

Practice Note: Sing Your Mental Noting

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 7, 2011

I think it's probably fair to say that for most of us, it's not that easy to meditate. We sit down with the idea of staying in the present moment, staying focused on the breath or on our steps as we walk. Then, whatever our intention is to stay present and be aware of what's going on, it can be hard because the mind gets involved in thoughts and imaginations, or gets caught by feelings, emotions, desires, or aversions. Sometimes we can be aware of it, let go or step back from it, and come back to the breath – but we easily get pulled back again. Sometimes we can multitask. We can *kind of* be with the breath or with our feet as we walk, but in the background, there is this churning of a thought, concern, or emotion. We're still caught and involved.

One of the really wonderful practice techniques in our tradition is mental noting or labeling. Some people don't like it. They may have strong feelings about not wanting to do mental noting. It's sometimes taught as a continuous practice. Today I want to mention one of the many values of mental noting, and that is when you find yourself entangled and caught up with thoughts and concerns. Maybe you can let go momentarily and come back, or you can't even let go and the thoughts are just churning along. That might be a really good time to use intentional mental labeling of what's happening. It could be as simple as saying, "Thinking." Or it could be, "Thinking about the dinner menu." Sometimes noting can be more than just a simple word. You clearly identify what it is, and then – without thinking too much about the exact right word – you label it. Just this simple acknowledgement of what you're doing helps you step back – and you're not so entangled.

But sometimes simple noting is not enough. Part of the opportunity with mental noting is that you can note in different ways, so that it changes your perspective of what's happening and helps pull you back more. For example, you can silently note in your mind much more loudly than you would normally. You can say it loud and clear, like you're going to let the world know. You don't say it out loud, of course, but "Thinking, thinking, I'm really thinking. This is thinking. Wow, am I thinking! This is really **thinking**." If you acknowledge what you're caught in loudly or vigorously, pretty soon the energy of your mind goes into the noting, rather than flowing into that entanglement.

When the acknowledgement becomes really big, sometimes you get a different perspective. It's like, "This is ridiculous." You know you're thinking about the same thing over and over again. You say it really loudly as if all your friends could hear, and then you realize that this is really silly. "Why am I caught up in dinner menu planning? Why am I reviewing what happened at the high school prom?"

A variation of mental noting is if you keep telling yourself the same thing – as in a common thread or belief system – maybe that you're completely inadequate as a human being. Then you repeatedly say that really loudly in your mind: "I'm really inadequate!" You don't do it in a subtle place where you continue to believe the thoughts and they're influencing everything. But you broadcast it throughout your mind, and even sing it: [sings] "I'm really inadequate. Boy, am I ever inadequate! I'm the most inadequate person in the whole universe, and I really know it." Try to get into it. After a while, you say, "This is silly," and it helps loosen up the grab or the pull these thoughts have on you. It changes the perspective of it all.

If you continue with business as usual and keep noting in the same way, then you kind of stay in it. But, if you're stuck and need a little break to loosen you up, then try something a little more dramatic. Then you can go back to a more quiet, subtle way of noting – or not noting – and being present.

Make some sense? Have fun with it. Sing your mental noting. You'll find your mood changes quickly. So now enjoy your morning.