

Points of Wisdom from the Cynics

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." —Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." —Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Note • The following points of wisdom come from, or they are about, the Cynics. Each begins in *italics* with a single word or more indicating the point's topic or meaning. For more points of wisdom from the Cynics organized by topic, buy the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of the Cynics*. These specific points come from the Cave's *The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics*.

Points of Wisdom from the Cynics

Seek the goal of life—happiness. The main goal of the Cynics . . . was how they themselves might be happy.
—Julian, the Roman emperor

Go for happiness. One must go for happiness, as Diogenes used to say, even if the going is through fire.
—Crates of Thebes

Look for happiness in the right place by listening to Socrates say, "Where are you hurrying? What are you doing, you miserable men? Like blind people you are wandering up and down. You are going by another road and have left the true road. You search for prosperity and happiness where they are not. And if another shows you where they are, you do not believe him." —Epictetus (citing Socrates)

Do happiness (rather than talking or thinking about it). Long is the path that leads to happiness through words alone. But the path that leads to happiness through the practice of daily deeds is short. —Crates of Thebes

Choosing and doing happiness versus reading books. I still believe that even before Heracles, not only among the Greeks but among the barbarians also, there were men who practiced this *Cynic* philosophy. For it seems to be in some ways a universal philosophy, and the most natural, and to demand no special study whatsoever. But it is enough simply to choose the honorable by desiring virtue and avoiding evil. And so there is no need

to turn over countless books. For as the saying goes, “Much learning does not teach men to have understanding.” —*Julian, the Roman emperor*

Do philosophy like a Cynic. Do philosophy more often than you breathe. I say this because living well, which philosophy produces, is more choiceworthy than simply living, which breathing produces. Don’t do philosophy as others have done it, but as Antisthenes first practiced it, that which Diogenes brought to fulfillment.
—*Crates of Thebes*

Live according to nature. I am heaven’s dog . . . living according to nature. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Practice following nature. Rather than unprofitable, toilsome exercises, men should prefer those which follow nature in order to live happily. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Follow nature by altering the currency. Diogenes granted nothing at all . . . to human custom and law; rather, he followed nature. In this way he practiced “altering the currency,” which is to say he reevaluated human customs. —*Diogenes Laertius*

How to follow nature. It was by watching a mouse—how it didn’t long for a marriage bed, and how it didn’t care about the dark, and how it didn’t long for things that have a reputation for causing pleasure—that Diogenes discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances.
—*Theophrastus of Eresos (about Diogenes of Sinope)*

Do virtue; practice. Virtue is something you do—it’s a matter of deeds. It doesn’t require a stockpile of arguments or much learning. . . . Virtue is sufficient for happiness. . . . Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away. —*Antisthenes*

The goal is virtue, which strengthens and heals. The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. . . . Virtue alone is that by which the soul can be strengthened and delivered from its afflictions. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Imitate Diogenes’ example. Diogenes was courageous in his practice of virtue. . . . Put on his armor and carry his weapons. —*Crates of Thebes*

Strive to be a good and noble man. Men strive in punching and kicking to outdo one another, but no one strives to become a noble and good man. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Know yourself. When he was asked what result he obtained from philosophy, Diogenes said, “The ability to be in my own company and to be acquainted with myself.” —*Diogenes Laertius (citing Diogenes of Sinope)*

Soul care. Take care of your soul—but your body only so far as what is necessary, and externals not even that much. I say this because happiness is not a pleasure that requires external things, nor does perfect virtue require these. —*Crates of Thebes*

Cultivate yourself. We must look into the good and bad done in our own households. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

POINTS OF WISDOM ▪ FROM THE CYNICS

Harmonize yourself. Observing a foolish man tuning a harp, he said, “Are you not ashamed to give this piece of wood harmonious sounds while you fail to harmonize your soul with your life?” —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Obey the commander of your soul. Reason is commander of the soul, a noble thing, the greatest good for human beings. —*Crates of Thebes*

Steer your life with reason. Let a person entrust all his affairs to reason and intelligence and steer his course by them—for this was the central point, I suppose, of Diogenes’ philosophy. —*Julian, the Roman emperor*

Seek freedom. The Cynic Diogenes declared that his manner of life was the same as that of Heracles. He preferred freedom more than everything else. —*Diogenes Laertius*

Freedom from others. So long as you are a slave to the opinions of the many you have not yet approached freedom or tasted its nectar.” —*Julian, the Roman emperor*

Be free of what others think. Do not be distressed, father, . . . Instead, be delighted that your son is . . . free from popular opinion, to which everyone, both the Greeks and barbarians, are enslaved. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Train; practice; do. Absolutely nothing in life is successful without training, which has the power to conquer anything. —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Two kinds of training. Diogenes declared that there are two kinds of exercise—training of the soul and training of the body. And that the latter exercise gives rise to perceptions that facilitate virtuous deeds. Each practice is incomplete and ineffectual without the other. —*Diogenes Laertius*

The need to train. Virtue enters the soul by means of training—not automatically as happens with vice.
—*Crates of Thebes*

Exercise using pleasure and hardship. Keep training just as you began and earnestly set yourself in equal measure against both pleasure and hardship —*Diogenes of Sinope*

Practice self-control and endurance. Flee not only from the worst of the vices, injustice and a lack of self-control, but also what produces them, pleasure and enjoyment. . . . Pursue not only the best of goods, self-control and endurance, but also what produces them, hard work and toil. In doing so, you will exchange hard work and toil for virtue. —*Crates of Thebes*

Practice endurance. Making his home in the Piraeus, Antisthenes used to walk about five miles to Athens every day in order to hear Socrates. He learned the art of endurance from him, imitating his indifference to suffering. So it was that he began the Cynic philosophy and the Cynic way of life. —*Diogenes Laertius*

Come up with specific ways to train. In summertime, Diogenes used to roll in his wine-jar house over hot sand. And in wintertime, he used to hug statues of men covered with snow. He practiced endurance in every way.
—*Diogenes Laertius*

POINTS OF WISDOM ▪ FROM THE CYNICS

Need or desire reduction. Train yourselves to need very little—for this is closest to god, while the opposite is farthest.—*Crates of Thebes*

Look down on unnecessary things. When you train to look down on poverty, a bad reputation, low birth, and exile, you will live blessedly. . . . Otherwise, you will live miserably.—*Diogenes of Sinope*

Train while eating and drinking. Get used to eating barley cakes and drinking water.—*Crates of Thebes*

Be content with simple things; practice self-sufficiency. Diogenes used to teach the boys in his care to supply their own needs, and to be content with simple food and water to drink.—*Diogenes Laertius*

Cultivate contentment with little. Do not be distressed, father, that I call myself a dog, and I clothe myself with a doubled over tattered cloak, and I carry a leather bag over my shoulders, and I have a staff in my hand. It is not fitting to be upset by such matters. Instead, be delighted that your son is content with little.

—*Diogenes of Sinope*

Practice rejection. Diogenes once begged alms from a statue. When asked why he did this, he said, “To practice being rejected.”—*Diogenes Laertius*

Go your own way (not with the crowd). Diogenes was going into a theater while everyone else was going out in the opposite direction. When someone asked him why, he said, “This is what I practice doing every day of my life.”—*Diogenes Laertius*

Stand apart from what people say. When Antisthenes was applauded by bad men, he said, “I’m afraid that I have done something wrong.” One man said to him, “The many praise you.” In response, he said, “Why? What wrong have I done?”—*Diogenes Laertius*

Reputation. A bad reputation is a good thing.—*Antisthenes*

Reinterpretation. When someone reminded Diogenes that the citizens of Sinope had sentenced him to exile, he said, “And I sentenced them to stay there.”—*Diogenes Laertius*

A real human being. Diogenes lit a lamp in the middle of the day and walked around saying, “I’m searching for a human being.”—*Diogenes Laertius*

Wealth and evil. Wealth is the origin of all evils.—*Diogenes of Sinope*

Where blame belongs. We blame everything else more than we do our own irritability and unhappiness. . . . We blame old age, poverty, chance encounters, the day, the season, the place. . . . Many mad men lay the blame on circumstances rather than on themselves.—*Teles the Cynic*

A trouble-free life is impossible. I have concluded from my own life that we human beings are distressed whenever we wish to live a problem-free life. But this is impossible! For by necessity we live with the body, and by necessity we also live with human beings.—*Crates of Thebes*

POINTS OF WISDOM ▪ FROM THE CYNICS

Meet circumstances as they are. One should not attempt to change circumstances; rather, one should get ready for them as they are. Do this as sailors do. They don't try to change the winds and the sea. Instead, they ready themselves so that they are able to respond to these things. — *Teles the Cynic*

Jealousy. As iron is devoured by rust, so are jealous people consumed by their own jealousy. — *Antisthenes*

For **more points of wisdom** from the Cynics organized by topic,
buy the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of the Cynics*.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." — Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." — Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

