

### 3. TAKING THE WARRIOR'S SEAT

#### *Courage and Gentleness*

A soldier's training and life focus on accomplishing tasks—mundane tasks on the base and dangerous missions in the field. It's a realm of energized, organized activity, meant to reach a goal, complete a mission. It's about taking *action* and getting *results*.

But what we're talking about here might seem antithetical: sitting down and doing nothing.

We can bring mindfulness to any activity we do, but first we must learn *how* to be mindful at the most essential level, how that feels in our bones. Then we'll be able to apply that understanding in action.

We'll describe in detail how to do the sitting meditation technique and other mindfulness practices, but to begin with it's important to understand the attitude to take toward the practice and to have a sense of how it evolves.

You sit down, settle yourself, straighten your posture, and bring your attention to the breath, feeling your mind flow with it. There's nothing between you and the direct experience of your body and mind. We call this "taking your seat." It's a place of power and perspective. You assume a sense of dignity where you can feel and examine what's happening inside yourself. You're not theorizing what's going on; you're actually looking.

We can insist that we're *this way* or we're *that*, that this thing is *good* and that thing is *bad*. What we haven't done is really looked to see what's there, what's

happening inside ourselves. Much of our resistance to this comes from fearing what we might find, as well as a basic aggression towards ourselves that's not accepting of who we are and what we feel.

We may fear feeling uncomfortable if we slow down our busyness. We might fear—correctly—that painful states of mind could arise. We could fear there's something terrible about ourselves lurking underneath it all, something we don't know about. Most of all, for soldiers, there's fear of trauma surfacing, from combat or some other harsh, hard situation.

The bravery of facing your thought process requires something further—an essential gentleness toward yourself. If you have a hard, unforgiving attitude toward the world, it's likely you hold the same attitude toward yourself at a subtle level. If you feel shame and guilt about things you've done or failed to do, being with your mind can easily turn into torturous condemnation. The attitude of self-aggression simply will not help. It merely adds to the chaos, creates more thoughts, and covers things in a heavy, suffocating blanket.

You may have seen or done things you deeply regret. This isn't about pretending anything that happened didn't happen, or eluding any level of responsibility. But, as we'll explore later in this book, there's a difference between wrapping yourself up in guilt and self-hatred, making that into your stuck, fixed identity, and truly coming to terms with your actions and e-

volving through them to a greater understanding and humanity.

Therefore, to take the meditation seat and become mindful of your thoughts requires an attitude of non-aggression toward your mind. You're not trying to force your mind to be a certain way; you're not trying to get rid of thoughts and make sure they don't arise; you're not trying to float up into the clouds above all your problems. Instead, you're learning how to be present with your thoughts as they arise, play themselves out, and dissolve. You're looking to see how your mind works, and how thoughts build themselves into states of mind that are like overwhelming epic movies, brimming with drama, action, and special effects. Without fighting your thoughts or clinging to them, you're showing up to see what's really going on, and that means it won't help to be judgmental or mean-spirited. It's *your* mind. If you really want to reduce your suffering, start by reducing the aggression you have toward yourself. That will lighten things up.

### *Taming the Mind*

One thing that you can rely on to carry you through is the breath. The breath has no attitude, no politics, no big deal philosophy, no neuroses. It will be there for as long as you're alive. It's a reliable part of the present moment, and can soothe and stabilize you as the waves of your thoughts carry you up and down, churn, and

crash on shore. It's a thread of sanity that you can feel right now.

As we've discussed, it's a challenge to keep the mind on the breathing. The mind's long developed habit is to dart from one subject to the next, repressing some thoughts and dwelling on others. Everything else it regards as uninteresting and ignores. Releasing thoughts and returning to the breath shifts your habituation—it develops a new habit of coming back to your body, back to now, and not getting so buffeted by thoughts and emotions. It has a calming effect over time. It's settling you into your seat on a more fundamental level, and giving you a way of dealing with thoughts. You start to relax more with yourself.

