



**The tales of a stoic mule**



**English transcript  
to the  
podcast**

# The tales of a stoic mule

## An introductory podcast to Stoicism

### English Transcript

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*ES = Eliane Schmid*

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*ES: Hello, and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices, to be found on [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch). My name is Eliane Schmid and I will be hosting today's podcast centered on Stoicism.*

*Yesterday I overheard a woman call her dog a Stoic mule when he just decided to sit in the street, regardless of the cold and freezing rain. Not even tugging at the leash dissuaded him from his sit-in. Maybe it was just a slip of the tongue and she actually wanted to call him a stubborn mule, but I thought this was a nice example of a common misunderstanding, that Stoic calm is often interpreted as stubbornness, as an attitude in which nothing seems to matter, a kind of phlegmatic view on life, as if Stoic people were sedated. So let us find out what Stoic philosophy actually is and was.*

*Michael Hampe, you are the person to talk to on this matter. Welcome to the studio.*

*MH: Hello.*

*ES: Michael Hampe is Professor for Philosophy at ETH Zurich and initiator of the METIS Project. Having researched on Stoicism for much of his career, I am excited to ask you, Mr. Hampe, many*

*questions related to Stoicism and our conception of it today. Mr. Hampe, how would you define a Stoic person?*

MH: Well, a Stoic person is somebody with certain ideals of wisdom, who is striving for a certain tranquility of mind, a certain autonomy in leading his or her life, likes a simple life. Somebody for whom wisdom consists in being emotionally able to accept what is necessary, unavoidable, like death for example. A person who stays calm in dangerous situations and loves the world, although it includes suffering, an attitude that had been called '*amor fati*'. Although he did not call himself a Stoic, could not describe himself that way, Socrates was a Stoic sage in that sense.

*ES: I see. When was such an ideal image of a human being coined? In what environment did Stoicism emerge?*

MH: Well, Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Cyprus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. He was supposedly a merchant who lost a ship in a storm with all its freight, all goods that he wanted to sell, and he went bankrupt because of this and turned to philosophy after that. And Socrates was an important figure for Zeno supposedly, as for many other philosophical schools in the ancient European times, like the cynics, the skeptics, and the Platonists.

When Zeno lived, Aristotle was already dead, and also Alexander the Great, the pupil of Aristotle and Athens, and the city states in general in this area, started to lose their political importance. Alexander had founded an enormous empire, and this empire was multicultural. And it was a problem of the Hellenistic Empire and also for the later Roman Empire, that they included so many different cultures, that the old Aristotelean distinction between the cultivated Greeks and the barbarians lost its grip.

A political, cultural and moral disorientation was the consequence of this development. It is therefore no accident that the Stoics coined the concept of 'cosmopolitanism' that they said that slavery in general is a moral no-go and that we should find orientation in life by turning to nature or the cosmos. They were supposedly the first pantheists in the West believing that the world itself is divine and good in order to be admired and that humans should strive to live in

harmony with nature. The Stoics wanted to replace the different cultural, moral and political orientations in human life by something greater, something all-encompassing, by divine nature. This idea was very influential not only in the ancient, but also in modern times. Spinoza's universalism and pantheism was influenced by the Stoics, and so was Kant's universalism in his moral philosophy. And the Jewish philosopher Karl Löwith who had to leave Germany when the Nazis ruled said in his Stoic attitude: "To believe that one can find orientation in life by looking at the rules humans invented by trying to obey political institutions is like trying to survive in the sea by grasping for the waves. Everything changes in culture and political lives. We have to find our orientation in something that is relatively much more stable," Löwith thought "than human culture, and that is supposedly nature."

*ES: I did not know about the origin of meaning for cosmopolitanism, so I'm very intrigued by that, and also, I'm interested to learn more about these entanglements. So, you have already pointed out that Stoicism did not simply emerge in a vacuum. It emerged in interaction with other schools of thought concerning themselves with the world and life on it. Could you tell us more about this?*

MH: Sure. Sure. As I said, Socrates was a starting point for many philosophical schools at that time and also for the Stoics. But it was not the Socrates of Plato, the Socrates we knew from Plato's dialogues who believed in transcendent ideas, but the Socrates of Xenophon, Socrates the Skeptic, who lived indeed a simple life and who taught in public and not in the academy, who was anti-elitist, a craftsman who believed that you can do a good job as a carpenter, or as a shoemaker, so you can do a good job in leading your life or a bad job, and that we should try like a craftsman to do a good job in leading our life. It is a fearless Socrates who drinks the hemlock poison without any hesitation. That is important for the Stoics and not the one who holds the Platonic metaphysics of ideas.

