## CHAPTER 5

# WITHDRAWING THE FUEL

## *Strategy #3—Avoid It, Ignore It, Forget It*

*When the mind is not obsessed, tireless energy is aroused, unmuddled mindfulness is set up, the body becomes tranquil and untroubled, the mind becomes concentrated and one-pointed.*
—Connected Discourses of the Buddha[51]

Wise attention optimizes each moment of contact to incline the mind toward skillful states such as those that promote concentration and insight. We nurture wise attention by distinguishing beneficial thoughts from harmful ones. In chapter 3 you developed the skill of replacing unwholesome thoughts with wholesome ones. Then, in chapter 4, you learned to reflect on the dangers in unwholesome thoughts to help you determine what to pursue and what to avoid. If these exercises have not yet removed the distraction, you can try the next strategy—ignore it, avoid it, forget it, turn your attention away from it.

With this sequence of strategies in mind, you hold a detailed road map for developing attention. The Buddha articulates this way of

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developing wise discernment: "There are two kinds of happiness: the kind to be pursued and the kind to be avoided. . . . When I observed that in the pursuit of such happiness, unwholesome factors increased and wholesome factors decreased, then that happiness was to be avoided. And when I observed that in the pursuit of such happiness unwholesome factors decreased and wholesome ones increased, then that happiness was to be sought after."[52]

In this chapter we will consider the advice to "try to forget those thoughts, and not give attention to them."[53] An earnest meditation student might argue that ignoring experience sounds like the opposite of mindfulness practice. After all, aren't we supposed to be open, allowing, and receptive to the full gamut of our experience? There may be situations, however, when ignoring could be the most skillful response.

Imagine you want to lose a few pounds and you start a diet. The next day, you enter your workplace for a staff meeting to discover a large platter of pastries. Would it be wise to sit down right in front of the pastries, fixate on them, and drool with desire? Does it help to lash out in anger at the colleague who provided the snacks? If seeing the platter of pastries triggers craving, anger, or self-loathing, give yourself a break from the painful trigger of staring at baked goods. Take a seat further away. You can simply turn attention away from habitual triggers, withdraw your interest, and let your attention dwell somewhere else with perceptions that support your goals.

## Wisdom of Seeing and Not-Seeing

The Buddha compares the strategy of ignoring to people with good eyesight who can easily open and close their eyes. Similarly, we have the option to engage with sensory and mental phenomena—or not. We can either give time and energy to a perception or thought pattern or withdraw our attention from it.

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Habitual thought patterns can be triggered by the environments we find ourselves in. For example, walking past a bar might stimulate the desire for a drink, watching a movie might seem to require popcorn to complete the experience, feeling annoyed might trigger the urge to self-soothe with a cookie, receiving criticism might trigger self-deprecating or blaming thoughts. Habitual thoughts and urges are hard to ignore because they are reinforced by emotions and intertwined with a sense of personal identity.

Given all this, this teaching might sound simplistic, unrealistic, and perhaps unwise: "If you don't want to see something, don't look at it, and if you don't want to think something, don't think about it!" If it were easy to forget obsessive thoughts, they wouldn't be obsessive. If all our problems could be resolved by ignoring them, we would surely be living in a more ethical world. Nevertheless, it can be empowering to consider the possibility of simply turning away in some situations. This instruction could be one step toward expanding your options.

Research shows that we can successfully ignore much more sensory stimuli than we think we can. Psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated that attention is selective. We are constantly bombarded with sensory input from the five sense doors; a single square centimeter of an olfactory sense organ can contain millions of sensory neurons. In addition, the mind-door processes uncountable mental impressions of images, memories, and thoughts. Our minds must constantly filter which sensations are worthy of being brought to our conscious attention and which can be ignored.[54]

In a famous study at Harvard University, researchers tested the limits of attention by asking student volunteers to watch a short video of two teams passing around a basketball. The students were instructed to count the number of times the basketball got passed between players.[55] As they intently watched and counted basketball passes, a woman wearing a gorilla suit strolled into the action on the court. The gorilla faced the camera, thumped its chest, and then left

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the court. Half of the students reported not having seen the gorilla. In repeated experiments in various countries, the results were the same.

The volunteers were attentive and watchful, but they were so engrossed in their task, primed to look for basketball passes, that extraneous information was completely ignored. Some participants in this study who were shown the video replay of the experiment could not believe it was the same video they initially saw and insisted there had never been someone in a gorilla suit on the court.