At the same time you're gaining perspective on thoughts. They often seem so solid and real and tangible to us they might as well be like cars and buildings and mountains. As you get more able to rest your mind on your breathing, then thoughts start to loosen up and come apart. They're not such a solid wall. You begin to see that they come and go. Where do they come from? It's hard to say. Where do they go? They just seem to disappear. Instead of being caught up and tossed about by the waves of thought, we start to get that they're coming up out of the mind and rolling back into it, like waves rise up and subside on the surface of the ocean. Waves are an expression of the ocean, as thoughts are expressions of mind. In the same way, if we relax and let it happen, thoughts will subside like waves do. If

many thoughts arise, that many will dissolve away. It's all they can do, if we learn how to let them.

Another good analogy is the sky and clouds. The sky is the clear, open space of mind and thoughts are like the clouds that come out of that space and disappear back into it. No matter what kind of weather passes through—stormy, sunny, foggy, whatever it is—the sky itself is never disturbed. In the same way, the open space of the mind remains no matter what kind of thoughts pass through it.

Things arise in our minds that pull at us and control us. The warrior learns how to keep his or her seat in this confrontation with the mind. Rather than jumping up instantly the moment there's a compelling thought ("I want a beer!"; "I should smack that creep!"), we hang with the mind and its many ups and downs, ins and outs. This establishes the foundation of the practice. We're generous enough to accommodate the mind's antics and dramas, and courageous enough not to bolt from our seat when we feel irritated, vulnerable, or challenged. In this way, we start to connect with some of our underlying strength of mind, and begin to learn about ourselves.

In a war zone, keeping your seat can mean the difference between who lives and who dies. When we can be totally present in the moment, it calms us and clarifies our ability to see what's in front of us, and guides us in choosing the right action. In this example,

SSG Kendel “keeps his seat” while literally in the gunner’s seat of a Humvee on patrol in Iraq:

We came around a sharp bend to the left where there were a few mud huts among trees. Directly in front of me, on the other side of the road, I noticed children, ages three to eight, as they played in the front yard of a small house. I then focused on a small white car stopped in the right lane ahead. I had to make a split second decision whether or not to fire on the vehicle. It was not completely off the road, as was the normal Iraqi procedure. My thoughts ranged from *perhaps the man was unaware of our sudden appearance to maybe he was the father of the children and had stopped in for lunch.*

He seemed to be waiting for someone from within the house. The squad leader bellowed from below, “Shoot the fucking car! Shoot the fucking car!” With one eye I could see the car, and with the other I could see the kids playing in the front yard. Deducing that the car wasn’t an immediate threat, I concluded that we’d simply surprised him. If I shot and hit the car the bullets could very well ricochet, cutting down the children.

I chose not to shoot. We passed without incident.

Here, within a second or two, the gunner had to choose whether to fire in defense, refrain from firing in case innocent lives were lost, or to follow the squad leader's order to fire, and he accurately trusted his perception of what was really taking place—that there was no threat, and firing could unnecessarily kill. The sense of keeping your seat ultimately means an ability to handle difficult circumstances and choices, retaining your mental poise in order to understand the truth of the situation and act accordingly.

With consistent practice over time, the mind begins to settle down more, and its ability to stay with the breath grows more consistent. You become less reactive to thoughts and emotions, and less invested in dwelling on them or avoiding them. It gets easier to return to the breath. In fact, as you feel calmer in meditation and less uptight in your daily life, you get more enthusiastic about your practice. You can feel for yourself that it works, despite your ups and downs.

A greater level of accomplishment comes when the mind can stay one-pointedly on the breath without wandering. The body and mind remain synchronized rather than in conflict. At this level, thoughts become minimal or evaporate altogether. The mind feels expansive, joyous, and clear. You become rooted to your meditation seat, like a sapling easily whipped about by the wind grown into a tall, mature tree: strong, sturdy, and imposing. When the mind becomes this stable in the practice, its quality of insight grows penetrating because

its noise and agitation have been tamed. The warrior's discipline of sitting meditation has turned into a powerful and healthy state of being.