The Dichotomy of Control in Practice

“Just know that when you are provoked, your own mind was complicit in the provocation.” — Epictetus

I remember the moment I first read those words. I experienced an almost instantaneous realization—a profound understanding, deep within my psyche, that I had spent an enormous portion of the previous twenty-five years reacting rather than consciously choosing how to respond.

I had lived in an almost constant state of provocation. Worse still, I had become so thoroughly habituated to reacting that I was perpetually on a hair trigger, ready to be provoked by almost anything, at almost any moment, throughout much of my waking life. What I had come to regard as normal was, in fact, a deeply ingrained pattern of automatic emotional reactivity.

But those words from Epictetus changed something fundamental in my understanding of myself. They marked the beginning of a long journey toward learning not merely how to resist provocation, but how to stop participating in it.

As my awareness grew, I began to recognize just how frequently I involved myself in matters that neither required nor warranted my attention. I was allowing external events, other people's behavior, and circumstances beyond my control to dictate where I directed my thoughts, emotions, and energy.

Eventually, I sat down and developed a list of ten questions to ask myself whenever something external threatened to capture my attention or provoke a reaction.

The purpose of these questions was simple: to create a deliberate interval between stimulus and response—a *Stoic pause*.

By asking myself these questions, I could interrupt the automatic process of reacting, examine whether my involvement was necessary or appropriate, and give myself the opportunity to make a conscious, reasoned choice.

I was learning that I did not have to participate in everything that invited my participation, react to everything that provoked a reaction, or assume responsibility for everything that came to my attention.

And perhaps most importantly, I was beginning to understand that while I could not always control what entered my life, I could learn to exercise far greater control over what I allowed to occupy it.

Below are the ten questions I settled on:

1. Is this actually my problem to solve? Am I assuming ownership of something that properly belongs to someone else?

2. Is this genuinely my responsibility? Do I have a real obligation here, or am I creating one for myself out of habit, guilt, fear, or expectation?

3. Is this within my control? Can I meaningfully influence the situation through my own choices and actions, or am I attempting to control other people, events, or outcomes?

4. Does this actually require my involvement? Would anything important be lost if I simply chose not to participate?

5. Is this something that can wait? Is there a genuine need for immediate action, or am I responding to an artificial sense of urgency?

6. Am I responding thoughtfully or reacting emotionally? Is my desire to become involved driven by reason and principle, or by anger, fear, disgust, anxiety, resentment, curiosity, or the need to be right?

7. Am I the right person to address this? Do I have the authority, knowledge, ability, and appropriate relationship to make a useful contribution?

8. What will my involvement cost me? How much time, attention, energy, emotional stability, or opportunity am I about to commit, and is that expenditure justified?

9. Will my involvement make anything meaningfully better? Am I likely to contribute to a constructive outcome, or merely add another opinion, argument, complication, or source of friction?

10. Can I choose not to engage and remain at peace with that decision? Can I allow something to remain unresolved, imperfect, or outside my influence without feeling compelled to intervene?

This list is in a kind of order based upon how often I engaged each option over time. Yes, in the early months of practicing the dichotomy of control, I tracked (loosely) the number of times I used one of the ten questions to avoid reacting or involving myself in external situations.

Before I tell you which question appeared most often at the start of my practice. Which one do you think would appear the most in your life? Hint: anger, fear, disgust.

In the beginning, Question 6—*Am I responding thoughtfully or reacting emotionally?*—was by far the question I asked myself most often. Anger, fear, and disgust were frequent triggers, and I had become so accustomed to reacting to them that I often felt compelled to do something simply because I felt something. But an interesting change began to occur. As I practiced cognitive self-regulation, Question 6 gradually moved down the list. I was no longer having to interrupt quite so many automatic reactions. Through repetition, reflection, and

deliberate practice, I was beginning to change the underlying habits of thought that had made those reactions so commonplace. What initially required considerable conscious effort was gradually becoming a more natural way of thinking. I was not simply learning to control my reactions. I was learning to become less reactive.

Book recommendation: William B. Irvine discusses the dichotomy of control in his book: A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy.