

Noting and labelling: mindfulness made easy!

So, when we make the decision to meditate, one thing is sure: our mind is going to wander! We are not doing it wrong! This is just the way our mind is! When we focus on a routine task... the mind will wander and where it goes is really interesting! Watching our mind wandering, noticing, labelling the content of the mind wandering helps us to get to know our mind better and control the direction it takes.



In the practice of mindfulness, we begin to notice the content of our wandering mind, which is our default mode. We wake up to our automatic inner chatter! Following our mind when it wanders is key to get to know mind more intimately which then enable us to guide it appropriately.

We don't need to be ruled by our mind and its random thoughts. We can become the driver of our mind and take the wheel. We understand that our brain is a thought-producing machine. We can step back and sort out what is helpful and not helpful. We are not our thoughts. We are more than our thoughts, we can become the observer and driver of our thoughts. It is not because we are thinking something that it is true! Thoughts are not facts, they are perspectives, opinions, judgements, assumptions and projections. If the thought is not helpful and not pointing to a solution we can change it and adopt a perspective which is calmer, accepting and oriented to problem-solving.

Mindfulness is all about cultivating awareness of what is happening in each moment with a non-reactive, accepting attitude. We usually begin learning mindfulness by developing an awareness of our bodily sensations while breathing or walking and very soon we notice our mind wandering. This is how it should be; the first insight when we practice mindfulness meditation is that our mind wanders! This is very normal, very natural! We can't go wrong when we begin to observe our wandering mind. Mindfulness is not about blanking our mind, stopping or suppressing our thoughts but, instead, we can notice the thoughts that are constantly arising, as "thoughts", without getting caught up with them.

Whatever arises in our mind, whether internally or externally, is forever changing. Thoughts, feelings, images, ideas, bodily sensations or sounds, come and go in waves, arising and vanishing. During a meditation, we can practice a simple method called "noting" and "labelling" which means to turn the spotlight of our attention on our wandering mind, on the thoughts that arise spontaneously as we aim to concentrate on a meditative point of focus. In this way, we stay present and do not get carried away, engaging with the wandering mind as we normally do. Working with noticing and labelling whatever is there, is a way to begin to grow in our ability to be more mindful. Practising mindfulness is like any other exercise. It takes time to build our muscles when we start lifting weights and it takes time to build our "mindfulness muscles" when we begin to notice what is in our mind from an observer perspective.

In "noting" and "labelling", the objective is to stand back, to observe our "mental activity" by using our attention to track the "mental event" moment by moment, becoming interested in our thinking as well as feelings and sensations. We step back, we notice as an observer, without taking ownership of the content of our mind. Instead of being lost in thought, ruminating over past or future events, we wake up being present to what is here in the moment. We simply observe what is in our mind, noticing the wording of the thought(s), the intensity of the feeling(s), the location in our body of the sensation(s) without engaging with it.

Technique of “labelling” and “noting”

Noting: “I see you”

When we turn our attention to our mind wandering, we can begin to notice specific “mental activity” such as a specific thought, emotion or physical sensation saying something like: “I see you”, “Isn’t interesting that this is coming up!”, without judgement and then return to the present moment, coming into our body, to some point of focus which can be the sensation of breathing or the feet touching the ground. We can also increase the noticing by giving the thought, emotion or sensation a label.

Labelling

This practice can be done formally as a part of a meditation sitting practice or informally throughout the day. Labelling can also be done at the beginning of a meditation to settle the mind and subsequently in daily activities.

The aim here is to examine our habitual thought patterns, to take a step back, to get some perspective. In this way, we can break the cycle of rumination. It is simple and a great practice for the beginner as well as the advanced practitioner.

During a meditation, we choose a point of focus such as the awareness of the breath, or the footstep as in mindful walking and when our mind wanders, we kindly notice the “mental activity”, giving it a label and then coming back paying attention to being present with our chosen point of focus. We simply notice that the mind has wandered and that this was the content of the thought...with curiosity and kindness, without evaluating or analysing the thought. We can use a general “action-verb” label, saying in our mind or aloud(if we are alone) “thinking” or specific label such as “planning”, “criticising” or if we are distracted by a sound we can say “hearing” and then come back to whatever we had chosen to be an anchor for our attention. We can also name what we are observing using a general “noun” such “sensation” (tingling, aching, warm), “thought”(words, image, memory), “urge”(desire impulse) or “emotion” or “feeling” or “sound”. You can further increase the acceptance by saying something like “yes, I see you there”, “yes to whatever is here”.

It is also important not to spend too much time thinking about the kind of label you wish to use, remembering that the aim is simply to observe, to be aware, to be present. It is okay to use either vague or specific label, as long as you keep it simple and easy. You will become aware that the labelling is often after the fact or in hindsight. That is okay, that is just the nature of the mind. Also, you don’t have to label everything, just what you become aware of every so often. And it is okay to label the same thing over and over again if it is what is there for you. We encourage you to experiment with it and make it your own way.

