

# Galen

## Doctor and Philosopher

Galen is perhaps the world's most famous doctor. He had an insatiable curiosity for developing scientific understandings of the body and, as a young man, travelled far and wide, studying different methods and theories of medicine. At the age of 28, he accepted a position to be doctor to the gladiators of the High Priest of Asia. During his five years in that post, only five gladiators died under his care (60 had died under the previous doctor). Later, he took up a position in Rome, tending to the medical needs of the emperors, including Marcus Aurelius (whom Galen described as having some trouble sleeping!). Galen's method was rigorous and his output was extraordinary: it is said that Galen published almost 600 works, and that he used to dictate to a team of 20 scribes. However, Galen is most known, and in fact ridiculed, today for this theory of the four humours - blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm, and yet, he had many other theories as well. We will be looking at one of these in particular, that of 'preventative medicine', which Galen followed for his own long life (some scholars believe that he died at the age of 87, which was very unusual in Ancient Rome). Could these theories still be important for our own times? See what you think.



### *Introduction to The Art of Preserving Health*

“But after my twenty-eighth birthday, I persuaded myself that there was a way to look after my health. And I have followed the principles of that way for the rest of my life and, with the exception of the occasional fever, I have suffered not one incident of poor health since.

Surely anyone who values and wishes to understand the most important things in life will not dismiss the art of looking after one’s health but will instead consider the benefits of that art as some of the most important things of all. For how are the results of this art not a great and wonderful thing if, even as one grows old, one can be kept healthy and free from disease?”

**Overview:** When Galen was young, he was often in bad health. But as we see in this passage, at one crucial point he wondered whether how he was *living* had something to do with the state of his health. At that moment, he decided to follow a new way of life that supported his health far better. This new way of life was a kind of ‘diet’, but not as we understand that word. For us, a diet means a short-term change of the foods we eat and (in some cases) of the exercise we take in order (usually) to lose a certain amount of weight. But the ancients has no time for any ‘short-termism’. Indeed, the ancient Greek word for ‘diet’, ‘*diaitaō*’ (from where our word ‘diet’ clearly comes), actually meant *following a particular way of life*. This means subscribing to a set of valued principles which affect how you think and act about every area of your life, throughout your *whole* life. Galen discussed the particular principles he developed in a work called ‘On Looking After Health.’ From that book, there are **six** basic, and universal, principles which we find that anyone can adapt and fit into their life. On the next page, we will look at each of these factors in turn:

## *The Six Factors*

- 1) **Food & Drink.** For Galen, food & drink were almost like medicine, and their properties were essential for maintaining good health. Whatever we eat has an effect on our body and mind. Thus he suggested that we should only eat foods that support our health and strength. This need not be a chore: Galen did not want people to eat food that was not *tasty*. Ideally, the food one eats should be both tasty and nutritious. However, cakes and sweets are off the menu with this approach, apart from at special occasions.
- 2) **Exercise.** Galen used to recommend that each person follow an exercise regimen that was *appropriate* to them, something that allows one to take moderate exercise *consistently*. The key word was balance: very strenuous exercise one day followed by none for the next six days is not the Galen way.
- 3) **Sleep.** Galen, in line with modern scientific thought, knew that poor sleep was very detrimental to both physical and mental health. During sleep, the brain repairs and restores itself – a troubled night’s sleep can make life during the day quite difficult. Galen stressed the importance of getting a healthy amount of sleep – neither too much nor too little.
- 4) **Environment.** This aspect has many implications, from what our room or place of work is like, to the quality of the air we breathe, to how we interact with society as a whole. The most important point is to make an effort to keep where we live and work as positive an environment as possible, and to consider the bigger-picture of how we want our life to affect others for the better. For Galen, one did not follow a health regimen for oneself but as a means of allowing each individual to be at their best when they interact with, and help, others.
- 5) **Mind.** It is in this aspect that Galen perhaps differs most from our modern conceptions of what ‘diets’ involve. For Galen regarded the mind and body as linked – he used the example of an angry person goes red in the face and breathes erratically – and considered our ability to look after, for example, strong emotions as essential for our overall health, not to mention for the welfare of those around us. This aspect will be more explored in our next Galen passage.
- 6) **Balance.** Galen recommended never doing too much of one thing, - all must be kept in moderation. And if we ever do happen to do too much of one thing, Galen recommended balancing that activity out with its opposite for a while. So if one does go to an unGalenic party, then a few quieter, more health-conscious, days after it should do the trick!



### Questions for Discussion

- Galen's emphasis was on preventative healthcare, i.e. on maintaining the health of the human being first and foremost so that no illness came to exist. How similar is this to the emphasis of our own healthcare system?
- What do you think our modern healthcare system has which Galen did not?
- Discuss our own idea of what a 'diet' involves, and how different it is to that of Galen's. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?

