

# Mental Noting

*by Gil Fronsdal*

Thinking can be a powerful force of distraction, preventing us from being mindfully present in a useful way. During meditation, a simple method in which we use thinking to stay present rather than carrying us away is 'mental noting'. This is the practice of using a simple "note" to calmly name – as a whisper in the mind – what we are experiencing. Though it can take a while to learn, and can be awkward at first, with practice, mental noting can become second nature.

Noting directs thinking into a simple, rudimentary form, rather than letting it wander off into distraction. "An idle mind will get in trouble" is a saying that describes how an insufficiently attentive mind can all too easily drift off into thought. Mental noting gives the thinking mind something to do, which supports meditation rather than distracts from it. It can be a useful way to interrupt the incessant flow of discursive thoughts.

In contrast to most thinking, noting is not discursive. It does not involve analysis or judgment. Rather, we simply give our current experience a one-word label. For example, upon hearing a sound we note 'hearing' without thinking further about the sound. Other common mental notes are 'seeing', 'touching', 'feeling', and 'thinking'.

Some experiences may be given more descriptive labels. For example, sensations may be noted as 'warmth', 'coolness', 'pressure', 'tightness', and so on. Emotions may be named: 'happiness', 'sadness', 'excitement', 'fear'. Mental activity may be recognized as 'wanting', 'planning', 'resisting', and the like. With mindfulness of breathing a common note is 'rising' as the belly or chest lifts on the inhalation, and 'falling' as we exhale.

Usually, a specific note is repeated until the experience being noted disappears, is sufficiently acknowledged, or is no longer predominant.

Noting in meditation has many functions. The primary one is keeping the meditator present – sometimes it is called an 'anchor' to the present. The mind is less likely to wander off if one keeps up a steady stream of **relaxed noting**. If the mind does wander, the noting practice can make it easier to reestablish mindfulness.

Another function of noting is to better acknowledge or recognize what is occurring: the clearer one's recognition, the more effective one's mindfulness. Naming can strengthen recognition. Sometimes this can be a kind of truth-telling, when we are reluctant to admit something about ourselves or about what is happening.

A third function of noting is to help recognize patterns in one's experience. A frequently-repeated note reveals a frequently-recurring experience. For example, persistent worriers may not realize it until they see how often they note 'worry'.

And fourth, as described above, mental noting gives the thinking mind something to do rather than leaving it to its own devices.

A fifth function is disentangling us from being preoccupied or overly identified with experience. Noting can help us 'step away' so that we might see more clearly. For example, noting 'wanting' might pull us out of the preoccupation with something we want. This may not be immediate, but by repeatedly noting 'wanting, wanting,' one may be able to be aware of the wanting without

being caught by it. As an antidote to drowning in strong emotion or obsessive thinking, mental noting is sometimes called a 'life preserver'.

Noting can also help maintain a non-reactive form of attention. Calmly and equanimously noting what is happening, we are less likely to get caught up in emotional reactions. The stories of Mara, the god of temptation and distraction, visiting the Buddha illustrate this. The Buddha does not chase Mara away, nor does he give in. He simply looks at him directly and says, "Mara, I see you." With this, Mara runs away. Similarly, noting 'fear' can be like saying, "Fear, I see you." Noting helps us to see mindfully while remaining free of what we see.

The tone of the inner voice that notes may reveal less-than-equanimous reactions to what we are trying to be mindful of. The noting may sound harsh, bored, scared, hesitant, or excited, to name just a few possibilities. By noticing and adjusting the tone, we may become more balanced and equanimous.

Each person needs to find his or her own way of noting – it isn't a fixed technique. And as circumstances change, how one notes may change. Sometimes, what is most useful is calmly noting everything one is being mindful of. Other times, noting may be useful when one is easily distracted but not when one is settled. Some people only use noting when being mindful of particular experiences, such as thinking or feeling emotions. Others limit their noting to naming only what is distracting. And some people find that it is never helpful to use mental noting; they prefer a more silent form of knowing.

The noting practice has a number of pitfalls. It can become rote or mechanical. When one notices this, it's often useful to pause and **relax** before starting again. Another hazard is focusing too much on noting at the expense of being mindful. One version of this is the 'check-list approach' to mindfulness – one believes it is enough to simply note an experience. **Noting is mostly a slight nudge** to encourage mindfulness, so that attentiveness to the felt experience increases. Another pitfall is that noting may become an attempt to control or drive one's experience instead of simply recognizing it. Or it may be used to create an artificial distance from experience: naming becomes a substitute for feeling. Relaxing and allowing the mindfulness to become more receptive can help with this.

Noting can become a hindrance to meditation if one starts thinking about what word to use. Sometimes beginners to mental noting are too concerned with the 'right' note. The most obvious label is good enough. If a vague note like "here" or "this" helps one stay present, it has fulfilled its primary function. While precision in noting can sometimes sharpen mindfulness and help with insight, **there is no need to analyze one's way to greater precision.**

Some people find that as the mind becomes more peaceful in meditation they may need to adjust the relative 'loudness' or 'intensity' of the noting to keep it in harmony with the meditative stillness. As the mind becomes quieter, so should the mental noting. It can become a softer and softer whisper. At times words are no longer needed – a soft "hmm" may suffice.

A basic principle for the practice of mental noting is to use it when it is helpful and to avoid it when it is not. Mindfulness practice aims to cultivate awareness, insight and liberation. It can be quite satisfying when noting supports these aims. It can be a reminder that all of one's faculties can be used in the service of freedom, including our cognitive functions such as naming our experience.