



What are the ways in which we can reach a Zen-like state when our heads are exploding with crippling financial anxiety?

Don't worry, be happy – no matter what



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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PEOPLE are going a bit crazy these days. Perhaps it's the scorching heat and smog choking them during hours stuck in traffic gridlocks. Or perhaps it's the multipronged ambush of inflation and shortages on all fronts – fuel, power, gas, food, dollars, everything. This is the time when everyone should perhaps adopt the delusional, sorry, “optimistic” philosophy of Pangloss, a character in Voltaire's satirical novel *Candide*. Pangloss, a tutor, teaches his naïve, young Candide that “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” So no matter what disasters befall Candide and his companions – murders, hangings, earthquakes – he believes in this mantra until his epiphany almost at the end of the novel, which we shall not dwell upon for now as we prefer the burying our heads in the sand position.

So, what are the ways in which we can reach a Zen-like state when our heads are exploding with crippling financial anxiety?

For starters, adopt the “less is more” motto. In fact, many of our fellow citizens already are. They are eating less and less of oil, meat, vegetables, even rice; in fact, some of them are on a water diet. The more privileged sections of society, who are afflicted by diseases caused by eating too much and working (in terms of physical labour) too less, can take lessons from the poor and lower middle class, and actually benefit health-wise through lower calorie intake and prolonged intermittent fasting.

The fuel crisis, too, can be seen as a blessing in disguise. With fewer buses on the road and public transport fares soaring like tidal waves, bicycling has become a desirable mode of transport. What's more, it gives people the workout they need, and for which many have to pay exorbitant sums in gym memberships. If you still don't know how to ride a bike – like some of us – and have no intention of trying to learn this skill, walking is the best option. And it is also free. If it's a distance as long as Uttara to Karwan Bazar, start before dawn and take breaks at the tea stalls. Don't worry about the spike in sugar levels from the syrupy

tea – you will soon be walking off the calories. Also, look at it as a challenging trek across a rugged territory. The rocks, sand, unpredictable holes in the ground and hostile animals (the human kind) all may be compared to the conditions of the Amazon. The lush vegetation can be imagined.

Of course, for some of us lazy people, neither option is feasible and we must be carried in some form of contraption that moves. Thus the government should now ban all buses, CNGs, private cars, etc and only allow pedal rickshaws and

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van *garis* – not the battery-operated ones, since they will require electricity to charge the batteries. Bicycle-sharing has already been introduced for the immobile yet adventurous types. From a macroeconomic view, unemployment may be eased.

What about load-shedding in the peak of summer? And that the price of electricity will be increased by 58 percent? Think of yourself as an eco-tourist who has deliberately sought out an existence without the modern contraptions of electric lights, fans and air conditioners. It may even mean going without Wi-Fi as well as mobile phones and laptops when their batteries die. Thus there will be many hours when you can meditate while getting a free sauna and get in touch with your inner self – all within the luxury of your brick, cemented walls. While not many city-dwellers have the option to go to the terrace to cool down *and* to “watch the stars” as they fall asleep, they can always get a hold of those traditional hand fans that will build their biceps, whether they are fanning themselves or others. It's all about going back to nature

or just going back... digital Bangladesh can wait. Again, for most residents of this fabulous concrete jungle, the breeze from swaying tamarind and fragrant *hasnahena* trees have to be figments of the imagination. You may also want to emulate those people whose bedrooms are the pavements, and beds a pile of newspapers or a bamboo *jhuri* (basket); then you can get all the open sky, wind, rain and visits from the mini vampires you like.

Our traditional resilience and innovative spirit, therefore, will keep us not quite aloft perhaps, but at least breathing. At this point, we must laud the innovativeness of the government to help foreign countries that are also going through economic hell, by importing vital items. So we will be importing diesel at higher prices since we kind of forgot (since 1968) to update our very own oil refinery that does not have the capacity to refine or store the crude oil (that could have produced the diesel). The good news for those naysayers, who think we should have made some savings before the price hikes by buying the crude oil when prices were low, is that a proposal for increasing the capacity is underway and has been “fast-tracked” – we have already passed 10 years since it was proposed – just a matter of a few more decades before we have the capacity that could save a mere Tk 2,500 crore per year. Our great-great-grandchildren may actually get to see this miracle in their lifetime.

In fact, the extent of our generosity – to others – is truly mind-blowing. Instead of going for gas exploration using our own Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) to extract the gas that experts say would have solved a major portion of our energy demands, we have decided to opt for importing LNG (liquefied natural gas) no matter how much their prices fluctuate. We will also continue to pay the thousands of crores in capacity charges to foreign and local quick rental power plants, in dollars. They may not be producing any electricity, but at least we know they have the capacity to do so.

The road ahead, therefore, needn't be perceived so bleakly, but with positivity. If things are bad, there must be a good reason for it. It's time we stopped listening to the experts – what do they know? We have almost reached Candide's Eldorado, a land where there is no crime and therefore no courts, and where citizens have no use for the abundant gold and gems around as all their needs are met by the government. Imagination is more important than knowledge, said Einstein. And in the present times, ignorance is definitely bliss.

THE TAIWAN QUESTION

Peace is good for all, but why do some still prefer conflict?