Information that is superfluous to our focus or does not fit with our prescribed assumptions is much less likely to make an impression on consciousness. We tend to perceive what we expect to and want to perceive, and when we are paying attention to one thing, we might be ignoring something else.

Selective attention can cause us to look at the world incorrectly because we tend to see only what we already believe and ignore observations that do not fit into our model of the world. For example, depressed individuals might only remember tragic events in their lives and forget their happy memories. Those who have low self-esteem might frequently think about their failures and ignore their past successes. People who suffer from anxiety attacks might dwell on traumatic events and be oblivious to the routine and potentially joyful events that occur every day. If romantic relationships end in betrayal, lovers might focus on the undesirable qualities of their partners and forget why they fell in love in the first place. Polarized thinking of this kind prevents people from seeing the world as it really is. It can even shift a beautiful or neutral perception into something scary and threatening.

Another example of the limited capacity of our attention can be found in traffic laws that prohibit texting or using a phone while driving. When attention is occupied with a conversation, less cognitive bandwidth is available to process traffic conditions. Even hands-free systems have been shown to restrict the range of attention and

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create a kind of tunnel vision, focusing attention only on the lane in front and eliminating peripheral vision. By giving attention to one thing, we are not noticing something else. Even if we follow safe driving habits, we might still occasionally miss our freeway exit when we are engaged in heated imaginary conversations in our own minds.

These studies show that we already have the ability to ignore a lot! What can we do to refine our natural aptitude for selective attention so that we can direct our attention more skillfully? It might help to broaden the field of attention, expand our perspectives, and notice more that is happening around us. At other times, it might be better to narrow the scope of attention to steer clear of harmful patterns. By learning to be more aware of what our mind is focused on and what is excluded from its attention, we can enhance mindfulness and steer our engagement toward greater well-being.

## Erasing Unwanted Tendencies

Training attention to consistently support our spiritual path means that we must stop habitually following conditioned patterns of distraction. Mindfulness shows us that there are pathways we don't want to go down. When they arise in the mind, we have the option of not following them.

While others might amuse themselves with fantasy, make selfish decisions, and indulge in worry and fretting, you are not compelled to do the same. By understanding how the human mind works and observing your own mind, you can develop the tools to skillfully manage your thought habits. Just as the pilot of a ship slowly turns the wheel to change its direction, through practice, you can steer your mind away from danger.

A discourse called Effacement in the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* enumerates a list of forty-four harmful qualities and actions; their absence is described as the skillful means by which to

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avoid them. The title of this discourse highlights the term *effacement*, which means "to erase, make disappear, withdraw." In this teaching on forty-four ways of making defilements disappear, the Buddha reminds his disciples that "even the inclination of mind toward wholesome states is of great benefit" and even greater benefit comes through dedicated bodily and verbal actions.[56]

The Buddha taught:

> Others will be cruel; we shall not be cruel here: effacement should be practiced thus.
>
> Others will kill living beings; we shall abstain from killing living beings here: effacement should be practiced thus. . . .
>
> Others will speak falsehood; we shall abstain from false speech here: effacement should be practiced thus.
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> Others will gossip . . .
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> Others will be envious . . .
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> Others will be deceitful . . .
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> Others will be arrogant . . .
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> Others will be difficult to admonish . . .
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> Others will be lazy . . .
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> Others will be unmindful . . .
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> Others will adhere to their own views, hold on to them tenaciously, and relinquish them with difficulty; we shall not adhere to our own views or hold on to them tenaciously, but shall relinquish them easily: effacement should be practiced thus.[57]

This discourse lists forty-four defilements presented in a similar structure. For the purposes of this chapter, I have only included a few of the specific defilements.

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## A Powerful Pause

This ancient instruction repeats the same list of forty-four defilements in light of personal tendencies. The Buddha suggests, "A person given to killing living beings has abstention from killing living beings by which to avoid it . . . One given to gossip has abstention from gossip by which to avoid it . . . One given to restlessness has non-restlessness by which to avoid it . . . One given to fraud has non-fraud by which to avoid it . . . One given to negligence has diligence by which to avoid it . . . One given to laziness has the arousal of energy by which to avoid it . . ."[58]

Many unwanted habitual patterns can be countered by simply stopping. If you can pause before unleashing habitual unwholesome chain reactions, you might discover that stopping becomes a remarkably viable alternative. In the moment of that pause, you are observing rather than reacting to experience.

Pausing makes it possible to perceive and choose a radically different path. The Buddha reminds us that there are options to our habits: "Suppose there were an uneven path and another even path by which to avoid it . . ."[59] Just as a traveler with the wish to complete their journey safely would not choose an uneven path if an even path were available, a wise person would opt for the more skillful option even if it were less familiar.

