

THE BIG IDEAS

Nichiren Buddhism

Key distinction.

An Undefeated Mind

What does it look like?

The Nine Principles

For creating an indestructible self.

Discover Your Mission

Creating value for others.

Getting Knocked Down

And getting back up.

Changing Poison

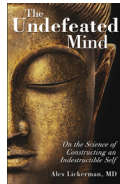
Into medicine.

Let's Encourage Others

Every day.

Never Be Defeated.

Ever. Period.



The Undefeated Mind

On the Science of Constructing an Indestructible Self

BY ALEX LICKERMAN, MD · HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS, INC. © 2012 · 278 PAGES

“But things aren’t as bleak as they seem. Or rather, things are *only* as bleak as they seem, for the way events impact us depends far more on the lens through which we view them—our inner life state—than on the events themselves. Not that mustering up courage, hope, and confidence in the face of adversity is easy...

Though absolute control over our response to adversity may elude us, influence over it need not. If we can’t change our emotional reactions by force of will, we can at least increase the likelihood that our reactions are constructive by cultivating something psychologists call *personality hardiness*: the capacity to survive and even thrive under difficult conditions—what in Buddhist terms would be considered a strong life force.

This book is about how we can develop that life force. For hardiness, contrary to popular belief, isn’t something with which only a fortunate few of us have been born, but rather is something we can all create. Hardiness of a kind I’ve come to call an *undefeated mind*.”

~ Alex Lickerman, MD from *The Undefeated Mind*

The Undefeated Mind.

I like the sound of THAT. :)

“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.”

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?

*"The reason optimism yields results isn't that we necessarily try *harder* when we think a goal is achievable; rather, we tend to try *more often.* Optimism, in other words, yields persistence, for nothing seems to keep us going like believing success is possible."*

~ Alex Lickerman, MD

"This, then, is what it means to possess an undefeatable 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 undefeatable 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 undefeatable mind means never forgetting that defeat comes not from failing but from *giving up*. An undefeatable mind doesn't fill itself with false hope, but with hopes to find real solutions, even solutions it may not want or like. An undefeatable 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 undefeatable 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 undefeatable 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
9. Muster Your Courage.

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

DISCOVER YOUR MISSION

"The quantity and quality of value we create for others is what contributes to our happiness the most."

~ Alex Lickerman, MD

"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—

"The trait most strongly associated with long-term increases in life satisfaction is, in fact, a persistent commitment to pursuing altruistic goals."

~ Alex Lickerman, MD

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 Gaia.)

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.

"The path to true success, the path we actually end up traveling whether in turning a failure into success or adversity into wisdom, is almost never what we envisioned at the outset."

~ Alex Lickerman, MD

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.

"...helping others can provide us with enthusiasm, encouragement, and even joy by forcing us to summon them when we're feeling discouraged.' If one lights a fire for others,' wrote Nichiren Daishonin, 'one will brighten one's own way.'"

~ Alex Lickerman, MD

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.*"

Amen. Amen. Amen.

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!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you'll probably like...

The Obstacle Is the Way
The Dhammapada
An Iron Will
Unbeatable Mind
With Winning in Mind
Mind Gym

About the Author of "The Undefeated Mind"

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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.