

IV 3 *What to aim for in exchange for what*

[1] If you forfeit an external possession, make sure to notice what you get in return. If it is something more valuable, never say, 'I have suffered a loss.' [2] It is no loss if you get a horse in return for an ass, cattle for sheep, a kind act for a little money, real peace in place of idle chatter, decency in exchange for vulgarity.

[3] Bear this in mind and you will everywhere preserve your proper character; forget it and I assure you that your time here will be a waste, and whatever care you are now expending on yourself will all go down the drain. [4] Very little is needed for everything to be upset and ruined, only a slight lapse in reason. [5] It's much easier for a mariner to wreck his ship than it is for him to keep it sailing safely; all he has to do is head a little more upwind and disaster is instantaneous. In fact, he does not have to do anything: a momentary loss of attention will produce the same result.

[6] It's much the same in our case. If you doze off, all your progress up to that point will be negated. [7] So keep a sharp eye on your impressions, and never fall asleep. It is no small thing that is being watched over, it equates with honesty, trustworthiness and stability. It is freedom from passion, grief, fear and consternation – it is freedom itself.

[8] What are you going to get when you trade your freedom away? Check to see what your proud new possessions will be worth.

‘But I won’t be getting anything like it in return.’

If you go ahead and get it anyway, consider again what you are getting for it. [9] ‘I have self-control, he has a tribuneship; he has a generalship, I have my honour. I don’t scream and yell when to do so would be rude; and I won’t jump up out of my seat where such behaviour would be out of place. I am free and a friend of God, whom I obey willingly. [10] I do not claim possession over anything that does not belong to me, not the body, not possessions, not power, not fame – nothing. Because God does not want me competing for such things. Had he wished it, he would have made them good for me. But he has not done that. And I must not ignore his orders.’