"The Undefeated Mind" is a book that exhorts us to stop hoping for easy lives and instead to focus on cultivating the inner strength we need to enjoy the difficult lives we all have. Though our ability to control what happens to us in life may be limited, our ability to establish a life state strong enough to surmount the suffering life brings us is not.

— Alex Lickerman, MD

I was introduced to this book via Ryan Holiday’s *The Obstacle Is the Way*. It’s a fantastic blend of Western science and Eastern mysticism—specifically, a form of Buddhism I had never heard of called Nichiren Buddhism (which focuses on chanting as a means to challenge negativity to bring forth wisdom).

Alex Lickerman is a medical doctor who brilliantly walks us through his nine principles for attaining what he calls “victory” en route to, as the sub-title suggests, “constructing an indestructible self.” The book is packed with inspiring wisdom. (You can pick it up [here](#)!) We’ll kick it off by taking a quick look at the core of Nichiren Buddhism, then take a quick peek at the nine principles, then some of my favorite Big Ideas. Let’s jump in!

**NICHIREN BUDDHISM**

“The answer he found wasn’t, contrary to what many other forms of Buddhism suggest, that suffering arises from the frustration of our desires. Rather it was that suffering arises from our deluded thinking about the nature of life itself—specifically, from our deluded belief that we lack the power to overcome the obstacles that confront us. We don’t suffer, according to Nichiren Buddhism, because we face obstacles; we suffer because we face obstacles we don’t believe we can overcome. Even the state of continuous suffering—clinical depression—is considered to result from our being overwhelmed by a feeling of powerlessness.”

— Alex Lickerman, MD
I love that distinction.

According to Nichiren Buddhism, the root of our suffering is not attachment to our desires. They tell us that the root of our suffering is the mistaken belief that we can not powerfully meet the challenges we face in our lives.

As Alex points out, the most extreme example of suffering—clinical depression—is essentially a complete sense of powerlessness.

Our goal then is to create an undefeatable mind—absolutely resolute in the knowledge that, although we can not control what happens to us, we *can* obtain the greatest benefit possible from each obstacle we encounter.

Here's a deeper look at what that mind looks like:

**WHAT DOES AN UNDEFEATED MIND LOOK LIKE?**

"This, then, is what it means to possess an undefeated mind: not just to rebound quickly from adversity or to face it calmly, without being pulled down by depression or anxiety, but also to get up day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade—even over the course of an entire lifetime—and attack the obstacles in front of us again and again until they fall, or we do. An undefeated mind isn’t one that never feels discouraged or despairing; it’s one that continues on in spite of it. Even when we can’t find a smile to save us, even when we’re tired beyond all endurance, possessing an undefeated mind means never forgetting that defeat comes not from failing but from *giving up.* An undefeated mind doesn’t fill itself with false hope, but with hopes to find real solutions, even solutions it may not want or like. An undefeated mind is itself what grants us access to the creativity, strength, and courage necessary to find those real solutions, viewing obstacles not as distractions or detours off the main path of our lives but as the very means by which we capture the lives we want. Victory may not be promised to any of us, but possessing an undefeated mind means behaving as though it is, as though to win we only need to wage an all-out struggle and work harder than everyone else, trying everything we can, and when that fails trying everything we think we can’t, in full understanding that we have no one on whom we can rely for victory but ourselves. Possessing an undefeated mind, we understand that there’s no obstacle from which we can’t create some kind of value. We view any such doubt as delusion. Everyone—absolutely everyone—has the capacity to construct an undefeatable mind, not just to *withstand* personal traumas, economic crises, or armed conflicts, but to triumph over them.”

Wow.

Now, I’ve read a lot of books. (In fact, this is the 215th PhilosophersNote I’ve created.)

In all the books I’ve read, I can’t remember feeling a stronger sense of “WOW!” than I felt reading that passage.

To use Alex’s frame, the “life force” in that is STRONG! Blow your soul-hair back strong. :)

THAT is what an undefeatable mind is like.

Let’s take a quick look at the nine principles Alex has identified to help us rock it.

**NINE PRINCIPLES FOR CONSTRUCTING AN INDESTRUCTIBLE SELF**

"In this, resilience, I’m convinced is more like muscle size than body height: with effort it can indeed be increased.

For we can resist discouragement by articulating our life’s mission; accomplish that mission by making a great determination; overcome the obstacles that naturally arise when we make such a determination by changing poison into medicine; gain the strength to change poison"
into medicine by accepting responsibility and standing against injustice; endure pain by accepting it and loss by letting go of what we cannot keep; enjoy what we have by learning to appreciate it and help ourselves through trauma by helping others; conquer fear by leveraging our connections to the ones we love. And, finally, I realized, gain inspiration from others who’ve managed to forge an undefeated mind of their own.”

That’s the essence of the nine principles that form the backbone of the book. Alex dedicates a chapter to each of these principles:

1. Find Your Mission
2. Make a Vow
3. Expect Obstacles
4. Stand Alone
5. Accept Pain
6. Let Go
7. Appreciate the Good
8. Encourage Others

Let’s take a quick look at some of my favorite Big Ideas!

**DISCOVER YOUR MISSION**

“That’s what worked for me. Also, when I was in college, I found that constantly thinking about what I wanted to do led me nowhere. But when I reframed the question, asking myself instead what kind of value I wanted to create, ideas began popping up. In fact, here’s another idea: Have your son try writing down fifty or so experiences he’s had so far that have brought him the most joy, and then have him figure out which ones involved contributing to the well-being of others and the mission statements he would craft for each of them. Then ask him to imagine being given an award by the president at the age of ninety for having spent his entire life dedicated to whichever one seems to him the most consequential. Whichever ‘award’ fills him with the greatest sense of pride—whichever makes him feel the greatest sense of satisfaction—then that’s the mission he should probably spend his life trying to fulfill.”

Wow. That’s a *really* cool exercise to help us discover our missions.

First, Alex differentiates our Purpose vis-a-vis our Mission. (He breaks it down kinda like I do in this video I created a couple years ago: [How to Discover Your Purpose in 5 Seconds](#).

Key idea: We all have the same Purpose. From Alex's/Nichiren Buddhism’s perspective, that purpose is to be happy. (I like to say it’s to connect to the Highest within ourselves, which leads to a state of happiness/joy/enthusiasm/etc.)

So, we all share that same Purpose. Got it.

Our individual Missions, on the other hand, are unique to us. And, that exercise is one of the coolest ways I’ve read to help us articulate it!

So, back to you.

What’s *your* mission?!

Here’s another gem to keep in mind as you contemplate your mission/deepest “why”: “Nietzsche once wrote that he who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*. According to Nichiren Buddhism, however, not every *why* is created equal. To build the strongest life force possible—
one that can bear the weight of any how—Nichiren Buddhism argues we need a why to live that in some way involves contributing to the well-being of others."

<— Amen to that!

GETTING KNOCKED DOWN AND GETTING BACK UP

“And when our response to failure is to summon an even greater determination to succeed, vowing to get back up after being knocked down not just once but again and again each day and with every obstacle that rises up to challenge us—attacking them, as Nichiren Daishonin wrote, like a “lion king who unleashes the same power whether he traps a tiny ant or attacks a fierce animal”—then we’ll have found a treasure even more valuable than any apparently foolproof plan to reach our goal: the determination necessary to seek a better one when it fails. For in demonstrating to ourselves that we can always summon more of it, our determination becomes to us like a good friend, its steady presence and our faith in its power imbuing us with confidence that no matter how many times we’ve failed, no matter how much we want to quit, victory can still be ours.

“When your determination changes,” Daisaku Ikeda, the third president of the Soka Gakki, writes, “everything will begin to move in the direction you desire. The moment you resolve to be victorious, every nerve and fiber in your being will immediately orient itself toward your success. On the other hand, if you think, ‘This is never going to work out,’ then at that instant every cell in your being will be deflated and give up the fight. Then everything really will move in the direction of failure.”

That merits another “wow.”

And, it reminds me of an experience I once had raising money for my last business, Zaadz.

Quick context on the short story: I once met a super-cool, super-hippy woman named Christiana at an Integral Institute event in Los Angeles. The Little Prince tattoo on her back, hemp dress, old Prius, the whole thing. (Laughing.) We hit it off and were talking about life, integral theory and other such interesting things.

Then she said something about her family’s hedge funds—which made me say, “Huh?! Did you just say *hedge* funds?”

Long story a little shorter, Christiana’s father (Sam Wyly) is a brilliant guy who happens to be a billionaire. He and his wife and Christiana and their family provided an incredible amount of support—financially and energetically and wisdom-wise—to me and our team as we built Zaadz. (Which we later sold to Gaiahn.)

Now, here’s the story I wanted to share. We were in Aspen and Sam invited some of his friends over so I could tell them a bit about the biz.

He introduced me to his friends by simply saying (something like) this: “I invested in Brian because he’s been knocked down and bloodied and knows how to get up off the mat. Brian: Tell them more about your business!”

Seriously.

That was it.

At the time I just thought that was an interesting way to introduce me (hah!) but as I reflected more on it in the years since, I’ve been struck by the fact that a man who has created such an ENORMOUS (!!!) amount of business success would choose THAT as the most important thing he could tell his friends about me.

Amazing.
He knew we’d inevitably hit road blocks. Success isn’t about never failing. It’s about knowing that when we do inevitably fail and get knocked down and bloodied, it’s all about knowing you have the mojo to GET BACK UP.

As Alex tells us in his powerful passage above, that treasure is more valuable than any business idea or plan. It is THE key to ultimate victory in every aspect of our lives.

And making a VOW that we will get up every time we’re knocked down and that we will work harder than ever to master ourselves and make the most of our obstacles is the essence of the second principle to crafting an undefeatable mind.

Back to you.

Are you facing any obstacles that feel overwhelming?

KNOW that you have it within you to get back up, dust yourself off and rock it.

(P.S. Sam’s bet was a good one. We more than doubled his money.)

**CHANGING POISON INTO MEDICINE**

> “From the Buddhist perspective, I told him, all of us have the capacity to make use of any circumstance, no matter how awful, to create value. This ability to “change poison into medicine,” as it is known in Nichiren Buddhism, makes plausible the transformation of even the most horrific tragedy into something that enables us to become happier... . . . Believing in your ability to transform poison into medicine when you don’t know how, and often won’t except in retrospect, is difficult, I admit. But that’s the confidence you have to find. That’s the confidence that represents your greatest defense against discouragement.”

Changing poison into medicine. That’s so good.

Alex presents this wisdom in the context of the third principle: Expect Obstacles.

We need to QUIT thinking we’re going to somehow cruise through life without any hiccups. (And, that when we discover them that it’s a sign something is wrong with us.)

We need to EXPECT obstacles. To expect “poison.” And we need to believe in our ability to turn that poison into medicine—taking the stuff that we’re afraid might kill us and, through force of character, transmute it into stuff that MAKES US STRONGER!

As Nassim Taleb tells us in *Anti-Fragile*, “Wind extinguishes a candle and energizes fire.”

Let’s turn our poison into medicine.

Let’s energize our fires with every obstacle.

**LET’S ENCOURAGE OTHERS**

> “We may think our advice represents the most valuable thing we have to offer those who suffer, but it pales in comparison to the power of our encouragement. Encouragement, at its heart, represents an attempt to make others feel that they have the strength, wisdom, courage, and ability to solve their problems themselves; it aims not to provide specific solutions but to make others believe that they can find those solutions on their own. With encouragement we express our belief in the indefatigable power of the human spirit to make what appears to be impossible possible, all in the hopes of awakening the same belief in those we’re trying to encourage.”

This is the essence of the eighth principle: Encourage Others.
Alex shares some great stories about how much more important ENCOURAGEMENT is vs. advice. As he says, we may think advice is what people want most. It’s not.

It’s someone believing in them. Someone who sees their unconquerable spirit even when (especially when!) they don’t see it themselves.

We need to deliberately cultivate our practice of encouraging others.

How can you do that more today?!

NEVER BE DEFEATED

“Sometimes no matter how hard we pull, our lives don’t seem to move at all. Some struggles, in fact, take years or even decades to win (one of the titles bestowed upon the Buddha was “He Who Can Forbear”). But as long as we refuse to give in to despair and resolve to continue taking concrete action, some kind of victory is always possible. So when everything seems hopeless and you want to give up, no matter how much others may doubt you or you may doubt yourself, hold that knowledge fast to your heart and fix your mind unwaveringly on this most imperative of calls to action: never be defeated.”


May we never give in to despair and resolve to continue taking concrete action.

Let us never be defeated.

I believe in you. I’m excited about all that we can do together.

Let’s do this!

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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The Obstacle Is the Way
The Dhammapada
An Iron Will
Unbeatable Mind
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About the Author of “The Undefeated Mind”
ALEX LICKERMAN, MD

Alex Lickerman, MD, is a physician and former director of primary care at one of the world’s most prestigious universities, the University of Chicago. He is also a practicing Nichiren Buddhist and leader in the Nichiren Buddhist lay organization, the Soka Gakkai International, USA (SGI-USA). Learn more and connect with Alex at www.alexlickerman.com.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.