

How to do Labeling and Noting During Meditation, 1 of 2 Parts

~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 Here's how I like to conceive of the structure of the notate.

00:00:27 There's a rhythm that is set up of acts of noting.

00:00:33 Each act typically, but not inevitably, consists of two parts.

00:00:39 A brief moment of clear acknowledging that some sensory category or some sensory event

00:00:48 is present.

00:00:49 So that's a clear acknowledging.

00:00:51 And then there's a few seconds of intent focusing.

00:00:55 The main exception being that sometimes as soon as something is acknowledged, it immediately

00:01:00 disappears.

00:01:01 So there can't be that few seconds of intent focusing in that case.

00:01:06 And in fact, as I pointed out, the immediate disappearance, whether it's due to the fact

00:01:11 that you acknowledged or it's due to some other fact, makes no difference.

00:01:15 That's a huge insight into vanishings.

00:01:30 The default, meaning what you fall back on, all other factors being equal, is not to label.

00:01:37 But just to be clear about the category with direct awareness.

00:01:41 However, that is often very difficult.

00:01:44 You'll find as soon as you try to track those things without at least mental labels, you're

00:01:50 just in la-la land.

00:01:52 In that case, got a label.

00:01:55 But the ideal is to be able to track with clarity and not even a mental label.

00:02:02 So that's sort of the default that you can gradually work towards with time.

00:02:05 But don't fault yourself if you find that you have to use labeling most of the time.

00:02:14 I mean, sometimes I'll go for the no labels.

00:02:18 But even for me, it's hard work.

00:02:21 It's easier to do it with labels of some sort.

00:02:27 You can, to a certain extent, control the concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity

00:02:37 that you have at a given time.

00:02:38 You don't have a huge amount of control over it because those are the skills we're trying

00:02:43 to build.

00:02:44 If we had a lot of concentration, clarity, and equanimity to begin with, we wouldn't

00:02:47 be doing these exercises.

00:02:49 You don't lift weights if you're already strong.

00:02:53 So we don't expect that you'll have much concentration, clarity, or equanimity.

00:02:57 But there are things that you can do with the options in the noting apparatus that can

00:03:03 help in those directions.

00:03:06 And the options come under three broad categories.

00:03:11 Options with regards to labeling.

00:03:14 Options with regards to how you spatially direct your attention during the focus on

00:03:20 phase.

00:03:22 And options with regards to the pacing of the labeling.

00:03:26 If you come to me and report difficulty with practice, the first thing I'll ask you is

00:03:32 what techniques are you using.

00:03:35 Second thing I'll ask you is which options have you used to deal with the challenge.

00:03:42 It's perfectly okay if you say, I tried them all and none of them helped.

00:03:46 Then we'll go creative.

00:03:49 And I'll give you special exercises and so forth.

00:03:52 But you should have at least tried them and see, well, could any of them help with the

00:03:58 challenge.

00:04:01 With regards to a clear acknowledge phase, you have the following options.

00:04:08 You can speak a label out loud.

00:04:11 You can think a label mentally.

00:04:13 You can not label at all.

00:04:16 And some people finger label.

00:04:20 We won't go into that.

00:04:21 If you're ever interested, maybe we'll talk about it someday.

00:04:25 But that has been something that people have, some people have found useful.

00:04:30 Basically you just assign categories to fingers in any way you want.

00:04:45 If you elect to speak the labels out loud, you have sort of three levels.

00:04:50 Strong, medium, and weak.

00:04:53 The weak level is you whisper them so another can't hear.

00:04:56 You sub vocalize.

00:04:58 That would be for a group meditation situation.

00:05:01 The medium level is an ordinary voice.

00:05:03 The strong is that you're forcing yourself to make the label.

00:05:07 You probably have resistance to doing it.

00:05:11 You're making it loud and clear and crisp and you're really listening to make sure that

00:05:15 that label stream does not stop.

00:05:19 And that's when you're really going up a hill.

00:05:28 Intentionally create a kind of gentle matter of fact, almost impersonal quality to the

00:05:38 mental or spoken labels.

