

Shaila Catherine

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

Week Four: “Your Virtues Are Stronger Than Your Defilements”

February 25, 2023



Hello, I'm Shaila Catherine, author of *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind*. In the previous talks, we've explored the process of thinking and how to overcome habitual distractions. We've looked at thoughts and recognized that they're just thoughts, mental events. And we've looked at the different kinds of thoughts that might arise that obstruct our practice. Then, we took a discourse from the Middle Length Discourses, Sutta 20, and explored the first four of five strategies for removing distracting thoughts. Those included the skill of replacing an unwholesome thought with a better alternative; examining the danger of those thoughts; considering the possibility of simply turning away from them, ignoring them, withdrawing the attention; and finally, if those thoughts continue to persist, we looked at ways to investigate the root causes of those habitual patterns.

Today, we're going to work with the fifth and final strategy in that series, which involves resolve, determination, and strong energy. I think of it as simply saying no to those thought patterns and actually meaning it, saying no with such clarity and wisdom that a no means no. It's not an aggressive no. In fact, I believe we should only employ this strategy after we've developed the wisdom and the clarity from the earlier steps, especially the investigation, because once we've seen the root causes of our thoughts, our thought habits, and our mental patterns, especially the unwholesome patterns, we know it's just the unfolding of causes and conditions. There's no aversion there. There's no identification with the thoughts. We're not taking them to be who we are.

A problem people have sometimes is if they employ this fifth strategy as their first strategy because if we bring in a strong energy if it's not supported by wisdom and if aversion or anger is still present, then we'll be very self-critical. We'll be harsh against ourselves. We'll be self-judgmental, and it might even feel like we're beating ourselves up. But if this strategy of strong resolve, of saying no and meaning it, is supported by the qualities and skills and insights developed through the previous strategies, then it is simply no, and those thoughts no longer

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arise. We have that potential. We have that power. We have the capacity to think the kinds of thoughts we want to think and not think the thoughts that we don't wish to think.

This is a line from the discourse that I always found very inspiring where the Buddha said, "When one is called a master of the courses of thought, one will think whatever thought one wishes to think, and one will not think any thought one does not wish to think." Wow. What a potential we have. When I first read this many decades ago, I was so inspired. I thought, Wow. I just imagined how much suffering the mind would be freed from if it simply didn't think the thoughts it didn't even want to be thinking. Working with this series of strategies and developing the skills step by step enables this to be a real possibility for all of us.

The simile that's used for this strategy of strong resolve and determination is of a strong man who might beat down a weaker man by the head or shoulders. It sounds a little aggressive, doesn't it? It sounds almost violent. But I don't take it that way because at this point in our development, the mind is free from anger and aversion. I feel like it's important that we recognize that our virtues, our mindfulness, our wisdom is stronger than our defilements and that we can apply our wisdom to, in a way, crush the defilements.

This series of strategies develops a mind that is profoundly clean and clear, deeply calm and able to be very concentrated, fit for the deep states of absorption. It's a practice that's supportive of the deep *jhana* states and also creates a mind that is very fit for deep insight and liberating insight.

I want to review the five strategies for removing distracting thoughts. As a preliminary, we first recognize a thought as a thought. So we're mindful of thinking. And if it's an unwholesome thought that we don't want to continue as a habit in our lives, an unwholesome thought that we recognize is an obstruction to our deepest goals, then we might want to develop some skills to free the mind from those patterns.

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The first strategy is to replace an unwholesome pattern with a more wholesome alternative. The development of this skill in replacing teaches us something very important. We're not stuck in our mental patterns. No matter how many times we've thought that thought in the past, the very fact that we can shift to another thought reminds us it's not permanent. It's just a thought, and we don't need to be stuck in that. So we develop a flexibility, and we develop the wisdom that knows that there are better alternatives. Those unwholesome patterns are not who we are. They don't need to determine the course of our lives.

But if that unwholesome pattern hasn't disappeared yet, then we might need to go to the second strategy, which is to examine the danger in those thoughts. That helps us reflect: Where is this going? Where is this leading? And do I really want to go there? This strengthens our commitment to free the mind from unwholesome patterns.

The third strategy is to avoid those thoughts, to abandon them, to ignore them, to withdraw the fuel from those thoughts, to turn away. Although this seems very simple and certainly wouldn't be the strategy you would always use—where would the wisdom come if we were always turning away—we need the ability to turn away. If we don't have the capacity and the skill to turn away from a thought, it might be a little scary to turn toward it because we might get sucked in.

But when we know that we can turn our attention away, then we can progress quite safely and wisely to the deep investigation of the fourth strategy, which is a deep investigation that stills and resolves the fundamental causes of those patterns. The traditional language is stilling the thought formations of those thoughts, but it's about a powerful and strategic investigation that sees: What are the causes? What are the conditions that keep perpetuating thought patterns that we really don't want to be living with? The freedom and release come at that deep level of causes.

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If that insight, understanding, and wisdom don't yet free the mind, then we progress finally to this fifth strategy, which is to say a firm and clear "No more" to that pattern. We've seen it clearly, and we are simply not going to think it anymore. This comes in with energy and strength—the strength of our virtues, the strength of our wisdom. We bring it to bear on that unwholesome pattern, and we say no.

When we've developed the ability to free the mind from a wide variety of unwholesome patterns that may occur in the course of our lives, then we will have the skills not only to concentrate the mind but also to see the nature of thought, the empty nature of thought, and learn to free our minds from obstructions on the spiritual path. These strategies are very practical. They work beautifully in the context of meditation and can also be applied in your day-to-day activities. I hope you'll explore them. I hope you'll enjoy applying them and working with them. Thank you for joining us. I hope you've enjoyed this course on "Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind."