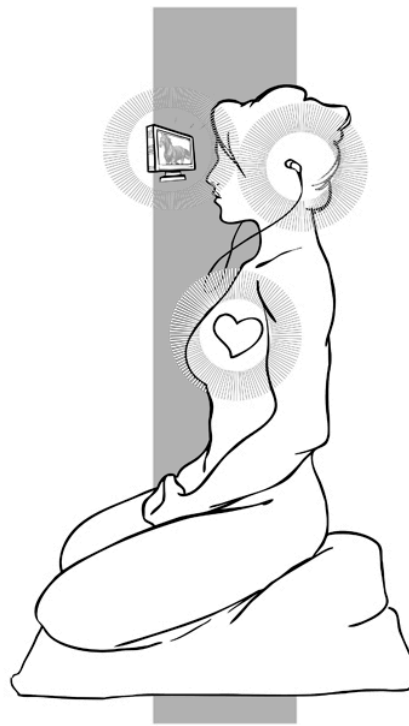


# See Hear Feel: An Introduction

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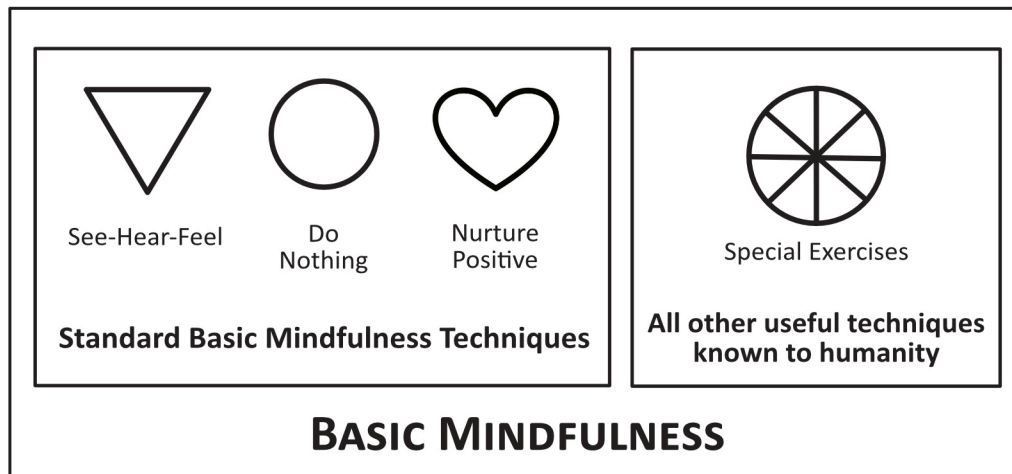
**[This is an initial and unedited version of this document, meant only for usage in Shinzen's retreat programs for Summer 2015. Please do not distribute. We will update/edit the document and post it on our website later this year.]**

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## Preface: Introducing See Hear Feel

This article is an introduction to one of the standard techniques in the current version of Basic Mindfulness (post-2014). The technique is called See Hear Feel. The other two standard techniques of Basic Mindfulness are Nurture Positive and Do Nothing. The entire Basic Mindfulness system can be represented graphically this way:



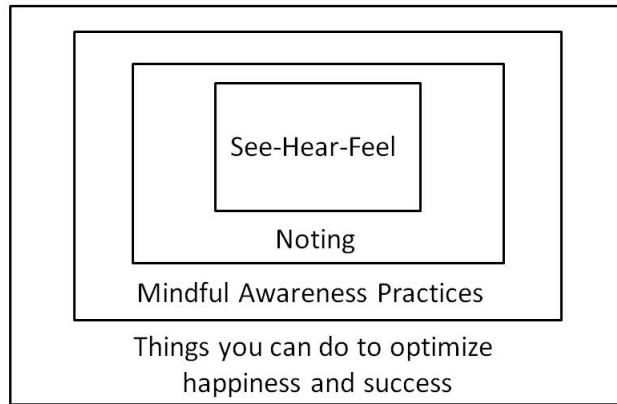
Like MBSR, Basic Mindfulness is a modern, evidence-based system of mindfulness. The principles that underlie its structure are described in the document entitled [What is Mindfulness?](#)

See Hear Feel is a form of noting. There are many other ways to do noting (i.e., the classical Mahasi system which is the original inspiration for See Hear Feel). In the Basic Mindfulness system, mindful awareness is defined quite broadly: concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity working together. From that broad perspective, any practice that, with time, elevates your base level of those skills counts as a mindful awareness practice. So techniques like Nurture Positive and even Do Nothing can be considered mindful awareness practices.

Spoken or mental labels are options within the process of noting, just like first gear and second gear are options within the process of driving. In this article I talk a lot about labeling before actually saying much about noting, but there's a reason for that. Anyone can learn how to label sensory events. When you label properly you have, by definition, enough concentration, clarity, and equanimity for the noting to be effective. Once you get a taste of what that state is like, you'll probably be able to reproduce it even without the labels. If not, you can always go back to using the labels.

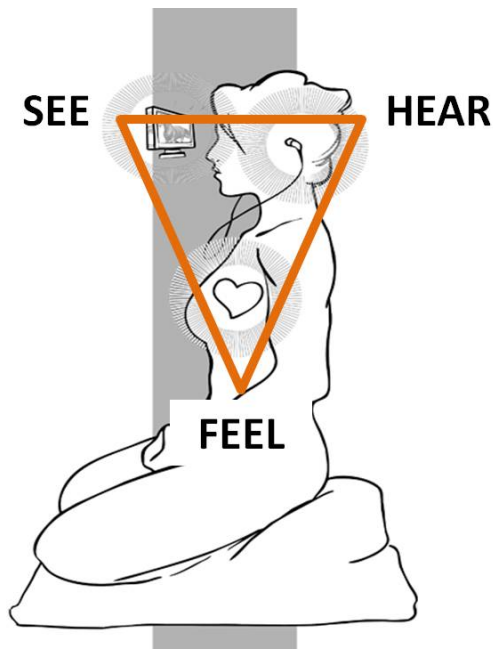
So the labels perform two functions. First, they train you to recognize what it's like to be in a basic level of mindfulness. Second, if you're running into a challenge, all you need to do is go back to labeling in order to reestablish that basic level of mindfulness.

Here's a Venn diagram that clarifies some basic relationships:



Look over the graphic below. Notice how the words See, Hear, and Feel are arranged at the corners of an inverted triangle. Notice also that next to each label is a box and each box contains five items. Those five items are the five basic themes or types of experience potentially covered by the label. Don't worry at this point about what all those phrases mean; that will be explained later on.

