

Living the Galenic Life

Ancient Ideas on Well-being in Practice: Guidelines & Information Booklet

*'But after my 28th year from birth, having persuaded myself that there is a certain art, that of preserving one's health, I followed its precepts for all my subsequent life, so that I no longer was sick with any disease, except an occasional transient fever. And it is possible for anyone to guard his or her own health.'*¹

Introduction: In our modern world we have access to a medical system which has made extraordinary and wonderful advances. However these advances exist more often for *when things have already gone wrong*. Conversely, in the Ancient World, where medical knowledge for the treatment of disease was more limited, the emphasis was strongly focussed on *preserving one's health in the first place*. The tradition of preventative medicine in the Western World has strong roots in the Hippocratic approach (5th-4th centuries B.C.) and also in the work of the 2nd century A.D. doctor and psychologist Galen. In this experiment, you are invited to live your life for a short period of time with, in particular, Galen's principles for preserving health as a guideline. You will be following a Galenic *diet*, and by the word 'diet', we do not refer to our current understanding of the word, associated as it is only with choosing what to eat and what not to eat. In the Graeco-Roman world, the original word 'diaita' meant 'way of living' or 'mode of life'. The verb form, 'diaitaō', also means 'to lead one's life' but in addition means 'to investigate'. For the Ancients, the process of leading a healthy life was one of *learning and inquiry*. We are constantly learning what works and what does not work for our health and wellbeing. Galen wrote: '...the recollection of previous events will indicate to you the error, and show the correction from comparison with the present conditions.'² Our own experience is very important.

The Art of Preserving Health has three essential areas for our concern and investigation:

- 1) Our **bodies** which are healthy and which must be kept so.
- 2) The **evidence** or signs from our bodies on which we can base our practice of preserving health.
- 3) The **means** and methods through which our **guardianship** of health is accomplished.³

All this is common sense, but becoming the active guardian of your own health can be more difficult than one might think, or not seem as obviously relevant today as it did to those living 2,000 years ago. And yet, it is no less essential. By living your life based on Galenic principles, you are invited to bridge an important gap and bring the strong spirit of preventative medicine and measures of the Ancient World into the scientifically and medically advanced Modern World.

¹ Galen, *Art of Preserving Health*, 188-189. N.B. I am using Green's translations (from Galen's *Hygiene*) for the most part, though some have been modified and rendered slightly differently so as to be more relevant for a contemporary audience.

² *Ibid.* 192.

³ *Ibid.* 47.

Galen's Principles: Galen's approach to preventative medicine is holistic, and focusses on **six** essential factors for promoting wellbeing, and which will provide our framework for the trial period. These factors are:

- 1) the **food & drink** you consume
- 2) getting the right amount of **exercise**
- 3) living and working in an **environment** conducive to wellbeing
- 4) getting the right amount of **sleep**
- 5) actively caring for your **mental** wellbeing.

The **sixth** factor is maintaining **balance** in all of the other five factors. We will examine each of these factors in turn shortly, but for the moment it is essential to know that Galen did not develop a *one size fits all* approach for these factors.⁴ Instead he stressed that the actions undertaken in each case were to be **relative** to the individual.⁵ A doctor, Galen said, must know all aspects of his or her patient's constitution and character (even down to the 'character of the soul'). Galen was quick to remind one that health does not equal an absolutely perfect constitution like that of Achilles. Such a person who considers that one would have to be like the Homeric hero to be considered 'healthy' would be 'undermining the foundation of the entire consideration of the study of health.'⁶ All things are relative.⁷ That which is conducive for the state of health for one person will be different for another. When you come to consider the six factors for wellbeing, really ask yourself 'what actions would be conducive to health for *me* in this instance'?