Habits have become habits because we have repeatedly nourished them with energy, time, and attention. In the language of contemporary neuroscience, our brains are continually creating neural highways and reinforcing tendencies through repetitive actions. The synapse connectivity of the neural pathways we use most frequently will strengthen. But even if we find ourselves caught in a deep rut, a brief pause can be powerful. It can prepare the mind to choose a nonhabituated route. We might opt for the even path that the Buddha describes, a path that leads to happiness, freedom, and peace.

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Even if our habits are easily triggered, and we often indulge in them, and their momentum feels strong, we are not compelled to go with the habitual flow of energy. We can stop. But to successfully discontinue those thoughts, we will need the support of concentration and clear intention.

## How Do You Use Your Mind?

The key to this strategy of ignoring, avoiding, forgetting is developing the skill to withdraw your attention from mental entanglements, thereby realizing that you can choose how you use your mind. It appears similar to strategy #1 (replacing), but with less emphasis on what you turn your attention toward and more focus on your capacity to pull your energy away from the magnetic force of habit. For example, when you let go of an angry thought and shift to thoughts of loving-kindness, strategy #1 manifests in the replacing of anger with benevolence, and strategy #3 is demonstrated by the withdrawal of attention from the triggers that feed anger. By training to withdraw attention, you strengthen your capacity for restraint.

Strategy #3 teaches you to leverage the innate human ability to select where you put your attention. Instead of reinforcing habitual biases that obscure unexpected perceptions, you are cultivating the skill to restrain and guide your attention wisely. You learn to consciously restrict the field of attention to those perceptions you deem helpful. You refuse to be pulled into the seductive vortex of familiar fantasies, personal dramas, and chronic worries. You learn not to think the thoughts that you do not want to think. When a mental pattern no longer captures your attention, it eventually subsides and withers away from lack of fuel.

One meditation student did not understand the value of this strategy until the day her partner lashed out in a verbal tirade over some perceived offense. As she withdrew her attention from the

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harsh words, she turned her mind to observe how her reactions manifested in her body.

She was mindful that defensive thoughts were arising: "It wasn't my fault! You're misinterpreting my intentions! This problem is yours, not mine!" Instead of verbalizing her reactive thoughts, she immediately chose to abandon them. She silently recited a phrase

### *Billable Hours*

Whenever you find unproductive, repetitive thoughts dominating your mind, you can find creative and effective ways to stop thinking them.

Choose a mental habit you want to change and apply billable hours to it. Each time you find yourself ruminating, worrying, or thinking the thoughts that you decided to put out of your mind, pay for the time you spent dwelling on them. Set a rate that is compatible with your hourly wages and pay according to the amount of time you spent thinking those thoughts. For example, if you spent two minutes worrying and you make $60 per hour, put $2 in a special container and give the money to charity.

Eventually, as your skill in directing your attention increases, you'll have the flexibility to turn your attention toward or away from thoughts and perceptions at will.

This will enable you to relax when it is time to relax, observe when it is appropriate to observe, reflect when it is useful to reflect, and move confidently into action when it is the right time to act.

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that inspired her. "Abandoning reactivity requires the utmost courage." Instead of responding with her typical defensive pattern, she redirected her attention to her bodily sensations—tightness and constriction in her belly, chest, and throat—recognizing them as strong and uncomfortable, but bearable and not dangerous. Finally, she reminded herself of the peaceful spaciousness that is available once reactive thoughts are abandoned. The physical, emotional, and interpersonal tensions soon diminished, supporting calmer and clearer communication.

The more she practiced this way, the more vividly she recognized that it was an illusion to think that her defensive reactivity would provide the self-protection and self-nourishment that she desired. Over time, she experienced a sense of peaceful spaciousness and profound equanimity with increasing frequency. It's a virtuous cycle that makes it easier and easier to abandon thoughts and the reactivity associated with them. By not reacting defensively in the moment, she gives herself and her partner time to calm down, see each other's perspective, and try to reconcile.

## Pick Your Battles

Ambitious meditators can sometimes push themselves more quickly than their meditative skill warrants. They might explore a defilement so vigorously that they feel overwhelmed and want to quit.

If you are compelled to confront every situation, you will likely exhaust your energy and lose touch with your priorities. Sometimes it is better to ignore an event, preserve your energy, and practice serenity or cultivate concentration. To progress on this path, you will need the flexibility to confront a thought process head-on, but also to cautiously back off when warranted.