- Physical Sights
- Mental Images
- Visual Rest
- Visual Flow
- Visual Spaciousness



- Physical Sounds
- Mental Talk
- Auditory Rest
- Auditory Flow
- Auditory Spaciousness

- Physical Body Sensations
- Emotional Body Sensations
- Body Rest
- Body Flow
- Body Spaciousness

If you're familiar with the older (pre-2015) forms of Basic Mindfulness, you'll probably want to read the Appendix Section before getting into the body of this article. The appendix outlines the main differences between the older and current formulations. If you're brand new to the system there is no compelling reason to study that material unless perhaps you're interested in the historical evolution of my thinking. Whether you're a newbie or an old hand, I hope you'll find this article both fun and informative.

You'll notice that each section of this article is followed by a short quiz. Taking that quiz is optional but if you really want to internalize this material, completing the quizzes will give you great confidence.

I was once in a sweat lodge run by a Lakota Indian friend of mine, Lisa Wahpepah. At one point the heat got quite intense. She exhorted us:

*I know this Path is hard. I know this Path is hard. But there's something harder than this Path. What's harder than this Path is not having a Path!*

I wish you a good journey on your Path of Mindfulness.

*Shinzen*

# Why Learn See Hear Feel?

Why allocate time and energy to learn, practice, and apply the See Hear Feel technique? The answer is simple, deep, and bold:

## **SO YOU CAN BE OPTIMALLY HAPPY IN EVERY WAY POSSIBLE.**

To understand this claim, two points need to be carefully considered: What does it mean to be optimally happy? How many basic ways of being happy are there?

First point: To be optimally happy is to be as happy as possible given conditions that cannot feasibly be changed. The breakthrough insight here is that a person's happiness is not necessarily dependent on conditions. That becomes clear through a careful consideration of the second point.

Second point: The various ways in which we are either happy (or unhappy or neutral) represent what we might call the basic dimensions of happiness. We often speak of happiness as if it can be measured on a one-dimensional scale. But it's more useful to think of it as a multi-axial variable. Each axis represents a (more or less) separate dimension of happiness. Depending on what I want to emphasize, I sometimes analyze happiness into three basic dimensions, sometimes into four basic dimensions, and sometimes into five basic dimensions. The key point is that no matter how you choose to cut up the happiness pie, mindfulness skills will either directly or indirectly contribute to optimizing each piece. Moreover, *certain aspects of happiness are essentially inaccessible without mindfulness skills*. Here are a few examples: the ability to be sensually fulfilled in a boring environment; the ability to escape into pain; the ability to deconstruct negative emotions into vibrant energy. Notice that each of these involves a way of being happy that does not depend on conditions.

In a short article like this, it's not feasible to detail the specific mechanisms by which mindful awareness affects the various dimensions of happiness. But I can give you a comprehensive list of what those dimensions are.

Three Dimensions of Happiness:

- 1) Appreciate self and world.
- 2) Transcend self and world.
- 3) Improve self and world.

I sometimes refer to these as Humanity's Three Jobs.

Four Dimensions of Happiness:

- 1) For yourself – achieve forms of happiness that depend on conditions.
- 2) For yourself – achieve forms of happiness that do not depend on conditions.
- 3) Help others achieve forms of happiness that depend on conditions.
- 4) Help others achieve forms of happiness that do not depend on conditions.

I sometimes refer to these as The Four Quadrants, or Four Views of Happiness, where (1) is the surface local view; (2) is the deep local view; (3) is the surface global view; and (4) is the deep global view. Mindfulness teachers specialize in the two deep views.

Five Dimensions of Happiness:

- 1) Reduce perceived suffering.
- 2) Elevate sensual fulfillment.
- 3) Understand yourself at all levels.
- 4) Make positive behavior changes.
- 5) Cultivate/discover a spirit of love and service.

I sometimes refer to this formulation as the Five Goals or Five Applications of Mindfulness.

A careful consideration of these lists will reveal that they are merely different ways of cutting up the same pie. So why offer three versions of essentially the same thing? Because each is useful in a unique way. The 5-D model is practical – anyone can understand it. The 4-D model is comprehensive. In fact, each of its quadrants can be further divided into sub-dimensions. This allows for a classification tree of happiness that encompasses all current and historical models, from the ethics of Aristotle to the positive psychology of Csikszentmihalyi. Amazingly, it can be shown that concentration, clarity, and equanimity are relevant to each branch and sub-branch of this taxonomy—although for some categories the impact will be more direct and immediate, while for other categories the impact will be somewhat indirect and down the line.

The 3-D model is more “spiritual” in nature. It clarifies certain relationships which people on a Path often get confused about. For example:

- What is the precise relationship between Form and Emptiness?
- What is the precise relationship between transcending conditions and taking care of business?
- If things are already perfect, why bother improving anything?

The See Hear Feel technique will impact your happiness in two ways – one generic, the other specific.

*Generically:* With regular and continued practice, See Hear Feel will dramatically elevate your base level of concentration, clarity, and equanimity skills. And this in turn will directly or indirectly elevate your base level of happiness.

*Specifically:* You can use different versions of See Hear Feel as tools for dealing with particular situations or issues. Say, for example, you’re doing a boring task. You could Focus Out during the task. By that I mean you could let yourself become enchanted with the relevant sights, sounds, and pure physicality of the task while at the same time pulling away from the inner world of memory, plan, fantasy, and judgment. Or say you’re having difficulty sleeping. You could focus on Rest – selectively attending to visual rest, auditory rest, and body rest. Even if you don’t get a good night’s sleep, you could eventually train yourself to consistently get a good night’s rest. Or say you’re going through a period of severe emotional distress. You could deconstruct that distress using a Focus In approach – untangling the mental image, mental talk, and emotional body sensations that make up that challenge.

For each of the options mentioned above, we will refer to the categories of experience that you intentionally focus on as your “focus range.” When you first learn the See Hear Feel technique, you’ll probably explore four focus ranges: work just with visual experience; work just with auditory experience; work just with body experience; or work with any and all experience.



## Quiz

1. According to this section, there's a simple, deep answer to the question, "Why should I allocate time and energy to learning, practicing, and applying the See Hear Feel technique?" What is it?
2. Name some dimensions of human happiness.
3. Describe a pleasant experience that might be more fulfilling if you applied the See Hear Feel technique to it.
4. Describe an unpleasant experience that might cause less suffering if you applied the See Hear Feel technique to it.
5. How might you use the See Hear Feel technique to change a negative behavior pattern? (This was not explicitly explained in the text; it's an exercise in creative thinking.)
6. What does "focus range" mean?

