

BEING A WARRIOR

1. WARRIOR'S BATTLEGROUND

Military service leaves an enormous imprint on the life of any soldier, sailor, airman, or marine, even long after that service has formally ended. It trains you to respect chain of command, to maintain disciplines of dress, conduct, mission integrity, equipment usage, and many other things. It inculcates heartfelt loyalty to your unit and your nation, and demands that you act selflessly in defense of them. If your service has led you directly into combat, it may demand that you sacrifice your life. Obviously, this is *not* an ordinary job! It's a way of thinking, a way of life, and it frequently brings soldiers face to face with the harshest, most dangerous aspects of human experience, something their training is meant to prepare them for.

But what that training may never have prepared you for is the psychological and spiritual aftermath of war. More subtly, it may never have taught you how to work with your mind outside of the very specialized characteristics of the military world. You can't approach a civilian life in exactly the same way as you lived in the military, just as you can't behave on peacetime streets like you would in a war zone.

In a fundamental human sense, whether you're a military veteran who's survived the most horrific action or someone who has lived a completely ordinary civilian life, there's no avoiding having to deal with your mind. It's the basis of how you think, feel, and react to your world, and without understanding it well and truly knowing how to work with it, your perceptions can be distorted, your choices can be off base, and the results of those choices can harm yourself and the people around you. Such harm can come through one mean word all the way up to an act of blind, senseless violence. Not understanding yourself deeply or clearly seeing the world around you has significant consequences.

This is what the practice of mindfulness is meant to address.

Facing Your Mind

How well do you *really* know your mind? If your daughter does some minor thing wrong, like putting a jar back in the wrong place, and you take her head off for it, do you know your mind? If you can't sleep through the night because there's so much tension in you down below the surface, do you really *know* your mind?

What if the people you've most cared about—parents, spouse, children—you find you have trouble relating to now? What if you can't perceive a future with creative possibilities and instead see only a discouraging darkness? What if you feel things that haunt and distract you such that you'll do anything to avoid them, like spending all your time drunk? What if you can't appreciate something simple, like sunlight glittering on snow or a phone call from an old friend?

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First Lieutenant Lyndsey Lyons, who served in Afghanistan, discusses the confusion and doubt that can surround one's time in service:

With serving, there's a great feeling of pride that comes with that. But then you can begin to question that: What did I serve? Who did I serve? Did it make a difference? Was it worth it? You can look at your life, and say, "My life's now a mess, but it was in service to someone else," so there can be some peace to that. But vets may come back, having killed a lot of people, and their marriages fall apart, their life becomes a mess, and what was it all for?

It will take making a journey into yourself to really experience what's going on there. The only way out of this dilemma is going through it.

Understanding any of these issues comes with recognizing how the mind has become captured and frozen in the past and no longer has a *now*, a present that's compelling and positive. As we'll see, it's not only the problem of men and women enduring war trauma or, clinically, Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS). The everyday way we freeze and solidify our mental patterns leads us into states of disconnection from ourselves and others, even without traumatic experiences that increase the difficulty exponentially. We can come to terms with this problem by facing our minds without avoidance, to see what's actually there and what actually isn't.

The practice of mindfulness is essentially very simple: *paying attention to what's occurring in the present moment*. We attend to what we're doing and thinking, and to what's going on around us.

Don't we do this anyway? If we're studying for a test, we have to pay attention to our study materials as we're reading and committing them to memory, or likely we fail the test. If we're driving at 70 mph on the throughway, we need to know what's going on around us, the traffic nearby, the road conditions, the visibility. Without this quality of attention, we could never have made it this far.