But there were other influences as well. It's difficult to say where the pantheistic ideas I just pointed to came from in Stoicism, perhaps from the Pythagoreans. And then there is an emphasis on rationality, on logic in this tradition as well, that the world is not only divine, but that it has a rational, a logical structure that we can understand the world. So Stoicism is a

combination of natural piety with logic and ethics in a very peculiar way, a way which we find again in modern times in the great philosopher Spinoza.

*ES: I'm glad we're talking about the Stoics today, or Stoicism in general, because METIS, as I believe, does want to try to find out what is a good life or a wise life or how to do this all. So this is very interesting. But I here also wonder, you gave us a broad overview of how this all developed or the very beginnings, but how did we get these sources to understand the origins now? I mean, we have no sources from the first Stoics, I believe. How do we actually know about their thoughts? And was there a kind of academy as well in the beginning?*

MH: No, that's a very important question because it's typical of the Stoics that they did not mimic Plato or Aristotle who had academies. Plato called his school the 'Academy', and we know of Aristotle school, the 'Lyceum'. And the Stoics intentionally did not found such a school. So the first Stoics were discussing in public, in the colonnades of the marketplace, and that's why they called themselves Stoics from the Greek 'Stoa Poikile', the painted column. That's what Socrates did as well. He was also walking around in Athens and discussed in public. Later, Epictetus supposedly had a school, a place where he was gathering his students and talking to them. But what is peculiar for the Stoics as well, is that the early Stoics did not write anything down just like Socrates who was only talking to other people, and then Plato was supposedly writing down what Socrates said. So all we know about the teaching of Epictetus, for example, was written down by his pupil Arrian, who became a famous historian as well. And most of what we know about the Stoics, we know from quotations by other philosophers. Two very important authors in this context are two Roman philosophers, Cicero and Seneca. And they were also great writers and produced what was considered ideals of Latin prose. And because of that, their texts were used in Latin schools and generations of pupils, me included, had to learn their Latin by reading Cicero and Seneca. And both of them were disciples of the Greek Stoics and quoted them. Kant was therefore influenced by Cicero and Seneca and so were many other philosophers.

*ES: So actually, as I understand, the Stoics did not want to be focused on one sole person as a leader, but it appears to me that this inadvertently happened even so over time. Could you explain more about the famous representatives of the stoa in that case, from those people that we have received the writings from, for example, Lucius Annaeus Seneca that you mentioned, that's his whole name, who was he and what did he teach or preach?*

MH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Seneca was a very interesting and in many sense very famous person. He was born in Spain, in Cordoba, probably around the year 4 BC. And like Socrates, he had to commit suicide in the year 65 because, and that's one source of his fame, because his pupil, the Roman Emperor Nero believed that he was part of a conspiracy against him. And this death, that Nero commanded his teacher to kill himself, shows already that he was a very important figure in Roman politics. In fact, he raised to praetor, but not in the army, but as a high officer in the ranks of the Roman government and as a direct advisor to the Caesar, to Nero.

But he was also a famous playwright and an acclaimed speech writer. And because he was accused of adultery in the year 41, he had to leave Rome for exile in Corsica. And this was a very heavy blow for his mother who loved him dearly and for whom he also cared a lot. So he wrote a very famous consolation letter to his mother, in which he tried to show that being exiled and losing all his honors is not important for him, does not make him unhappy. And in this letter we find some very typical Stoic remarks, and perhaps I can quote some sentences from it.

*ES: Oh, that would be great.*

MH: "We are born under circumstances that would be favorable if we did not abandon them. It was nature's intention that there should be no need of great equipment for a good life: every individual can make himself happy. External goods are of trivial importance and without much influence in either direction. Prosperity does not elevate the sage and adversity does not depress him. For he has always made the effort to rely as much as possible of himself and to derive all delight from himself.