## Answers to Quiz

1. So you can be optimally happy in every way possible.
2. Three Dimensions of Happiness:
  1. Appreciate self and world
  2. Transcend self and world
  3. Improve self and world.
 Four Dimensions of Happiness:
  1. For yourself – achieve forms of happiness that depend on conditions.
  2. For yourself – achieve forms of happiness that do not depend on conditions.
  3. Help others achieve forms of happiness that depend on conditions.
  4. Help others achieve forms of happiness that do not depend on conditions.
 Five Dimensions of Happiness:
  1. Reduce perceived suffering.
  2. Elevate sensual fulfillment.
  3. Understand yourself at all levels.
  4. Make positive behavior changes.
  5. Cultivate/discover a spirit of love and service.
3. You're enjoying conversation with friends. You tune into the pleasant emotional feeling this creates in your body. You note it as Feel.  
Dozens of similar answers are possible: you're listening to music, eating a nice meal, making love, etc.
4. Example 1: You're experiencing an uncomfortable emotion and you break it up into manageable pieces. You note the disconcerting mental images as See, the negative self-talk as Hear, and the uncomfortable body emotion as Feel.  
  
Example 2: You're experiencing physical discomfort. You note the physical discomfort as Feel, you note any mental images that the discomfort triggers as See, you note any judgmental self-talk as Hear, and if you have any body emotion triggered by the physical sensation you note that also as Feel.  
  
Example 3: You're experiencing doubt, indecision, or confusion and for a brief period of time you let go of the need to have an answer and attempt to deconstruct the experience of confusion. You note the chaotic images as See, the chaotic mental chatter as Hear, and the emotional body sensations triggered by your mind as Feel. The confusion itself may or may not get resolved but the suffering around it will be dissolved: you're having a *sensorily* clear experience of being *mentally* muddled!
5. Objective behaviors are preceded by sensory states (i.e., mental image, mental talk, physical body sensations, and emotional body sensations). If you can detect and equanimize (ee-quá-ni-mize) those states, you can interrupt the negative behavior.
6. The set of experiences you intentionally focus on.

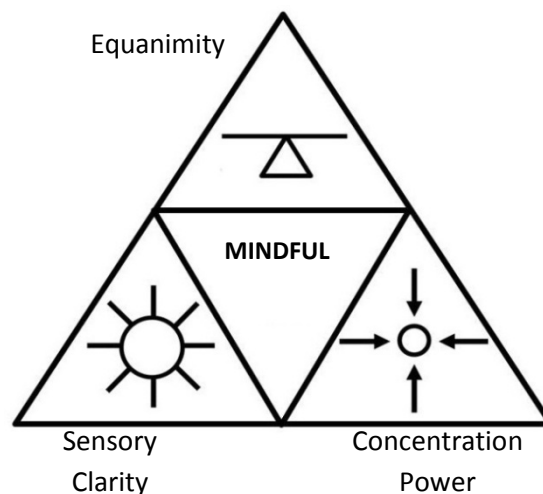
## What is Mindful Awareness?

Basic Mindfulness is a way to think about, practice, and teach mindful awareness. It is but one system among many that are currently available. Each approach to mindful awareness has strong points and weak points. The strong point of Basic Mindfulness lies in its conceptual clarity and comprehensiveness. Its weak point is its complexity. In particular, the large number of focus options it offers can be a bit overwhelming at first. It may be helpful to remember that you don't have to try all or even most of those options. If you can find one or two that really work for you, that's all you need. Within the Basic Mindfulness System, mindful awareness is defined as:




Concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity working together.

What does this mean? It means that mindful awareness is a collection of skills. A skill is an ability that can be improved with practice. Most skills involve some sort of external performance, but mindfulness skills are "internal." Mindfulness skills are a way to process your sensory experience. By sensory experience, I mean not just outer physical experience like sights and sounds, but also your inner experience of thoughts and emotions. So mindful awareness is a certain way to pay attention to what is happening around you and within you. It involves three core skills. Each skill is distinct from the others, and they work together to reinforce each other.

You can think of concentration power as the ability to focus on what you consider to be relevant at a given time. You can think of sensory clarity as the ability to keep track of what you're experiencing in the moment. You can think of equanimity as the ability to allow sensory experience to come and go without push and pull. We could represent this symbolically as a triangle:



Or we could represent this as a rectangular table:

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Concentration Power</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Staying with what is relevant.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Sensory Clarity</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Brightness, high resolution, untangling.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Equanimity</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">A kind of inner balance; A third possibility between pushing the senses down (suppressing) and being pulled away by the senses (grasping).</p>

The easiest way to understand these descriptions is to look back on your own experience.

Have you ever experienced anything like this?

- In a certain situation, you suddenly fell into a state of high focus. Things slowed down and you were totally in the groove, in the zone. As a result, you were able to respond with great effectiveness.

If you ever experienced anything like this, then you know what a *temporary* state of high concentration is. With practice, you can develop the ability to get into that state *anytime you want*.

- Your senses suddenly became unusually bright and clear. You could detect great detail and everything seemed unusually vivid and rich.

If you ever experienced anything like this, then you know what a *temporary* state of high sensory clarity is. With practice, you can develop the ability to get into that state *anytime you want*.

- You were going through some physical, emotional, or mental discomfort. For some reason you stopped fighting with the discomfort and just let it flow through you. When you did that, the sense of problem or suffering became much less (or perhaps even totally vanished).

If you ever experienced that, you know what a *temporary* state of equanimity is. With practice, you can develop the ability to get into that state *anytime you want*.

If you answered yes to any of the above, then you already have some understanding of how improving the quality of your mindfulness could improve the quality of your life.

Now, let's consider the reverse situations....

Have you ever experienced anything like this?

- There was something important that didn't go well because you lacked the ability to maintain focus.

If you've ever encountered something like that, then you're aware of the negative effects of *lacking* concentration power. Through systematic practice, you can *avoid such problems*.

- You went through an experience where so much was happening so fast that you couldn't keep track of it: What part is physical? What part is mental? What part is emotional?  
As a result, you became overwhelmed and flooded, and that overwhelm caused you suffering or made you do something you later regretted...or both.

Chaos, flooding, and overwhelm are caused by loss of sensory clarity. Through systematic practice, you can *avoid such problems*.

- You experienced something pleasant but were so tense about it that you couldn't really enjoy it.

