



Author of this essay:

[Ming Zhen Shakya, OHY](#)

(August 1996)

ZEN AND MONEY

by Ming Zhen Shakya

This week I'd like to discuss how cultivating the Zen attitude helps to avoid financial disasters.

Zen is an extremely practical religion. Aside from providing efficient methods and techniques for achieving exalted spiritual states, it offers some very common sense guidelines for living in the world.

Zen first requires that we have the courage to confront ourselves. Before we commit to a course of action we have to examine our motives. We have to be like Method-School actors who can't do a scene until they understand the psychology of an action. "What's my motivation?" they demand to know. Before we buy, invest, borrow, lend, co-sign, or enter into any kind of contract, we have to scrutinize our desires.

Let's recall Buddhism's Four Noble Truths: One, the ego's world is bitter and painful; Two, the cause of this bitterness and pain is craving; Three, there is a cure for this malady; and Four, the cure is to follow the Eightfold Path. And the essence of the Eightfold Path is simple self-awareness.

Craving, whether obsession or whim, is the desire for something; and that's what gets us into trouble. Why do we want what we want? We have to be ruthless in our analysis. We can't disguise desire with rationalization or sentimentality in order to convince ourselves that we are acting prudently or altruistically.

Before buying anything we need to ask, "Is this something I need or just something I want?" We should give desire a time test. "When did I decide I wanted to make the purchase? Was it something I planned to buy and then went looking for, or did I decide I needed the item right after I saw it or its advertisement?"

Impulsively made purchases are seldom appreciated beyond their period of novelty. So, especially with 'big ticket' items, we need to take time to get beyond the impulse, to free ourselves from being pressured into acting quickly. Professional sellers are adept at creating a

sense of urgency that we easily succumb to. They know that the irrational fear of losing out on a good deal will obstruct our good judgment.

Also, we ask ourselves, "How much of the purchase price will go to satisfy my need and how much of it will go to satisfy my ego?"

If we need a watch, we can buy an excellent timepiece for fifty dollars. We can also buy one for five thousand dollars. The difference in price doesn't have anything to do with knowing the correct time. It has to do with ego gratification or with maintaining an image, the persona of success.

If we need a new car to provide reliable transportation, we can buy one for fifteen thousand dollars. We can also pay fifty thousand. If we can't easily afford the model we choose, we should sit down and calculate its total cost... insurance premiums, registration fees, maintenance, repair. And if we intend to borrow money to make the purchase, we add-in the interest charges to see how much the item is really going to cost. The world is filled with dejected guys who bought flashy cars because they wanted to attract girls only to discover that after they met all the expenses they didn't have any money to date any of the girls they had attracted.

Always we need to look ahead to the long term care of a purchase. Silk shirts are nice, but they'll probably require dry cleaning every time they're worn. Aside from the expense, there's the inconvenience.

That cute little puppy with the impressive pedigree is going to grow up. He needs to be taken out for walks. There'll be Vet bills and license fees and food costs and grooming bills and pet insurance... and damage to rugs, furniture, and landscaping... and some chewed shoes and complaining neighbors.

We also have to resist the tendency we all have to be 'penny wise and pound foolish.' It's said that it's easier to get a Congressional Appropriations' Committee to approve the expenditure of billions for an atom-smashing cyclotron than it is to get them to approve ten thousand dollars for a public restroom in a park. The committee members don't know anything about nuclear physics and they don't have experience in funding such one-of-a-kind projects; and, having no way to challenge an expenditure, they quickly vote yes. But when it comes to the public restroom, one Congressman says, "Two thousand dollars for a roof! What is this, the Taj Mahal? I'm from Vermont and you could get Vermont slate for less than two thousand dollars." And another Congressman says, "A thousand dollars for landscaping? You could plant Texas bluebonnets in there for ten dollars and it would look one heck of a lot better." And they can go on like this for days.

Especially when making a big-ticket purchase or investment, we should ask ourselves, "Am I competent to make such a purchase?" If we're not experts, we should consult them.

Let me tell you about a businessman and his business - a small franchise company - that he successfully operated in Las Vegas some years ago.

This man, the owner, was a very pleasant sort of fellow. He was trying to establish a nationwide chain of confectionary outlets... the kind of shops you'd find in malls and such.

He had a pilot franchise, a kiosk, in one of the major Las Vegas resort hotels. It sold nuts and candy and had a fancy machine that made fresh nut butters... almond, peanut, cashew... all that sort of thing.

On the walls of his office were photographs of his various franchisees posing proudly outside their shops in different cities. The franchise operation had its distinctive logo-sign and color scheme - tan and green and orange - which identified the shops as members of the same chain.

