

Carpe Diem

To seize or to embrace, that is the question

“Seize the day”. A well-known advice, ancient as the writings of *Odes*¹ of the Roman poet Horace², who lived during the reign of the first Roman emperor Caesar Augustus³, also known as Octavian – the time when Rome’s republic turned into an empire. Horace used this aphorism in *Odes* 1.11, where the Latin verse reads:

“carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero”,

meaning: pluck the day, put very little trust in the future. It is the eighth line of the poem in which Horace warns us in different ways not to inquire into the future, or even hope for a long future, for while doing this, envious time has been wasted that could otherwise be well spent in the present moment.

Different meanings of *carpe diem*

I think the original meaning that Horace had in mind when writing “*carpe diem*” is much like “be here now”, don’t dwell on past or future, for life is in the moment and we have to make the most of this. This is more like “harvest the day” or “pluck the day”.

“Seize the day” is the popular, a bit more aggressive translation, like in “go for it”. It is like the words of the teacher John Keating in the movie *Dead Poets Society*⁴, who tells his pupils: “We are food for worms, lads. Believe it or not, each and everyone in this room one day is going to stop breathing, turn cold and die – (...) *carpe diem*, seize the day boys; make your lives extraordinary”.

In 2017, social philosopher Roman Krznaric presented a book called *Carpe Diem Regained*⁵, for which he and his team analyzed the use and meanings of the phrase since the 16th century, in writings as diverse as sermons and pop songs⁶. They found four different meanings of the aphorism⁷.

¹ *Odes* is a collection of four books of Latin lyric poems, written by **Horace**. They were published between 23 and 13 BC.

² **Quintus Horatius Flaccus** (65 BC- 8 AD).

³ **Gaius Octavius** (27 BC – 14 AD). He was the second cousin of the (in)famous **Julius Caesar**.

⁴ The YouTube clip can be seen [here](#).

⁵ **Roman Krznaric**, *Carpe Diem Regained – the vanishing art of seizing the day*, Unbound 2nd edition 2018.

⁶ For instance “Carpe diem baby” from **Metallica**.

⁷ The team also mentions a fifth expression of the *carpe diem* idea, pointing to the possibility of joining forces in order to change our political system – for instance the demonstrators in 1989 Berlin who seized the opportunity to tear down the Wall. This is the plural form of the phrase: *carpamus diem*, let us seize the day together and make things change. I think however that this expression is, in itself, not different from the first meaning.

The first of which is: seize the opportunities of life before they disappear forever. This is like the “go for it” attitude that is audible in “seize the day”. This is the most common, opportunistic meaning of the phrase, with about 75% of all references found pointing to this interpretation. It is also present in the acronym “fomo”, meaning fear of missing out – get it while you can. Krznaric refers to the origin of the word opportunity, which comes from the Latin *ob portum veniens* – coming toward a port. It points to a ship that waits for a favorable wind to allow entering the harbor. It should use this wind when it is there, for it might not come again any time soon. This is an interesting association, but unlike Krznaric, I think it doesn’t support this active and impatient interpretation of *carpe diem* very well. Patiently waiting for a favourable wind to me sounds more like surrendering to what is, going with the flow, in the Daoist Wu Wei sense of the word.

In modern days this most common meaning has been, in the words of Krznaric, hijacked by the consumer culture, which turned the drive of “just do it” into “just buy it”. It has turned “seize the day” into “seize the credit card”. In this way, freedom has deteriorated to a choice between brands – not exactly what Horace had in mind for sure. And it is also reflected in the 2011-acronym “Yolo” (you only live once), which is the popular translation of *carpe diem* for our youth.

The second meaning that Krznaric mentions is similar to what I think Horace seemed to have had in mind: presence, being here now, live in the moment. It is much more like the wisdom of Wu Wei I mentioned before. According to Krznaric this meaning however dates back only fifteen years, since the mindfulness revolution took place, which turned “just do it” into “just breathe”. I think however that Horace was much more mindful than Krznaric gives him credit for. I agree that the mindfulness movement has turned the practice of being present into a therapeutic means to an end that has little to do with the origins of the Hindu and Buddhist approach to mindfulness as in the Sanskrit word *smriti* or the Pali word *sati*⁸. But I feel that reducing the secular mindfulness movement to “just breathe” is not doing justice to it either.

Thirdly the research discovered the notion of living spontaneously, experiment, try out new things, breaking the rules. Here it mentions an interesting development, where since the 17th century spontaneity has been on a decline. This, according to Krznaric, has been caused by the protestant reformation that prohibited many outings of spontaneous behaviour, and by the industrial revolution with the introduction of the factory clock, deadlines, the measuring of our time and the speeding up of society. In our present lives this shows in the cultivation of time management and efficiency, that forces us to plan everything, not leaving much space for spontaneity. So this aspect of *carpe diem*, the researchers feel, is under pressure.

There might be some truth in this, but on the other hand I feel that spontaneity springs eternal, no matter circumstances. We might plan (of our own volition or under pressure of efficiency), but continuously things will turn out otherwise because of spontaneous happenings that we did not foresee. Our entire body is a spontaneous happening. Spontaneity is also what drives creativity, and I don’t think that creativity has been declining since the golden age. If we only look at the visual arts as an expression of creativity, we had many developments like

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satipatthana>.

impressionism, expressionism and abstract art. In music, after the baroque period of the 17th century (Bach, Händel), there was the first Viennese school (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert), the middle and late Romantic period (Chopin, Brahms), the impressionist music (Debussy, Ravel) and the second Viennese school (Schönberg, Berg, Webern). These developments hardly indicate a decline of spontaneity in my opinion.

In the 17th century *carpe diem* was popular in a fourth meaning, to denote hedonism: the enjoyment of our senses as way to actively explore the world. As long as we do this mindfully, there is nothing wrong with this. But in modern society there is a tendency to go to unhealthy extremes in sensory experience, and on the other hand we tend to explore the world passively behind a digital filter of tv, tablet and phone screens, which is not the same.

The other side of the coin

Birth and death are two sides of the coin of manifestation. With *carpe diem* focusing on the born part of this coin, the other side is captured in the aphorism *memento mori* (remember that you have to die). This concept has its roots in philosophers of classical antiquity and in many religions, often pictured with the image of a human skull and bones, a coffin, an hourglass and wilting flowers. In particular for the Stoics the practice of remembering death was prominent, and Seneca often mentions in his letters to be aware of and meditate on death. In music, we find this theme present in the form of the requiem and the danse macabre.

Being two sides of the same coin, it is easy to see that both aphorisms can be honored by living in presence, fully aware of the beauty and joy of the present moment and of the notion that every moment can be the last one, for the bodily form is perishable.

The primal questions

If we go from the presumption that there is some one there that grab hold of something called “a day”, we could indeed think and talk about different meanings of what Horace wanted us to tell and Krznaric’s research is interesting. And in the same presumption we could meditate over the fleetingness of the body.

But of course we first should ask: to whom do the thoughts of ceasing the day before death comes, arise? To the ego, the person, you might say. But who is this person? Does he really exist? Is he not merely a bundle of conditioned thoughts, feelings and convictions that tries to convince us of his and our separate (and timely) existence? Why does he feel the day is something external to him that can and needs to be captured? Isn't the day (life, being) already what is capturing him continuously, without any effort or doing on his part? Is he in fact not utterly identical to Being already? What is there to capture and by whom?

Then the whole idea of *carpe diem* dissolves into Being one with what already always is. And this is presently not different from five hundred years ago. Presence, Awareness. Impersonal Being. These all spring eternal, beyond birth and death.

Although Horace was close to pointing this out to his readers, this notion of impersonal being precedes even the original meaning of *carpe diem* as I think was his intention. Being here now, with no thoughts about ego, future or past, exploring the world directly through our senses in

choiceless awareness. Embrace the day, surrender to what is. This is also what *smriti* and *sati* point to. Not as a means to an end, not as a therapeutic tool for reducing stress, but for realizing the innate joy of aliveness, the *sat-chit-ananda*⁹ which is the original meaning of being mindful. Even *memento mori* is dissolved into this, for this Aliveness of Being is beyond both birth and death.

It means rising above the thoughts and emotions to truly understand the nature of ourselves and reality, to become one with the source of being which is timeless.



Horace reads his poems in front of Maecenas¹⁰
By Fyodor Bronnikov¹¹

J.Paul Jordaans
Grathem 6 June 2022
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⁹ Being-consciousness-bliss as denoted in the Vedanta branche of Hindu philosophy.

¹⁰ **Gaius Cilnius Maecenas** (70 AD – 8 BC) was friend and political advisor to **Octavian**. He was an important patron to the Augustan poets **Horace** and **Virgil**. Hence his name became an eponym for a “patron of Arts”.

¹¹ **Fyodor Bronnikov** (1827 – 1902) was a Russian-born history and genre painter who spent most of his life in Italy.