00:05:41 And that may seem artificial, but that will tend to induce equanimity.

00:05:47 And it's a sort of like the tail can wag the dog kind of situation.

00:05:52 Because you wouldn't think that artificially forming an equanimous voice would authentically

00:05:58 induce equanimity into consciousness.

00:06:01 But typically it does.

00:06:03 Sometimes it might take as long as a half an hour.

00:06:06 Sometimes I work with people going through major physical and or emotional freak outs.

00:06:11 And I have one of the main tasks is to sort of get them to the point that they're willing

00:06:17 perhaps in between sobbing and even screaming in pain, they're willing to have that equanimous
00:06:23 voice to the labels.

00:06:24 They don't have to be equanimous with regards to expression.

00:06:27 They can flail, they can scream, they can cry, but they keep the labeling voice, albeit

00:06:34 artificially with that gentle matter of factness, usually within a half an hour, consciousness

00:06:39 itself has dropped into equanimity.

00:06:42 And my phrase for that is use the voice.

00:06:46 You use the voice to meaning the tone of the voice, including the mental voice of your

00:06:53 labeling to induce equanimity.

00:07:00 In general, you do it not too fast, not too slow, but everybody finds what's good for

00:07:06 them.

00:07:07 If it's too fast, it's making you frenetic.

00:07:10 If it's too slow, you might be spacing out.

00:07:13 You find the rhythm that works for you.

00:07:17 Sometimes the phenomenon that you're noting happens very, very rapidly.

00:07:23 There's like a rapid fire stream, like a machine gun shooting.

00:07:28 It's like really quick, like ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta.

00:07:32 It's like bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

00:07:34 Or sensations are bang-bang-bang-bang-bang.

00:07:37 They're very, very rapid.

00:07:40 You just average.

00:07:43 So every few seconds, you just say touch.

00:07:47 And that's an abbreviation for, I just had a dozen lightning fast touch events.

00:07:55 But you just go touch, and you understand that, OK, that's averaging what I experienced

00:08:00 over the last few seconds.

00:08:02 Some people find that the rhythm of the noting tends to entrain with the natural rhythm of

00:08:08 their breathing.

00:08:09 That's fine.

00:08:10 If that happens, let it happen.

00:08:14 Should you try to make that happen?

00:08:15 Certainly not.

00:08:17 But you don't have to prevent that from happening.

00:08:20 So that's the sort of pacing piece with regards to the rhythm of the breath, how the rhythm

00:08:26 of the noting relates to the rhythm of the breath.

00:08:28 If it entrains naturally and that really works for you, great.

00:08:32 But you don't have to fight with that happening, and you certainly don't have to try to make

00:08:37 that happen.

00:08:44 The option to repeat the same note more than once, it can sort of slow down your internal

00:08:55 clock and make it a little easier to detect things and so forth.

00:09:05 It's more likely that you will start to notice vanishings if you constrain yourself to go

00:09:12 back to the same thing for more than just a few seconds.

00:09:16 If you say, OK, for a period of time, I'm going to do it that way.

00:09:20 A further option is repeat until gone.

00:09:27 These are options.

00:09:29 So you're going to go touch, touch, and you're just going to lock onto that touch and keep

00:09:38 noting touch, touch until there's a vanishing, until some part of it abruptly subsides.

00:09:49 Then you note gone.

00:09:52 And maybe if it doesn't disappear, then you can move on to something else or whatever.

00:09:57 So you can repeat until gone, until there's some indication of abrupt subsidence is an

00:10:03 option.

00:10:05 And depending on what's happening and how things are presenting themselves, that might

00:10:10 be something that you would decide to do.

00:10:14 So I know this is a lot of information, but actually, most of you have heard this before

00:10:20 many times.

00:10:21 But I wanted you to get the whole picture of sort of the apparatus of noting with all

00:10:29 the bells and whistles.

00:10:30 So you realize how really powerful it is if you internalize all of these variations.

00:10:39 You should be able to deal with the bulk of challenges that would come up.