Every few weeks, this businessman would go to a distant city - one preferably near a military base where there'd be a concentration of men who were near service retirement - and would likely have the ten thousand dollars needed to buy a franchise. This was a lot of money at the time. You could buy a nice house for under twenty-five thousand dollars in those days. Also, a military base gave the added advantage of providing a concentration of men who would be dispersing to various parts of the country. Since a franchise outlet has exclusive rights to a specific territory, he naturally didn't want all his prospective clients to come from the same area.

This businessman, the franchise operator, would rent a suite in a hotel and place an ad in the local papers; and then interested people would come and meet with him.

He had brochures and photographs of his various franchise outlets - especially the Las Vegas outlet - and copies of beautiful display ads that had appeared in magazines; and he'd explain the operation, how really it required no business skill at all - you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to sell candy and nuts - how the company would supply everything needed to get started, including initial advertising, and how he'd always be available for consultation.

He'd explain that the company would get 10% of the gross sales - which was more or less standard in franchise operations - and so, this being the Company's source of income, it was to the Company's advantage to see to it that its franchisees were successful. It was the kind of 'nuts and bolts' logic that anyone could understand.

The plan was that the new franchisee would find a business location in his selected city and the Company would dispatch an interior decorator to come and apply the distinctive paint scheme, logo sign, and get him "all set up to go." Also, if a franchisee wanted the exclusive rights to a large area, let's say the entire Cincinnati area, there was a price-break incentive. The potential franchisee could immediately see the advantage of having exclusive rights to a large area. He could exploit the cheap labor market, hire high school kids or folks on social security, and all he'd have to do was go around to his groups of outlets, supervise, and collect the money.

People liked the deal. Invariably they were enthusiastic and wanted to invest right on the spot. But this businessman said he didn't want anyone to buy anything sight unseen. So he'd refuse to accept any money or deposits until the potential franchisee was better informed and had first-hand knowledge of the operation. He wanted all questions answered before any contracts were signed. He insisted that good business sense demanded that the buyer see an actual franchise

operation... that he talk directly to another franchisee. This would pay off in better relations down the line. There would be no misunderstandings. This businessman was so sure of the quality of his operation that he'd offer to fly a potential client and one other person - friend, wife, girlfriend... whomever he wanted - to Las Vegas for the weekend. He'd pay for two roundtrip airplane tickets and two nights in a motel. The client and friend would have to supply their own meals. The businessman would pick them up at the airport and take them back, too.

He'd also take the client to the Strip hotel that had the operating franchise, and then he'd purposely walk away so that the client could speak privately with the operator and satisfy himself that everything was on the 'up and up' and that this businessman was, in fact, a decent and responsible guy to work with.

Who could ask for a better deal or a more honest approach? If the client was satisfied, then and only then would any money change hands. He'd go back to the office, sign the contract and write the check. And if the client wasn't satisfied with what he saw and heard, no harm done. He'd have gotten a free trip to Las Vegas.

But everybody was impressed and nobody ever just took advantage of the free trip. They all bought franchises.

And then the client - the new franchisee - would go home and scout out a location for his operation. After he found one he'd, of course, sign a lease and would have to come up with the necessary first and last month's rent and security deposits... and get a phone installed... and then the decorator would come and paint the place tan and green and orange and hang the sign outside where he'd take the photograph of the proud franchisee for the main office to hang on the wall.

And then the plumbing fixtures and the expensive display cases would arrive... COD; and the eight hundred-fifty dollar industrial-grade nut-grinding machine would arrive... COD; and the expensive cash register and commercial scale would arrive... COD; and the paper bags and other stationery items would come... COD; and the product would arrive - ordinary hard candies and nuts of ordinary quality but all wildly overpriced and all... COD.

And this wasn't what the client had expected. This wasn't "getting him started" in anything but the long slide into bankruptcy. What had he purchased for his ten thousand dollars? Good question. He had been led to believe that he'd be a "franchise operator" whatever that meant. He had had the idea that the company would own the equipment and that he'd just operate the outlet. Sure, he expected to have to buy the product and pay the company 10% of the gross sales of it, but not the furniture, fixtures, and supplies, or certainly not to pay so exorbitantly for them.

And what about the newspaper display ads that the new franchisee had ordered to announce his grand opening? Well, as verbally requested, he had turned the bills in to the office for reimbursement or direct payment, but the office never paid a dime to the newspapers and radio stations and they were coming after him for payment.

And whenever the client, who was frantic by then, would call, he'd be told that everything was clearly spelled out in the contract. And it WAS in perfect legal language.

