

20. EXAMINING HARDENED BELIEFS

In Section V we'll discuss methods you can apply to ease your inner tension and stuckness, and help you open to the experience of moral injury in a way that can bring out your wisdom.

In this chapter we'll present some contemplation and awareness practices that can help loosen your view of yourself and encourage some fresh air to come into the cocoon.

Analyzing Extreme Beliefs

One important way we maintain the cocoon is continually building up certain thoughts about "how things are." You may have gone into the military with one set of beliefs, but come back with another one. An extremism can typify this thinking. There's not a total spectrum of possibility anymore; it's been replaced by a bitter absolutism. It's a thinking where things get glued in place, fixed in hardened cement. Maintaining these thoughts without genuinely examining them helps solidify the cocoon, as you sink down farther and farther into its darkness.

Therefore it's important to examine your thinking objectively and come to understand its sense of imposed limitations.

This could be done in formal sitting meditation posture. You would sit for a while, settle your mind some, and then examine one of these topics. You could also do this in more comfort, if that would support you better, like sitting in bed or on the sofa or alone in a park.

It might also be helpful to do this in writing, on a pad or a computer—which could help you organize your thoughts and see them more clearly when you're done.

Whatever situation you choose, the main idea is to do this in a tranquil, unhassled setting where you can feel free to focus and investigate if you fall into any of these categories of distorted thinking, and in what ways.

1. A Black and White View

This tends to ignore any ambiguities or contrary examples. It's all one way and can never be another. For instance, you may tell yourself, "I can't trust anyone." You've lived in extremely dangerous situations where you only trusted your unit, and now that you're back home, you retain your sense of nervous survival, while you no longer trust your family or civilians in general. Therefore, ask yourself these questions:

–Are all civilians dangerous? Are they out to harm me?

–Is my family dangerous? Would they try to kill me?

–Do my friends really want the worst for me? Is the bus driver truly out to harm me?

While it may be that civilians have little or no real sense of what took place when you were in the military, does that mean that they're all genuinely untrustworthy and uncaring?

So you're detecting absolutism of this sort and deliberately challenging it. What are counter-examples to

your thinking? What are the situations where your belief simply doesn't apply or make sense?

2. Total Pessimism

You think that only the worst result is possible and nothing else can occur. For instance, you say, "I'm ruined—I'll never feel happy or good again"; "I'll never be able to relate to my family, no matter what I do"; "I can't control anything in my life"; "There's no reason for me to live."

An obvious question to ask here is, "How do you know that's true?" If you feel bad today, how do you know that it won't be some other way tomorrow or next year? If you related well to your family in the past, what makes you so certain that it's lost forever? There are many things in your life you can't control (just as in the lives of everyone else); what do you genuinely have control over?

2nd Lt Finney describes being chained to these rigid kinds of ideas:

Guilt is our assessment of our own actions. Then there's the regret, and me trying to rewrite the ending that can't be changed. Then there's shame, which plays into so many different things. Sometimes it's why we don't let people get to know us. We think: "I'm not worthy of love, of respect." There's a sense of attaching ourselves to these labels and experiences that we absorb as part of our self-identity—it's how we lose our-

selves. We latch onto those things and lose sight of the bigger picture. It's possible to have the equanimity that I made a mistake, but *I'm* not a mistake; I failed to do something, but *I'm* not a failure.

You have some potential to control your own mind, your speech, and your actions through mindfulness. Most especially, you're learning how these kinds of assertions aren't truly solid; they come and go. If you repeat them to yourself constantly, they could start to seem like reality, but it's a reality you've invented without attending carefully to what's going on in your mind. Therefore, consider other possibilities, and let them become a part of your thinking. Is there no reason to live if there's still love in your heart? Is there truly no reason to go on, once you see you don't have to cling to these self-hating states of mind? Start to look around and find what lies outside of your condemnation.

3. Assumptions about Other People's Judgments

This particularly relates to paranoia concerning what others think of you, assuming they have negative judgments toward you, though you have little or no evidence of that. You may think they regard you as a loser or a failure. You read into them attitudes that aren't necessarily related to how they feel. Does the waitress—who just met you—really think you're not employable or worthy of respect? Does your old teacher from school gen-

uinely look down on you since you returned from your tour? How do you know they might not be feeling other things?—after all, *you can't read their minds*. You may have reacted strongly to your interactions with different people, but does that mean they felt what you're telling yourself they felt?

In this way, you might see how you're imposing your own self-judgment onto others, so that it seems like everyone's rejecting you, while it's you who are rejecting and looking down on yourself.

4. "If Only I Had..."