If you've ever encountered something like that, then you know how a *lack* of equanimity can decrease the satisfaction you derive from pleasure, or perhaps even turn the pleasure into frustration. In other words, you've experienced the negative results of non-equanimity. Through systematic practice, you can *avoid such problems*.

So that's the "Good News" of mindfulness—you can dramatically increase your satisfaction and decrease your suffering by systematically training your attention skills. How you organize that training is referred to as your practice. Practice involves deciding on one or several focus techniques and then doing them a regular basis.

## Quiz

1. In the basic mindfulness system how is mindfulness defined?
2. You can think of concentration power as: \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).
3. You can think of sensory clarity as: \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).
4. You can think of equanimity as: \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).

## **Answers to Quiz**

1. Concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity working together.
2. The ability to focus on what you deem relevant.
3. The ability to keep track of what you're experiencing in the moment.
4. The ability to allow sensory experience to come and go without push and pull.



## Labels Help You Monitor Experience

In the Basic Mindfulness system, a label is a word that names what you're experiencing at a given moment. You can think that word to yourself or say it out loud. We'll refer to the first option as Mental Labels. We'll refer to the second option as Spoken Labels.

As you label, try to maintain a low, gentle, almost matter of fact quality in your voice. This applies to both the outer physical voice you use when speaking the labels and the inner mental voice you use when thinking them. We'll refer to that voice tone as an equanimity voice. Maintaining an equanimity tone in your voice tends to create an equanimity state in your consciousness. When you're in an equanimity state, sights, sounds, thoughts, and body sensations arise and pass without "stickiness." It's the sensory version of being a super conductor.

In terms of pacing (how slowly or rapidly you label), go with what's comfortable for you at a given time. Typically, pacing ranges from about one label every second to one label every four or five seconds. It's okay to label the same thing over and over if nothing else comes or calls. The pace doesn't have to be perfectly regular like a metronome. Just find an average that's neither racy (too fast) nor spacey (too slow). Some people are naturally drawn to synchronize labeling with their breath; that's okay, but definitely not required. Spoken labels are especially useful if you're having difficulty concentrating.

When you get personal coaching from a Basic Mindfulness facilitator, they may sometimes ask you to speak the labels out loud. By listening to the tone, pacing, and wording of your labels, the facilitator can get a clear idea of how best to guide you. Of course, speaking labels out loud while someone listens might make you feel a bit self-conscious, but that usually goes away quickly. More importantly, it's a chance to experience self-consciousness in a mindful state. That can be incredibly liberating and empowering.

Whether spoken or mental, a label is an auditory event. Spoken labels create an outer auditory experience. By way of contrast, mental labels represent an inner auditory experience. A common question goes something like this: "When I hear my own label, do I label that as an auditory experience?" The answer is no. Do not label the labels. Labels are certainly auditory events but they're not included in what we're tracking. They represent a kind of exterior scaffolding upon which we stand. The scaffolding helps us observe the building (i.e., all other sensory events).

If you want to use spoken labels but you're in an environment where you can't use a full voice, you can whisper the labels to yourself or even just move your lips. Whispered or mouthed labels still count as spoken. Examples of such situations would be when you're in a public place or when you're participating in group practice.

If you are really running into difficulty, you should try strongly spoken labels until you get re-grounded. Here's what I mean.

Normally, during the labeling process most of your attention should be directed to the sensory event you're labeling – mental image, mental talk, physical sight, physical sounds, body sensation, and so forth. Very little attention goes to the label itself. But when you use strongly spoken labels, the emphasis shifts because it's an emergency option. During strongly spoken labeling you speak in an intentionally clear, crisp (but still equanimous!) voice. And you divide your attention: half of your awareness is still on the experience that you're

labeling but the other half is listening to the label stream itself. The idea is to create a strong feedback loop. As soon as the label stream stops, that's a "tell": you know that you're losing mindfulness. As soon as you reinstate the labels, you are, by definition, back to the basic level of concentration, clarity, and equanimity needed for effective practice.

## Quiz

1. What is a Label?
2. What is a Spoken Label?
3. What is a Mental Label?
4. In the Basic Mindfulness system, mindful awareness is defined as “concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity working together.”
  - a. The pacing of the labels primarily aids which of those?
  - b. The wording of the labels primarily aids which of those?
  - c. The voice tone of the labels primarily aids which of those?
5. If you run into difficulty you are encouraged to immediately go to strongly spoken labels. Explain the main difference between strongly spoken labels and normal labels.
6. For how long should you maintain strongly spoken labels?
7. Why do strongly spoken labels help?
8. Should you label your own labels?

## Answers to Quiz

1. A word that names what you're experiencing at a given moment.
2. A label that you speak out loud.
3. A label that you think to yourself.
4.
  - a. Concentration (or more completely, concentration power).
  - b. Clarity (or more completely, sensory clarity).
  - c. Equanimity.
5. In normal labeling (whether spoken or mental), most of the attention goes into the thing being labeled. Very little of the attention is on the label itself. With strongly spoken labels your attention is more or less evenly divided between observing the thing labeled and listening to the label itself.
6. Until you can maintain an acceptable level of mindful awareness.
7. They create a strong feedback situation. When the label stream stops you immediately know that you're getting spaced out or getting caught up. When you re-establish the label stream you are, by definition, back to an acceptable level of mindful awareness.
8. No.

## Labels Aid Noting

To note a sensory event means to clearly acknowledge its presence and then to briefly focus on it. After that brief moment of being “fully present” to that event, you note again—either the same event or a new one. The sole purpose of labeling is to aid noting. As mentioned previously, the pacing of the label helps you to maintain a continuity of concentration. The wording of the labels helps you to maintain a state of sensory clarity. And the tone of the labels helps you to maintain an attitude of equanimity. We will say that anyone who’s labeling at a comfortable pace with an equanimity voice and using appropriate label words is, by definition, doing the technique with enough mindful awareness.

So the labels help maintain the noting and that’s their only function. If you can maintain a solid rhythm of noting without intentionally labeling, feel free to drop the labels any time you want. This gives you two basic ways to note: we’ll call the first “noting with labels” and we’ll call the second “noting without labels.” Sometimes we may refer to noting without labels as “noting with direct awareness.” Feel free to switch between those two possibilities or mostly to use just one of them – whichever appeals to you. But remember, if you find it difficult to concentrate or find it difficult to remain open to things, your automatic response should be to immediately start spoken labels or perhaps even strongly spoken labels. And maintain that until you’re back on track.