So what was 'health' for Galen? It was:

- 1) The condition 'in which we do not suffer pain, and are not impeded in the activities of life.'⁸
- 2) That which is 'in accordance with nature' [that which is unhealthy is 'contrary to nature'].⁹

The first definition is clear enough. The second requires a little more explanation. For Galen, nature knows best and knows how to keep the body in harmony and regulation. But, if we do not aid our bodies in this process, then nature struggles. We need to live our lives in accordance with that which is health giving, with that which is in *accordance with nature*. Some *natural* deterioration of health will occur, as one gets older, but that is natural and therefore not unhealthy, and a process of which the more detrimental effects can be avoided completely by good regimen and diet. For Galen, preventative medicine was a matter of sensible 'fore-thought'¹⁰ for every stage of life. His

⁴ *Ibid.* 223. 'It is impossible for the physicians to use one plan of life that shall be beneficial for all.'

⁵ *Ibid.* 28.

⁶ *Ibid.* 15.

⁷ *Ibid.* 13-14.

⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

⁹ *Ibid.* 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 7.

principles were firmly based on common-sense, and thus when considering each of the six factors, it will be important for you to use them as a framework to which you can add your own principles and observations on approaches which have worked for *you*. When reflecting on the **six-factor-framework**, remember that what is important is self-awareness, knowledge and trust in your own capacity to understand what is right and conducive to wellbeing for your body and mind. Thus did Galen write: ‘For the healthy body itself, impelled by the inclinations of its own nature, will discover everything for itself, and especially if the functions of the mind have been well trained.’¹¹

The **First** Factor: Food & Drink

‘Our care is by food and drink which replace that of the body’s substance which flows away.’¹²

In the writings of the ancient doctors, food was considered as quasi-medicinal and as primarily for nourishment. This medicinal function of food was so primary that, for the Hippocratic doctors for example, taste and enjoyment were ‘totally irrelevant.’¹³ This does not mean that we should avoid preparing dishes that are tasty. Indeed, for Galen, if food tasted bad it probably had a similar effect on the body!¹⁴ However we should regard the **primary** purposes of food differently. From Galen, we can infer four central functions of food:

- 1) Nourishment 2) Health 3) Strength 4) Promotion of Longevity.

For the time of this trial period, you are asked only to choose foods on the basis of the above four primary purposes, with pleasure a secondary consideration. Of course, a food may be pleasurable to eat *and* also be nourishing, healing, strength-giving and good for your long-term well being, and it is likely that if the food you choose fits into the above four categories, then it will also be tasty. If a food does not match these four primary functions, then please do not eat it for the trial period.¹⁵ These four functions are concerned with allowing food to fulfill its *natural* function, and in line with this, we must also consider carefully the **amount** of food we eat. Galen wrote:

‘And the judgment as to what is proportionate is derived from the purpose of food. Its purpose is to nourish the body; this will be accomplished if food is well digested; and it will be well digested if the amount is proportionate – great amounts, as we know, remain undigested. And if this ever happens, then the food’s purpose is necessarily lost.’¹⁶

¹¹ *Ibid.* 77.

¹² *Ibid.* 235.

¹³ Craik, *Food in the Antiquity*, 349.

¹⁴ Galen, *On the Power of Foods*, 2.51.

¹⁵ If this is disappointing, you can remind yourself that there is much more to the process of eating than taste. For example, your taste-buds might appreciate a chocolate bar, or cupcake, but every other part of you that comes into contact with it probably does not! In fact, the sort of sugar we find in cupcakes and chocolate today was not part of the Ancient Diet at all.

¹⁶ Galen, *On the Cure of the Affections in Each Man’s Soul*, ch. 9.

As with the other aspects of the programme, everything is relative and we need to know the appropriate foods for *us* to eat.¹⁷ Different people require different foods and it will be important to work, as always, from your own experience. Here are several additional considerations recommended by Galen, which you might find helpful to follow, if they match with your own experience:

- 1) On Wine. Galen recommended wine in moderation for the middle-aged and elderly, as it aided greatly in improving kidney function.¹⁸ In excess, however, it was dangerous and made otherwise rational people 'prone to anger and impulsive to insolence...(and also makes)...the rational part of the mind sluggish and confused.'¹⁹ He was less convinced of its purpose for younger adults.
- 2) On Meat. Galen lived in a time when only the wealthy had regular meat as part of their diet. In general, he is wary of most meats, and in particular the difficulties the digestive system can have when processing meat. For the elderly, Galen did not recommend meat at all, whilst for the young, it was occasionally useful, though strictly in moderation.²⁰ Again, work with your own experience.

