

Or she might journey across the sea hovering above the swelling waves,  
And never taint her swift feet with weiness.<sup>1</sup>

This is an example of swiftness measured in its own right, rather than swiftness praised by comparison with those who are very slow. What if you were to call someone with a mild fever 'healthy'? Moderate sickness is not good health.

5. The objection is, 'the wise person is said to be undisturbed in the same way that some pomegranates are said to be seedless—not if its seeds are not hard at all, but if they are less hard.' But that is false. For my meaning is not that a good man has a reduction in bad qualities but an absence of them. There ought to be none, not small ones. For if there are any at all, they will grow and at some time get in his way. Just as a large and complete cataract blinds the eyes, so a limited one impairs them.

6. If you allow *some* passions to the wise person, his reason will be no match for them and will be swept away as though by a kind of torrent—especially since you are giving him not just one passion to struggle against, but all of them. A group of passions, no matter how modest in power, has more impact than the violence of one big one.

7. He has a desire for money, but limited desire. He has ambition, but not agitated ambition. He is irascible, but can be pacified; he is not steadfast, but is not too unstable and fickle. He suffers from lust, but not insane lust. The situation is better for the person who has one vice in its entirety than it is for the person who has them all, though they are less severe.

8. Next, it makes no difference how big the passion is; no matter what its size, it doesn't know how to obey and cannot take advice. Just as no animal obeys reason, neither the wild beast nor the domesticated and tame animal (for their nature is deaf to its persuasion), so too the passions do not obey and do not listen, no matter how small they are. Tigers and lions never cast off their ferocity, though sometimes they moderate it, and when you are least expecting it their tempered savagery flares up. One can never be confident that vices have been gentled.

9. Next, if reason is effective then the passions don't even get started; if the passions get going despite reason then they will persist despite it. For it is easier to check their beginnings than to control their attack. Therefore that so-called 'moderation' is bogus and useless, and should be treated in the same way as if someone said that one must be moderately insane or moderately sick.

## LETTER 85

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. I had been sparing you and passing over all the knotty problems which still remained, satisfied with giving you a taste, as it were, of what our school says to prove that virtue alone is effective enough to complete the happy life. You are urging me to include all of the arguments which have been either devised by our school or thought up in order to ridicule us. If I can bring myself to do that, this won't be a letter but a whole book. I swear, over and over again, that I take no pleasure in proofs of this type; I am ashamed to go into a battle engaged on behalf of gods and humans armed with nothing but an awl.

2. (a) 'He who is prudent is also self-controlled; (b) he who is self-controlled is also steadfast; (c) he who is steadfast is undisturbed; (d) he who is undisturbed is free of sadness; (e) he who is free of sadness is happy.' (f) Therefore the prudent person is happy and prudence is sufficient for a happy life.'

3. Certain Peripatetics respond to this inference as follows: they interpret 'undisturbed' and 'steadfast' and 'free of sadness' as though we called 'undisturbed' someone who is disturbed seldom and moderately, not someone who is never disturbed. Similarly they say that someone is said to be 'free of sadness' if he is not a prey to sadness and doesn't suffer from this vice frequently or to excess; for it is a denial of human nature that someone's mind be immune to sadness; the wise person is not overwhelmed by grief but is touched by it. They also add other points of this sort, in accordance with their own school.

4. With these points they do not eliminate the passions but moderate them. But how little we grant to the wise person if he is stronger than the very weak, is more happy than the very sad, is more temperate than those who are totally uncontrolled and rises above the most lowly. What if I adas were to admire his own swiftness by comparing himself to those who are lame and weak?

She might zoom over the tips of the leaves of a grainfield without touching them  
And would not harm the tender ears in running.

<sup>1</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid* 7.808–11.

10. Only virtue possesses mental balance; bad characteristics don't admit of it, and you could eliminate them more easily than you could control them. Surely there can be no doubt that the long-standing and seasoned vices of human intelligence, the ones we call 'diseases', are uncontrolled—for example, greed, cruelty, fury. It follows that the passions too are uncontrolled, since one slides from the passions to the diseases.

