

A Note on Noting (or Labeling)

by Stephen Levine, *Guided Meditations*

Noting is a silent acknowledgment in the heart of what is occurring in the mind. Noting simply states what is without the least intention to interfere. It encourages and openness to healing. It cultivates qualities of honest, non-judgmental awareness of the contents of consciousness, and an ongoing sense of presence in the present. It brings the practice from the meditation pillow into the world. It aids in generating a continuity of awareness. It keeps the mind in touch with the body. It is a direct recognition of the moment.

When thinking draws awareness to itself, one notes silently “thinking, thinking.” In the beginning of this practice the grossest evident state of mind and body will be easily labeled as “thinking” or “feeling” or “pain” or “resistance.” Later, as the process of noting becomes refined and takes on a quality of subtler recognition, one might find it natural – without thinking a label, to just note spontaneously the qualities therein – instead of noting “thinking” one might notice “planning” or “doubting” or “loving” or “fearing.”

The degree of a thought’s “power of attraction” to awareness is called “attachment.” Tens of thousands of mind-moments flash through awareness from instant to instant but only a few have the density and magnetic attraction to arise fully into consciousness as a thought. That magnetic propensity that originates from one’s personal (and inherited) history is a degree to which we have positive and negative attachments. A grasping or resistance that reacts to any object of awareness passing through. Noting attachment – noting “liking” and “disliking” from object to object – keeps us aware of “the chain of events.” Indeed there is a method of mindfulness that deals not only with watching sensations, and feelings against the silent backdrop of physical sensations, but is primarily focused on noting the liking and disliking that arises in the mind from moment to moment.

Noting keeps awareness on track. It is recognition of the weather of the mind. It senses when there is an 80% chance of rain today or when the clouds are parting. It feels the first rays of the sun, as well as the first drop of rain. It is present in the present. It receives a snowflake in an open palm, not in a fist jammed deep within a lint-lined pocket.

Noting is a process of identifying a state of mind before we identify with that state. Recognizing a swamp before we are sunk up to our hips in the ooze. Though it may take a while to integrate noting into our daily experiences, it eventually becomes a lighthearted recognition of occasional heavy heartedness. We begin to meet the world and we meet them with the light-hearted ease of “big surprise, fear again, anger again, resistance again.”

Noting becomes a gentle acknowledgment of the passing show. It recognizes and notes change as it occurs. It allows content to be seen within the larger context of process. And eventually process in the enormous context of being, the sacred emptiness of our essential nature, the boundary-less heart.

Noting means nothing added. It means “just this much,” the moment as it is. The millisecond in which truth is to be found. Noting is not even a subvocalization. It arises at the moment of perception, before interpretation changes experience to a personal memory. As one longtime meditator said, “It is the meditator’s world companion. When you know where you are, you are always at home.”

Noting takes meditation “off the cushion” and into everyday lives. It is with us throughout our daily changes. It recognizes when we are moving towards or pulling away from the moment. It is with us when we drive, when we eat, when we work. It is like an old friend remind us to pay attention.

Eventually, noting becomes a spontaneous response to changing states. Noting with a simple easiness the flow of consciousness. Not thinking about or analyzing this state in order to label it – not creating more thinking.

Acknowledging the flow of consciousness: “planning,” “doubting,” “hoping,” “wondering,” “fearing,” “enjoying,” “liking,” “disliking,” “envying,” “loving,” “hating,” “longing,” “pride,” “jealousy,” “enthralment,” “joy.”

If noting gets in the way, discard it. It is only a technique. When the mind is of itself on track and clear, noting may be “something extra” and leave a trace that is not useful. If noting sometimes feels to be more a hindrance than an ally, encouraging the analytical tendency rather than the simple presence – more work than clear play – drop it.

As the practice of noting enters deeply and becomes one’s own, the words tend to fall away and just recognition of changing content maintains itself. The effort to become effortless has once again paid off. Then perhaps noting will only be employed for the heavy, more afflicting, states we recognize we sometimes become lost. Noting perhaps “fear” or “doubt” or “distrust” or “joy” so as not to be swept away by these more intense unfoldings. But generally just mindfulness notes what is, wordlessly, no longer a “labeler” or even a “watcher,” but instead, having entered directly into the process, the watching itself.