Further considerations on food, and the other factors, are discussed in the section on **balance** below.

The Second Factor: Exercise

*'The art of exercise is no small part of the art of preserving one's health, and avoiding fatigue is no small part of the art of exercise.'*²¹

For Galen, taking exercise was natural,²² and essential to maintaining and promoting our well being. From exercise, he said, our internal organs become stronger and function better, our body temperature rises comfortably, our breathing becomes easier, our metabolism improves, our body generally becomes stronger, its flow of nutrients improves, as does its capacity for removing superfluous or harmful substances.²³ Galen defined exercise as that which *alters respiration*,²⁴ which makes clear again, the fact that what constitutes exercise for one person does not necessarily constitute exercise for another. One person might need to run, the other to walk. Galen discusses a whole host of exercises that were performed in the Ancient World from wrestling and boxing to walking and deep breathing,²⁵ the first two of which are less commonly practised these days as part of a normal exercise regimen. So from your own

¹⁷ Craik, *Food in Antiquity*, 348: 'what we are conditions what we ought to eat.'

¹⁸ Galen, *Art of Preserving Health*, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 207.

²¹ *Ibid.* 143.

²² *Ibid.* 24.

²³ *Ibid.* 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 53, 54. This can be an increase, or decrease, in respiration – depending on the exercise.

²⁵ For a deep breathing exercise, see Appendix A.

experience, decide what sort of exercise regimen is right for you over the trial period. For the type of exercise you undertake, make sure to educate yourself as to its effects and benefits.²⁶ In addition Galen had some general guidelines for exercise, including:

- 1) It is best to exercise before a meal²⁷ and vigorous exercise, i.e. exercise that increases respiration, should not be undertaken having just eaten.²⁸
- 2) As a general rule, avoid forms of exercise that are too fast and violent. Intermediate and moderate is best (as 'intermediate' and 'moderate' apply to you).²⁹ Know when enough exercise is enough.³⁰
- 3) If you are fatigued after exercise, Galen felt it was best either to perform the exact same exercises the next day,³¹ or to rest the next day, and bathe the body in moderately warm waters.³² Please note that modern advice is to rest the body the next day if you are fatigued from exercise. As long as you do not overdo your exercise however, you should not suffer from excess fatigue,³³ and so if you do, then consider modifying your fitness regimen.

Taking all these factors into account, plan your exercise programme over the trial period, and resolve to stick with it. Of course, be prepared to change it, if your experience teaches you so.

[N.B. Massage was thoroughly recommended by Galen, and it is clear from his work that his clients were massaged often, usually daily. This practice is less frequently observed today due to its expense. However, Toby Taylor, a qualified masseur resident in Exeter and working at the Exeter Natural Health Centre, is on stand-by for participants of this course to offer one hour massage at a special rate of just 20 pounds. His number is 07583354211 and his email is i.tobias.taylor@gmail.com. Should you take up this offer choose, as with all things in the art of preserving health, the type of massage that most suits your disposition. Ask Toby for more details].

The Third Factor: Environment

*'But of those things which affect our health from without, certainly one which is inseparable and, as one might say, essential is the surrounding atmosphere...'*³⁴

One might feel that there is less that one can do about one's environment. However this is an area which allows for much creativity. You should most certainly ensure plenty of fresh air every day, and you might try working

²⁶ *Ibid.* 90-91.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 79, 225.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 54-55.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 92,

³⁰ *Ibid.* 76,

³¹ *Ibid.* 123.

³² *Ibid.* 101.