11. Next, if you grant any authority to sadness, fear, desire, and the other wicked motions, then they will not be in our power. Why? Because the things which stimulate them are outside us, so they grow in accordance with the size of the causes which stimulate them. The fear will be greater if the object of our terror is greater or is seen from closer up; desire will be sharper to the extent that it is summoned up by a hope for greater gain.

12. If it is not in our power whether or not we have passions, then certainly their magnitude isn't either. If you have let them get started, they grow along with their causes and their magnitude will be what it will be. Add to this the fact that these things, though they start out tiny, grow bigger. Destructive things do not observe a limit. No matter how minor the starting point for diseases, they sneak up on you and sometimes a very small increase overwhelms ailing bodies.

13. How crazy it is to believe that things whose starting points are beyond our authority can have end points that are within our authority! How can I be strong enough to put an end to something which I wasn't strong enough to prevent from starting, considering that it is easier to bar them than it is to repress them once they have gained entry?

14. Certain people have made a distinction which leads them to say, 'The temperate and prudent person is tranquil with regard to the state and condition of his intellect, but not with regard to what actually happens. For as far as the condition of his intellect is concerned he is not disturbed nor is he saddened or afraid, but many external causes impinge from the outside which inflict disturbance on him.'

15. What they want to say adds up to this: he is not irascible but nevertheless he gets angry sometimes; and he is not fearful, but gets afraid sometimes, i.e., he is free of the vice of fear but is not free of the passion. But if it is allowed in, fear will by frequent occurrence turn into the vice and anger, once admitted into the mind, will undermine that disposition of a mind which is free of anger.

16. Moreover, if he does not hold in contempt the causes which come from the outside and if he fears something, when he has to go bravely against weapons and fire on behalf of his fatherland, the laws, and freedom,

then he will go forth hesitantly and with a sinking spirit. But this mental deviation does not afflict the wise person.

17. Moreover, I think that one ought to watch out that we not confuse two things which ought to be proven separately. For there are independent lines of inference which show (a) that the only good is what is honourable and (b) that virtue is sufficient for a happy life. If the only good is what is honourable, everyone grants that virtue suffices for living happily. But the converse is not conceded, that if only virtue makes one happy then the only good is what is honourable.

18. Xenocrates and Speusippus think that one can be happy even if all one has is virtue, but not that the only good is what is honourable. Epicurus also holds that when one has virtue one is happy, but that virtue itself is not sufficient for a happy life, because it is the pleasure produced by virtue that makes one happy and not the virtue itself. This is a clumsy distinction. For Epicurus also says that one never has virtue without pleasure. So, if it is always conjoined with it and is inseparable, it is also sufficient on its own. For it brings along with itself pleasure, and it is never without pleasure even when it is on its own.

19. But the further point they make, that one will be happy even if all one has is virtue, but that one will not be *perfectly* happy, is ridiculous. I cannot figure out how this could be the case. For the happy life has within itself a good which is perfect and unsurpassable. And if this is the case, then the life is perfectly happy. If the life of the gods has nothing greater or better, and the happy life is divine, then there is no higher state to which it could be raised.

20. Moreover, if the happy life is in need of nothing, then every happy life is perfect and the same life is both happy and most happy. Surely you do not doubt that the happy life is the highest good. Therefore, if a life has the highest good it is supremely happy. Just as the highest good does not admit of an addition (for what is above the highest?) then neither does the happy life, which cannot exist without the highest good. But if you introduce someone who is 'more' happy, then you can also introduce someone who is 'much more' happy. You will generate countless distinctions within the highest good, when on my understanding the highest good is that which has no level above it.

21. If one person is less happy than another, it follows that he will have a stronger desire for the life of the other person than for his own; but a happy person prefers nothing to his own life. Either of these two propositions is unbelievable: (a) that there is something left for the happy person to prefer to be the case than is already the case; or (b) that he

does not want what is better than he is. For certainly the more prudent a person is the more he will strive towards what is best and desire to achieve it in any way possible. But how can someone be happy if he can—indeed, should—desire something even now?

