrior energy.

The author also calls for the warrior spirit and occasional "fierceness" to be used in relationships. He quotes psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who said that American marriages were "the saddest around because the man reserved all his fighting for the office." At home he was a pussycat. Fierceness involves protecting what is rightfully yours, and women want to know what a man's boundaries are.

Coming to ground

A man may spend his twenties and thirties as a sort of "flying boy"; in his imagination, nothing can hold him down. But for a man to be made whole, there has to be something that rips him open, a wound that allows his soul to enter. In many myths, a wild animal gets close enough to a young man to gore his leg; in the Iron John story, it is a knight who chases after the prince and stabs him in the leg. As he falls off his horse, the golden hair he has hidden from everyone underneath the helmet is revealed. Until then he has seemed two-dimensional. Appreciation of pain and sorrow, Bly says, is as vital to a man's potentiality as is having the ability to soar through the air.

A hunger for the masculine

The male initiation ceremonies of all cultures form a deepening, a forced discovery of the dark side. Women can't initiate men. In many cultures, a boy is taken from the women who have so far managed his life and made to live among older men for a while. Modern society has few structures for initiation, and boys can spend their teenage years prolonging their freedom, manifested in wild behavior, rudeness to parents (particularly the mother), and clothing and music that attract attention.

Millions of men have grown up with an environment of feminine energy—which isn't a problem in itself, but boys also need the masculine. Men start to think more about their fathers

as they get older, and mythology has much to say about the heaviness of "entering the father's house," leaving behind the expectation of lightness and comfort to face grim reality. Bly says that Shakespeare's Hamlet, for instance, is an elaborate metaphor for this process of moving from the mother's side to the father's.

Colors of a life

In Iron John the prince, disguised as a knight, rides a red then a white then a black horse. These colors have a logical symbolic progression in relation to a man's life: The "redness" of his emotions and unbridled sexuality in younger years; the "whiteness" of work and living according to law; and the "blackness" of maturity in which compassion and humanity have the chance to flower.

Bly comments that in the later years of his presidency, Lincoln was a man in black. He had seen it all. No longer ruled by his emotions (red) or some external set of principles or law (white), he had ceased to blame and had developed a brilliant, philosophical sense of humor. You tend to know a man who has begun to move into the black because he is really trusted. There are no hidden corners, because he has fully incorporated his shadow.

Final comments

Why has Bly's retelling of a fairy tale appealed to millions of western men?

The Iron John story has been told around campfires for millennia. Unfortunately, like an inheritance that lies uncollected, many men do not know exactly what they have missed, but this book's impact suggests that many overdue claims for genuine masculinity are now being made—and women and the rest of society will be better off for it too.

Men who may laugh at a book like this are probably those who need it most. The most destructive types tend to be those with the least developed powers of self-examination, and women should welcome any efforts to revive a forceful, but non-destructive, spirit of masculinity. What *Iron John* has done for men, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (Clarissa Pinkola Estés) has achieved for women, and is highly recommended.

Iron John bears reading twice or more, especially if you are unfamiliar with mythology. This was Bly's first book of prose, but it includes a good selection of his excellent poems.

Robert Bly

Born in 1926 in Madison, Minnesota, to a farming family, Bly went to Harvard for his BA and received an MA from the University of Iowa. He is one of the most renowned living American poets, and has edited a number of collected works, mentored many young poets, and made non-English poetry more widely available through his translations. He was a leader in the anti-Vietnam war movement.

Bly has written other mainstream books, including The Sibling Society*, which argues that we now live in an "adolescent" culture,* The Maiden King: The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, with self-help author Marion Woodman, and* A Little Book on the Human Shadow. *He lives in Minnesota.*

The Consolation of Philosophy

6th century

“Contemplate the extent and stability of the heavens, and then at last cease to admire worthless things.”

“… lack of self-knowledge is natural in other living creatures, but in humans is a moral blemish.”

“So although the general picture may seem to you mortals one of confusion and turmoil because you are totally unable to visualize this order of things, all of them none the less have their own pattern, which orders and directs them towards the good.”

“’This is why,’ she went on, ‘the wise man ought not to chafe whenever he is locked in conflict with Fortune, just as it is unfitting for the courageous man to be resentful when the din of battle resounds. For each of them the difficulty offers the opportunity; for the courageous man it is the chance of extending his fame, and for the wise man the chance of lending substance to his wisdom.’”

In a nutshell

No matter what happens to you, you always have freedom of mind.

In a similar vein

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (p14)
David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (p50)