There are probably times when the sound of a phone ringing interrupts your focus. You might be in the middle of a phone conversation and be distracted by the call waiting signals in the background

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on your device. Often it is best to abandon the curiosity to see who called and just ignore the notification tone.

A student told me that she enjoyed a weekly yoga class, but often felt irritated by the cacophony of ringtones coming from the coat and shoe area. When the sounds seemed to interrupt her experience of serenity, she reminded herself not to let innocuous sounds trigger the defilements.

We can pick our battles skillfully and choose to ignore some experiences. When you intuit that any level of engagement will likely fuel a hindrance such as desire or aversion, practice this strategy of avoiding, ignoring, and forgetting.

## Avoid

A careful and wise person avoids apparent dangers: a recovering alcoholic might wisely avoid hanging out in bars, a person with anxiety might limit the number of news broadcasts she listens to each day, and a sensible nurse would wear a protective facemask before helping a contagious patient.

The Buddha said that one

> reflecting wisely, avoids a wild elephant, a wild horse, a wild bull, a wild dog, a snake, a stump, a bramble patch, a chasm, a cliff, a cesspit, a sewer. Reflecting wisely, one avoids sitting on unsuitable seats, wandering to unsuitable resorts, and associating with bad friends, since if one were to do so, wise companions in the holy life might suspect one of evil conduct. While taints, vexation, and fever might arise in one who does not avoid these things, there are no taints, vexation, and fever in one who avoids them. These are the taints that should be abandoned by avoiding.[60]

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When you know the danger (that is, when you see the hook), your instinct for self-preservation will kick in and quickly move you away from the threat.

The Buddha did not suggest that his disciples avoid all difficult situations. You cannot avoid all pain, illness, unwanted changes, or death. You cannot control other people or eliminate all unjust conditions in the world. You probably did not choose your family members, office mates, or the politicians that govern your community. Some situations are unavoidable.

There are, however, some situations for which a skillful withdrawal might be a strategic option. When you are surfing and see a great white shark swimming nearby, it might be a good idea to get out of the water for a while. When you see your colleagues gossiping about the boss in the pantry area, you can turn the corner and walk away from them. Similarly, when you know that nothing good will come from indulging a habitual train of thought, it is a good idea to give it a wide berth.

## Ignore

When my family adopted a nine-year-old calico cat from the local shelter, the whole household went through a period of adjustment. She was a good-natured cat, but exploring her new home and family involved figuring out her boundaries and determining what we would and would not tolerate: how far could she push to get what she wanted?

She tried various catlike maneuvers. The most unpleasant was waking us up in the morning by hitting our sleeping faces with her paw. The first tap was gentle, but if we didn't wake up, she began pounding more aggressively and putting out her claws. Since her basic needs for food, playtime, grooming, sunbathing, and a clean litter box were routinely satisfied, we believed that she just wanted attention. Our strategy was basically to ignore her when she beat

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on us, and mostly it worked. Only rarely did we need to employ stronger expressions of disapproval before she quit this predawn punching game.

While you might sometimes find that your unruly defilements are pestering you, you do not always need to engage with them—they might gradually subside just by not being fueled. Do not deny that they are present; simply refuse to feed defilements by flattering them with your attention.

Whatever your usual obsessions might be, try to set some reasonable limits. For example, you might practice dealing with work issues at work, but not bringing them into your home. In order to fall asleep at night, you must temporarily stop fretting over your concerns and allow the mind to rest. Write down your priorities for tomorrow and trust that you will deal with your troubles then, at an appropriate time.

Participants at meditation retreats perform simple daily kitchen and housekeeping chores that allow them to practice being intentionally present with what they are doing: not thinking about making salad while sitting in the meditation hall and not wishing to be sitting in the meditation hall while washing dishes. You can train yourself to be present in this way and thereby put aside potentially intrusive thoughts.

### *Not My Business!*

One of my students could see her faultfinding and self-critical thoughts clearly. She could recognize an inner tirade directed at people she saw in her neighborhood, on TV, or in her family. "You are not doing it right! It should be done like this! How could you act that way? You idiot!"

Wherever she looked, she saw what was "wrong" and scurried about trying to fix everything. When walking out of a restaurant, she felt compelled to straighten the chairs others left askew while mentally castigating their laziness. Strolling along the main street

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downtown, she would hate the people that she imagined had left litter on the street, and then become so preoccupied with picking up trash that she forgot the errand that brought her downtown in the first place. While everyone knows it is good manners to push in your chair when you get up from a table, and it is one's civic duty to avoid littering, she felt deeply disturbed when her attention was so painfully hijacked by these behaviors. She did not feel joy when picking up trash, as others might with an act of generosity. Affected by her hypercritical judgments, she lived an angry, irritated existence.

