

Additional praise for
STILLNESS IS THE KEY

“Some authors give advice. Ryan Holiday distills wisdom. This book is a must read.”

—CAL NEWPORT, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *DIGITAL MINIMALISM*

“Don’t be fooled. Within the pages of this unassuming little book lie a life-changing idea: that in order to move forward, we must learn to be still. Ryan Holiday has done it again.”

—SOPHIA AMORUSO,
COFOUNDER AND CEO, GIRLBOSS

“In the world today the dangers are many—most notably, the endless distractions and petty battles that make us act without purpose or direction. In this book, through his masterful synthesis of Eastern and Western philosophy, Ryan Holiday teaches us all how to maintain our focus and presence of mind amid the sometimes overwhelming conflicts and troubles of twenty-first-century life.”

—ROBERT GREENE, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE 48 LAWS OF POWER*

“Ryan Holiday is one of the brilliant writers and minds of our time. In *Stillness Is the Key* he gives us the blueprint to clear our minds, recharge our souls, and reclaim our power.”

—JON GORDON,
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ENERGY BUS*

“Ryan Holiday is a national treasure and a master in the field of self-mastery. In his most compelling book yet, he has mined both the classical literature of the ancient world and cultural touchstones from Mister Rogers to Tiger Woods, and brought his learnings to us in terms that the frantic, distracted, overcaffeinated modern mind can understand and put to use. Highly recommended.”

—STEVEN PRESSFIELD, BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *THE WAR OF ART* AND *THE ARTIST’S JOURNEY*

Praise for Ryan Holiday

“[Ryan is a] self-help sage, who is now a sought-after guru to NFL coaches, Olympians, hip-hop stars, and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs... [he] translates Stoicism, which had counted emperors and statesmen among its adherents during antiquity, into pithy catchphrases and digestible anecdotes for ambitious, twenty-first-century life hackers.”

—ALEXANDRA ALTER, *NEW YORK TIMES*

“Holiday is an out-of-the-box thinker who likes to take chances.”

—*NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

“I don’t have many rules in life, but one I never break is: If Ryan Holiday writes a book, I read it as soon as I can get my hands on it.”

—BRIAN KOPPELMAN, SCREENWRITER AND DIRECTOR,
ROUNDERS, OCEAN’S THIRTEEN, AND BILLIONS

“Ryan Holiday is one of the most promising young writers of his generation.”

—GEORGE RAVELING, HALL OF FAME BASKETBALL COACH,
NIKE’S DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL BASKETBALL

STILLNESS
IS THE KEY



RYAN HOLIDAY

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The struggle is great, the task divine—to gain mastery,
freedom, happiness, and tranquility.

—EPICTETUS

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PREFACE

It was the late first century AD and Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Rome's most influential power broker, its greatest living playwright, and its wisest philosopher, was struggling to work.

The problem was the ear-shattering, soul-rattling noise that poured in from the street below.

Rome had always been a loud city—think New York City construction loud—but the block where Seneca was staying was a deafening cacophony of disturbances. Athletes worked out in the gymnasium underneath his suite of rooms, dropping heavy weights. A masseuse pummeled the backs of old fat men. Swimmers splashed in the water. At the entrance of the building, a pickpocket was being arrested and making a scene. Passing carriages rumbled over the stone streets, while carpenters hammered away in their shops and vendors shouted their wares. Children laughed and played. Dogs barked.

And more than the noise outside his window, there was the simple fact that Seneca's life was falling apart. It was crisis upon crisis upon crisis. Overseas unrest threatened his finances. He

was getting older and could feel it. He had been pushed out of politics by his enemies, and, now on the outs with Nero, he could easily—at the emperor’s whim—lose his head.

It was not, we can imagine from the perspective of our own busy lives, a great environment for a human to get anything done. Unconducive to thinking, creating, writing, or making good decisions. The noise and distractions of the empire were enough “to make me hate my very powers of hearing,” Seneca told a friend.

Yet for good reason, this scene has tantalized admirers for centuries. How does a man, besieged by adversity and difficulty, not only *not* go out of his mind, but actually find the serenity to think clearly and to write incisive, perfectly crafted essays, some in that very room, which would reach millions upon millions and touch on truths that few have ever accessed?

“I have toughened my nerves against all that sort of thing,” Seneca explained to that same friend about the noise. “I force my mind to concentrate, and keep it from straying to things outside itself; all outdoors may be bedlam, provided that there is no disturbance within.”

Ah, isn’t that what we all crave? What discipline! What focus! To be able to tune out our surroundings, to access one’s full capabilities at any time, in any place, despite every difficulty? How wonderful that would be! What we’d be able to accomplish! How much happier we would be!

To Seneca and to his fellow adherents of Stoic philosophy, if a person could develop peace within themselves—if they could

achieve *apatheia*, as they called it—then the whole world could be at war, and they could still think well, work well, and be well. “You may be sure that you are at peace with yourself,” Seneca wrote, “when no noise reaches you, when no word shakes you out of yourself, whether it be flattery or a threat, or merely an empty sound buzzing about you with unmeaning sin.” In this state, nothing could touch them (not even a deranged emperor), no emotion could disturb them, no threat could interrupt them, and every beat of the present moment would be theirs for living.

