

Shaila Catherine

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

Week Three: “Investigating the Underlying Causes of Distraction”

February 18, 2023



Welcome to this brief talk on *Beyond Distraction*. I'm Shaila Catherine, author of *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*. In the previous lectures, we've briefly introduced how to work with thoughts that cause us some trouble and obstruct our concentration. First, we recognized our thought patterns and identified which ones are helpful and which ones are harmful, and then in the last session, I introduced the first three of five strategies for removing those thoughts that we know to be distracting.

You may remember those first three strategies include replacing an unwholesome thought with a more wholesome alternative. If those thoughts persist, then we might contemplate and examine the danger in those thoughts. And if those distracting thoughts continue to persist, then we might intentionally withdraw the fuel and turn our attention away. Those are the first three strategies that were introduced in the Middle Length Discourses Sutta 20, *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts*.

Today, I want to go on to the fourth strategy. I believe it's important to practice these, at least initially, in sequence, to not just jump to the investigative strategy, which is what I'll be talking about today, because some of the skills that we develop in those initial strategies allow us to investigate deeply with meditative investigation and not get so entangled in our thought patterns. The description of this fourth strategy is to still the thought formations of those thoughts. It's basically a deep but brief meditative investigation based upon a calm, tranquil, still mind. So we shouldn't sit down and try to figure out or try to think about our thought patterns, but instead, we let the mind become very calm, and we look at the underlying causes for those thoughts. We're basically curious: How did this arise? Where did this come from? We're not so concerned with the superficial level of the thoughts. We're not so concerned with the content.

In the process of investigation, we might explore the interaction of thoughts and emotions and feelings. We might recognize what kinds of experiences trigger those patterns and what

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reinforces it. But primarily, we're looking very deeply at the underlying causes and conditions that give rise to and feed unwholesome patterns in our own minds. Very often, when we look deeply, we start to recognize how a certain view of self, in a way a thought of self, is at the root of many unwholesome thoughts. And so this meditative investigation can bring deep insights into the emptiness of thoughts and into the not-self characteristic of mental activities.

To further and explore this process of discovering the causal dynamics, those deep causes, we can use a few models. We can consider the first one, which may be familiar to some of you. The acronym is RAIN. R stands for *Recognize*. We recognize that habitual thought process and pattern that has arisen. A stands for *Accept*. We accept that it arose. To recognize it and then accept it, we're in the present moment, aware of what's actually happening. I stands for *Investigate*. This allows us to look very deeply. But meditative investigation is brief. The mistake many meditators make is they sit down and just try to figure it out, thinking in their ordinary way of thinking. But meditative investigation is a way of looking with curiosity and calmness. And so we do investigate but briefly. N stands for *Not identify*. When we recognize what's at the root of those patterns, that's what we're seeing are conditioned patterns, not self, nothing to identify with, nothing to claim as mine.

The simile that is used for investigating and getting to the thought formations is that if somebody who was walking really fast decides, "Why am I walking fast? Let me walk more slowly," and then when walking more slowly thinks, "Why am I walking slowly? Let me simply stand," and when standing thinks, "Why am I standing? Let me sit," and when sitting thinks, "Why am I sitting? Let me lie down." One substitutes for the coarser, more agitated posture one that is subtler. In the same way, we look deeper. We progressively and gradually look deeper into the mind to see the causal dynamics that are at the root of our most habitual thought processes.

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I'd like to offer an alternative to the RAIN acronym, which is OUR. This is a very simple learning process. We *observe*. What is that pattern? Let's observe the thought. In observing, we come to *understand* the dynamic. We might understand why it engages the mind, why we keep getting lost in that, what the triggers are. We might understand the interaction between emotions and feelings and thoughts. We might understand why we're sensitive to certain patterns, whereas other things we let go really easily, and some patterns we cling to for dear life. And then R stands for *respond*. Whenever we've learned something, it affects our response, and that takes us into a new moment that we observe, understand, and then again respond to and then again into a new moment, where we observe, understand, and respond.

Perhaps in your daily practice, you can play a little bit with the acronym RAIN (recognize, accept, investigate, not identify) or OUR (observe, understand, and respond) to begin to look more deeply at the causal dynamics of the various patterns that obstruct your concentration or seem to be a block or a distraction in your spiritual progress. In the next session, we will come to the fifth of the five strategies for removing distracting thoughts. This final one will bring in a strong energy or resolve that will remove whatever thoughts have persisted and have continued even after you have seen the root causes. I hope you join us then. Thank you.