So what, am I calling myself a sage? Certainly not. For if I could claim that, not only would I be denying that I was wretched, but I would be asserting that I was the most fortunate of all men and coming close to God. As it is, doing what is sufficient to elevate all wretchedness, I surrendered myself to wise man. The man who's not puffed up in good times does not collapse either when they change. His fortitude is already tested and he maintains a mind unconquered in the face of either condition. For in the midst of prosperity he has tried his own strengths against adversity. So I have never believed that there was any genuine good in the things which everyone prays for."

So by describing himself in this way, he believes that he can convince his mother that he's not in a bad situation in exile.

*ES: Although this is very beautifully written and seems calming, I'm not sure his mother would've felt very calm about this. I'm sure she was still just very upset. But I do wonder, apart from his mother, how this legacy then continued. I mean, what happened after these letters were written or what happened to the further development?*

MH: Yeah, in a sense it was a style of Seneca to write letters to persons close to him. But at the same time, the letters sound as if he was already anticipating that they were written for the past, for people that were not his relatives. So especially his letters to Lucilius became a classic of Stoic learning. And these letters are real letters too. Lucilius was a real friend of Seneca, but probably he wrote these letters also with the intention to become public texts.

And they deal with all problems of life, with the problems of calming down one's anxieties. If one is drawn into a dangerous lawsuit that one should not dwell in hopes or fears or sorrows, but focus on the present situation, that one should reflect each day if one has spent it meaningfully, that one should be very cautious with making friends. But once you've made friends, you should be loyal to them. So all very practical topics.

But he also wrote discourses, quite theoretical discourses, in natural philosophy pointing to the constant rhythms of nature, the law-like structure of nature, which is in a sense elevating for us if we contemplate them.

*ES: So you said that he mostly addressed his closer friends or people surrounding him. Do you think he had an educational mission? Do you think he wanted to teach his friends, or was it just thinking aloud? Who do you think these thoughts were directed towards? Do you think they were also meant to kind of have a longer lasting influence, or was it for the general public that he would meet walking along these pillared streets?*

MH: I think he had the attitude of a teacher and he wanted to educate his surrounding, but I believe that although he was mainly addressing Roman nobility, people of high standing like his mother, or like Lucilius, I think that his intention was not that he wanted to be seen as somebody who is educating high ranking politicians, but I think he wanted his reflections to be of general interests. And I think that he tried to say something that should be valid for all human beings. The attitudes of trying to be emotionally stable, even when death is near, of doing one's duty, of not letting the mind wander in hopes or fears are very useful, for example, for soldiers in general. And sometimes it was said that the Stoic ethics of Seneca is the ethics of the Roman soldier.

But if you think about it, it's a fact that we all have to die and that many of us may have to fear sufferings and trying to be brave is a useful exercise for everybody. So I think that Seneca believed that his teachings are of a general value. He himself was certainly a very, very rich man, and he did not lead a simple life at all, also he was teaching that we should lead a simple life, and he was criticized for his wealth and the discrepancy between his teachings and his political and financial ambitions.

*ES: I see. I see what you're explaining and the criticism that he received in talking from a very privileged position. But I'm kind of glad for him that he did reach a kind of calmness towards death when he was actually sentenced to death later on, so that he could actually do what he preached.*

*But let's move on to another representative of the Stoa: Epictetus. You mentioned him before. Not much has been handed down from him either, if I'm correct. And for Epictetus too, power is a central theme when it comes to the proper conduct of life. What form of power does he concern himself with?*



MH: Epictetus was in a sense, the opposite character to Seneca because he was born poor and powerless. In fact, he was born in the year 50 in Phrygia, what is now Anatolia, as a slave and with a disability. He had a lame leg. But later on he became a free man, but was supposedly treated very cruel by his master before that. And freedom is a very important topic in his thinking and teaching. Some people who have looked in the writings of the Bible and of other philosophers and in what has come to us from Epictetus say that freedom is the term he uses most often and much more often than you can find it in the New Testament, for example.

And he does not think about freedom in a political manner, but more in an existential mode. He says: We should ask ourselves very clearly what is in our power, and that's what you ask for. So power is related to freedom. So in order to understand in what sense we are free, we have to know what powers we have, what is in our power and what is not.

