

The Undeclared Mind

*On the Science of Constructing
an Indestructible Self*

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The names, identifying details, and histories of the patients whose stories appear in this book have been altered and condensed to preserve their privacy and protect their confidentiality.

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for my parents

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Introduction

Six months into my second year of medical school, the first woman I ever loved brought our year-and-a-half-long relationship to an end, causing me to fall immediately into a paralyzing depression. As a result, my ability to study declined dramatically—and as a result of *that*, six months later I failed Part I of the National Board Exam.

It was a devastating blow, not just to my ego, but also to my potential future: if I couldn't pass Part I, I wouldn't be allowed to graduate from medical school. My dean told me I could retake the test, but the next opportunity to do so was at the end of my *third* year of medical school. This was—to put it mildly—problematic: at the start of the third year, students leave the classroom and begin caring for patients in the hospital, an activity renowned for swallowing entire days of time at one stretch and causing all personal dimensions of a student's life to atrophy. I'd have little opportunity to study the material I was expected to learn on the wards, much less the basic science I was already supposed to have learned during my previous two years of classroom work.

I had no idea what to do. My thinking spiraled in useless circles as I hunted for a solution, my depression intensifying as none appeared, and soon I found myself crouching at the edge of despair.

Personality Hardiness

Are you feeling discouraged about something, too? Do you need to find a job in an overcrowded field? Pay a mortgage you can't afford? Overcome an illness with a grim prognosis? Prepare yourself for the death of a loved one? Or has the omnipresent cacophony of misery, injustice, and cruelty in the world just become too much for you to bear?

You're not alone. Even before the U.S. economy nearly collapsed in 2008, data from the National Comorbidity Survey told us that an astonishing 50 percent of Americans report having suffered at some point in their lives from a psychiatric disorder, most commonly depression, alcohol dependence, social phobia, or simple phobia.¹ Even more startling, research shows that Americans have only a 35 percent chance of rating themselves "very happy" by the time they reach their late eighties.² Given that the same research showed happiness tends to *increase* with age, it would seem that most of us are destined to live the majority of our lives without much joy.

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.³ Not that mustering up courage, hope, and confidence in the face of adversity is easy. Viktor Frankl was only half right when he argued in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* that we have control over how we respond to what happens to us.⁴ In fact, often we don't. At least, not how we respond *emotionally* to what happens to us. And as emotion usually wins the tug-of-war with intellect in determining behavior, unless

we happen to be gifted with a mighty will, controlling how we respond to what happens to us can be almost as difficult as controlling what actually happens to us.

But Frankl wasn't entirely wrong, either. 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 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 develop. Hardiness of a kind I've come to call an undefeated mind.

Nichiren Buddhism

The kind of Buddhism I practice isn't Zen or Tibetan, the two most popular forms in the United States, but rather Nichiren Buddhism, named after its founder, Nichiren Daishonin. Currently, 12 million people in 192 countries and territories practice Nichiren Buddhism; most of them, like me, are members of the Soka Gakkai, a lay organization of Nichiren Buddhists whose name means "value creation society." The practice of Nichiren Buddhism doesn't involve meditation, mindfulness, centering oneself, or learning to live in the moment as do most other forms of Buddhism, but rather something even more foreign and discomfiting to those of us raised in the traditions of the West: chanting. Every morning and every night I chant the phrase *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* with a focused determination to challenge my negativity in an effort to bring forth wisdom.

And over twenty-three years of Buddhist practice, wisdom has indeed emerged for me—and often in the most surprising of ways. After spending many months of such chanting to free myself from the anguish that the loss of my girlfriend had caused me, I realized one morning that my suffering wasn't coming at all from what I'd thought (the loss of my girlfriend), but rather from the misguided belief that I needed her to love me to be happy. I'd always known intellectually this wasn't true—had even pointed it out to friends struggling with the debris of their own failed relationships—but not until that moment in front of my Gohonzon (the scroll to which Nichiren Buddhists chant) did that knowledge become wisdom—that is, become how I *felt*. Insight, that most mysterious of experiences in which knowledge takes root in a person's psyche and alters what he believes and therefore how he behaves (expressed, for example, in the moment an alcoholic understands he needs to stop drinking and does) had at last found me. What I achieved in my moment of insight wasn't a greater intellectual understanding that I didn't need my girlfriend to love me to be happy, but rather an emotional belief: a belief based on an acceptance of evidence that seemed abruptly so convincing I became incapable of refuting it. No longer did I have to work to remind myself I didn't need a woman's love to be happy; now, I couldn't forget it. And in the act of coming to know it in this way—the same way I knew that if I stared at the sun too long it would blind me—my suffering ceased.