Recognizing this painful hypercritical tendency, she worked diligently to observe and overcome it. When she noticed the pattern occurring, she would remind herself with a gentle, clear inner voice, "Not my business. Not my responsibility. I can't control the world." Repeated dozens of times a day, these little reminders have transformed her interactions and given her the flexibility to sometimes help and sometimes just step back and ignore the disturbing perception.

There is no end to the faults found by a mind inclined toward criticism and blame. If allowed to run rampant, chronic judging and faultfinding could occupy a lifetime, leaving little room for constructive development. Sometimes it is better to walk away and ignore it. Perhaps we will return later, when conditions ripen, and address the situation effectively. Or maybe we will just move on with our lives and forget about it.

## Forget

Do you spend your meditation sessions rehashing memories that trigger anger or fear? Do you take worries to bed with you in your thoughts and dreams? Resentment, worry, regrets, and fears are reinforced by thoughts—they can build into crippling anxiety or harsh grudges. These are the kinds of thoughts that might be better to forget.

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### *Not My Business!*

Setting boundaries around thoughts can be especially helpful for people who describe themselves as chronic fixers, habitual faultfinders, or possessing strong aversive or controlling tendencies. If you identify with one of these patterns, develop some phrases to remind yourself that you do not need to intervene in every situation.

For example, you might remind yourself:

- This is not my business.
- It is just an opinion.
- I'm not a mind reader; I don't know everything.
- I can't predict the future.
- Let's see how it develops.
- I can't control the world.
- Not my problem.
- This is how it is.

Then, whenever a judging or controlling thought arises, remind yourself to relax by reciting your phrase of good counsel.

This exercise should not prevent you from caring about the state of the world and taking action. Not all problems should be ignored. But you can develop enough flexibility that when you do engage, you do so consciously and wisely rather than manifesting familiar compulsive and controlling habits.

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Consider whether reminding yourself of the many ways you were wronged brings you closer to resolution or fans the flames of your outrage. To subdue grudges and dispel resentment, the Buddha recommended five approaches. One of these was to forget, disregard, or pay no attention to the person that you resent. He taught, "one should disregard the person one resents and pay no attention to him; in this way one should remove the resentment toward that person."[61]

Emotional healing requires the ability to let go of the past. Whether the harm was caused by the actions of another or by your own foolishness, you can stop dwelling on thoughts that strengthen anger or trigger fear and shame. This kind of ignoring does not deny the pain associated with those events. But if you find that dwelling on toxic worries, traumatic memories, or thoughts of your vulnerability will magnify suffering, give yourself the opportunity to not keep those experiences vividly alive in your mind.

If you find you are tormenting yourself by remembering your most embarrassing moments, do yourself a kind favor and just forget it happened. Set aside those thoughts, perhaps just for a while, now and then. Everyone does foolish and embarrassing things; everyone experiences failures in life. No one consistently presents their best qualities to the world. We must learn to sometimes shrug off our losses, dismiss our mistakes, and forget our shameful moments so we are available to be present now.

Healing from trauma is a gradual process, requiring sensitivity and patience. It can include skillfully revisiting the past to enhance your understanding and accept your feelings. It can also involve improving your connection with present lived experience. You might need to give yourself permission to stop allowing painful memories to occupy space in your mind. Learn to dispel them; trust that you can grow past them.

When you recognize that relentless repetition of those thoughts causes harm, give yourself the option to leave them behind. Moving

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forward in your life does not deny your pain; it does not acquiesce to injustice, and it is not an absolution of past crimes. You will feel what you feel, and you will learn through the experiences in your life. As you refine your skills in working mindfully with thoughts, you will be able to determine which thoughts, interpretations, and memories to foster and nourish. This ability to guide your attention away from harmful thoughts is key to developing resilience in the face of trauma.

People respond very differently to traumatic events—some recover quickly while others can experience debilitating symptoms that persist for years. Contemporary researchers are working to identify the factors that increase one's risk for prolonged posttraumatic responses and to propose methods that can build resilience to potentially stressful events.

