

How to Note and Label

Some Definitions

The goal of mindfulness practice is to precisely track what you're experiencing and to let things come and go with detachment. To create a structure for that to occur, we'll often use noting, and sometimes labeling as well.

DEFINITION: Noting

To note something means to notice it and then focus on it intently (but gently!) for a few seconds, unless it happens to immediately vanish.

To facilitate this process, you have the option of accompanying the noting with labeling.

DEFINITION: Labeling

To label means to think or say a word or phrase that describes what you are noting.

The relationship between mindfulness, noting, and labeling is as follows: Labeling is designed to facilitate noting; noting is designed to facilitate mindfulness.

Pacing and Voice Tone

As a general principle, note and label at a leisurely pace, allowing approximately 4-6 seconds between each labeling.

When you speak the labels out loud, intentionally use a low, gentle, matter-of-fact, almost impersonal tone of voice. When you think the labels, create the same tone in your mental voice.

The leisurely pace allows you to soak in and savor each experience as you note it. The tone of voice helps put you in a deep state.

Noting

An act of noting usually consists of two parts:

1. An initial *noticing*, which takes place in a fraction of a second, and
2. A period of intently focusing on what you noticed. This typically lasts for several seconds, during which you intentionally soak into it and open up to it. This second part is traditionally referred to as “penetrating” or “knowing,” but we will often refer to it as “soaking.”

Thus, noting consists of a sequence of well-defined noticings and highly focused soakings. We will refer to what gets noted (Touch, Feel, Image, Talk, Relaxed, Peace, Blank, Quiet) as “categories.” Associated with each category to be noted is a word or phrase—its label.

When you note a vanishing (“Gone”), there’s only the noticing part, since you cannot soak into something that is not extended in time and space.

Labeling

Noting need not be accompanied by labeling, and labeling may be mental or spoken. This gives us three possibilities:

1. Just noting without intentionally labeling.
2. Mental labels accompanying the noting.
3. Spoken labels accompanying the noting.

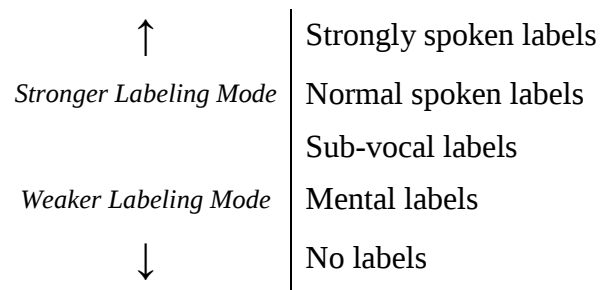
Within the spoken labels there are three sub-types:

- a. Sub-vocal labels (Mouthed, whispered, or *sotto voce* labeling that would be inaudible to people near you.)
- b. Ordinary spoken labels.
- c. Strongly spoken labels.

(Obviously the latter two can only be done in appropriate environments.)

This gives you a spectrum of 5 possibilities analogous to gear positions in a car. We will refer to these 5 possibilities as “labeling modes.”

The standard way to label when you work on your own is to freely shift back and forth between labeling modes. You may shift frequently or seldom as circumstances dictate. By circumstances, I mean what is going on inside you (how focused or scattered you are) and what is going on around you (whether there are people you might disturb, etc.) As a general principle, as soon as you get spaced out or caught up, immediately shift to a stronger mode of labeling. Once you get well focused, you can drop to a weaker mode of labeling if you so desire.



Sometimes, in order to fortify your practice or check in on what you’re experiencing, a facilitator may ask you to note using a specific mode of labeling, such as (ordinary) spoken labels, strongly spoken labels, mental labels, and so forth. The instruction will be formulated something like, “Now note XX using spoken labels.”

However, if you are just given the instruction, “Note XX” without further specification, assume that this means to note in the standard way, i.e. shifting freely between noting modes.

Noting the Noting

A frequently asked question regarding labeling is: “Making a mental label is obviously an instance of Talk. Should I note or label it as such?” The answer is no.

Dividing the Attention between the Label and the Labeled

As a general principle, put no more than 5% of your attention on the labeling process itself. The other 95% goes into the soaking and opening process.

An exception to this is the case of strongly spoken labels, which are used when you really “hit the wall” and need a period of continuous feedback to fight through the wandering and unconsciousness. When using strongly spoken labels, 20% or even more of your attention should go into *really listening* to the labels. That way as soon as the label stream ceases, you have instant feedback letting you know that you are getting spaced out and caught up.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1: Noting makes me think a lot. I think about if I’m doing it right. I think about what to look for next. I think about thinking about thinking. What should I do?

A: Just be patient. Those are common initial reactions. They tend to go away with time as the noting categories become more second nature for you, and your mind simply gets tired of playing games with itself.

Remember, you can always practice “even coverage” for awhile if you need a break from the headiness of noting and labeling. One of the reasons for including even coverage as one of the focusing methods is to provide a passive procedure to contrast with the “doingness” of noting.

Another thing you can try is to make your noting voice more impersonal and matter-of-fact. That may help reduce the “tripping out on yourself” aspect you reported.

Q2: It seems that a lot of my labels are just guesses.

A: That’s okay. You have to start somewhere. Confidence comes with experience.