So a period of noting practice (typically) involves a sequence: acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus.... Some mindfulness teachers compare the acknowledgment phase to aiming at a sensory target and the focus phase to shooting awareness into that target.

However, there can be exceptions to this pattern. That’s why the word “typically” appears in the paragraph above. The main exception comes about when the things you’re acknowledging disappear so fast there’s no time to focus on them. Sometimes people think of this situation as a problem: “I never have enough time to sink into anything.” But this situation is emphatically not a problem. It’s the opposite of a problem. It’s a huge opportunity to get insight into the impermanent nature of sensory experiences. (For details see [The Power of Gone](#).) A person might object: “If all I’m aware of is immediate passings, where’s the concentration? Where’s the clarity?” The answer is simple: the object of concentration is incessant gone-ness and the clarity is the ability to continuously detect that goneness. If you’re constantly aware of goneness, you’re continuously being called to Absolute Rest—the still point of the turning world.

On a related note, sometimes the very act of observing will cause something to disappear or cause a sensory system to drop into a relatively restful mode. A classical example of this occurs in the mental talk system. You may find that as soon as you detect the beginning of a mental sentence, that sentence immediately drops away. Or you may find that maintaining attention in talk space (i.e., in your head and/or at your ears) causes mental talk to cease arising. Problem? Not at all! First of all, if acknowledging talk makes it disappear, use that as an opportunity to detect “gone.” And if observing the talk system causes it to get quiet, use that as an opportunity to hear inner auditory rest. A person may object that such observation-induced phenomena are artifacts, not part of “what’s really there.” But in the Basic Mindfulness paradigm you take a different perspective. The general principle is ...

*The act of observing may alter the thing being observed. If that happens, observe the alteration just as you would any other phenomena.*

In other words, if there is some sort of “truth” that we’re supposed to be detecting, it has to do with the basic nature of every sensory experience, regardless of what causes that experience.

One final point: in some systems of mindfulness, noting is equated with labeling. But in Basic Mindfulness they are clearly distinguished – i.e., labeling is an optional feature of noting and noting is one way to develop mindful awareness. Recall the Venn diagram that appeared earlier:



## Quiz

1. Noting typically involves a rhythm of acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus.... There is, however, a common exception to this pattern. Describe that exception.
2. Say that you're interested in tracking your mental talk but you find that the very act of observing makes each burst of mental talk immediately vanish. Is this a problem? If not, why not?
3. What is the relationship between labeling and noting?
4. What is the relationship between noting and mindful awareness?

## **Answers to Quiz**

1. When the thing being noted immediately disappears as soon as you acknowledge it. There's no time for the Focus Phase.
2. No, it's not a problem because it's an example of detecting impermanence. Detecting the impermanence of sensory experiences is a significant form of clarity.
3. Labels aid Noting.
4. Noting is one way to develop Mindful Awareness.

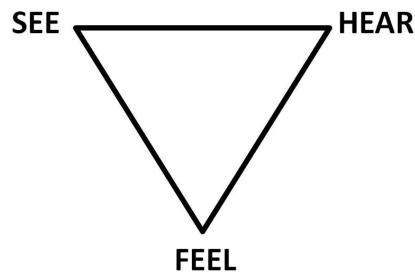


## Labels Can Be Simple

Sensory events can be classified in terms of three modalities: visual experience, auditory experience, and body experience. Sometimes body experience is referred to as somatic experience. Somatic (Greek) = corporeal (Latin) = body (Anglo-Saxon). The labels for these basic modalities are:

See  
Hear  
Feel

Please memorize this list in the order given by saying it out loud and thinking it to yourself a few times. To aid in visual memorizing, you can think of the three modalities as corresponding to the three vertices of an inverted triangle:



Notice that the memorization order starts in the upper-left corner and proceeds clockwise.

Examples of things you might see include:

- Physical sights
- Mental images
- Visual rest states (blank mental screen, defocused gaze ...)
- Visual flow states (pixilation, swirling, twinkling in your visual field...)
- Visual spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within a visual experience)

Examples of those things you might hear include:

- Physical sound
- Mental talk
- Auditory rest states (physical silence, mental quiet....)
- Auditory flow states (a background hum in the silence around you, a sense of subtle stirring underneath surface mental talk...)
- Auditory spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within an auditory experience)

Examples of things you might feel include:

- Physical body sensations

- Emotional body sensations
- Smells and tastes
- Body rest (physical relaxation, emotional peace...)
- Body flow states (tingling, pulsation, undulation, vibration, expansion, contraction ... in part or all of your body)
- Body spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within a somatic experience)

The third body item – smell and taste – might seem a bit strange. But in order to keep symmetry and simplicity in the classification, we will include smell and taste under the category of body experience. (After all, we do experience them somatically – in the mouth, in the nose, on the tongue, and so forth.)

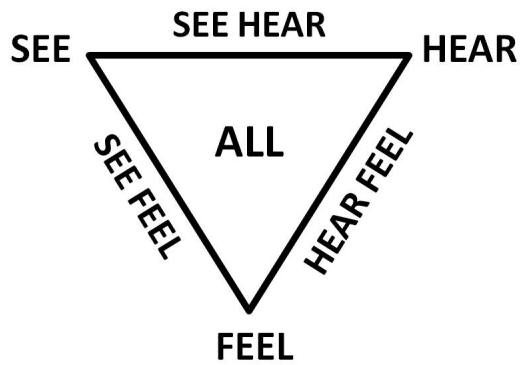
Sometimes two or even three modalities might call your attention at exactly the same time or more or less the same time. In noting such co-occurrences you have a choice of approaches. Either is natural and both can be productive. The simple option is to just acknowledge one of the elements and focus on it for a moment. In other words, you choose just one modality as your “target.”

The more complex option is to note exactly what’s there. If it’s visual and auditory at the same time, focus on both components. If you label, the label will be “See Hear.” If it’s visual and somatic at the same time, once again focus on both components. In this case, the label would be “See Feel.” If it’s auditory and somatic at the same time, focus on both components. The label would be “Hear Feel.” If it’s all three at the same time, focus on all three components at once. The label will be “All.”

We’ll refer to the first approach as noting with exclusive emphasis – or exclusive noting for short. We’ll refer to the second approach as noting with inclusive emphasis – or inclusive noting for short. When you first learn See Hear Feel you’ll most likely start with exclusive emphasis, and it’s fine if that’s the only option you ever use.

