

Do Nothing Technique

Do Nothing is an approach to rest that involves little or no effort. You don't even have to intentionally note restful states. It is totally passive and easy going.

This approach has been discovered and re-discovered many times and in many places, so it is known by many different historical names. Here are a few:

- Choiceless Awareness (term used by Krishnamurti and others);
- Open Presence (term used by neuroscientists);
- Just Sitting (according to some definitions of that phrase);
- Dzogchen/Mahamudra (in Tibet);
- Passive Contemplation (in Christianity); and
- Non-dual Awareness (according to some definitions of that phrase).

Do Nothing could also be called “The Technique of No Technique.” Because this sounds a bit selfcontradictory, you might suspect that there are a few subtle points involved in the instructions. Indeed, that is so.

Let's start with the basic instructions (which are quite short). Then we can clarify the subtleties.

Basic Instructions

1. Let whatever happens, happen.
2. Whenever you're aware of an intention to control your attention, drop that intention.

Now for the subtle points. There are two sides to understanding those subtleties. First, you need to understand what the instruction requires. (Yes,

there is a very small amount of doing in Do Nothing. :-)) Second, you need to understand what the instruction does not require (but what you might think it requires and thus make something that's easy into something that's hard).

Let's start with the phrase “intention to control your attention.”

Sometimes your attention may be drawn to an experience spontaneously without control. The experience just happens. At other times, you may find yourself intentionally controlling the direction or content of your experience, trying to keep it on a certain thing or pull it away from some other thing. This is true of all sensory experience including thoughts (recall: in Basic Mindfulness, thought is defined as mental image, mental talk, or both simultaneously). Sometimes a thought just arises on its own. At other times, you may find yourself intentionally thinking about a topic, intentionally pulling away from a topic, or actively directing a thought after it has arisen spontaneously.

During a period of Do Nothing practice, if you notice that you're intentionally directing your awareness, you drop the intention to do so. You do this whether that intentional direction involves an objective arising (such as sights, sounds, physical body sensations), a subjective arising (such as mental images, mental talk, or emotional body sensations), a restful state, or a flow state.

Notice that what you've been asked to drop is the intention to direct awareness. You're not being asked to drop the thing that you happen to be aware of. So if a thought comes up spontaneously, you don't have to drop that thought. But when you find yourself controlling that thought, drop that intention to control. Do Nothing never asks you to drop experiences. It only asks you to drop intentionally directing how your attention moves within experiences. And **you only have to drop an intention when you happen to notice the presence of an intention, which may or may not be very often**. So, when you Do Nothing, you may have a lot of sensory activity and you may go unconscious and get caught up in things

quite a bit. That's okay! Whenever you notice an intention to do anything about all of that, drop that intention.

But what exactly does it mean to “drop” an intention? It means to let go of that intention in that moment. So, dropping is not the same as getting rid of. The intention might immediately reappear over and over. That's perfectly fine.

But what if you cannot drop it for even a moment? Then you don't have to! Here's why. We're going to define intention within this context to mean something that is totally voluntary. If you cannot drop it for even a moment, then, by our definition, it is not really part of your free will. It's happening to you and you don't need to drop it.

Notice also that the instructions do not ask you to continuously check for whether you're intentionally controlling your awareness or not. To continuously check for the presence or absence of such intention would itself create a continuous intention! When you Do Nothing you may notice intention to control your awareness frequently, occasionally, or hardly ever. Any of these possibilities is fine.

As you can see, anyone can do the Do Nothing technique “perfectly” because its goals are extremely modest. Of course, doing the technique perfectly does not mean that your experience of it will be pleasant, restful, or productive. That's quite a different issue. A “perfect” period of Do Nothing practice may be essentially indistinguishable from a perfect storm of Monkey Mind.

So, what to do when Do Nothing does nothing for you? Do something else! Basic Mindfulness gives you almost two dozen other focus options.

A general principle is:

- If Do Nothing makes you too spacey, try Noting for a while.
- If Noting makes you too racy, try Do Nothing for a while.