A study of the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing by researchers at the University of California at Irvine found several predictors of acute stress symptoms: (1) being present at the bombing or knowing someone who was directly affected, (2) previous exposure to traumatic events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, (3) a history of mental illness, and (4) having watched six or more hours each day of media coverage in the aftermath of the event. This fourth factor turned out to be highly predictive of high-stress reactions.[62]

This may not be a surprise to readers—you have probably already recognized that repeated exposure, whether through external media or internal rumination, perpetuates stress. Many other psychological studies have found correlations between the tendency toward rumination and the prolonged experience of depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms.[63]

Thus, evidence supports the suggestion that it can be beneficial to skillfully withdraw the mental energy that feeds harmful thoughts. Through the practice of meditation, you can train yourself to stop giving your habitual defilements any more of your time.

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You may not be ready or willing right now to completely forgive yourself, to understand the people who harmed you, or to love the world at large, but every bit of letting go supports the heart's healing from past shame and trauma. Sometimes experiences that cause acute pain or shame are the very ones that will fortify your commitment to sobriety, honesty, spiritual development, and an unshakable commitment to act with virtue in the future.

You may need to reflect on the painful memory or shameful action to gain a fuller understanding before you move past it. Then, when you are ready, you can give yourself permission not to dwell upon painful thoughts. Focus on your growth, strength, and virtue instead.

## Distract

Sometimes a little skillful distraction is the most effective method for taking the mind off disturbing thoughts. Have you developed an effective way to take a break from persistent obsessions in your ordinary activities? When caught in worldly worries, you might call a friend and talk about a sports event. Reading a novel, dancing to your favorite music, playing tennis, knitting on the porch, hopping on your exercise bike, or stepping outside to gaze at the starry sky can temporarily give the mind a much-needed break.

Compassionate acts of service might be even more powerful than worldly hobbies. A friend told me that when he felt depressed, he would go out and help someone. He might help an elderly neighbor trim the bushes, divide a watermelon into quarters and share the wedges with neighbors who live alone, stop by the nursing home to visit a friend, or volunteer at the local soup kitchen. Compassionate actions like these can improve our moods and free our minds from current obsessions.

A strategic distraction can remove unwholesome thoughts and focus attention on what is most useful. Such distractions create a

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much-needed pause in the habitual pattern and can give your mind the chance to relax, unwind, let go, and reset. Just a few minutes of an alternative activity might be an effective intervention to free the mind from habitual ruts.

Although the suggestions here might seem to overlap considerably with the strategy of replacing that was covered in chapter 3, the emphasis here is on your ability to withdraw the interest and pull away; the perception that is substituted is secondary.

Even when conditions are agreeable, meditation does not always go smoothly. In one teaching the Buddha suggests that if, while practicing mindfulness, one finds oneself overcome by sluggishness, anger, or distraction, "that bhikkhu should then direct his mind toward some inspiring sign. When he directs his mind toward some inspiring sign, gladness is born. When he is gladdened, rapture is born. When the mind is uplifted by rapture, the body becomes tranquil. One tranquil in body experiences happiness. The mind of one who is happy becomes concentrated. He reflects thus: 'The purpose for the sake of which I directed my mind has been achieved. Let me now withdraw it.'"[64]

Even if you have sat down with the intention to work with one meditation subject, there are times when it is wise to take a break from your primary practice and refresh your meditative attention with an "inspiring sign." You might do some loving-kindness practice, contemplate death, reflect on the qualities of the Buddha, investigate feelings, analyze a sensory perception, or shift attention to a different sense door. You are not forced to stay riveted to one meditative perception—you can skillfully adjust your practice to maintain a balanced, joyful interest in the development of your mind.

There are appropriate times for distraction. A parent might dangle a set of keys or a toy rattle in front of a crying baby—the screaming stops and she smiles. The child's attention is no longer obsessed with whatever caused her to scream; now she is fascinated by the dangling keys. When your mind is having a tantrum, dangle something else

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in front of your attention to help recompose and soothe yourself. Use the shift in perception to ground your attention in the present, remembering, "Oh, this is what's happening now."

Traditional suggestions for skillful distractions include reflecting on noble qualities of the Buddha or your teacher, or chanting Dhamma verses. Reciting a verse of wisdom can shift the mind toward wholesome thoughts.

If reflections and recitations fail to settle your mind, you might do some simple chores and focus your attention on what you are presently doing. The ancient commentaries suggest that a monk inventory his possessions.[65] The monk is told to go to his bag and take out each of the items, identifying them one by one: "This is a toothbrush. This is a spoon. This is a sewing kit. This is a nail-cutter." I compare this to housecleaning. When I felt upset as a teenager, I would gather my wits by cleaning a drawer, organizing my desk, or filing papers—simple, unexciting activities.