And when the new franchisee discovered that the public wasn't beating a path to his door to buy these candies and nuts that they could buy at any supermarket for a fraction of the price, he'd get the idea that he had been defrauded and he'd go to see a lawyer and the lawyer would say, "Why are you seeing me now? It's too late! Look, you signed this contract in the State of Nevada, not in the State of Ohio. If you want to sue this fellow you'll have to go to Nevada and get a lawyer."

And the client would mentally add up the cost of doing that, and he'd soon see the folly of his ways. His "free trip" to Las Vegas had been a trick to get him into the State of Nevada to sign the contract.

If he had looked more carefully he'd have seen that that reassuring franchisee he had spoken to at the Las Vegas hotel outlet just happened to be the wife of that nice guy who sold him the franchise. But it never occurred to him to check the business license. He never checked anything.

In the office there was a locked file drawer filled with lawyers' correspondence from everybody who ever purchased a franchise from this company. In fact, in all the U.S.A. there was only one operating franchise... in Las Vegas. The others had all failed miserably.

And the "interior decorator" who came to apply the tan and green and orange paint? He was an unemployed relative of the owner.

The clients didn't get a nickel back. How could they? The owner owned nothing. Even the Cadillac he drove to the airport to pick up the potential clients was rented.

Sad to say, this scheme, though clearly unethical, was still more or less legal, and he knew it. Once, when asked if he felt at all guilty about taking the life savings of these men, he sneered, "Why should I feel guilty when I can always see the greed and lust in their eyes, especially when I tell them how they can tap the cheap labor market." And he bragged and explained, "The randy guys I tell to be sure to hire only pretty high school girls since they make the best sales personnel, and I can see them salivate thinking about the girls they'll be able to dominate. Why, some of them will actually ask their wife's parents to lend them the money to buy exclusive rights to an area so they'll have more girls to play with! And the greedy guys I tell to hire people on social security who are struggling to make ends meet, who'd be willing to work for peanuts. I'd joke and say, 'You really will be paying them in peanuts.' And they'd laugh. Oh, you can't cheat an honest man!"

But that's not true. You surely can cheat an honest man. But whenever I've been shortchanged or overcharged or cheated in some way, I wonder what the person who cheated me had mentally accused me of in order to justify the theft. So what can we learn from all this? Investigate before we invest? Sure. But we already knew that. See a lawyer before we sign a contract? Of course. But we already knew that, too.

So why, when we already know what we should do, do we allow ourselves to be swindled? It's simple. All an ego has to do is crave something, and it will sacrifice anything or anyone to get it.

Egotistical desires confuse our judgment. The images in our mind superimpose themselves, one on top of the other, a double or triple exposure. The desire for one thing colors or contaminates the desire for something else. The desire to go to Las Vegas infects the desire to be a small business owner. The ego wants to brag and gorge itself on notions of self-importance. Where's the swaggering potential in saying "I'm flying to Davenport for the weekend"? No. The ego wants to be A Player! It wants us to be able to say "I'm flying to Vegas for the weekend." If any one of those franchise buyers had picked up a phone and called any of the other franchisees whose photographs had been shown to him, he'd have uncovered the scam. But nobody was interested in Davenport or Rockford or Boise. Egos prefer Las Vegas.

OK. To do the Zen thing is to inspect our motives, to look ahead to the subsequent costs, and to realistically appraise our own competency. It's so clever to say, "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to sell nuts and candy". But what is the difference between marketing nuts and candy and marketing artichokes or surgical supplies? The market is the market. The laws of supply and demand apply to any market. In the particular scam I've just related most of the franchisees were career military men. How much did they really know about private enterprise? They never had to think about profit and loss. We know how government operates. Is this not the land of the free and the home of the six hundred dollar hammer? Why did these men desire to start a business at all? Other men welcomed retirement because it gave them time for reflection, spiritual development, recreation, study, or travel... Did these franchisees scoff at those other men? What did they think they knew that those other fellows didn't know? Why, so late in life, were they still so adventurously motivated by money? Why didn't they choose more conservative investments?

Why were they so incredibly trusting? What in their personalities made them respond to this con man's appeal? Was it because he was so friendly and they needed a friend - especially a friend who had such a big Cadillac. Did that car influence them? The con-man must have thought so. The only time he ever got it washed was when he went to the airport to pick up potential clients.

If we look deep enough we'll no doubt discover that these victims were all vulnerable because their egos craved admiration, respect, power... status. Egos crave glory and excitement and are therefore seduced by the promise of it... by glamour, which by definition is that "deceptive charm," that "spell that confuses" and destroys all common sense!

Self-control can be attained only after self-scrutiny. If we can't be honest with ourselves, we lose the moral right to expect other people to be honest with us.

Examine. Scale-down. Simplify. Peace is purchased by vigilance.