



The Fuel of All Things Good

A recent issue of *Business Week* has stuck in my mind. The cover story is “The Case for Optimism,” and it is full of inspiring stories and studies showing that optimism works. Students of Zen Buddhism and those knowledgeable with the way our mind functions might be saying “duh” to this. And serious Zen students may find a chat about inspired optimism a bit lame and Pollyanna-ish. Yet our very society and life success is dependent on inspiration and optimism — the fuel of all things good.

I have been thinking about what we could learn about inspiration and optimism through a practical Zen prism. From my observations of successful and happy people, the roots of their power source go deep into a soil rich in optimism and inspiration. But why does one person’s root system choose a soil rich with these vital nutrients, while another’s withers in pessimism, inertia, and negativism? *Business Week* warns of failed companies and the resulting lost jobs for those silly enough to be uninspired. At the same time, my Zen muse, Dogan, is sitting on my shoulder saying, “Water the thoughts you wish to flower, weed the thoughts that are not helpful, and follow the eightfold path.”

With Dogan’s help we can further divide the paths into three categories: 1) interconnectedness and wisdom; 2) compassionate, proper, and ethical conduct; and 3) optimistic and inspired mental discipline. That seems more complex, but it really boils down to choices: we can choose to read, watch, and participate in activities that inspire us and show our fellow humans engaging in helpful and positive activities . . . or not. Discipline and practice — so simple, but as investments legend Warren

Buffett often muses, “Just because it’s simple doesn’t make it easy.”

So let’s make it even simpler and easier. What do optimists know that

THE BUDDHA chatted about the eightfold path in his first sermon after his enlightenment. The list is straightforward, powerful, and worth carrying in your wallet.

1. **Right View**
2. **Right Intention**
3. **Right Speech**
4. **Right Action**
5. **Right Livelihood**
6. **Right Effort**
7. **Right Mindfulness**
8. **Right Concentration**

others miss? Optimists realistically know that problems can be solved, and they have the faith in human nature to persevere, even when most are saying swear words like “can’t” and “impossible,” or are running to find friends that support their pessimism. Many readers of this column have experienced, firsthand, pay cuts, mortgage foreclosures, unemployment, bad schools, and overspending, and some feel hopeless about the future. I do not want to minimize the severity of such calamities, but I can say from experience that pessimism doesn’t help.

If you are feeling low or worried about the future, you may want to do what I do.

First, I go a few days where every hour, I pull out the eight noble truths from my wallet and re-read them, while connecting them to each moment of my day.

Second, no matter what happens, I smile at the learning, irony, or humor of the *calamity* of the moment (remember, suffering exists so that we have something to do).

Third, I pretend I am a happy, optimistic, and inspired person.

When I don’t feel like having the mental discipline to express my highest spiritual values, Master Dogan appears and hits me over the head with a brass pan. Simply said, there is no excuse for victim-oriented negative, pessimistic talk, actions, or behavior.

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