### Points for Reflection

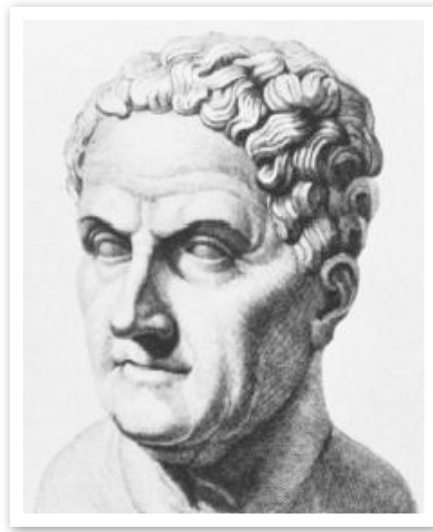
- Is following such a health regimen selfish?
- A government-commissioned report predicts that over half of UK adults will be obese by 2050 and a report by *the World Health Organization* predicts that, by 2020, depression will be the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest contributor to the 'global burden of disease.' To what extent could Galen's message help reverse these terrible predictions?

### What can you Do?

- Why not try and follow the Galen diet for a defined period of time, such as two weeks? **You can find a full 10 page booklet detailing the six factors in more detail at this web-address:**

<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/ancienthealthcare/files/2012/05/Living-the-Galenic-Life-InformationBooklet.pdf>

- Having followed it, you could reflect on how easy or difficult it was to implement, how beneficial it might be for your life as a whole and whether or not you might like to continue with it (or with some aspects of it).



### *Galen on Mental Wellbeing*

“It is something shameful that someone will devote his efforts for a period of many years to become a good doctor, public-speaker, grammarian, or mathematician, but that one should ever give up on becoming a good human being.”

Galen

**Overview:** Galen considered the deliberate training of one’s character for the better to be an essential part of one’s health regimen. This desire to ‘become a good human being’ was important in ensuring a wholesome sense of purpose, an ability to deal with the ups and downs of life as well as with more difficult and destructive emotions such as anger, envy, fear and craving. In short, Galen was interested in understanding one’s mind and how one can develop it in a wholesome direction which will be of benefit to yourself and others. This is not just a matter of becoming more ‘intelligent’, - for you can read as many books as you like but still end up like the men Galen mentions in the following example:

‘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.’<sup>2</sup>

Galen even mentions a wealthy man who was so angry with a servant (for not a very good reason) that he poked the servant’s eye out with a pen! All such desperate situations, which have their root cause in such destructive emotions as those mentioned above, can be avoided, Galen would say, with proper character training. And this can be achieved by the conscious decision to *habituate* ourselves in a beneficial direction, a direction informed by values and ethics. In short, with enough willpower and patience, one could change one’s character over time. Modern research in the fields of ‘neuroplasticity’ (‘brain change’) have shown Galen to be right in his understanding: the brain does respond, and change over time, to how we consciously think.

And this character training was not just important for its own sake, but for health also. For Galen believed in a connection between *what we think and what we feel* (just remember the example of the angry people mentioned above!) and considered that a calm mind was important for a calm body. Furthermore, good mental wellbeing helped with the other five factors: a well motivated person is more likely to eat in moderation, take exercise, sleep well, and be kind to others. And the funny thing is that ‘Galen’ actually means ‘Mr. Calm’ in Greek! [Though you might not guess it from the picture above!].

## Questions for Discussion

- How important is mental wellbeing for one's overall health? Should it be considered an essential part of any health regimen?
- How often is the importance of mental wellbeing, and what you can *do* about it, discussed today?
- Galen equates 'mental wellbeing' with being 'a good human being'. Do you agree?

## Points for Reflection

- For the ancients, the conception of 'mental health' was quite different to our own. Nowadays, someone who is 'suffering from depression' is often given medications, as a primary response, in order to alter brain chemistry to a healthier state. In Galen's time, the primary response would have been to see which life events had led to the depression, and to prescribe advice on how to think about those events and how to move forward in a constructive way. Of course, the advances made in medicine have been wonderful in helping people cope with, for example, depression and anxiety but if, say, a difficult relative or stress from work is the primary cause, should pills be the primary response, or could Galenic methods and principles be the first port of call? Could living a Galenic life even help prevent depression in the first place?

## What can you Do?

- Why not try to incorporate the advice of the ancients into your daily life for whatever period of time you wish, and see if it makes a difference? There are three 'exercises' on the next page which Galen and the ancients practiced linked to the theme of mental wellbeing which you might like to try.

## *Three Mental Trainings*

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.' Perhaps there are certain 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 perhaps 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) How do you feel about your **schoolwork**? For Galen, it was important not to become a 'slave to your work'. People can become slaves to work more often than not through the feeling that there is not 'enough time in the day to get everything done'. Alternatively, one might feel like a 'slave to work' because one has not done enough of it – even the thought of it is off-putting because it feels like there is so much to 'catch-up on'. Can you find a balance between these two extremes, where you can enjoy your work in such a way that you see the importance of it, without it becoming a 'chore'?

3) **Increased Awareness of Character.** There was a very useful exercise, used throughout the ancient world, called the **Bedtime Reflection**. It is excellent for increasing awareness of and changing one's character for the better. 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.'

You could 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) 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.