Now you can appreciate the initial phrase in the instructions: “Let whatever happens happen.” With this technique, there is no attempt to achieve any particular effect. If the Do Nothing approach happens to work for you at a given time, pursue it; if it doesn't, don't.

“Do Nothing” Meditation Video Transcript

[0:00] [caption] "Do Nothing"

[0:05] A lot of the techniques that I give you – the noting techniques and so forth – they require a certain amount of effort. It's good to be able to drop effort also. The techniques I give you involve a certain amount of making decisions. Even moment by moment, when you're doing a noting, if more than one phenomenon is available, you have to sort of choose, and also you choose what approaches you're working on.

[0:46] It's also good to have a practice that involves no choices whatsoever – not even a choice as to directing what's happening in attention. Some people call this *choiceless awareness*; some people call it *just sitting*; some people call it *the great perfection* (in Tibetan: Dzogchen); or *the grand symbol* (in Sanskrit: Mahamudra). There's different ways of describing it. I like to call it Do Nothing – that's just my name for it.

[1:38] There is a way to Do Nothing – a conceptual framework. Needless to say, because the verb 'do' and 'nothing' don't go together, there are some subtleties as to what this all refers to. The Do Nothing technique is designed with time – (I cannot overemphasize that phrase – *with time*; not when you practice it at a given occasion, but *with time*) – it is designed to create a sensitivity for a certain circuit in human consciousness – the circuit that controls attention – and it sets up an environment wherein that circuit will turn itself off for a while. [2:47] If you try to turn it off, obviously that's not going to exactly work because you have to keep it on in order to try to turn it off. The Do Nothing technique doesn't involve your hand turning off

yourself. It sets up a situation where nature will grow that hand, reach around, and turn off the robot-self for a brief period of time. At some point you and the world will come back so nothing bad at all will happen; you don't have to be afraid.

[3:33] So that's one way to look at the Do Nothing technique. With time, it will set the stage; you'll develop a sensitivity for the part of you that controls attention (and that's a very, very primitive part of our being); and then, once that sensitivity is developed, it will, for periods of time, turn off.

[4:02] A lot of people report when I ask them about their experience in practice – 'I can't decide what to do [at] certain times. I'm just confused with all the options.' That's a really good experience. I know you think it's a bad experience, but actually that's a good experience, because when you're sort of like – 'I don't know what to do with my meditation right now' – the part that controls attention is maximally activated at that time. That's the thing that's going to turn off through the Do Nothing technique. But when it's maximally activated, it's good to know because that points you to – 'Oh, that's the place.' This sort of, 'I don't know what to do, and I should be able to figure out what to do next' – whenever that confusion about what should I do with the practice arises, that's a strong arising from the place of choice. That's good, because for a moment your attention is adverted to the place of choice. Love that. Maybe that wouldn't be a bad time to Do Nothing.

[5:20] The instruction set for how to Do Nothing is very short – just two sentences: Let whatever happens happen. As soon as you're aware of an intention to control your attention, drop that intention.

[5:40] Let's go through the inevitable subtleties, the inevitable confusions. There's nothing in this technique that says that you should *maintain* an intention to drop intentions. It says, 'When you are aware of an intention to control your attention, drop that intention.' You might think that the technique is saying, 'Moment-by-moment monitor whether you have an intention or not, and always maintain the intention to drop those intentions.' Well then you'd be doing two things instead of doing nothing.

[6:27] 'Let whatever happens happen' means whatever sensory experiences are going to happen, let them happen, including that you may be very scattered, maybe that you may get sleepy and go unconscious, that you may get lost in monkey mind for long periods of time, that you will have very little concentration, clarity or equanimity. Those are some of the things that *could* happen. They come under the phrase, 'Let whatever happens happen.' So there's nothing in this technique that says those things won't happen, and they may be all that happens. However, it also says, 'As soon as you're aware of the intention to control your attention' – so, if you have an intention to do something about anything that has happened – drop that intention.