Here’s an interesting conceptual reframing. Say something really upsets you emotionally. It’s likely that this will involve simultaneous eruptions of mental image, mental talk, and emotional-type body sensations. The bad news is you’re going through significant distress. The good news is it’s an opportunity to have an “All” experience – a full arising of self in the clear form of simultaneous See Hear Feel activation. According to some traditional models, stream entry (initial enlightenment) occurs when a person experiences a total arising of self in a total state of mindfulness.

So, the vertices of our triangle represent experiences that only involve one modality. How about experiences that involve two modalities at the same time, or more or less at the same time? We can use the edges of the triangle to represent those situations. The upper edge of the triangle represents situations where there’s something visual and there’s something auditory co-occurring. For example, co-occurring mental image and mental talk, or co-occurring visual rest and auditory rest, or even something like physical sight and mental quiet at the same time. We can use the front edge of the triangle to represent co-occurring visual and body experiences, and we can use the back edge of the triangle for co-occurring auditory and body experiences. Finally, we can think of the triangular area itself as representing a sensory event that simultaneously involves visual, auditory, and somatic elements.



Note that the line segments are ordered top – front – back. “See Hear,” “See Feel,” and “Hear Feel” refer to situations where two or all three modalities arise simultaneously or nearly simultaneously. So if a sound and its mental image arise close enough together you can label it See Hear. But if there’s enough temporal separation between them, you can label each element individually: “Hear ... See.” What constitutes “enough” separation is entirely up to you.

Here are the two label sets side-by-side for comparison:

Exclusive Emphasis:	Inclusive Emphasis:
See	See
Hear	Hear
Feel	Feel
	See Hear
	See Feel
	Hear Feel
	All

As mentioned above, you’ll probably start off with exclusive emphasis. If at some point you elect to utilize inclusive emphasis you should memorize the rightmost list of items *in that order*.

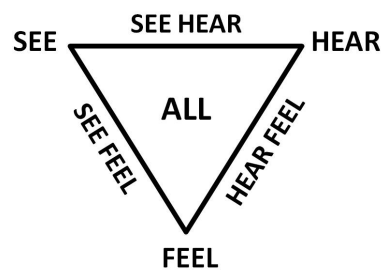
Notice that in Basic Mindfulness “emphasis” is a technical term, not a generic one. When we speak of choosing an emphasis we’re referring to the choice of whether you utilize exclusive noting or inclusive noting. The word “emphasis” is not used for other options, such as the choice of what types of experiences you focus on (those choices are called range options); or whether you use spoken labels, mental labels, or no label (those choices are called label options); or whether you intentionally double note each thing, triple note each thing, etc. (those choices are called re-noting options).

## Quiz

1. What are the three basic sensory modalities as defined in the Basic Mindfulness system? (Please write them in the standard order.)
2. If, while doing the See Hear Feel technique, two or all three modalities arise at the same time, you have two choices as to how to note that. What are those two choices called?
3. List a few basic types of visual experience.
4. List a few basic types of auditory experience.
5. List a few basic types of body experience.
6. True or False: In Basic Mindfulness the word “emphasis” refers to choices in general.
7. Draw the See Hear Feel triangle. (Extra points if you can include all seven labels.)

## Answers to Quiz

1. See, Hear, Feel.
2. Exclusive emphasis and inclusive emphasis.
3. Examples of things you might see include:
  - a. Physical sights
  - b. Mental images
  - c. Visual rest states (blank mental screen, defocused gaze ...)
  - d. Visual flow states (pixilation, swirling, twinkling in your visual field...)
  - e. Visual spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within a visual experience)
4. Examples of those things you might hear include:
  - a. Physical sound
  - b. Mental talk
  - c. Auditory rest states (physical silence, mental quiet...)
  - d. Auditory Flow states (a background hum in the silence around you, a sense of subtle stirring underneath surface mental talk...)
  - e. Auditory spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within an auditory experience)
5. Examples of things you might feel include:
  - a. Physical body sensations
  - b. Emotional body sensations
  - c. Smells and tastes
  - d. Body rest (physical relaxation, emotional peace...)
  - e. Body flow states (tingling, pulsation, undulation, vibration, expansion, contraction ... in part or all of your body)
  - f. Body spaciousness (the openness around and/or thinness within a somatic experience)
6. False. Choices in general are called “options.” The word “emphasis” refers to the choice of whether you utilize exclusive noting or inclusive noting.
- 7.



## Labels Can Be Flexible

Say you would like to explore restful experience for a half hour. In other words, for the next half hour your focus range will be restful states only. You could label things this way:

“See Rest” for things like:

- Darkness/brightness in front of/behind your closed eyes.
- Defocused/soft-focused external gaze.
- Absence of mental image.
- Etc.

“Hear Rest” for things like:

- Physical silence.
- Mental quiet.
- Etc.

“Feel Rest” for things like:

- Physical relaxation in your body.
- Emotional neutrality in your body.
- Etc.

But there’s an even simpler way to go about this. You already know that for the next half hour your focus range will be restricted to restful states. So you could drop the specifier Rest and just say:

- “See” for any form of visual *rest*.
- “Hear” for any form of auditory *rest*.
- “Feel” for any form of body *rest*.

Likewise, if you are restricting your focus range to inner activity (i.e., thoughts or emotions – Focus In), you could use the same words but know that, for the present, See refers to mental images, Hear refers to mental talk, and Feel refers to emotional-type body sensations. Or say you restrict to Outer Activity (i.e., the physical senses – Focus Out), in this case See refers to physical sights, Hear refers to physical sounds, Feel refers to physical-type body sensations. And likewise for the themes of Flow and Spaciousness.

Another example. Say you wish to ignore auditory and body events for a while and just explore the visual modality. In this case you would use the single word See for any visual experience. A similar principle would hold if you were to explore just auditory experience or just body experience.

To sum it up, with flexible labeling there’s just one concept to master:

### THE MEANING OF THE LABEL DEPENDS ON YOUR FOCUS RANGE

See always refers to something visual. But it could be used to label any and all visual experience that may come up or just one very specific type of visual experience that you’re currently exploring. Likewise for Hear and Feel. So, for example, if your focus range were restricted to breath sensation (and assuming that you even wanted to use labels), you would just think “Feel” each time you contacted the breath. If you were doing a body scan (and

once again assuming you even wanted to use labels), you would just think or say “Feel,” “Feel” as you moved awareness up and down your body.

