

Shaila Catherine

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

Week One: “A Thought Is Just a Thought”

February 4, 2023



Hi. I'm Shaila Catherine, and I'd like to welcome you to this first lecture on *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*. In this session, we're going to look at thinking.

The main point is very simple. In fact, it's totally obvious to understand that a thought is just that: a thought. If we really understood that a thought was just a thought and that when we were thinking the thought, we knew we were thinking, then thoughts would be no problem at all. But very often, we believe the thoughts. We get lost in the story of thoughts. We get entangled in the images and the scenarios and the narratives of our own making, and we give them more reality than they actually have. Or perhaps we could say that we disconnect from the reality or are unaware of the reality of what's actually happening: the mind is thinking.

And so the first really important insight that we have to have around thoughts is that a thought is a thought. A thought is a discrete mental event. If I'm thinking of a dinosaur, a dinosaur is not in the room with me. It's a thought. If I'm fantasizing about how I'm going to engage in a conversation tomorrow, I am not having that conversation with the other person. It's a fantasy. It's an imagination. It's a thought. If I'm worrying about something that I did in the past, maybe feeling shame and going over and over again some mistake I made, I'm not making that mistake. In the present moment, that event is not happening. The content is not real. It's a thought. It's not to dismiss the reality of things that have occurred. Events happen. They impact us, we feel them, and we learn from them. But if we habitually rehearse them or repeat them or ruminate on them and don't have control over what we think, then we can really be entangled in our own mental scenarios and suffer.

There are many kinds of thoughts. Some of them are very useful, and some of them cause a great deal of anguish in our lives. Habitual unwholesome thoughts, thoughts of anger, thoughts of revenge, thoughts of lustful fantasies, and thoughts of arrogance and delusion reinforce and create deeper unwholesome grooves in our minds. But we also have beautiful

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thoughts—thoughts of wisdom and understanding, curiosity that leads to learning, thoughts of compassion, and thoughts of kindness and generosity—that really bring forth those beautiful qualities of our hearts and of our minds and bring those into the world.

Thoughts are not a problem. None of us would want to be thoughtless individuals. None of us would want to lose the capacity to use our minds wisely. But are you using your mind wisely or caught in habitual patterns? For most of us, each day, sometimes we're caught in habitual patterns, thinking things we wish we weren't thinking. And sometimes we're engaging out of wisdom and compassion and kindness and virtue.

It's important to know the quality of our own thoughts, to know if those thoughts are leading to what is beneficial or what is harmful. The Buddha said that whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of one's mind. So if we're frequently thinking and pondering upon unwholesome thoughts, we're deepening that pattern and creating an inclination of the mind towards obstruction in our spiritual path rather than opening and spaciousness and kindness and wisdom in the unfolding of our spiritual life. So it's helpful to really look closely at our thoughts. What kind of thoughts are you thinking? You can notice: Is judging predominant? Is faultfinding predominant? Anger? Rumination? Worry? Obsessive planning? Problem solving? Trying to fix everything? Are those thoughts useful or not useful?

In the Middle Length Discourses Sutta 19 called *Two Kinds of Thoughts*, the Buddha describes how he looked at his own mind prior to his enlightenment. He said that when he looked at his mind, sometimes he saw wholesome thoughts and sometimes he saw unwholesome thoughts. When he saw those unwholesome thoughts, he considered and reflected, "Is this beneficial, or is this harmful? Does it lead to the affliction of myself and others, or is it free from affliction? Does it not cause trouble?" And when he saw that his mind was going in a direction that he did not want to go, that was going to cause suffering, those thoughts were subsided. He abandoned them,

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he released them, he freed his mind from them. And he also saw that those thoughts that were helpful, thoughts of generosity, thoughts of kindness, thoughts of compassion, though there was nothing to fear from those thoughts, though they didn't cause any affliction, they were wholesome thoughts, nevertheless, they prevented the deepening of his concentration. And so he also allowed those thoughts to subside in order to deepen his concentration and realize awakening.

He used the simile of a cowherd. So when the crops are thick and have not yet been harvested, the cowherd has to be very diligent to keep his cows from straying into the fields and munching on the crops because if he allowed them to wander into the fields, that cowherd would be fined or punished. Similarly, if we allow our minds to follow into habitual thoughts of desire, fear, anger, hate, delusion, and conceit, we will be punished in the sense that we will experience the results of those unwholesome patterns.

But there also comes a time when those crops are taken in when the harvest has occurred, and there's no problem then for the cows to wander in the fields. Similarly, there are times when just as the cowherd can sit under the shade of a tree and simply be mindful that the cows are there, so too there's a time when we can look at the quality of our minds and realize there's nothing to fear here. There's absolutely no problem with these thoughts of wisdom and clarity, reflection and kindness, and commitment and virtue. And so we can rest back and simply be mindful that those thoughts are there.

So we have a different mode of working with thoughts. That mode changes depending upon whether the thoughts are useful or not useful, beneficial or not beneficial, harmful or helpful. And we also consider our aim: Is it the time to just rest back and allow the thoughts to arise and pass with no entanglement and no concern? Or are we trying to perhaps deepen our

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concentration, really steady our focus on something? We might want to be more diligent and work more specifically with removing certain distracting thoughts.

So to review, the main point here is to recognize that a thought is a thought. What's actually occurring is a mental activity. And then we can look at the type of thought that's arising and consider: Is it wholesome or unwholesome? The Pali terms are *kusala* and *akusala*. Is this a pattern we want to develop? If we frequently think and ponder upon this thought, is it the inclination of our mind that we want to deepen? And of those thoughts that we realize, "I don't really want to cultivate those thoughts," there are certain thoughts that we can then work with and patterns that we can learn to free the mind from. This will be the topic of the next session. See you then.