

Shaila Catherine

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

Week Two: “Three Strategies for Working with Distracting Thoughts”

February 11, 2023



Welcome to this brief talk on *Beyond Distraction*. This is the second in a four-part series. I'm Shaila Catherine, author of *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*. In this session, I wanted to speak a bit about a discourse in the Middle Length Discourses, Sutta 20, called *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts*. In this discourse, we have five practical strategies for removing those thoughts that cause us trouble and distraction, that prevent concentration and keep us caught in unwholesome patterns.

Today, I want to look briefly at the first three of these strategies. These offer three things that we can do when we notice that there's a particularly unhelpful pattern going on in our minds. Maybe we're worrying, maybe we're ruminating, maybe we're caught in planning fantasies, maybe we're lost in vengeful narratives. In some way or another, we recognize there's an unhelpful, unwholesome mental pattern going on. The Buddha suggested several things we can do about it. Each of these steps offers an opportunity to cultivate mental skills.

The first strategy is to replace an unwholesome thought for a more wholesome alternative. Now, it may be that we do this all the time. When we notice the mind is wandering, we come back to our meditation object, and then when we notice the mind wandering again, we bring it back to our meditation object. So in some sense, just by returning to present experience, returning to our meditation object, if we find ourselves distracted in daily life, we come back to the task at hand, maybe this is a big part of the cultivation of this replacing strategy. But the discourse actually suggests to replace an unwholesome thought with a wholesome thought. So we're replacing one thought with an alternative thought. And I think this is important to know that we have alternatives. Though we may have a pattern that tends toward one type of thoughts, we can shift. We're not caught. We're not stuck. We can replace it with an alternative. The simile that's used for this strategy is imagine a block of wood where there's a peg stuck in the block of wood, and you want to remove the stuck peg. You can take a smaller peg and use the smaller peg to knock out the larger peg, but that smaller peg does not get caught and does not stay stuck in the wood.

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So for example, imagine you might frequently worry about something that's going to happen in the future. You can notice that pattern of worrying, and you can replace the worry with something that produces perhaps a little trust or confidence, faith that you can handle it. It might be as simple as replacing it with the thought, "It'll be OK" or "I will respond as best I can," some very simple response that is an alternative to worry. Maybe you're laying in bed at night unable to sleep because the mind keeps ruminating around something that has already happened, and you can replace that rumination with a recognition, "Now I am in bed and feel the experience of the body lying underneath the blankets." If you're frequently angry or irritated with somebody, before you go to meet them in the next meeting or the next project or the next meal or whenever you're going to see them, instead of focusing on those qualities or thoughts or memories of the things that they do that irritate you or that trigger anger, focus on something that you respect about them. Cultivate a thought of kindness and compassion for them.

These are some examples of ways that we can replace an unwholesome pattern with a more healthy and supportive and useful alternative. But this doesn't always work. Some thoughts will fall away, and then you continue with your meditation practice with the task at hand. But sometimes we need an alternative, a different strategy. So after we've tried replacing it, we might need to go to the second strategy. That second strategy is about examining the danger in those thoughts. When we consider the problems, when we consider where those thoughts are leading and is it where we want to go, then we develop a stronger sense of commitment, maybe a sense of resolve, a sense of dispassion toward that pattern.

Sometimes we keep thinking certain unwholesome patterns because it's like we're getting something out of it. There's some sense of reward or gratification. Sometimes we think thoughts of conceit because of the pleasure related to that boosting of the sense of self. Arrogance can be

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very pleasant. Do we really want to cultivate arrogance? So we look at the danger of it. We look at the downside of those thoughts.

There's a couple of similes that I want to share. The first is the simile that's in this discourse in the Middle Length Discourses, Sutta 20, where the simile that's given is of somebody who is wearing a flayed corpse like a scarf or a necklace or an adornment. They're displaying something as though it's beautiful, but in fact, it's quite repulsive and horrifying. Similarly, sometimes when we keep repeating our unwholesome patterns, we do so because we're not seeing the problems in them. We're displaying them as though they're wonderful. We're engaging in them just from the sense of some kind of personal reward and not seeing the danger of those patterns.

Another image that we find in the discourses of the Buddha is of a fisherman who casts a baited hook into a lake. The fish that don't see the hook only are enchanted by the bait, and seeking gratification through the bait, they chomp down and they suffer. Similarly, if we only see the pleasantness or the personal boost of energy or comfort that comes from an unwholesome but familiar pattern, then we're not seeing the hook, and we might similarly be like those fish, who keep getting enchanted by the bait, seeking gratification through that familiar pattern, and don't see the danger it poses.

But when we see the danger of those thoughts, naturally, we'll want to avoid them. This takes us to the third strategy in the discourse on removing distracting thoughts. It's to avoid them, ignore them, forget them, in some way withdraw our attention from them. Now, for mindfulness meditators, this might seem like a strange instruction because many people think mindfulness is all about confronting, all about directing our attention to the experience. That may be so, but we also need the freedom and the wisdom to sometimes withdraw our attention. The wise thing to do sometimes is to not give attention to something. When you give your attention to something,

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does it increase the unwholesome qualities of mind? Does it make you more angry, more lustful, more arrogant? Or does it increase the wholesome qualities of mind?

There are times when we realize it's better just not to think that. It's better just not to attend to that. And so we learn to turn away. A simile that's used is that somebody who has the capacity to see simply closes their eyes. They can open their eyes, or they can close their eyes. They can look at something, or they can turn away. This ability to see, to bring wise attention to our experience rather than just be compelled to fall into whatever habitual pattern has already been laid down through past causes, this ability to turn away is the application of wise attention.

Perhaps when you're meditating, you might notice the mind going into some habitual pattern that you really don't want to cultivate. You've tried to replace the thoughts, you've tried to contemplate the danger in those thoughts, and now, you just want to turn away from them. It's like setting a little boundary around the thoughts. Some people like to imagine that there's some kind of a storage box, and they drop those thoughts in the storage box and come back to them perhaps at another time. Other times, you might just want to say, "Let it go. It's past. It's over. It's done with," especially with thoughts of grudges or rumination over a past unpleasant event. Just remind yourself it's past. Let the thoughts settle, turn away from it, and continue on with whatever is present and alive for you right now.

Many of our thoughts and unwholesome patterns will be resolved either simply by being mindful that we're thinking or by applying one of these first three strategies: replacing, examining the danger, and withdrawing the fuel, turning our attention away, ignoring it, forgetting it. But some thoughts persist. Some patterns are deeply rooted. And so in the next session, I'll introduce the fourth strategy, which is about examining very deeply the causes of those thoughts. I hope you'll join us for that. Thank you.