## Quiz

1. With flexible labeling, there's just one concept to master. What is it?
2. If you were doing breath focus and you wanted to use a standard Basic Mindfulness label, what word would that be?
3. Assume your focus range is unrestricted. What are some of the basic things that might be labeled "see"?
4. If your focus range were restricted to "inner activity" (i.e., thoughts and emotions), how would you label mental talk?
5. If your focus range were restricted to restful states, what label would you use for physical relaxation?



## Answers to Quiz

1. The meaning of the label depends on your focus range.
2. "Feel."
3.
  - Physical sight.
  - Mental image.
  - Visual rest states.
  - Visual flow states.
  - Visual spaciousness.
4. "Hear."
5. "Feel."

## Labels Are Not Necessary

As you'll recall, noting (typically) involves a sequence: acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus.... Labels help you maintain the pace of that sequence. If you can maintain it without labels then feel free to drop them and note with direct awareness. But remember: dropping labels is not synonymous with dropping the noting.

Often people report that labeling things gets in the way of experiencing them.

- It agitates – stirs up thoughts, confusions, decisions, reactions.
- It reifies – makes what's being labeled into an objectified thing.
- It creates mental associations.
- It creates performance anxiety.
- It requires effort.
- It creates distance between observer and observed.
- It interferes with the thing being observed.

Regarding such issues there are just two concepts to master – the quick fix and the deep fix. The quick fix is simple. Drop the labels! The deep fix requires persistence.

When I was first introduced to labeling I hated it because I experienced most of the phenomena listed above. But after a few months I saw for myself that those phenomena eventually disappear. Now I can precisely and rapidly and efficiently mentally label any sensory phenomenon without it stirring up even a hint of agitation or separation. So if you prefer not to label, that's fine, but know also that the above mentioned problems tend to take care of themselves with time. It's like learning to drive. When you first start, it's effortful and agitating but at some point it becomes easy and automatic.

You may be also find yourself inclined not merely to drop intentional labeling, but also to drop intentional noting. This may be a sign that it's time to transition from the See Hear Feel technique to the Do Nothing technique (or it may just be a sign that you're getting sloppy ☺).

(See Hear Feel, Do Nothing, and Nurture Positive are the three standard techniques of Basic Mindfulness. Some people learn just one, some people learn two or all three. If you know more than one you can switch back and forth in any way you want. Some people like to work in a cycle doing See Hear Feel, then shifting to Do Nothing, and then after that shifting to Nurture Positive, then perhaps repeating the cycle. Those three steps roughly correspond to the Three Jobs of a Human Being: appreciate self and world, go beyond self and world, and improve self and world.)

## Quiz

1. Name at least three common objections to the labeling process.
2. There are two ways to deal with such issues. What are they?
3. Within the Basic Mindfulness system, might there be times when it's appropriate to drop noting itself (i.e., to shift from See Hear Feel to some other technique)?

## Answers to Quiz

1. Any of the following:
  - It agitates – stirs up thoughts, confusions, decisions, reactions.
  - It reifies – makes what’s being labeled into an objectified thing.
  - It creates mental associations.
  - It creates performance anxiety.
  - It requires effort.
  - It creates distance between observer and observed.
  - It interferes with the thing being observed.
  
2. The quick fix is to decide not to label; the deep fix is to have patience and let the above issues take care of themselves as the labeling becomes more automatic and effortless.
  
3. Yes. You might want to shift to Do Nothing or Nurture Positive if you happen to be familiar with those techniques.

## Where To Start

Most attention training exercises involve a well-defined focus range. A focus range is the set of experiences you've decided to focus on for a certain period of time – perhaps five minutes, perhaps five months. A focus range could be quite narrow – for example, the sensation of breath at your nostrils as in the classical *ānāpāna* practice. Or it could be medium sized, as in the classic body scan. Or it could be completely unrestricted (i.e., encompass whatever comes up), as in the Open Presence or Choiceless Awareness type practices.

Noting sensory experiences in terms of See Hear Feel can be applied to a wide choice of focus ranges, including all the ones mentioned above. The various choices of focus range are considered options within the See Hear Feel technique. Other options include whether you use labels or not, how you deal with situations where more than one modality calls your attention, whether to explicitly note the moment when something vanishes, and so forth. These and other options allow you to customize the See Hear Feel technique to your needs and interests at a given time.

The standard starting point for learning See Hear Feel is to become familiar with four focus ranges.

- Focus on See – Restrict the focus range to just visual experiences.
- Focus on Hear – Restrict the focus range to just auditory experiences.
- Focus on Feel – Restrict the focus range to just somatic experiences.
- Focus on Everything – Unrestricted focus range. You note whatever comes or calls.

These four options give you a nice set of contrasts. The first three represent the most natural ways to limit your range. The fourth provides a well-defined way to develop Choiceless Awareness / Open Presence.

After you've explored each of these range options for a while you may decide that you want to mostly utilize just one of them. Or you may decide that you would like to utilize two, three, or all four. If you learn all four, you could (if you wish) organize your practice into a five-step sequence devoting a set amount of time to each step. If you devote one minute to each step, you'll complete the sequence in five minutes. If you devote two minutes to each step, you'll complete the sequence in ten minutes. If you devote five or six minutes to each step, you'll complete the sequence in about a half hour. If you devote ten to twelve minutes for each step, you'll complete the sequence in about an hour. Feel free to explore various paces. The five steps are:

1. Focus on Everything.
2. Focus on See.
3. Focus on Hear.
4. Focus on Feel.
5. Focus on Everything.

In other words, you start broad, then scroll through each of the modalities, then go back to broad. You could even make it into a repetitive cycle:

1. Focus on Everything.
2. Focus on See.

3. Focus on Hear.
4. Focus on Feel.
5. Focus on Everything.
6. *Wind-up, or go back to step one.*

Of course, it's not required that you organize your practice into a set sequence. You could always use just one of the four basic range options or you could decide in the moment which option you want to explore and for how long. In the latter case, you would make that decision based on interest, opportunity, or necessity.

Another cool thing about these four initial focus ranges is how natural they are. Children from the age of four on can usually understand and implement each of them. This allows kids to do the same practice as their parents – *the family that sits together fits together.*

Sometimes an unrestricted range can be challenging because a lot is happening all at once. If so, you can go to just visual, just auditory, or just somatic – whichever appeals to you. On the other hand, sometimes trying to limit your attention to one type of experience can be taxing. In that case you can broaden your focus range to include everything.

Sooner or later everyone encounters uncomfortable experiences during practice. It's part of being alive. Common examples include: emotional distress, mental confusion, physical discomfort, sleepiness or fatigue, negative urges, and so forth. You are strongly encouraged to apply the See Hear Feel technique to such challenges. There are two basic strategies for doing that. *They are equally valid because they both develop the same skill set* – concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity.