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SOME of you may remember the American think tank called “Project for the New American Century” (PNAC) founded in 1997 by a group of academics and neo-conservative politicians. It advocated for total global military domination by the US four years before the 9/11 terrorist incident. In a letter to President Bill Clinton and others, it demanded action against Iraq including regime change. Many called this letter the blueprint of the Iraq War. Of the 18 who signed it, 10 got senior positions under President George W Bush's administration (e.g., Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld).

Bush took over as the 43rd American president in January 2001. Ominously, PNAC predicted just before the 2000 election that the Middle East's alignment with American interest would come slowly unless there were “some catastrophic and catalysing event, like a new Pearl Harbour.” In September, that

influence of the hawks in Washington. Then came the trade war, tech war, and cyber war. The incumbent superpower is now ominously sliding towards a military confrontation with the rising one.

As with any rising power, China wants to be in control of its immediate neighbourhood that includes the South China Sea and, of course, Taiwan, the unfinished task of the Communist victory in 1949. But the US, with the dominant role it has secured after the Second World War, won't let that happen. With the onset of the Ukraine conflict, and with Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, the US is perhaps playing the endgame of the post-WW2 Cold War. It may even end up dismembering Russia, the last bastion of the now defunct Soviet Union. With that, it will get closer to China's western borders through more compliant Central Asian states, bolstering its China containment policy. Since the 1970s, Washington has been playing



Both the US and China are now preparing for war.

PHOTO: DADO RUVIC/REUTERS

catastrophe came as the Twin Towers' cataclysmic collapse. America attacked Afghanistan instantly with massive firepower, then Iraq in 2003, both on flimsy grounds and ending in disasters for millions, turning the world into a more dangerous place than before. With its mission accomplished, PNAC slowly disappeared by 2005. However, the neoconservatives and their military-industrial allies are still shaping America's foreign and military policies through other such organisations, such as the Washington DC-based think tank Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

In April, CNAS arranged a war game simulating an all-out Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The exercise concluded that the US should send more arms to Taiwan and build stronger military alliances in the Indo-Pacific with Australia and Japan. It should also shore up its bases in the region with more long-range, precision-guided weapons and under-sea capabilities. Another such organisation is the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). It predicts that Beijing will launch a surprise attack on Taiwan and American targets in the western Pacific.

Instead of ignoring such provocations, Washington is flirting with the possibility of another war that might trigger a worldwide catastrophe. Encouraging Taiwan to declare independence and angering China with high-profile visits is extremely dangerous and irresponsible. A conflict with China over Taiwan will make Ukraine look like a preview, not the war, as Professor Andrew MacLeod of King's College London, has warned.

But both the US and China are now preparing for war. With increasing military might, China is more aggressive than ever in tone and actions. The US is also strengthening its regional alliances and military bases. Once unthinkable, war is now perhaps improbable but not impossible. After years of mutually beneficial economic cooperation, the US declared China a “strategic competitor” in 2017, reflecting the growing

China against Russia. Now that Russia's power is declining, America's focus has shifted to the remaining adversary: China.

But with a dominant economy and a commensurate military power, China is doing exactly what every superpower in history has done. The US expanded over the North American continent by war, conquest, and migration. Then it set up overseas empires through the Spanish-American War of 1898 when the European powers were scrambling for colonies in Africa and Asia. The First World War saw the collapse of the German, Russian Czarist, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the rise of Communist Russia and Nazi Germany. Then followed the Japanese Empire's rise in the 1930s.

During this period, China experienced the “century of humiliation” from 1840 to 1949 when it was at the mercy of Western colonial powers. It ended with a communist victory and the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC). With its newfound strength, Beijing now wants to rewrite that century from a position of strength.

But make no mistake. The US reaps significant benefits from trading with China. According to US official data, its China-based companies sold products worth USD 379 billion in 2019, more than double the value of US exports to China. With this money, many companies reinvested in R&D to develop cutting-edge technologies bolstering America's position as a leader in innovation. China has also hugely gained from US trade and saw a five-fold economic growth, adjusted for inflation, compared to 2001. It is this growth that has lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty.

But there is another crucial aspect of this epic rivalry. Taiwan produces 92 percent of the world's advanced chips that run everything from cars to medical equipment to fighter jets to missiles to satellites to supercomputers. Both America and China want to control it, even if that involves war. Without advanced chips, there will be no superpower.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Racket

5 Reach across

9 Women's quarters

11 Garage buy

13 Peace goddess

14 Put in office

15 Settle the bill

16 Try for enrollment in

18 Patsies

20 Crew need

21 Apartment worker

22 Trial group

23 Way off

24 Orange tuber

25 Sweater material

27 Neighbor of Egypt

29 Slip

30 Funny

32 Thief's crime

34 Georgia airport code

35 Place

36 Extreme

38 Throw

39 Parrot

40 Iditarod need

41 Quick kiss

DOWN

1 Fleet makeup

2 Jewelry units

3 Shocked question

4 Fellows

5 Dance makeup

6 Pharmacy unit

7 "Did I do something wrong?"

8 Sweet drink

10 Paltry

12 Account

17 For each

19 Milky stone

22 Green stone

24 "That looks delicious!"

25 Like Dylan Thomas

26 Gives an address

27 Heir, often

28 Acid type

30 Handed over

31 Typewriter sound

33 Spelunking site

37 Jar part

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