Meditators should select their distractions carefully. You should be able to easily return attention to your primary meditation practice (or the activity at hand). Choose wholesome or neutral activities that engage and organize attention but do not stimulate exuberant excitement or create an internal drama that feeds sensual desire, aversion, comparison, or fear. A distraction should produce calmness and ease, not increase your workload or exacerbate your worry. It should help you compose yourself and refresh your energy but not keep you awake at night developing an exciting new project.

During long, silent retreats, it is almost inevitable that enthusiasm will not remain high every moment of every day. Acceptable distractions can refresh your energy and provide a break. Inspired by the innocuous and almost dull character of the commentarial recommendations, I have developed a personal list of allowable distractions on retreats, including cleaning my room, doing laundry, taking a walk, mending clothes, flossing my teeth, and volunteering

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for an extra housekeeping chore. These activities give me something to do when I do not want to meditate, but they are not exciting enough to stimulate additional disruptive thoughts. And as a bonus I often feel slightly virtuous after I floss my teeth or darn my socks. The tasks can be performed mindfully, and then I get back to my meditation practice.

A meditation retreat is not the appropriate time for exciting activities. It is not the time to write a new book, begin a new project, or get caught up on the wide range of productive worldly activities that usually fill to-do lists. If your mind is agitated and you feel you just can't keep facing the same thoughts, get your needle and thread and sew up holes in your socks. Don't design a pattern for a whole new outfit; only do enough to take your mind off the obsession.

## Take a Break

Avoidance should not become your primary approach to spiritual development. Mindfully and directly meeting the full array of feelings, perceptions, and experiences is generally a more effective approach to personal, social, and spiritual transformation. There are times, however, when you may not have the capacity to deal wisely with what is happening.

If your body and mind are excessively reactive, it might be better to take a break: soak in pleasure by letting the sun warm your back, smile as you watch squirrels playing in the trees, feel the soft suds of soap as you wash the dishes, delight in the distinctive scent of autumn as you rake leaves in your yard, or enjoy refining your golf swing. Ordinary pleasures can reset your stress response and reduce agitation.

This take-a-break approach should not create a habit of pleasure seeking to soothe or avoid emotional discomfort. For example, compulsive snacking is not a healthy long-term strategy for calming the mind. Nevertheless, intentionally relishing ordinary pleasures can sometimes knock the mind out of its negative cycles and restore

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### *Skillful Distractions*

We all need to distract ourselves from our own thoughts at times, but is the distraction you have chosen a skillful one? Does it refresh your attention, restore your confidence, and lead you toward your goal?

Develop a list of skillful distractions to employ when you feel agitated by your thoughts.

For example, to distract yourself from obsessive thoughts in daily life you might:

- Organize a desk drawer
- Sort your inbox
- Mend clothes
- Weed the flower bed
- Solve a crossword puzzle
- Invite friends over to play Scrabble
- Step outside
- Exercise or stretch
- Listen to soothing music or perhaps stimulating music that moves you to dance
- Call an old friend
- Try a new soup recipe

To distract yourself from obsessive thought in meditation you might:

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- Count the breaths
- Change the object of attention for a few minutes, for example, by listening to sounds
- Move attention through a sequence of touchpoints
- Recite the refuges and precepts
- Contemplate your virtues or good qualities
- Visualize an inspiring image—perhaps a Buddha image
- Reflect on your intention
- Memorize and recite a Dhamma verse

your balance. Mindfully experiencing wholesome joy can brighten and inspire the mind. You can find a suitable time later to deal with the personal, psychological, social, or practical issues that need your attention.

There are times when you might need to give yourself a break by stepping back from the conditions that trigger reactions. After having distanced yourself from the habitual turmoil, you might find that you are quite capable of and interested in exploring your thought habits with mindful investigation (this inquiry is the topic of the next chapter). You could also need a more extended break to build up internal strength and supportive conditions.

Imagine that you can place your habitual thoughts in a drawer to await the time when you are ready to be mindful of them. Later you can pull them out, but for now they are out of sight and not actively demanding your attention. In the future you might bring a fresh perspective to the issues behind these thoughts, but for now you prefer to focus on developing inner resources that will make it possible to address the issues skillfully.

Ignoring is not quitting, but taking a graceful pause. When electronic devices malfunction, unplugging or shutting them down,

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waiting a few minutes, and then restarting can work wonders. Often a reboot is just the right cure for a troubled device. Not all your issues need to be unpacked in detail; not all unwholesome patterns need to be thoroughly examined. It is possible that you might just grow past your problems and find that the habits stop arising without requiring further attention. The significance of your stories might fade away and be forgotten with time as you move on with the next events of your life.