"If only I had steered the Humvee a little closer to the middle of the road..."; "If only I hadn't pulled the trigger..."; "If only I had acted a split second sooner..." There's no end to this kind of thought. It may be inevitable when something tragic happens, and you feel responsible. Naturally, you analyze it and try to understand what you should have or could have done so that things would have turned out well instead of tragically.

But of course, what you can't change is what you actually *did do*. Dwelling here tends to put you into a spin cycle of absorption in the past driven by self-recrimination.

In this case, as we discussed with the arising of emotions, it's important to reflect on all the conditions involved. It wasn't one thing that happened, like your own failure to act differently. Often you could not have acted in any other way given the circumstances.

For example, if you were sent out on patrol, got trapped in an ambush, and some of your buddies died, who is ultimately responsible for that? The commander who set the patrol schedule? The commanding officer, who could have chosen another route? The enemy, hidden in the landscape? What about the other soldiers who fought back? Did the weather play a part? Would you ever have been able to stop what happened, even if you were able to go back through it again?

The point here is to recognize and accept that multiple circumstances were taking place, with few, if any, you could control. If everything seemed normal but suddenly became overwhelmingly violent, there's very little time in which to evaluate what happened. Going over and over and over the same ground may make it seem like you had time to have chosen another way, but if you're honest, you can see how the circumstances trapped everybody, and whatever else you could have chosen might only be there because you've thought about it a thousand times, not as something genuinely available to you at the moment when the whole situation went sideways into chaos. Recognize how all these things contributed to the loss of life, not only your own actions.

But even for situations in which there was time and there was a choice, and you made the wrong one and caused terrible harm, examine how the total set of circumstances pushed you that direction. This isn't to absolve you of any personal responsibility, but for you to find a way to illuminate the whole collection of conditions you fell into.

–What environment were you in? A city, going from house to house? Desert, mountains, jungle?

–What was the mentality of your unit? On edge? Exhausted? Outraged?

–What kind of things were you feeling and thinking? Was anyone else influencing you, pressuring you?

–What came up inside you when the difficult situation arose? What kind of emotion?

–Was there some kind of unexpected, triggering event? Did things swerve out of control? How did that happen?

You need to gain an understanding of how the circumstances dragged you forward, maybe into an erratic state or a state of fury where your actions produced bad results. You can't change what happened, but you can *understand* what happened as a basis of evolving beyond it. We'll talk more below about dealing with an action or actions you regret. What's crucial here is to understand what happened to you, what came out of you, and how that came about through the conditions you were in. Knowing this, it becomes possible to guard against your mind getting dragged back into similar states and falling into similar actions. You come to an understanding of the challenges you were facing and the mistakes you made.

5. Cosmic Condemnation

If you had a religious upbringing or religious beliefs, especially of the kind that believe in God as a figure of ulti-

mate judgment, then you may also narrow this down into a stuck belief as well. If you've had horrific experiences in war, you may come to think that there's no such thing as God because you weren't protected from the terrible experiences you endured. On the other hand, you may feel completely condemned: "God will never forgive the things I've done."

In the first case, you've assumed that God will somehow prevent the savagery human beings have been doing to each other since the beginning of time. Is that truly who God is and is that how God works? What are your assumptions about God? Are those accurate to, say, the teachings of Jesus in the Bible?

The second belief, though, is perhaps more insidious. It's a sense of being completely and utterly condemned for all time, that your transgressions are so abhorrent, so inexcusable, that you only deserve the fires of Hell.

But why can't you ask for God's forgiveness? Consider this: If God is a being of infinite power, infinite love, and infinite forgiveness, why do you feel God's incapable of forgiving *you*?

There's someone here who's unforgiving, but it's not necessarily God.

Breaking Down the Conceptual Cocoon

What all these styles of distorted thinking have in common is clinging to an extreme view at the expense of all others, and generating a harsh sense of judgment-per-

haps toward other people, toward the “enemy,” toward the military or your country, but essentially toward yourself. The focus on any one of these kinds of thoughts narrows everything down so that you feel like you’ve got a grip somehow on what happened, on “reality.” It secures you in the cocoon, and though that starts to turn into an iron prison cell, at least it gives you an interpretive handle on some terrible, ambiguous, hard-to-fathom events.

Nevertheless, dwelling on these thoughts like they’re the truth, and constantly reiterating them to yourself, continuously reinforces the conceptual structure of beliefs that only maintain confusion, sorrow, and suffering. They hold you in; they take away your freedom and creative potential.

Learning to recognize these thoughts, bringing them into awareness, challenging their assumptions, letting them go and coming back to the present moment will chip away at your bondage, and open a way to get to the heart of the matter.