Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, was born in Citium, a small Phoenician-Greek city on Cyprus, about 336 B.C. (the year Alexander the Great became king of Macedonia) and died in Athens about 265 B.C. These dates are a matter of dispute. At the age of 22, he went to Athens, poverty-stricken (some say) as a result of a shipwreck off the Piraeus. Zeno was a Phoenician, but he knew Greek before the shipwreck (if it occurred), and his merchant father had possibly supplied him with writings about Socrates long before Zeno came to Athens. In 300 he started his school, first called the Zenonians, and later called the Stoics because he gave his lectures on the Painted Porch (Stoa Poikile) in the marketplace of Athens. The porch was so called because it was where the paintings of Polygnotus were. Epicurus had come to Athens in about 306, celebrating pleasure as the highest good and randomness as the basic condition of the physical universe. Some say that Zeno, in reaction to Epicurus, set up a school defending virtue as the only good and the law of nature or the logos as the dominating force in the universe. Personally, he had none of Epicurus’ attractive gentleness; he was dark, had a slightly twisted neck, and was severe or even harsh in manner. He ate raw food, drank mostly water, wore a thin cloak, and was apparently oblivious to rain, heat, or painful illness. Three of the many stories Diogenes Laërtius tells strikingly illustrate his philosophy (of which we have only a few fragments).

Once he was chastising a slave for stealing and when the slave pleaded that it was his destiny to steal, Zeno responded, “Yes, and to be whipped too.” His notion of destiny or providence was quite consistent with rewards and punishments.

After someone disapproved of Antisthenes’ writings in Zeno’s presence, Zeno showed him that author’s essay on
Sophocles and asked if he thought it had any fine qualities. The critic replied that he did not know. “Then,” said Zeno, “are you not ashamed to pick out and mention anything wrong said by Antisthenes, while you suppress his good things without giving them a thought?” This was essentially the response of Zeno and the other Stoics to those who would use the evils in the world as an argument against God or Providence.

The third anecdote is more famous. Zeno was walking on a road, when he tripped and broke his toe. Lying there, he struck the ground and quoted a line from the Niobe of Timotheus: “I come of my own accord; why then call me?” He then went home and killed himself (some say he held his breath and died there in the road). This story (quite possibly true) summarizes the Stoic’s belief that incidents in nature are the expression of God’s will and the instruments of destiny.

For all his severity, Zeno was honored lavishly in life and death by the city of Athens, which praised not only his temperance and his effect on the young but also the consistency of his life with his teachings.

Because of our fragmentary knowledge of the Early Stoa, it is difficult to distinguish Zeno’s contributions from those of his successor Cleanthes and especially from those of Chrysippus, called the second founder of Stoicism, who followed Cleathes as leader of the Stoa. But the stories about the man are so plentiful that we can trace his development with some precision (though we do not know with how much accuracy). After his arrival in Athens, he read (or reread) Xenophon’s Memorabilia and admired the calm, rational self-control of Socrates, the philosophical hero of the Greeks. He came under the influence of the Cynic Crates, the ascetic who taught that a wise man, even though a beggar, is a king whose sovereignty lies in his virtue, in his
hegemony over his own passions. While associated with Crates it is believed that he wrote his *Politeia* ("Republic"), possibly as an alternative to Plato’s book. It was supposed to be a completion of the ideal state which Alexander had failed to complete because of his death. It envisaged a world-wide state, whose citizens were not of Athens or Sidon but of the universe. It was patterned not after local traditions but after universal nature; it had no laws (because there was no crime), no gymnasia for idle activity, no class system, and no hatred; love was the master of this state, and the wise man was no leader here but a simple citizen. Much of this was pure Cynicism, especially the notion of a cosmopolis and the attack on local conventions and laws in favor of natural living.

However, Zeno came to see the difficulties in defending this doctrine (for instance, philosophers were too narrow-minded, contentious, and arbitrary to find the wisdom necessary for ruling such a state). And so he left Crates and turned to Stilpo the Megarian, hoping that the subtle, powerful logic of refutation and defense that the Megarians had developed might help him to build his doctrine on firm foundations. From Stilpo he is said to have learned that the key fault to be avoided was haste in giving assent, and while under his influence he developed not only his formal logic but also his distinction between degrees of certainty in perceptual knowledge. The lowest degree he represented with an open right hand, fingers extended: here the *phantasia* or mind-picture merely suggests a statement ("That is a tree"). After considering whether it is true, one gives casual assent (*synkatathesis*) to it - this Zeno represented by partially contracting the fingers. When the *phantasia* is clear and the assent is solid, the result of scrupulous attention, one has the *phantasia kataleptike*, or apprehensive mind-picture - this Zeno represented with a clenched fist. Finally, there is *episteme* or science, when all our firmly certain conceptions combine into a system - this Zeno represented by his left
hand firmly closed around his right fist. This only the wise man has.

In time Zeno underwent other influences and developed other aspects of his thought. For example, from the Academic Polemo he learned to love poetry as well as the severe arguments of men like Stilpo. But the greatest influence on his metaphysics was Heraclitus of Ephesus. From his studies of Heraclitus, Zeno learned the doctrine of eternal fire, out of which all elements come, the belief in a logos or reason of the universe that gives shape to each thing and harmonizes all things amid perpetual change, and the belief in a deity identical with this logos and also with the eternal fire. Apparently he did not forsake his belief in a cosmopolitan republic but established his belief in it by developing the metaphysics of Heraclitus and the logical inquiries of the Megarians to suit his own purposes.

By the time his school was flourishing (after 300 B.C.), he is said to have coined a word for “duty” (to kathekon), which summarized his philosophy by referring to a life according to nature or reason. The wise man, simply because he knows what nature requires, has to do his duty; and in doing it, he is at once virtuous and possessed of spiritual well-being. We do not know if Zeno ever softened his doctrine in the Politeia to the effect that all those who were not wise were one’s enemies, even if they also were one’s closest relatives. But we do know that his writings, with all of their logical and physical insight, were never permanently detached from his desire to make the world a cosmopolis, a universal republic of the wise, equal men living according to their rational grasp of nature’s laws, in harmony with each other and in tranquility within themselves.