## When Conditions Are Not Ripe

One student found herself forcefully trying to ignore distracting thoughts. She was eager to quickly forget her habitual distractions, but her efforts soon deteriorated into a tense desire to get rid of unpleasant conditions. Because she had neither developed skillful alternatives nor fully recognized the danger (strategies #1 and #2), this withdrawal of attention was not very helpful without the support of the preliminary strategies, so she changed her approach and took just a modest step back from the momentum of habitual thoughts to pause, feel present sensations in the body, and reflect on the pattern. In this way she found the ability to gently set healthier boundaries for her thoughts.

There are times when a direct approach is ill-advised and likely to be unsuccessful. At one time a monk named Venerable Meghiya was serving as the Buddha's attendant. Meghiya found a tranquil grove near a delightful stream and felt inspired to go there to practice meditation in seclusion. Aware that Meghiya was not yet mature enough to benefit from the intensity of solitary meditation, the Buddha tried to discourage him from meditating alone in the forest. Blinded by his own conceit, Meghiya departed against the Buddha's advice. Sure enough, he was overwhelmed by hindrances and soon returned to the company of the Buddha.

The Buddha explained that when the development of one's mind

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is immature, one should cultivate five conditions that incline toward maturity. One should (1) cultivate good friendships, (2) develop virtue, (3) discuss the Dhamma, (4) apply wise effort, and (5) possess a penetrative understanding of the arising and disappearance of phenomena.[66]

We must be realistic in our assessment of our meditative skills. Take the time to lay a strong foundation for your practice. Do not assume that you should be able to accomplish something just because you want it. Overconfidence is not conviction; it may be the deluded effects of conceit, arrogance, and misperception. Consider whether you have cultivated the skills and obtained the conditions that will support your endeavor.

## Summary of Main Points

As you go through life, discern which experiences are worth attending to and which are best ignored. With concentration and clear intention, you can learn to pull your attention away from unwholesome thoughts and from the signs that trigger them.

You have the option of forgetting regrets, grudges, and stories that might otherwise sustain ill will or reactivate traumas. You have the ability to pause and stop unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind.

There are times when a skillful distraction is just the right cure—recite a verse of wisdom, undertake a compassionate act of service, or just sweep your floor. Patterns and habits that trigger defilements might ultimately need to be examined closely, but wait until you have supportive conditions for this inquiry.

Avoiding, ignoring, and forgetting certain thoughts can be useful strategies to refresh, balance, and free your mind. At times, a skillful withdrawal might be the wisest choice.

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### *Setting Boundaries*

To strengthen your ability to turn away from states that you know will lead to harm or distress, notice when and how your energy goes out toward something (usually through craving, desire, resentment, or aversion) that is not worthy of your attention and time. Identify that entanglement and practice withdrawing your attention from its grasp. Refuse to be pulled into the vortex of fears, worries, grudges, anger, self-perceptions, shameful memories, regrets, fantasies, or attachments to views.

When obsessive thoughts are not fed by attention, they subside and wither away from lack of fuel.

Develop ways to set boundaries around your thoughts. For example:

- To support a peaceful sleep, you might tell yourself that you can let your worries go for now—you will deal with them tomorrow. Tonight, allow the mind to rest.
- Imagine there is a special box where you can store your worries and concerns to address at a more appropriate time.
- During a meditation session, make an agreement with your mind to focus on your meditation subject now, and promise that you'll address that worry or concern later.

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- When you come home from work, resolve to leave thoughts, worries, and stories about work at the office. Enjoy a nice dinner with family, friends, or alone, free from obsessive identification with work.
- If you are burdened by guilt or past regrets, remind yourself that the past is gone. Then consider what you learned from your mistakes and give yourself permission to move forward in your life.
- If you torment yourself remembering your most embarrassing or shameful moments, do yourself a kind favor and just ignore that it happened—forget it! Everyone has been embarrassed now and then; everyone has acted in ways they are later ashamed of. If you have learned from the experience and are not continuing the disturbing behavior, find a way to shrug off the memory.
- If past traumas haunt you, remind yourself that it isn't happening now and connect with what is *actually* happening now. We can't change the past, but we can meet the present with wisdom, compassion, and mindful attention. The dangers that we fear are not usually actually happening in the present moment. Sense how mindfulness can be a great shelter and refuge for the weary meditator.

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