I was flabbergasted. How had this happened? *What* had happened? Strong emotional reactions to traumatic events rarely end abruptly but usually taper off gradually, so only after some time had passed did I come to accept that I had indeed freed myself from suffering, and further that it had happened because insight had transformed intellectual knowledge into wisdom. But as to how that insight had occurred—as to the possibility that chanting a phrase over and over could have taken an idea that I'd neither been pursuing as a remedy nor even been wondering about and

turned it into a belief imbued with the power to end my suffering—well, frankly, it was preposterous. (Not that a newly minted belief could have ended my suffering, but rather that chanting could have been responsible for my coming to believe it.) And yet the possibility that this answer, this transformation, had taken place serendipitously or as a result of a general focus on my problem seemed equally unlikely to me. But because I couldn't split myself into one person who continued to chant and one who didn't to see which became happier, I resolved to continue chanting to see if other insights would follow.

To my surprise, they did, several times in as many months. A skeptic to my core, I nevertheless began to find myself viewing what now amounted to a series of life-changing revelations less and less as coincidences and more and more as evidence that chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* did have the power to catalyze aversive life experience into an engine for growth, to shatter delusions of which I remained unconscious but that nevertheless limited the degree of happiness I was capable of experiencing. Whether by a general meditative effect (something supported by a growing body of research) or through the activation of some as-yet uncharacterized force inherent within my life, I didn't—and still don't—know.

So I continued, reminding myself that subjective experiences *can* be scientifically investigated even when the investigator is investigating himself. When patients tell me, for example, that eating pizza predictably causes them abdominal pain, the fact that only they can observe the dependent variable, abdominal pain, in no way invalidates the conclusion that the independent variable, pizza, is the cause.

On the other hand, I've had to recognize that the insights I've attributed to my practice of Nichiren Buddhism have never come with the same regularity that abdominal pain has come to my pizza-eating patients. Sometimes breakthroughs have occurred after chanting for years about a particular problem; at other times after only a few minutes, a fact that's

prompted many of my non-Buddhist friends and family to ask just how confident I can be that chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* has in fact *caused* all the life-changing revelations that have come my way since I started practicing Buddhism. To which I've continued to answer since experiencing that first insight over twenty years ago that I'm just confident enough to continue looking for more definitive proof.

So my experiment goes on: The scientist in me continuing to argue with the Buddhist, demanding not just more convincing evidence that chanting generates wisdom but trying to understand the mechanism by which it does so, a mechanism couched in terms of established physical, chemical, and biological laws—one that provides a natural rather than supernatural explanation. The Buddhist, in turn, reminds the scientist that I don't entirely understand how my car works either, but I still get into it every morning and drive it to work.

Building Strength from Adversity

That which doesn't kill us *can* make us stronger, as Nietzsche tells us, but few sources offer any insight into just *how* one springboards from adversity into strength. Most presume, like Nietzsche did himself, that it occurs automatically as part and parcel of being human. But it doesn't.⁵ As anyone working in health care today can attest, lives filled with misfortune frequently add up only to lives filled with suffering. To build strength out of adversity, we need a catalyst.

That catalyst, according to Nichiren Buddhism, is wisdom. Inner strength, Nichiren Buddhism teaches, doesn't come from the experience of adversity itself but from the wisdom that the experience of adversity has the potential to impart. Nichiren Buddhism considers the development of strength through the acquisition of wisdom—a process it terms *human revolution*—the sole means by which we can establish a state of

indestructible happiness. This, Nichiren Buddhism argues, is the purpose for which we were all born.

Drawing then on the tenets of both Nichiren Buddhism and new scientific research, this book attempts to distill that wisdom into nine principles—principles anyone can incorporate into their thinking and behavior, whether they have any interest in chanting or not. In the opening chapter, I lay the groundwork for this exploration of resilience by defining the concept of the undefeated mind itself. In subsequent chapters, then, I describe the nine principles in detail by telling the stories of nine patients, each of whom used one of the principles to overcome suffering caused variously by unemployment, unwanted weight gain, addiction, rejection, chronic pain, retirement, illness, loss, and even death.

