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Cash is not king but the brain is

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"IT is better to be bankrupt than dead". These are the words of Sirivat Voravetvuthikun, the Thai multi-millionaire turned sandwich peddler. He is probably one of the thousands of former tycoons, moguls and barons of Southeast Asia who, with one stroke of the invisible hand, have gone from riches to rags.

Sirivat's courage and determination in facing the current economic turbulence is something many of us should emulate; the never-say-die attitude, the positive thinking and the holding on to the "when the going gets tough, the tough gets going" maxim.

His willingness to venture into a new, albeit unpretentious line of work has saved him from possible annihilation. Barely five months after the inevitable switch, his sandwich business is now worth a few million dollars. Theoretically, he is now back to being a millionaire again.

Of course, many others have not been as lucky as the sandwich-man. Although we are furnished daily with facts and figures on the state of the country's economy, the more subtle effects on the psychology of the people remain obscure.

Very few reports have focused on how Malaysians are coping with the stress. We have been fortunate that, unlike other countries facing the current economic downturn, suicide is almost unheard of.

It seems, therefore, that Malaysians are taking things in their stride. Perhaps the words of comfort and confidence from both local and international political leaders, economists and financiers have provided the psychological support.

The latest being Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's assertion that Malaysia can re-emerge as the region's economic powerhouse through close local and foreign corporate sector co-operation, and with a clear vision and proactive strategies.

And this week, Standard and Poor's report says that this country is a relative pillar of strength among East Asian countries, as it has been able to stabilise the economy, despite the currency depreciation late last year.

Or, maybe, the "rough and tough" Malaysians, a genre envisaged in the second challenge of Vision 2020 is already in the making. To get us back on the trail, the challenge is about creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished, and robust enough to face all manner of adversity.

During the time of crisis, many have proposed the need to draw from our inner strength. But what is this intrinsic strength? Do we all have it? Yes, the inner strength is already built-in within us. It actually resides in our head. We sometimes take it for granted, though.

The brain and the mind are probably assets many of us tend to under utilise. It has an almost boundless ability. The number of cells dedicated to the brain per se is in the region of hundreds of trillions. If one cell is equated to one byte of the computing memory, then with the human brain we are dealing with a system in the range of terabytes.

Can you imagine the possible permutations that can be derived from a computing power of such magnitude? Added to this, the brain cells can perform both parallel and serial or hierarchical processing without much fuss. In terms of computing power it is the ideal machine.

The brain is also where our life resides. Even medical practitioners now accept the fact that if you are brain dead, then you are truly gone. The beating of the heart and the rhythmic breathing are mere physical manifestations of life. You can use machines to make them happen.

But as for the brain, once it stops functioning, thus far, there is no way of bringing it back to life again.

All of us, save the most unfortunate few, are blessed with this dream machine in our head. There is no outlay involved. The cost of using it is also negligible. Mostly, it just needs the oxygen from the air that we breathe in for free, and the nutrition which we naturally take to satisfy our hunger.

Therefore the most pressing task we are faced with is to strengthen the brain's software, that is the mind. Make sure that we do not lose it. How do you do this? Being depressed is one way of risking losing our minds. That is the time when one feels that life is not worth living.

Depression is manifested in many forms, from seasonal depressions that come and go with the short days of the haze, to chronic depression that lingers for months. Among the symptoms of clinical depression are weight loss, early waking, diminished sex drive and general hopelessness.

However, not everyone going through the blues have depression. Feelings of sadness, frustration and unhappiness are normal reactions to real-life problems. These include a painful loss, a failed relationship and personal conflicts. These conditions are referred to by the psychiatrists as "adjustment disorders".

A simple rule of thumb differentiates between the relatively harmless "adjustment disorder" and the potentially harmful depression. If the symptom gradually clears up as the problem subsides, then it is most probably the former. Otherwise, clinical depression may prove to be the most possible diagnosis.

It has been said that many of us have gone through one form of depression or another. At any one time, it is estimated that ten per cent of Malaysians are going through depression.

This is not surprising. Looking at the suicidal way some Malaysians drive the car, which is one the probable symptoms of depression, the ten per cent figure is grossly underestimated. Furthermore, in the current economic situation, there are reasons to believe that depression is always on the lurk.

The brain consists of complex groups of cells which, most of the time, communicate with one another through chemical messengers. The chemicals which also regulate the functioning of the brain need to be kept in balance, If not, the brain may be "disregulated".

Chemical imbalances may occur due to certain stimuli from the environment. The way we perceive changes in the environment, such as the movement of the stock market index, the foreign exchange rates, the trade figures, or even the smile of a beautiful lass, will cause some temporary changes in the brain's chemical balance.

It is imperative that this balance be quickly restored. Otherwise, the persistent stimulus can become a stressful one and the disregulation of the brain becomes irreversible. This downward spiral may be unstoppable.

Thus, the most important thing is to realise that when the stimulus hits, the brain must be strong enough to withstand the pressure. A strong mind can alleviate the effects of the stimulus.

This strong mind is built through conscious evaluation of oneself. It is time to stop for a while and think about how to use the trillion bits of information which we already have incorporated into our brains.

All of us have gone through life, and have seen what is good and what is not. We have faced a barrage of television and radio messages on how to

deal with this life. We actually have a lot of the much-needed input in our brain. Now is the time to use it.

For example, in moments of hardship, focus all your attention to perform only the rational acts. Avoid thinking negatively. Whatever stimulus that goes into the brain, use it to your advantage. Should you start to have that sinking feeling, quickly call out for help.

Drug therapy is now available for professionally diagnosed depressed patients. Nine out of ten cases are responsive to this form of treatment.

One other way of getting over the blues is through what is known as religious psychotherapy. For Muslims, this can include sessions such as reading the Holy Quran and performing prayers. In any case, it is best to go back to using our brain and mind more often. After all, cash is not king. The brain is.