We can also choose to specifically name the emotion such as “stress”, “anger”, “fear”, “joy”, “calm”. When we note and label, we can use a friendly and gentle tone which add a strengthening quality of compassion to our inner chatter. We can also choose to talk to our self in the third person. You can talk to yourself as a friend saying: “Tom you are feeling angry today” or observing yourself as a detached observer: “Tom is feeling angry today” or “Marie is thinking that she is not doing enough practice”. As a friend, you can say: “Bev, you have a pain in your back” and further observer: “Bev is having a pain in the back”. Labelling as a friend in this way can give us a sense of being seen and understood. In addition, it creates a distance between what is happening and ourselves to reduce our reactivity. We don’t take it so personally. We don’t have to take ownership or authorship of it:

“it is not your fault”, “you are not your fault”. This often helps to be more tolerating and accepting of our difficult feelings. We invite you to experiment, choosing whatever feels better for you.

Benefits

The noting and labelling practices assist in gaining clarity as to “what is” in the present moment. It helps us to gain some insight into our relationship with ourselves, with our experiences, with others and with our environment. Usually when we have “a thought”, we engage with it automatically, fusing with it. As we know, some thoughts can be very sticky, making it difficult to step back. With mindfulness, we practice gently pulling away from thoughts, again and again, pausing, observing, creating more and more space between the “mental event” and the response.

Each time, in the moment, when we are practising noting and labelling, we are re-wiring the brain because we are doing something different from what we would normally do. Each time we are noting and labelling, we are disengaging from the default mode network. Instead of automatically engaging with the thought, we are stepping out of thought, creating a space between our self and our thought, allowing for choosing and responding rather than reacting, becoming the wise observer of our mind. In this way, we are less at the mercy of our default mode which can get stuck in unhelpful rumination and preoccupation. When we become more aware, we wake up and free ourselves from our conditioning, we begin to live in a more conscious and intentional way.

The benefits of this technique are numerous. We stay with what is there for us, easing the resistance. It helps us to manage our emotions by breaking the experience into different manageable parts such as a thought, emotion and physical sensation. It promotes acceptance and reduces reactivity. We notice without immediate identification, making space, cultivating equanimity.

Research in neuroscience has shown that the labelling of thought helps to regulate emotion and promote insight during times of stress and emotional upset. Labelling with kindness is very beneficial as it slows the thinking mind, creating a space in our mind, where we can step back and observe. This has the effect also of calming the stress reaction in our body and not getting caught in the intensity of the emotion.

Research has shown that mental noting and labelling help us to improve the emotional wiring in our brains. It produces a relaxing effect in our body, which helps us detach from thoughts. We stop identifying so personally with our thoughts and reacting emotionally to them. Rather than getting caught up in our thoughts, we train our minds to note and label. Then we have more choice in terms of which thoughts we can intentionally pay attention to. By riding the rumination or emotion with our attention, through noting and labelling, we can free ourselves from excessive preoccupation or reactivity, becoming calmer, being more able to turn to the good things in our lives.

General instruction

- In this practice, you have a primary object and secondary object of attention. That is, your primary object is your chosen point of focus that you wish to pay attention to and the secondary object is whatever arises in your present field of awareness which you will use for labelling. The primary object of attention could vary such as breath awareness, body scan, mindful walking or an everyday task. In the labelling technique, you choose to label the secondary object as you become conscious of it.

Here are the steps for the labelling practice:

- Choosing a comfortable position such as sitting, lying down, or walking.
- Choosing a primary point of focus: the breath, the footsteps, body scan or daily activity. If you wish you can further anchor your mind by labelling your primary point of focus such as while you are breathing saying “in” and “out”, or labelling the footstep saying “right” and “left” as you are mindfully walking.
- As appropriate, noticing mind wandering such as a thought, physical sensation or feeling.
- Giving it a descriptive word, a neutral label as an observer which can be a verb or a noun. For example, upon hearing a sound you can say “hearing” without thinking further about the sound. Other labels could be: “seeing”, “touching”, “feeling”, and “thinking”. Some mental activity may be specifically named such as “worrying”, “wanting”, “planning”, “resisting”, or “remembering”.
- You can further label emotions by saying: “this is fear” or “this is anger” and then describe the physical sensations associated with it, such as “tightness”, or “heaviness”.
- And once you have labelled what was there in your mind, you can re-anchoring your attention onto the breath, the footsteps or whatever else you chose as your primary point of focus.
- Beginning again and again as necessary, and strengthening your mindfulness muscles ... your awareness.
- Notice also the tone of your labelling, using a gentle friendly inner voice. You can note and label, either mentally in your mind or aloud (if you are alone). By saying it aloud, you engage the mind further.

You can initially practice "noting and labelling" as a meditation practice or include it in your other meditations. The more you cultivate this ability, you begin to be aware, recognising your thoughts, feelings and sensations and letting them go wherever you are. In moments when you feel stressed or experience difficulties or while interacting with others in your everyday life, you may simply note the content of your mind, step out of the default mode and respond more in line with your values.

Give it a go! Step back and enjoy the freedom of being the wise and kind observer of your mind!