And often, Epictetus thought, we think about things which we cannot influence. We think about the weather or what somebody else is thinking about us, what is going on, on another continent, and so on. But all this is not in our power, and we don't have the power to make the sun shine or let it rain, and we cannot influence what is going on in the heads of other people, or turn the politics in a faraway country. Nevertheless, we often bother about these things, form opinions on them.

On the other hand, some of us might not care very much about how they spend their day, what they eat, what they think themselves, with whom they spend their time. But all these things are in our power and are important for who we are. We can influence our health, our mood, our own development, our diet, our thoughts and our social activities.

So Epictetus thought we should bother about these things. We should bother about what power we have to change things and push away everything in our mind where we have no power about. It's a waste of time in his view and energy to think and bother about things we cannot alter. Thus freedom has something to do with finding out what one can change and what one cannot change, and to learn to accept what one can change and to learn to start to change what one can in fact change.

*ES: So Seneca and Epictetus actually have very similar thoughts, but from a very different vantage point because...*

MH: That's true, yeah.

*ES: You said Seneca was a very privileged man, whereas here we have someone coming from the position of suddenly being free. So this is actually quite fascinating. Could you tell us more about this?*

MH: Yeah. I think that if you describe Epictetus as a disabled slave and Seneca as a praetor and senator and advisor to the king, you have two persons on the opposite scale of the social ranks, but sticking to the same philosophy. And perhaps that shows that Stoic philosophy might be something very general that is not just directed to a certain social class. And Epictetus is not only saying that we should accept what is happening to us, that he accepted first being a slave and being disabled, but he goes even further, and in that sense, he's also in one line with Seneca by saying that we should love what happens to us. He says: "Nature is wonderful and full of love for all his creatures." And that sounds like Seneca saying: "The cosmos is a mother of all of us." And these expressions suggest that we are part of something that is not only much more powerful than we are, but that is also good, and therefore we can love it.

And this has been called '*amor fati*', the love for your fate. And Spinoza, who I mentioned earlier already, has picked this up in his talk about an intellectual love for God. And since Spinoza identifies God with nature of the world and does not believe that God is a person, he seems to say just like the Stoics, that a happy life consists in loving the powerful universe of which we are all a small part.

But how you might ask, can one love something that crushes one, that kills us all in the end? And this is only possible according to the Stoics and according to Spinoza, if we accept that we are only a little individuality, that our own limited powers are nevertheless part of a greater unity, of a big, beautiful and good power, so that our own activities and our own sufferings are something that happens in this bigger context.

And this is a sort of religious view of the world and of nature that is very difficult for us to understand now because the scientific outlook which we have onto nature and the world objectifies everything outside of us, considers it as something that has no feelings and no thoughts. But the pantheistic outlook of the Stoics is quite different. Our feelings and our thoughts are part of a nature and of a world that has feelings and thoughts. There is a logos out there, there's reason going on out there in the world, not only in our heads and our limited human persons.

*ES: This is a nice idea that science and religion, as we would probably differentiate today, that they go well together so they're part of each other and not this strict divide. So, this is actually something I would like to think about more in the future because it seems like a very healthy attitude, although I think it takes a big person to always see the beauty and love when things are not going so well. So this probably takes a lot of practice.*

*But then, I also wonder, do you think Epictetus' ideas were more directed toward the inner life of an individual than perhaps Seneca's were, because he seems more self-reflective versus Seneca that kind of tells people around him what to do, what to think and so forth?*

MH: I think that's exactly right. Epictetus is not known for doing research into nature. He was in awe of nature, of the world, but he did not write or teach anything about nature. Whereas Seneca wrote treatises on the wind, the clouds, on earthquakes, thunderstorms, and the meteors. So, Epictetus was much more a figure like Socrates, a pure moralist, one could say. So the good and mighty nature is sort of a religious horizon for him, but not something he would like to investigate.

It's also said that logic was taught in his school, but that he warned his pupils not to get involved too much into logic. So what he was interested in was really our personal life and how we can govern it and how we can get hold of our emotions and then thinking.