³³ *Ibid.* 102.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 11.

standing up, rather than sitting down. Working standing up, placing your computer or book on a surface at the right height for you, is an excellent way of increasing the strength of your postural muscles, your alertness and also of decreasing the tension you feel in your shoulders. In general, try to make, or continue to make, little touches to your home or office environment which will make you, and others, smile. On a more general level, you might consider the effect your actions have on the environment, in terms of the atmosphere and pollution. More advice on how to relate to our environment over the trial period, can be found in the Fifth Factor on **Mind**, below, and in particular in terms of what we engage with in our environment. In general, be creative with this factor. We are not writing many suggestions here – this is an area over to you!

The Fourth Factor: Sleep

For Galen, we needed to sleep in moderation – neither too much nor too little.³⁵ Over the trial period, make getting enough sleep a priority. Don't keep your mind active by working late at night, writing or marking essays. If your mind runs all over the place, and you find it difficult to get to sleep, you might try to take the opportunity of this trial period to learn how to practice a total body relaxation scan, by listening to a recording on your headphones. Your brain needs sleep to restore itself, and irritability, poor concentration and general malaise can all be attributed to lack of proper sleep. If possible, don't use an alarm but allow your sleep cycle to complete itself naturally. If you must use an alarm, consider investing in a Sleep Tracking device which can wake you up at the end of the sleep cycle closest to the time you need to get up. Not much more needs to be said about sleep – just make sure you give it the proper place it merits. Remember too much sleep can be as detrimental as too little, so you might wish to remember the advice of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose doctor was Galen, to himself on this matter:

'Early in the morning, when you find it so hard to rouse yourself from your sleep, have these thoughts ready at hand: 'I am rising to do the work of a human being. Why, then, am I so irritable if I am going out to do what I was born to do and what I was brought into this world for?''³⁶

If getting out of bed in the morning is difficult for you, keep a copy of this verse beside your bed to remind yourself of the importance of what you must do during the day ahead.

The Fifth Factor: Mind

*'It is a shameful thing that someone will make every effort for a period of many years to become a good doctor, orator, grammarian, or geometer, but that one should give up on ever becoming a good human being.'*³⁷

³⁵ *Ibid.* 53.

³⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.1.

³⁷ Galen, *On and Cure of the Affections in Each Man's Soul*, ch. 4.

For Galen, the mind and the body were linked. A healthy, well balanced and grounded mind would contribute to the health of the body, and vice versa. For example, someone who is angry, or anxious, finds their body temperature rising unnaturally and their breathing becoming irregular and erratic.³⁸ Galen offers the example of a man in the grip of rage:

‘Rage is nothing short of madness, as may be seen from the actions of men in the grip of it. They strike out, kick, tear their clothes, and perform every action in an agitated manner, to the point where – as stated earlier – they even get angry with doors, stones, or keys, which they rattle, bite, or kick.’³⁹

We must learn how to look after negative states, Galen said, such as *anger, craving, fear, unnecessary quarrelsomeness, zeal for reputation* and *envy*. This was not just so as to avoid harming others, but also to look after our own health. [It is interesting to note that ‘Galen’ means ‘calm’ in Ancient Greek.] Luckily, the ancients did not regard these character traits as fixed (something confirmed by modern scientific research in the field of ‘neuroplasticity’). We can learn, Galen would say, to overcome difficult mental states by starting to *habituate* ourselves in the right direction. This continuous habituation (the Greek word is ‘*ethos*’ with a short ‘e’) was what formed our character (the Greek word for which was the slightly different ‘*ethos*’ with a long ‘e’).⁴⁰ Our character is influenced and shaped by our habits, and processes of habituation. This process requires various exercises in character training, which we practice over our whole life. But for this trial period, we would ask you to renew your commitment to practicing any mind-training in which you are currently engaged (e.g. meditation) and in addition to focus on the following three key (two Galenic and one Stoic) approaches and exercises:

1) Be careful in what you **consume**, not just in terms of food and drink, but also with your mind and senses. Galen wrote: ‘The habit of the mind is impaired by **faulty customs** in food and drink and exercise and sights and sounds and music. Therefore the one who is concerned with conserving health must be skilled in all these areas.’⁴¹ Over the trial period, be wary of TV programs, music or books which you feel might be detrimental to your well-being. A balance is needed here: watching the news might be upsetting but *also* important whilst watching a melodramatic soap might be enjoyable but also subtly influence you into seeing melodrama in your own life when it is not actually present! Listening to Bach might not be your cup of tea, but little can go wrong, whilst listening to the rapper Eminem might be exciting but lead to a victim complex! Examine the pros and cons of what you consume during your leisure time, and find your own balance for what you know is right for your own well being.

2) Re-examine, if necessary, your **relationship with your work**. Galen wrote: ‘To me it seems that those who through ambition or zeal have chosen some form

³⁸ Galen, *Art of Preserving Health*, 81-2.

³⁹ Galen, *On the Cure of the Affections in Each Man’s Soul*.

⁴⁰ From this, we still have the word ‘ethics’, though it no longer carries quite the same meaning. Galen had devoted a whole work to this, called *On Habits*.

⁴¹ Galen, *Art of Preserving Health*, 26.

of life so involved in affairs of business that they can have little time for the care of their bodies are also willing slaves to hard masters.’⁴² Do not become a willing slave like this! Of course, people primarily become slaves to work, not through ambition or zeal, but more often through the simple feeling that there is not enough time in the day to get everything done. So, during the trial period, enjoy your work and take it slowly but surely. Find time to look after yourself. Do not feel like you have to stay up late at night working. You will get it done in just the same amount of time, and better, than when you are in a rush just ‘to get it all done’.

3) Increased Awareness of our own Character. Galen wrote that once one has started the mind-training exercises, we become far more aware of our own faults. He wrote: ‘...such cases too are plain enough to one who has started to engage in training his mind...therefore whoever wishes to be a decent human being, should bear this point in mind – that he is necessarily unaware of many of his own errors.’⁴³ A very useful Stoic, and indeed ubiquitous, exercise in the Ancient World, the **Bedtime Reflection**, is a perfect base from which to start this process. The Stoic philosopher Seneca describes it as following:

‘Every day, we must give an account of ourselves. This is what Sextius did. When the day was over and he had withdrawn to his room for his nightly rest, he questioned his mind: “What un-useful habits have you cured yourself of today? In what sense are you a better person?” Is there anything better than to examine a whole day’s conduct? What a good sleep follows the examination of one’s self! How tranquil, deep, and free it is, when the mind has been *praised* or *warned*, and has become the observer and secret judge of its own actions! I make use of this *power* every day. When the torch has been taken away and my wife has fallen asleep, I examine my entire day and measure what I have done and said. I hide nothing from myself, nor am I indulgent with myself.’⁴⁴

Try to practise this reflection for around 10 minutes every night before sleep, or, if you would rather, before going to bed but late in the evening. Indeed, if you find that this stimulates your mind, practice it after dinner instead. Take the following two steps:

- 1) Simply review the preceding day mentally, twice or three times if necessary.
- 2) Now ask yourself which actions did you perform well, and which actions did you perform less well? Which thoughts do you find helpful and which not so helpful? How did you act towards other people today? Do not blame or castigate yourself. If you did something you were unhappy with, simply mentally prepare yourself to handle the situation better next time.

You will, in addition, find your own questions to ask yourself. Experiment and find ways in which this exercise works best for you. Indeed, you might also

⁴² *Ibid.* 51.

⁴³ Galen, *On the Cure of the Affections in Each Man’s Soul*.

⁴⁴ Trans. modified for modern-day audience, adapted from Robertson’s *The Philosophy of CBT: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* (2010).

experiment with creating your own exercise for first thing in the morning, preparing yourself for the day ahead. Again be creative, and see what works for you. For the period of the trial, please follow the above three mind-training factors every day.