First Sergeant Crystal Martin, retired from the Army and struggling with her health, experienced an immediate change in herself on her first day of learning to meditate, but not a change to something totally new:

I'd been sick for quite a while, and seemed to lose some of my faculties. I was on like 25 different drugs. Simple tasks had become hard to do. Even just using the stick shift in my car was a challenge to keep my brain focused. I had been in three different serious car accidents in one year and got four speeding tickets. I finally realized I wasn't paying attention to the road. I remember as I sat there, practicing meditation for the first time, I experienced my mind clearing,

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and it was magic. That first day after meditating, when I got in the car, I was completely different. Normally I was really scattered mentally, but suddenly I could see the traffic very clearly ahead and could negotiate it easily; it seemed like I'd reclaimed my brain.

So we're not discussing something completely new or foreign to ourselves. We're talking about a natural capacity of our minds to attend to what's happening.

The more we can develop this capacity, the more powerful and capable our minds become. Though it's nothing new, we may never have focused this power of mind on the mind itself. Have we looked deeply at our thought process to understand how it works and what thoughts are? We may not get how thoughts become emotions and how emotions can in turn dominate and control us. We can fail to see how dwelling on beliefs can poison and imprison us. The mind has tied us in knots, but we haven't figured out how to unravel it. We may never recognize that there *is* a way out of this dilemma, if only we would face the mind and understand how it works.

Being a Warrior

While the practice of mindfulness is simple and direct, what it's looking at can be complicated and disconcerting. To say this more personally, when looking at ourselves, we often fear what we'll see. If we have combat experience or we've been traumatized in other circumstances, the intensity of our memories and feelings can rise to an unbearable, overwhelming degree. It might be the very last place we want to look.

But that doesn't mean those states of mind don't have a lot of power over us. If we spend all our time trying to control those thoughts and feelings, stuffing them down where we think we don't have to feel them, we're not actually *getting rid* of them. In fact, they are dominating everything we do, the elephant in the room no amount of blindfolding ourselves will push out the door.

As we've discussed, the military trains soldiers in principles of discipline, loyalty, and selflessness, with the goal of sending them into the worst possible circumstances where they may encounter intense emotional and physical struggle, facing destruction and death, and still perform with bravery and distinction. While this seems like the ultimate challenge and proving ground of bravery, bravery doesn't end when the tour of duty finishes.

It may take a considerable amount of bravery to confront your own mind, particularly in the aftermath of traumatic events. Even without trauma, we often don't want to look too closely at feelings that make us uncomfortable or memories that disturb us. We're quick to find distractions that take us away from feelings of dissatisfaction, depression, shame, and so on. We might bury ourselves in our work, or

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find the video game console, or reach for the liquor cabinet so we don't have to feel our own feelings. It's not the bravery of the warrior to duck conflict rather than showing up for it. When the conflict rages *inside* you, how far away can you run, when it comes right down to it?

Mindfulness practice has existed for thousands of years. Long ago, back in its origins, mindfulness practitioners connected the practice to being a warrior, describing it in the terms of warriorship: being brave, confronting the enemy, maintaining discipline, sharpening your skills, overcoming adversity, completing your mission, and attaining victory.

The famous Chinese monks of Shaolin Monastery took this approach even farther through training themselves rigorously in the martial art of kung fu. They used martial arts as a way to develop body/mind synchronization, a potent quality of energetic life-force, and an unwavering, one-pointed sense of personal discipline. While they had to, upon occasion, violently engage with bandits or others who came to bully and rob the locals or the temple, their sense of warrior's code always saw combat as a last resort to prevent cruelty and unnecessary deaths on both sides. The outer form of their warrior training was meant to train the warrior *inwardly*, to overcome the *internal warfare* of aggression and selfishness.

Similarly, the enemy we're discussing here is no longer external—it's your own afflictive emotions, your ignorance and habituation, your own doubt, fear, and hatefulness. Your weapons aren't for piercing and dismembering other people; they're your own intelligence, your power of attention, and your capacity for compassion. Just as surely as being on an actual battlefield took courage, confronting the raw truth of your own psychology and wounded spirit may at times take just as much.

To fully be a warrior means facing the situation as it is, and you won't be a warrior until you're willing to do it.

Rediscovering the Present Moment

The present moment, in the way we're discussing it here, is the warrior's battleground. It's a battle purely in the sense that the mind tends to avoid it. It prefers instead habitual patterns of thinking that it clings to in place of opening to things as they are right now. There's an essential fear of letting go and opening up. Instead it seems safer to stick with your assumptions and dwell in your usual reactions. It's predictable; it's what you know.

But the present moment has a quality of being free of all the ideas we impose upon it. We impose so many ideas, we hardly notice it at all. We're so confused, in fact, we fail to see that *the present moment is all there is*. We tend to assume that somehow the past continues to take place and that the future is inevitable. Well, if you look closely at

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your mind as it happens, the past is composed of memories that take place in the present; the future is only a current imagination of what hasn't happened yet. If you think back on when you mowed the lawn yesterday afternoon, you're remembering that now; when you did the mowing, it was in the present, but now that present has passed away. You look out your window and the lawn looks trimmed and neat, but already the grass has grown since you cut it yesterday. By the same token, you could plan to mow the lawn tomorrow, but it rains instead, and whatever you're imagining will happen never takes place.

Therefore how we think about things tends to displace the present moment, and we dwell in the past or the future as if thoughts about the past or future are taking place in those times, and the memory or the projection we're having is really happening, like it's the thing itself.

Similarly, when it comes to the present moment, we're always imposing something on it. We're telling ourselves about it, fitting it into some preconceived idea, reacting with some well-worn emotional impulse: "I can't be bothered with going to see my daughter's play"; "I hate this job"; "I think that son of a bitch just insulted me!" We're always coming up with a commentary, an explanation, or some kind of mental noise to fill in the space and filter out our experience.

What if we stopped filtering?

The main way to train in mindfulness is sitting meditation. In that practice, we discipline ourselves to let go of thoughts and bring our attention to our breathing. The use of breathing isn't intended to produce some kind of buzz or "high." Instead, the intention is to bring the mind into synchronization with the body, establishing an awareness of the present moment, free of imposed thinking. It's in the present moment that we can begin to contact another quality in ourselves, one that's clear, alert, and at peace. We can only contact it here, in the present. We won't find it anywhere else.

Gateway to Clarity

Over thousands of years, mindfulness practitioners –warriors on the path of the present moment–have discovered an underlying strength and healthiness of mind that's unconditional. It's not destroyed by trauma or drug delusion or extreme emotional distress. It's something we're born with and we die with. It's something we can access and bring out of ourselves, but we may have no idea it's there and a part of who we are. Instead, it's buried under layers of garbage–mental junk and emotional distortions and unexamined assumptions. It's all our internal chatter and damaged case histories that we take to be solid and true, but these only function to block out the deeper power and brilliance of the mind. The first is temporary; the second is the nature of who we are.

We won't uncover that nature unless we bring the mind into synchronization

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with the body in the present moment. This is the gateway into a fuller understanding of the mind and its many positive qualities. Normally we're gripping tightly to our thoughts and habits, struggling to maintain some superficial sense of who we understand ourselves to be, trying to ward off confusion and pain. But the tighter we hold, the more intense that layer of confusion becomes. We can get so locked into this that nothing else seems real, and think that any efforts we make to do things differently or to change our point of view won't make any difference at all.

You could especially believe, thanks to the horrors of war, that you're condemned to your trauma and alienation, and that you somehow deserve this outcome –or, at least, you're stained with it such that there's no removing from you what happened.

But as much as the mind can be trapped into circling in on itself over and over and over again, it nevertheless has the potentiality to understand and release the past, and to come into the present fully and powerfully. There's no way to change what has happened, but there is a way to evolve through it, to use it as a way forward. You can work with how your mind is now. Things that happen in the military might be deeply stamped in your consciousness, but they're not carved in rock. The mind is malleable, and its thoughts and impressions are temporary and changeable, including the harshest, sharpest wounds, as long as you have the courage to take the warrior's journey and the heart to face who you are.