Q3: It seems that my labels often come late, after the fact, especially with regard to tracking Talk.

A: That’s okay. You are still much more alert than you would be otherwise.

Q4: A lot of stuff is always going on at once. When I try to label it all, it speeds me up and makes me frenetic.

A: It’s okay to miss stuff as long as you really focus on what you do label.

Q5: The noting and especially labeling seem to interfere with or change the thing I'm focusing on so I can't detect what's really there.

A: Sure you can. What's really there is whatever was there, plus any change produced from the act of paying attention to it. In this practice our task is (1) to be specific about where we're focusing and (2) to soak in and savor it. Any sensory experience is a valid candidate for focusing on, even if that experience has been caused by or modified by the act of focusing itself.

Q6: Noting and especially labeling seem to reinforce a strong sense of an "I" doing the noting.

A: That's natural at the beginning. At some point the noting goes on autopilot. Just as you can do the complex task of driving a car without needing much of a "driving self," eventually you can quickly and accurately label complex phenomena without needing a "meditating self" controlling the process. When that happens, the sense of distance between noter and noted collapses.

Q7: I just keep saying "Touch ...Touch" over and over and over again. What's the point?

A: Remember that noting is not just noticing. Each time you note something you should *intentionally* soak into it and open up to it. In other words, you should intentionally infuse clarity and equanimity into what you note, *each time* you note. When you note that way you are doing something very powerful to reprogram the deep mind. You are not wasting your time even if you just note the same banal thing over and over.

I know that this can be challenging, because initially you may not get any immediate positive feedback to indicate that something is changing deep down. At some point though, you begin to sense your awareness penetrating down into the thing noted, softening and purifying the sensory circuits that lie below. When that happens, you start to get immediate tangible feedback that the noting is doing something useful, and you don't begrudge the fact that you're noting the same thing over and over. Before you reach that point, the going is tough and slow. After you reach that point, your practice snowballs upwards; you've passed the "breakout point" in the exponential (hockey stick) growth curve.

Q8: Why should I note and label?

A: There are many reasons. Here are a few.

- For one thing, the gentle loving tone that you create in your voice as you label can be very powerful. Your own voice can put you into a deep state of reassurance, safety, and self-acceptance. We'll refer to such a state as equanimity.
- Noting and labeling allow you to focus on just what's present in the moment. This reduces overwhelm, which in turn reduces suffering.
- Noting and labeling allow you to break experiences down into manageable parts and deal with them one at a time. A 500-pound weight will crush you, but ten 50-pound weights can be carried one at a time.

- Several of the noting categories that we use represent windows of opportunity—pleasant aspects of experience (such as rest and flow) that are often present but usually go unnoticed and hence un-enjoyed. The noting categories are set up to call your attention to such windows of opportunity.

Q9: I cannot seem to separate Image from Talk. Any suggestions?

A: It depends on what you mean by “separate.”

If by separate you mean preventing Image and Talk from happening at the same time, or stopping them from interacting back and forth, then you’re right. Neither you nor anyone else can separate them in that sense. However, the good news is that there’s no need whatsoever to separate them in that sense.

But, even when Talk and Image are intertwined, it is still possible to experience them as qualitatively and spatially distinct sensory events.

Qualitatively speaking, Image is visual, photic. Talk is verbal, acoustic. Spatially speaking, Image tends to be centered more forward. Talk tends to occur further back, in your head.

So, if you can distinguish external sights from external sounds, you can “separate” internal images from internal conversations.

Special exercises may also be helpful in this regard.

Q10: Can you summarize some basic guidelines for the noting and labeling process?

A: Sure. First come what I call the “3 okays.”

- It’s okay to guess.
- It’s okay to miss.
- It’s okay to be late.

Then there are the guidelines for “shifting gears.”

- If you are noting without labels and are getting spaced out or caught up, start to mentally label.
- If that doesn’t help, modulate your mental voice to be more gentle and matter-of-fact, even if that seems artificial and contrived.
- If that does not help, speak the labels out loud in that gentle and matter-of-fact tone.
- If that does not help, use strongly spoken labels.
- If the effort to speak the labels causes uncomfortable reactions (judgment, resistance, emotion, and so forth) label those reactions Talk, Feel, and so forth.
- Those reactions are proof that you’re doing the procedure correctly. The stronger labeling mode is forcing you to go toe-to-toe with unconsciousness!

Q11: I don't like to label.

A: The solution is easy. You don't have to! But if it's a choice between effortful, uncomfortable, unnatural, labeling on one hand, and being grossly spaced out on the other, go for the labels!

Q12: When I focus on Image, I get a homogeneous rapid-fire sequence of risings and passings. They come much too fast and furious to note and penetrate individually. If I were to try to label each one, I'd sound like a machine gun. What do I do?

A: This type of phenomena can happen in any domain, but it's particularly common in Image Space and Talk Space.

So, let me answer generically. Let X stand for whatever the rapid activity is.

Just note "X, gone" in the usual leisurely pace to acknowledge that you are continuously detecting both activation and vanishing.

Don't try to label each individual activation or vanishing. Rather just soak into the overall field. In this case the labels are just reminding you what you're focusing on. You are sort of labeling the average experience rather than each individual phenomenon.