[7:34] Inevitable question: 'What happens if I can't drop it?' Well, that goes to needing clarification about what 'drop' means and what 'intention' means. The phraseology has been extremely carefully developed: 'Whenever you're aware of the intention to control your attention, drop that intention.'

[8:00] We're going to define 'intention' in a very specific way, and we're going to define 'drop' in a very specific way. 'Intention' is something that, by definition, you have complete control over. You can initiate it, or you can drop it. I have complete control over the movement of my arm. I can raise it, and I can decide not to raise it.

[8:30] 'Drop' does not mean get 'rid of'. It's in the moment: you drop the intention; the intention might come back immediately. That's fine. When it comes back, drop it again. If you can't drop it for even a second, then it's not fully free will – it's not full intention, so you don't have to drop it. Anything that you might think is an intention to control your attention, that, when you drop it, you simply can't, then actually that's not free will – it's happening to you, and if you can't drop the intention, you don't have to drop it because the technique doesn't ask you to do that, and *certainly* the technique does not ask you to have a restful experience, although that could be a consequence of the technique and, with time, tends to be a consequence of the technique. If the experience is horribly agitating and

uncomfortable, there's absolutely no reason why you need to continue with this technique at that time. The catch phrase that I use is, 'If noting makes you racy, try Do Nothing. If Do Nothing makes you spacey, try noting.'

[9:53] Notice the phrase, 'As soon as you're aware of...' You may very seldom be aware of the intention to control your attention. That's perfectly okay; I didn't say you'd be aware of it very often. Specifically, you are not being asked to moment-by-moment monitor for the presence of that intention. You have to wait for the awareness to be there, which might not be much of a wait, or it might be a long wait while you're lost in reverie and sleepiness. Perfectly okay, as far as this technique goes. [10:36] This is gomeh. Last night, I gave a Tibetan word – dacmeh. I said meh means without; dac means self. Gom is the Tibetan word for meditate. Gomeh means 'don't meditate'. Of course, you are meditating though. The true gomeh would be the state of 99.9% of human beings all the time. They truly don't meditate. This is a form of meditation, but it's a sort of anti-meditation meditation. So, as soon as you're aware of that intention, then drop it, whenever that may be, which may not be very often.

[11:32] There's no noting or labeling involved, obviously.

[11:36] Common question: 'What if I have the intention to move my body?' Well... that's okay. I wouldn't *always* give in to it, but what you're pinpointing with this technique is most specifically whatever it is within us that decides to initiate thoughts, attempts to suppress thoughts, attempts to direct thoughts, decides to pursue a thought once it arises, or take it in some other direction once it arises, or use thought to do something about thought. That sort of place within us – whatever that place is – is what this technique will pinpoint with time.

[12:36] There are automatic responses of concentration, clarity and equanimity within meditators. You don't have to have an intention for those to occur. They occur automatically. You don't drop that, because you'd actually have to have an intention to stop an automatic meditator's response. So you absolutely do not interfere with the momentum of

concentration, clarity and equanimity that you've developed with the other techniques. In fact, that's sort of the whole idea. If there's any meditation that occurs in this technique, it's because of all the meditation you've done before is meditating *you*. You're not meditating.

[13:40] So two things are meditating you: the momentum of your previous practice and – whatever you want to call it – the nature of nature, spirit, time, God, God's grace – choose your words. I repeat, you're not meditating, but two things are meditating you: the momentum of what you've done previously and whatever you want to call this other thing.

[14:27] Someday we won't have to use this technique. We'll have a complete circuitry diagram of the human central nervous system that will be extremely complex – to put it mildly – but we'll probably be able to point to that circuit and probably be able to, from the outside, turn it off for a little while, perhaps inducing at will experiences of freedom from limited identity.

Sources:

- ["Five ways to Know yourself"](#) by Shinzen Young
- ["Do Nothing" Meditation - Shinzen Young](#)