The Sixth Factor: Balance

Health was a matter of harmony.⁴⁵ In all of the above five factors, we must retain balance ('exercise, food, drink, sleep, sex, all in moderation.')⁴⁶ The great maxim on the temple at Delphi 'Nothing in Excess' was a cornerstone of Galen's method, as can be seen from the passage below, which also shows that we can correct an excess by doing the exact opposite. That way, we are restored to a balanced middle ground. He wrote:

'And in the nature of eating and drinking...the objective also is moderation, so as to take neither too much, nor too little, but as much as, digested and distributed and nourishing the body well, if need be will supply symmetry to the still growing parts of the body, and leave nothing superfluous or lacking. And so also in sleep, and wakefulness, and baths, and the activities of the mind, and other such things, it is obviously suitable to preserve moderation, and, if ever anyone errs in respect to any one of the aforesaid aspects, to correct the fault. And let the common object of all correction be the employment of the *opposite excess*, if the body has toiled too much on the previous day, by diminishing the quantity of exercise, and if too little, by increasing it; and so also if it has used too swift motions by abating them moderately, and if too gentle, by intensifying them...(and so on)...correct excesses by means of the opposite excess, in order to stay healthy.'⁴⁷

It is also important to stress that this sixth factor, of balance in all the factors, makes clear that each factor relates to the other, and supports the other. For example, someone in a state of mental wellbeing will '...desist from food and drink, when they have been sufficiently filled.'⁴⁸ But they will need enough sleep, and the right amount of exercise to be in that good state of mind. All aspects inter-relate, and focussing on one will help all the others.

In Conclusion: By actively taking part in this trial on Galen's theory of preventative medicine, you are practising a type of skill which Galen valued above all others. He wrote: 'For how should not these works of art be great and marvellous, to keep a human being growing old to an advanced age, free from suffering in his senses, healthy through everything, without sickness, without pain, intact of life.'⁴⁹ We do this, by trusting in our bodies' own natural capacities to be healthy from following a natural *diet* (in the sense of the Greek word). Our bodies and minds, Galen would say, know how to be healthy if given half a chance. These two weeks are concerned with that half a chance. Health is natural,

⁴⁵ Green, *The Art of Preserving Health*, 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 53.

⁴⁷ Galen, *On the Cure of the Affections in Each Man's Soul*.

⁴⁸ Green, *The Art of Preserving Health*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 189.

and so will your actions be over the next two weeks. Galen wrote: ‘...the healthy condition is determined by functions occurring naturally; and that this is the optimum and, as one might say, the fulfillment and height of health’.⁵⁰ The spirit of preventative medicine, with which you are engaging, is captured in the following verses, attributed to Eupolis:

‘Nature was the greatest part, but then
I lent my hand to Nature eagerly.’

Nature knows how to stay healthy, but it is *up to us* to help Nature in every way that we can. Living in this way is a life skill. As Galen wrote: ‘All can be Healthy at all Ages.’⁵¹

N.B. Do not change any advice that you are following from your doctor and do not do anything which would contradict your own doctor’s advice. Consult your doctor if you are unsure of anything. The Galenic principles should fit easily into your life, and should complement any other regimen or advice which you are currently following.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 18.

Appendix A

An exercise in *Deep Breathing*, believed by Galen to aid in the removal of bad humours.

Find a quiet spot, somewhere you won't be disturbed for five minutes, or however long you feel is appropriate for you. This could be a break from work, in the library or your office, or in bed at night just before sleep. For this short period of time, bring your awareness to your body as a whole, lightly focussing on your respiration. Simply enjoy focussing on your breathing in and out, slowly, gently yet deeply. If you lose concentration, just gently bring it back to your breathing. If practising this exercise during the day, practise in such a way that you feel refreshed by the end of the exercise. If in bed at night, practice in a way that brings relaxation. Don't worry if you fall asleep!