Warriors Learn Peace of Mind

Buddhist-inspired exercises help U.S. servicemen and women cope with trauma and mental stress.

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U.S. soldiers patrol the streets of Kabul, June 18, 2006.

Mindfulness, a state of relaxed attention to the present moment, has been practiced for centuries by Buddhist contemplatives in Asia. Now, university-affiliated and Pentagon-funded programs of mindfulness training are helping U.S. military personnel before they deploy to combat zones and after they return.

Dr. Anthony King, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School, says that 15 to 20 percent of the U.S. Marines and soldiers now returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have “clinically significant” problems with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Many of these returning veterans might be helped by training in mindfulness, said King, who helps lead a program of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Meditation for Combat Veterans, funded partly by the Pentagon.

Cultivating mindfulness—a “nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness”—by paying attention to the natural cycle of one’s breath, or to bodily sensations, can bring one into the present moment and reduce distress, King said.

Pain or suffering?

“A lot of the suffering that we have about pain or about anxiety generally is not in the present moment. Very often, on top of our experience of pain, we pile a bunch of other stuff. We pile a bunch of emotional reactivity, sometimes despair or even guilt, which goes on top of the pain and makes it worse.”

“So the role of mindfulness in health care, or in coping with stressful situations, is to try to differentiate between what is the pain and what is the suffering,” said King, formerly a practitioner of Zen and for the last 20 years a student of the Tibetan lama Gelek Rinpoche.

In addition to mindfulness practice, participants in King’s program also engage in a “self-compassion” exercise
inspired by traditional Buddhist metta, or loving-kindness—contemplations in which they first think of someone close to them and wish them to be happy and well.

Then, these wishes are extended outward to others.

Finally, when the first stages of the exercise are well established, that feeling of kindness and concern is directed by the participant to himself.

“Isn’t it appropriate to also wish yourself happiness, to wish yourself health and long life, and to live with ease?” King asked.

A first group of returning veterans—recruited from the Ann Arbor, Michigan Veterans Administration Healthcare System—has already completed the program, King said.

“We’re now recruiting for our second group of eight veterans, which will start up at the end of September. And then we’ll finalize our treatment manual.”

‘Discerning warriors’

Dr. Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, said that mindfulness practice can also help soldiers before they deploy to “ready the mind for the high-stress, highly uncertain, and highly demanding context of combat.”

Jha, who directs the University of Pennsylvania-led STRONG project (Schofield Barracks Training and Research on Neurobehavioral Growth) and advises related programs, said that training in mindfulness can produce “discerning warriors.”

“[Mindfulness] actually highlights to us our vulnerability, the nuances, the discernment of our experience.”

These qualities become strengths for servicemen and women, especially as they move out of combat and into roles training local police forces, Jha said.

“Our research suggests that they are more in tune with what’s going on around them, so that they’re better able to do the mission, which is essentially helping.”

In every case, trainings in mindfulness, like the trainings of the Buddhist path itself, are aimed primarily at reducing suffering, Jha said.

Reported in Washington by Richard Finney.