22. I will tell you the source of this error. They do not know that there is only one happy life. It is its quality not its magnitude that puts it in the position of being best. And so it is in the same state whether it is long or short, expansive or constrained, spread through many locations and parts or confined to one. He who assesses the happy life with respect to its number, measurement, or parts strips it of its excellence. But what is it that is outstanding in a happy life? The fact that it is full.

23. In my opinion, the goal of eating and of drinking is satiety. One person eats more, another less. What difference does it make? Both are now sated. One person drinks more, another less. What difference does it make? Both are not thirsty. One person lives for many years, another for fewer. It makes no difference if the many years have made the former person as happy as the few have made the latter. The man whom you call 'less happy' is not happy. This predicate cannot be reduced.

24. He who is brave is without fear. He who is without fear is without sadness. He who is without sadness is happy. This is *our* [i.e., Stoic] argument. Against it, they try this response: we are claiming that something false and controversial is generally agreed on, that he who is brave is without fear. 'What then?' is the reply, 'will a brave person not be afraid if bad things threaten? That is the mark of a crazy lunatic, not of a brave person. Rather,' they say, 'he will fear very moderately; but he is not completely free of fear.'

25. Those who argue thus fall back into the same problem all over again: for them, smaller vices count as virtues. For the person who fears, but rarely and less severely, does not lack the vice but is bothered by a less serious vice. 'But I think that someone who does not fear when bad things threaten is a madman.' What you say is true—if they really are bad things. But if he knows that they are not bad and takes the view that only baseness is bad, then he ought to gaze upon dangers with calmness and to despise things which are fearsome to others. Or, if it is the mark of a fool and madman not to fear bad things, then the more prudent one is the more one will fear.

26. The reply is, 'On your view the brave person will expose himself to dangers.' Not at all. He will not fear them but he will avoid them. Caution suits him but fear does not. 'What, then?' is the reply, 'will he not fear death, chains, fire, and the other weapons of fortune?' No. For he knows

that they are not bad but only seem so; he considers all those things mere bupbears of human life.

27. Present him with imprisonment, beatings, chains, starvation, and bodily torture by means of sickness or injury or whatever else you can inflict on him. He will regard them as delusional fears. They are objects of fear only for the fearful. Or do you think something which we sometimes embrace of our own free will is bad?

28. You ask what is bad? Yielding to the things which are called bad and surrendering to them one's freedom—for the sake of which all of those afflictions should be borne. Freedom dies unless we despise the things which place the yoke on our necks. They would not have doubts about the behaviour which befits a brave man if they knew what bravery is. It is not unthinking rashness nor a love of danger nor a pursuit of frightening things. It is the knowledge of how to distinguish between what is bad and what is not. Bravery is very careful about protecting itself and at the same time is strong in its endurance of those things which give a false impression of badness.

29. 'What then? If a sword is held to the neck of a brave man, if his body is pierced again and again in one part after another, if he sees his bowels lying on his own lap, if he is attacked again and again after a rest, so that he might feel the torment more vividly, and if wounds newly scabbed over are made to bleed afresh, is he not afraid? Will you say that he is not feeling pain?' Yes, he feels pain (for no virtue strips a human being of his ability to feel), but he does not fear; he gazes upon his own pains from on high, unbeaten. You ask what kind of mind he has? Like the mind of those who comfort an ailing friend.

30. 'What is bad does harm. What does harm makes one worse. Pain and poverty do not make one worse. Therefore they are not bad things.'

The reply is, 'Your claim is false. For it is not the case that if something does harm it makes one worse. A storm or a squall do harm to the ship-captain, but do not for all that make him worse.'

31. Certain Stoics reply to this as follows: a storm or a squall do make the ship-captain worse because he cannot carry out what he intended to do and hold his course. They make him worse in his work but not in his art. To them the Peripatetic replies, 'Therefore poverty will also make the wise person worse, as will pain and other things of the sort. For they do not take away his virtue, but they do hinder his work.'