Offering a set of guidelines not for solving problems but for establishing a life state that makes all problems solvable, *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.

Knowledge vs. Wisdom

After a few days of giving serious consideration to dropping out of medical school, instead I became determined not only to retake Part I of the Boards and pass it, but also to score above the mean, something I'd never been able to do on any test I'd ever taken in medical school. Further, I resolved that no matter how much time I'd need to devote to studying for the test, my performance in the third year wouldn't suffer—rather, it would be stellar. I didn't just want to survive this obstacle; I wanted to triumph over it. I didn't just want to pass the test and learn the material; I wanted to transform the experience of failing into a genuine

benefit, into something I could one day say with conviction I was glad had happened to me.

I had no real idea how this would—or even could—occur. Nevertheless, I chanted to bring forth the wisdom that would enable me to achieve success. And then I took action: I studied every spare moment I had, sometimes staying up late into the night, sometimes arising several hours early in the morning. I studied at every meal. I stopped watching television, reading for pleasure, even socializing with friends. For the entire year, I remained disciplined, focused, and relentless.

Then, ironically, on the day of the test I almost missed the eight o'clock start time (which would have disqualified me from being allowed to take it) due to an accident on the expressway that slowed traffic to a crawl. Our eyes riveted on the clock, my mother and I cheered as my father sped through two red lights to get me to the test center on time.

The test was scheduled to last two days—twelve hours in total. I finished the first day with a sense that I'd performed well. But then came a crushing blow: the next morning, just before the start of the second day, we learned that test security had been compromised by thieves who'd managed to steal copies from a test center in Michigan and that officials were considering invalidating the test results for the entire country. As I glanced around at the horrified expressions in the room, I felt my will to complete the exam draining away. But rather than close my exam booklet and walk out as I felt the urge to do, instead I resolved to continue as I had all year, in willful ignorance of the odds stacked against me, fighting with all my might to overcome my impulse to give up.

My determination paid off. In the end, test officials decided not to invalidate the results, and I not only passed the exam but also met my goal of scoring above the mean. I went on to graduate medical school and landed a residency at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.

But the true victory didn't come until years later, sometime after I'd

begun working as a primary care physician at the University of Chicago, when a medical student came to see me one day distraught over having failed her third-year clinical rotation in internal medicine. Hoping to encourage her, I decided to divulge the story of my own failure. And as I told her what had happened and watched her expression shift from despondent to contemplative and then from contemplative to resolute, I felt my shame over having failed Part I of the National Boards finally evaporate. Only because I had failed, I realized, was I now in a position to offer someone else who'd failed in a similar way that most critical of psychological nutrients: hope. What's more, in telling my story to someone else for the first time, I realized that having to relearn all the material presented in the first and second years of medical school had made me a better doctor. It had not only broadened my knowledge base but also sharpened my reasoning skills, leading to an ability, I now saw, to make diagnoses I wouldn't have been able to make otherwise, as well as highlighted for me the importance of focusing not just on the diagnosis and treatment of disease, but also on the alleviation of the emotional suffering that disease often brings. I had indeed transformed the experience of failing the Boards into a benefit—twice.

After the student left my office, I found myself thinking about how quickly we pronounce final judgment on the things that happen to us, deciding whether they're good or bad in the first moment they occur—about how in doing so we surrender our own agency, abandoning the belief that we have the power to *create* meaning out of what happens to us. I'd always believed we did have that power—and had even encouraged others going through their own struggles to believe it—but hadn't known it was true myself until my own failure proved it to me.

Herman Hesse once wrote that wisdom, when spoken aloud, always sounds a little bit foolish.⁶ Perhaps that's because when we hear something that makes sense to us, we think we already know it. But often we

don't. At least not in a way that matters. We know it with our intellect, but not with our hearts. Not, as we say in Nichiren Buddhism, with our lives. For we can only be said to really understand a principle when we actually live by it.

So in full recognition that becoming more resilient is itself an arduous process, and that nothing as simple as reading a book could ever substitute for the difficult life experience that learning something with our lives seems to require, I offer *The Undefeated Mind* as a blueprint. A blueprint that if we make the effort to follow will enable us to assemble the most valuable of all commodities: the resilience we need to achieve victory in life.