

Shaila Catherine

*Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*

Meditation: “A Meditation on Exploring Thoughts”

February 25, 2023



Hello, I'm Shaila Catherine, author of *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*, and I'd like to guide you in a very brief five-minute meditation as we explore thoughts together. Please find a way of sitting where you're upright and at ease. Though we are going to be exploring thoughts, first ground your attention in the experience of sitting and breathing. Connect with the experience of the body just now.

It's kind of intriguing that sometimes when we give our minds a very simple thing to do, what seems like a not-so-difficult task—feel the body sitting, feel the sensations of the breath—the mind wanders off and starts thinking about other things, ruminating about the past, planning fantasies about the future, scenarios and narratives going on in our mind, stories about what we did and who we will be. First, when you notice that the mind is thinking, just simply notice, "This is a thought. The mind is thinking." That's what's occurring in the present moment. Let go of the entanglement in the storyline, and just bring the attention to the simple fact that thinking is happening.

Sometimes that simple mindfulness that a thought is just a thought is quite sufficient, and the attention settles again in present-moment experience. But over time, you might notice that there are certain thought patterns or habit patterns that tend to arise, and they're not very helpful. So you might want to work more diligently with certain unwholesome thought processes, maybe a pattern of obsessive planning or some angry, vengeful thoughts that you know are just not helping. So you can work more diligently with certain unwholesome thoughts and apply a series of strategies to them.

The first strategy is to consider some alternatives. If you're having a vengeful thought toward somebody, maybe you could replace it with a more peaceful thought, a thought of appreciation, perhaps. Shift your mind out of one pattern and give it something better to do., and then let it fall away and return to sitting and breathing.

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But if those unwholesome thoughts persist and you've replaced them many times, you might want to progress to the second strategy, which is examining the danger in those thoughts. Where are they leading, and do you really want to go there? Contemplating the danger strengthens our commitment to really letting those thoughts go. Is it a pattern you really wanted to reinforce?

Sometimes just contemplating the danger is enough and the thoughts subside and we're again available and fresh, sitting and breathing. But if those thoughts persist, we might progress to the third strategy, which is to ignore them, to forget them, to withdraw our attention. Sometimes the mind goes on and on and on about something that is long past. You can just ignore it. Forget about it. It's over and done with, bringing your attention again into present experience.

But if those thoughts persist, you might need to look more deeply and investigate the underlying causes. What keeps feeding those thoughts? Meditative investigation can be very powerful. And perhaps the understanding that comes at the level of causes is sufficient to settle the mind, and again, we're available for present experience not lost in thought.

But if those thoughts continue to hijack our attention and distract us from our meditation practice or whatever task we're engaged in, we might need to come in with a bit more oomph and say no to those thoughts, have the resolve and determination to truly abandon that unwholesome pattern. This is the fifth and final strategy.

Perhaps as we work with these various strategies for removing distracting thoughts, we will develop the wisdom to understand the dynamics of mind and the commitment and strength of our virtues and our clarity that allows us to truly let go of distracting thoughts. This will allow us to deepen the mind so that we can rest in deep states of clarity and concentration and see things as they actually are.

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I hope that you will sit a bit longer and take some time to explore the conditions of your own mind, to get to know the thought patterns that obsess your mind, and to discover ways of freeing the mind, skills for removing distracting thoughts. Enjoy your meditation.