32. This would be well said, if not for the fact that the situation of a ship-captain and that of a wise person are different. The purpose of the latter in living his life is not to carry out what he undertakes no matter

what, but to do everything properly. The purpose of the ship-captain is to bring his ship to port no matter what. The arts serve us and ought to carry through on their promises; wisdom is a sovereign director; the arts help with life, wisdom gives the orders.

33. I think that one should reply differently to the objection. The art of the ship-captain is not made worse by any storm nor is the performance of the art. The ship-captain did not promise you success, but a useful bit of work and knowledge of how to steer a ship. And this becomes more apparent as some violent chance event gets in his way. The person who can say, 'Neptune, you will never [sink] this ship except when it is well sailed' is doing all his art demands. The storm does not impede the work of the ship-captain but his success.

34. 'What then?' is the reply, 'does the situation which prevents the ship-captain from reaching port, which makes his efforts vain, which either carries him back out to sea or detains him and unmasts his ship—does this not harm him?' Not *qua* ship-captain, but it does harm him *qua* person sailing. Otherwise <he isn't a ship-captain at all>. So far from impeding the art of the ship-captain, it actually demonstrates it. As the saying goes, anyone can be a ship-captain when the sea is calm. Those things impede the ship, not its steersman *qua* steersman.

35. The ship-captain has two roles, the one shared with all those who boarded the same ship. He too is a passenger. The other role is unique to him. He is a ship-captain. The storm harms him *qua* passenger not *qua* ship-captain.

36. Next: the art of a ship-captain is someone else's good. It relates to those whom he conveys, just as the good of a doctor relates to those whom he treats. The good <of the wise person> is shared. It both <belongs> to those with whom he lives and is proper to himself. And so perhaps there is harm done to the ship-captain, whose service pledged to others is hindered by the storm.

37. But the wise person is not harmed by poverty, not harmed by pain, not harmed by the other storms of life. For not all of his works are hindered but only those which relate to others. He is himself always in action and he has the greatest impact when fortune is ranged against him. For he is then doing the work of wisdom itself which we said is both his own good and that of others.

38. Moreover, he is not hindered from benefiting others when certain inevitabilities oppress him. He is hindered from teaching how the state should be managed because of his poverty, but he does teach how poverty should be managed. His work extends throughout his entire life. And so

no fortune and no circumstance bar the wise person from acting. For the obstacle by which he is hindered from doing other things is something which he is actively engaged with. He is well suited for both kinds of situation. He manages good situations and vanquishes bad ones.

39. He has trained himself, I claim, to display virtue just as much in favourable situations as in adverse ones and to consider not the raw material of virtue but virtue itself. And so poverty does not hinder him, nor does pain nor all the other things which deter the inexperienced and drive them headlong.

40. Do you think that he is oppressed by bad circumstances? He makes use of them. Phidias didn't just know how to make statues out of ivory; he also made them from bronze. If you had offered him marble, if you had offered him some material still cheaper than that, he would have made the best statue that could have been made from it. It is thus that the wise person will, if he has the chance, display his virtue in his wealth; but if he does not have the chance he will display it in poverty. If he can he will display it in his homeland; if not, in exile. If he can he will display it as commander of the army; if not as a foot-soldier. If he can he will display it while sound of body; if not while crippled. Whatever lot he receives he will make something of it worth remembering.

41. Wild beast tainers can be counted on; they train the fiercest animals, the ones whose attack is fearful, to obey people. They are not content with conquering their ferocity; they tame them so thoroughly that they can live with us. The trainer puts his hand into the lion's mouth, the tiger's keeper gives him kisses, the tiny Ethiopian orders his elephant to kneel and to walk a tight-rope. In this way the wise person is a craftsman at mastering misfortune: pain, hunger, humiliation, prison, and exile are everywhere regarded with dread, but when they come up against him they are gentled. Farewell.