It’s a powerful idea made all the more transcendent by the remarkable fact that nearly every other philosophy of the ancient world—no matter how different or distant—came to the exact same conclusion.

It wouldn’t have mattered whether you were a pupil at the feet of Confucius in 500 BC, a student of the early Greek philosopher Democritus one hundred years later, or sitting in Epicurus’s garden a generation after that—you would have heard equally emphatic calls for this imperturbability, unruffledness, and tranquility.

The Buddhist word for it was *upekkha*. The Muslims spoke of *aslama*. The Hebrews, *hishtavut*. The second book of the Bhagavad Gita, the epic poem of the warrior Arjuna, speaks of *samatvam*, an “evenness of mind—a peace that is ever the same.” The Greeks, *euthymia* and *hesychia*. The Epicureans, *ataraxia*. The Christians, *aequanimitas*.

In English: *stillness*.

To be steady while the world spins around you. To act without

P R E F A C E

frenzy. To hear only what needs to be heard. To possess quietude—
exterior and interior—on command.

To tap into the *dao* and the *logos*. The Word. The Way.

Buddhism. Stoicism. Epicureanism. Christianity. Hinduism.
It's all but impossible to find a philosophical school or religion
that does not venerate this inner peace—this *stillness*—as the
highest good and as the key to elite performance and a happy life.

And when basically *all* the wisdom of the ancient world
agrees on something, only a fool would decline to listen.

STILLNESS IS THE KEY

INTRODUCTION

The call to stillness comes quietly. The modern world does not.

In addition to the clatter and chatter and intrigue and infighting that would be familiar to the citizens of Seneca's time, we have car horns, stereos, cell phone alarms, social media notifications, chainsaws, airplanes.

Our personal and professional problems are equally overwhelming. Competitors muscle into our industry. Our desks pile high with papers and our inboxes overflow with messages. We are always reachable, which means that arguments and updates are never far away. The news bombards us with one crisis after another on every screen we own—of which there are many. The grind of work wears us down and seems to never stop. We are overfed and undernourished. Overstimulated, overscheduled, and lonely.

Who has the power to stop? Who has time to think? Is there anyone not affected by the din and dysfunctions of our time?

While the magnitude and urgency of our struggle is modern,

it is rooted in a timeless problem. Indeed, history shows that the ability to cultivate quiet and quell the turmoil inside us, to slow the mind down, to understand our emotions, and to conquer our bodies has always been extremely difficult. “All of humanity’s problems,” Blaise Pascal said in 1654, “stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

In evolution, distinct species—like birds and bats—have often evolved similar adaptations in order to survive. The same goes for the philosophical schools separated by vast oceans and distances. They developed unique paths to the same critical destination: The stillness required to become master of one’s own life. To survive and thrive in any and every environment, no matter how loud or busy.

Which is why this idea of stillness is not some soft New Age nonsense or the domain of monks and sages, but in fact desperately necessary to all of us, whether we’re running a hedge fund or playing in a Super Bowl, pioneering research in a new field or raising a family. It is an attainable path to enlightenment and excellence, greatness and happiness, performance as well as presence, for *every kind of person*.

Stillness is what aims the archer’s arrow. It inspires new ideas. It sharpens perspective and illuminates connections. It slows the ball down so that we might hit it. It generates a vision, helps us resist the passions of the mob, makes space for gratitude and wonder. Stillness allows us to persevere. To succeed. It is the key that unlocks the insights of genius, and allows us regular folks to understand them.

The promise of this book is the location of that key . . . and a call not only for possessing stillness, but for radiating it outward like a star—like the sun—for a world that needs light more than ever.

The Key to Everything

In the early days of the American Civil War, there were a hundred competing plans for how to secure victory and whom to appoint to do it. From every general and for every battle there was an endless supply of criticism and dangerous passions—there was paranoia and fear, ego and arrogance, and very little in the way of hope.

There is a wonderful scene from those fraught first moments when Abraham Lincoln addressed a group of generals and politicians in his office at the White House. Most people at that time believed the war could only be won through enormous, decisively bloody battles in the country's biggest cities, like Richmond and New Orleans and even, potentially, Washington, D.C.

Lincoln, a man who taught himself military strategy by poring over books he checked out from the Library of Congress, laid out a map across a big table and pointed instead to Vicksburg, Mississippi, a little city deep in Southern territory. It was a fortified town high on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, held by the toughest rebel troops. Not only did it control navigation of that important waterway, but it was a juncture for a number of other important tributaries, as well as rail lines that supplied

Confederate armies and enormous slave plantations across the South.

“Vicksburg is the key,” he told the crowd with the certainty of a man who had studied a matter so intensely that he could express it in the simplest of terms. “The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket.”