*ES: Now, another person that is often brought in connection with Stoicism is Marcus Aurelius. And here we're moving to the Romans now. Was he a reader of Epictetus and was he influenced by these things, if he did actually read him? And what kind of philosopher would you call Marcus*

*Aurelius? Or was he even a philosopher, although he was actually also a Roman emperor? Do these things go together? So this is a bunch of questions that I have here now.*

MH: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Marcus Aurelius is a very interesting figure because in Seneca we had the advisor of the Roman Emperor Nero, and the idea of teaching those who are mighty is a very old idea that comes up already in Plato. And with Marcus Aurelius, we have somebody I think who you can call a philosopher being himself king.

He was born in 121 and was interested in philosophy already as a young boy supposedly, and followed the Stoic rules for a simple life, it is said already at the age of 10 by sleeping on the plain floor, which was very unusual for a child from Roman nobility. And it seems as if his interests in philosophy and truth and the right way of life was rooted very deeply in him. And it was because of these interests that Hadrian, the emperor of Rome, when Marcus Aurelius was a child, became interested in Marcus Aurelius and made him by some complicated maneuver, his own successor, because he believed that this boy may become the wise king of Rome.

And perhaps he was right in a sense. Perhaps Marcus Aurelius was an example of what Plato called a philosopher's king. And perhaps he is the only person in real history who came near to this Platonic idea. Although it's interesting that Nelson Mandela, the first president of the Republic of South Africa after the abolishment of Apartheid, was a reader of Marco Aurelius' *Meditations* in prison. And one might consider Mandela also a wise ruler.

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, the one and only book he wrote, was not meant for the public, very different from Seneca's letters. It was really a private diary he kept for himself. But Seneca had recommended that you should write each day in such a diary and about the difficulties you ran into in order to understand better what happened to you and how you reacted to it. And Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* did exactly this. He followed Seneca's advice.

And it's very interesting and moving to see how the emperor of Rome had to fight fears, his laziness, how he thought that he has nonsensical regrets, how he tried to force himself to focus on what he has to do today. So I believe that his *Meditations* show that it was possible to rule Rome and to try to stick to the principles of Stoic philosophy. And I believe it would be very

good for us politically today if the people in our governments would study Stoicism or Buddhism, which has many parallels to Stoicism.

*ES: It seems to me that we here have a third person from a very different societal level again. So, it seems that we have a person who obviously had the most power out of all three, but who was also in a sense humble and was thinking about a lot of things. And I'm intrigued how these three different people thought about life in this Stoic sense.*

*But you said that these were meditations that were not meant for publication. So, were these private notes, because they were private and not meant to have any teaching or educative value, do you think that they contain any innovative reflections in a sense, because they were not meant to be for a public? And do you think that the book is an application for his own life and that has a new take on Stoicism, or how would you regard this?*

MH: I think the last, what you said, is true that this book was an instrument for Marcus Aurelius to find something out about himself. But to my knowledge, the research does not say that *Meditations* contain any new Stoic principles or new philosophy. I think Marcus Aurelius was not somebody in search for philosophical innovations. Neither were Seneca or Cicero I would believe. It's characteristic for the whole Stoic tradition that it is eclectic and not trying to be original.

But nevertheless, I think that Marcus Aurelius' book is very moving and is a very good read because one seems to observe an honest and powerful man thinking or trying to think truthfully about himself trying to lead a good life, a life that is useful for his people. But since I'm not a historian of the Roman Empire or a classicist, I cannot say if Marcus Aurelius was successful in comparison, say to Nero or Caligula, emperors who are considered as mad or vicious by the general public. But it seems to me quite certain that Marcus Aurelius was a different type of man than Nero or Caligula, but I cannot judge the value of his politics.

But the form of the book, its autobiographical personal tone makes it a very special read. One can even take it as a paradigm for keeping one's own diary for producing one's own reflection about one's own needless fears and worries and inconsistencies and laziness.