As it happened, Lincoln turned out to be exactly right. It would take years, it would take incredible equanimity and patience, as well as ferocious commitment to his cause, but the strategy laid out in that room was what won the war and ended slavery in America forever. Every other important victory in the Civil War—from Gettysburg to Sherman’s March to the Sea to Lee’s surrender—was made possible because at Lincoln’s instruction Ulysses S. Grant laid siege to Vicksburg in 1863, and by taking the city split the South in two and gained control of that important waterway. In his reflective, intuitive manner, without being rushed or distracted, Lincoln had seen (and held fast to) what his own advisors, and even his enemy, had missed. Because he possessed the key that unlocked victory from the rancor and folly of all those early competing plans.

In our own lives, we face a seemingly equal number of problems and are pulled in countless directions by competing priorities and beliefs. In the way of everything we hope to accomplish, personally and professionally, sit obstacles and enemies. Martin Luther King Jr. observed that there was a violent civil war raging within each and every person—between our good and bad impulses, between our ambitions and our princi-

ples, between what we can be and how hard it is to actually get there.

In those battles, in that war, stillness is the river and the railroad junction through which so much depends. *It is the key . . .*

- To thinking clearly.
- To seeing the whole chessboard.
- To making tough decisions.
- To managing our emotions.
- To identifying the right goals.
- To handling high-pressure situations.
- To maintaining relationships.
- To building good habits.
- To being productive.
- To physical excellence.
- To feeling fulfilled.
- To capturing moments of laughter and joy.

Stillness is the key to, well, just about everything.

To being a better parent, a better artist, a better investor, a better athlete, a better scientist, a better human being. To unlocking all that we are capable of in this life.

This Stillness Can Be Yours

Anyone who has concentrated so deeply that a flash of insight or inspiration suddenly visited them knows stillness. Anyone who

has given their best to something, felt pride of completion, of knowing they left absolutely nothing in reserve—that's stillness. Anyone who has stepped forward with the eyes of the crowd upon them and then poured all their training into a single moment of performance—that's stillness, even if it involves active movement. Anyone who has spent time with that special, wise person, and witnessed them solve in two seconds the problem that had vexed us for months—stillness. Anyone who has walked out alone on a quiet street at night as the snow fell, and watched as the light fell softly on that snow and is warmed by the contentment of being alive—that too is stillness.

Staring at the blank page in front of us and watching as the words pour out in perfect prose, at a loss for where they came from; standing on fine white sand, looking out at the ocean, or really any part of nature, and feeling like part of something bigger than oneself; a quiet evening with a loved one; the satisfaction of having done a good turn for another person; sitting, alone with our thoughts, and seizing for the first time the ability to think about them as we were thinking them. *Stillness*.

Sure, there is a certain ineffableness to what we're talking about, to articulating the stillness that the poet Rainer Maria Rilke described as "full, complete" where "all the random and approximate were muted."

"Although we speak of attaining the *dao*," Lao Tzu once said, "there is really nothing to obtain." Or to borrow a master's reply

to a student who asked where he might find Zen: “You are seeking for an ox while you are yourself on it.”

You have tasted stillness before. You have felt it in your soul. And you want more of it.

You *need* more of it.

Which is why the aim of this book is simply to show how to uncover and draw upon the stillness we already possess. It’s about the cultivation of and the connection to that powerful force given to us at birth, the one that has atrophied in our modern, busy lives. This book is an attempt to answer the pressing question of our time: If the quiet moments are the best moments, and if so many wise, virtuous people have sung their praises, why are they so rare?

Well, the answer is that while we may naturally possess stillness, accessing it is not easy. One must really listen to hear it speaking to us. And answering the call requires stamina and mastery. “To hold the mind still is an enormous discipline,” the late comedian Garry Shandling reminded himself in his journal as he struggled to manage fame and fortune and health problems, “one which must be faced with the greatest commitment of your life.”

The pages that follow tell the stories and strategies of men and women who were just like you, who struggled as you struggle amid the noise and responsibilities of life, but managed to succeed in finding and harnessing stillness. You will hear stories of the triumphs and trials of John F. Kennedy and Fred Rogers,

Anne Frank and Queen Victoria. There will be stories about Jesus and Tiger Woods, Socrates, Napoleon, the composer John Cage, Sadaharu Oh, Rosanne Cash, Dorothy Day, Buddha, Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, and Marcus Aurelius.

We will also draw on poetry and novels, philosophical texts and scientific research. We will raid every school and every era we can to find strategies to help us direct our thoughts, process our emotions, and master our bodies. So we can do less . . . and do more. Accomplish more but need it less. Feel better and *be* better at the same time.

To achieve stillness, we'll need to focus on three domains, the timeless trinity of mind, body, soul—the head, the heart, the flesh.

In each domain, we will seek to reduce the disturbances and perturbations that make stillness impossible. To cease to be at war with the world and within ourselves, and to establish a lasting inner and outer peace instead.

You know that is what you want—and what you deserve. That's why you picked up this book.

So let us answer the call together. Let us find—let us lock into—the stillness that we seek.