*ES: It would be interesting to go back in time and see what people actually thought of Marcus Aurelius, how they perceived him, because like this, he sounds like a person one would be like to led by, because he seems as if you could also talk to him and discuss things through. But well, unfortunately we can't do that. So what we can do is think about what the value of Stoicism is today and how we think about it.*

*And in preparation for our METIS talk, I did a brief search on current books on Stoicism and was quite amazed by the number of search results that actually popped up. And actually counter to what you just said, they want to teach things. They don't want to be self-reflective as I saw, but they want to guide people of any kind of profession or in any kind of situation of life. And I do wonder what people's take is in that case on Stoicism today, and if they're meant as like these guiding books. Could you tell us more about how Stoicism is handled today?*

MH: Yeah, I think Stoicism is in the United States and in parts of Europe, probably the most popular philosophy presently. And I think that has something to do with modern globalization, with the speed by which we can know all things that are going on the globe. And this situation partly caused by the internet is very similar to what happened to the people in Alexander's and in the Roman Empire. It has something to do with cultural pluralism.

Cultural pluralism can lead sometimes to disorientation. And everybody in the Western world is now living in a post-colonial time. And we all know that we in the West are not the good guys, that we have enslaved many nations, killed many nations, that we, I mean the Western culture have been in a sense the cultural and natural disaster to the globe. And this is certainly very disorienting to people in the West.

I do not think that other human beings and other cultures and other times were better than us. They might have been not as powerful and therefore not as disastrous. On all continents humans have enslaved each other, slaughtered each other, but the European nations and the people who went from Europe to North and South America were extremely effective, so to say, in this human tendency to show no sympathy, no mercy to other members of your own species. And this is very disturbing. And we have to ask ourselves, "Where shall we go from here?"

And Stoicism is like Buddhism or Daoism, a system of how to lead a good and peaceful life that does not relate to a certain deity, but that offers emotional support, tries to calm you down, to develop sympathy for your fellow sufferers and bravery so that you can face your own suffering. And these are systems that all, they accept suffering, but do not increase it. Be a citizen of the world. Try to be humble. And we all know that Western societies are not humble. They are greedy. That capitalism leads to the opposite of a simple life and therefore to ecological disasters. And I think all of these obvious facts make Stoicism an attractive guide for many of us.

*ES: I agree. I think we should all have more humbleness to guide us, especially as you said, the Western world has put itself in a very unflattering position. They should be more self-reflective. Maybe we should all have a diary like Marcus Aurelius as well.*

*What still puzzles me though is that stoa guides us to appease our emotions, but also to give our life some kind of orientation. Is there a danger that one cuts off life's possibilities of intense experience if we always kind of try to appease our emotions, try to stay very tranquil and not go to extremes of ups and downs? Does this kind of run counter to the very purpose of giving life direction and meaning?*

MH: That's a very good observation, I think. And it was also made by the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who criticized Stoicism for leaving out personal love and bondage. And she considered Stoicism as an ethical system that is a typical manifestation of the male urge for autonomy. And she asks: "What about the intensities of erotic love, of artistic experiences? What about mothers caring for their children? What about daughters caring for their dying parents? Most of the caring work is still done by women, and is Stoicism us guiding here in any sense?" And Martha Nussbaum believes it's not.

I think she's right in parts that Stoicism does not offer a good ethics for caring and for love. And love for nature and love for the cosmos is quite an abstract thing. It's different from loving your child, loving your spouse, loving your parents. And it would be interesting to ask oneself how one should relate the ethics of love that Jesus produced in the 'Sermon on the Mount' to

Stoicism. But I have no answer to this question, and perhaps it could be a topic for a podcast on Christian wisdom.

*ES: Well, this teaches us once again that we kind of hold onto just one way of thinking, and this is also something that we're looking at in METIS, that we need all kinds of different thinking patterns, different guidances, or well, just ponderings. And you also mentioned that there is links to Buddhism. And so I think we can maybe, in another podcast or in our own readings and ponderings, try to make more connections to find out how can we combine Stoicism with a more friendly version of caring and love that you mentioned now.*

*But as I see, we have unfortunately already run out of time again, and this is the end of our Wisdom Talk, although Wisdom Talks never end. But Michael Hampe, thank you very much for joining me today and giving all this background information and what actually Stoicism is, and that it's not just about being phlegmatic. So, thank you.*

MH: Thank you.

*ES: At this point, I would also like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks, as well as to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be found on our website, [metis.ethz.ch](http://metis.ethz.ch), the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. Please also find more information in the show notes. Thank you very much for listening and goodbye.*

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