The first strategy is Turn Towards. For example, if you have some physical discomfort in your body you could decide to do focus on Feel for a while. In that case, the goal would be to fully experience whatever is coming up in your body including the physical discomfort and any related body emotion that may be present. That would be a Turn Towards strategy.

On the other hand, you could just as well decide to Turn Away from that body discomfort – for example, by going to focus on See or focus on Hear for a while. Both of those choices require, and therefore build, concentration, clarity, and equanimity. In other words, the Turn Away strategy develops the same skillset as the Turn Towards strategy.

So it's a win-win situation: you grow by Turning Towards and you grow by Turning Away if you do so as a mindful awareness practice.

With Focus on See, Focus on Hear, and Focus on Feel, what you do is pretty straightforward. You try to stay continuously with that modality. If you get pulled away to something *outside that modality*, you actively return. With regards to what comes up *within that modality*, you take a passive stance: letting your awareness go to inner activity, outer activity, or restful states.

With Focus on Everything, the structure is a little more complex because you have to decide how to deal with co-occurrences – i.e., instances where two or all three modalities come or call at the same time. The standard starter option is Exclusive Emphasis – just choose one to note. So if you were using spoken labels, at any given

moment you would be saying one of three words: See or Hear or Feel. If you were using mental labels, the situation would be similar. At any given moment you would be thinking one of three words: See, Hear, or Feel.

When you do See Hear Feel Everything, your contact stance is passive – you just lie back and let sensory experiences come or call. This can be quite relaxing and delicious. But what if nothing comes to your attention or calls your attention? In that case you are almost certainly experiencing one or a combination of the restful states...

- Visual Rest: Your mental screen is blank, your eyes are defocused though open, etc.
- Auditory Rest: Your head is quiet, you hear silence around you, etc.
- Body Rest: Your body is physically relaxed, emotionally neutral, etc.

In the Basic Mindfulness system, such restful states are considered to be forms of sensory experience because they're things you can see, hear, or feel. So if nothing much seems to come or call, then note one of the restful states. This is an example of learning how to appreciate what artists call negative space – absence as a kind of presence. It's a detection skill, and hence a form of sensory clarity.

You may sometimes experience things breaking up into “energy.” If that energy is in the visual field, it's part of what you're seeing and can be noted as See. If it's in the auditory field, note it as Hear. If, as is often the case, it's in the body, note it as Feel. In Basic Mindfulness, the technical name for such energy is flow. (But be aware that in the field of positive psychology, flow refers to something different.)

In its fullest form, the See Hear Feel technique is like an elegantly designed piece of exercise equipment with numerous user-adjustable features. Fortunately you don't have to know all, or even most, of these features. In many cases, one or a combination of the four ranges described above are all a person ever needs. On the other hand, at some point you may want/need to learn some other options, such as:

- Working in various specialized ranges (inner thoughts and emotions, outer physical senses, just rest states, just flow states, just spaciousness....)
- Explicitly noting the moment when things vanish (the label for this is Gone).
- Noting with inclusive emphasis.
- Re-noting: Intentionally noting the same thing two or more times. (This slows things down and reduces flooding.)
- Zooming: Control the spatial scope of your attention during a given act of noting.

These and other options allow you to customize the See Hear Feel technique to your needs and interests at a given time. They make it easier to deal with walls (uncomfortable stuff) and utilize windows (cool stuff). Whether you elect to stay with the startup options or move onto broader possibilities, the slogan is...

### **USE YOUR OPTIONS TO OPTIMIZE YOUR TRAINING.**

## Quiz

1. What is a focus range?
2. Give an example of a narrow focus range?
3. Give an example of a mid-sized focus range.
4. Give an example of a broad focus range.
5. When a person first learns the See Hear Feel technique they will probably start out with what four versions?
6. If you're working with "whatever comes or calls" we say that you have an unrestricted focus range. Other practice systems use other terms for this approach. Give an example of that alternative terminology. (Extra points if you can give two examples.)
7. In your first lesson you'll probably be taught how to do See Hear Feel with your eyes open as well as closed. Can you guess some reasons why each of those options could be useful? (This was not explained in the text; it's an exercise in creative thinking.)
8. When doing See Hear Feel with an unrestricted range, what is the standard "contact stance" – active or passive?
9. When you do See Hear Feel with an unrestricted range, if nothing much seems to be happening most likely one or a combination of three things are available. What are they? How should they be labeled?
10. As you're doing See Hear Feel you notice that all or part of your body seems to be full of energy – tingly, bubbly, vibratory, undulatory..... Using the current Basic Mindfulness label system, how would you label this phenomenon? What is the technical term for it?



## Answers to Quiz

1. The set of experiences you've decided to focus on for a period of time.
2.
  - Breath sensation only
  - Mental image only
  - Physical sound only
  - Gone only
  - Etc., etc.
3.
  - Visual experience only
  - Auditory experience only
  - Body experience only
  - Thought ("mental image and/or mental talk")
  - Inner activity (mental image, mental talk, emotional body sensation)
  - Outer activity (physical sight, physical sound, physical body sensation)
  - Rest states only
  - Flow states only
4. Any and all sensory experience, i.e., Open Presence/Choiceless Awareness.
5.
  - Focus on See – Any and all visual experience.
  - Focus on Hear – Any and all auditory experience.
  - Focus on Feel – Any and all somatic experience.
  - Focus on Everything – Any and all sensory experience.
6.
  - Open Presence
  - Choiceless Awareness
7. Eyes closed can make it easier or more comfortable to focus. Eyes open (or half open) can help you stay alert. Also, eyes open practice prepares you to be mindful as you go about ordinary activities.
8. Passive
9.
 

<u>What's Available</u>	<u>Label</u>
Visual rest (your mental screen is blank; your eyes are defocused though open)	See
Auditory rest (your head is quiet; you hear silence around you)	Hear
Body rest (your body is physically relaxed, emotionally neutral)	Feel

10. Label: Feel. Technical term: Flow

## The Four Okays

It may be useful to remember The Four Okays of noting:

- It's okay to miss.
- It's okay to guess.
- It's okay to be (a little) late.
- It's okay to "average."

Here's what they mean:

### **It's okay to miss.**

Often a lot is going on all at once. You're not required to try to detect each subtle event. All that's required is that you have a brief, quality moment with whichever event that you've chosen as your target for that moment. If while you're doing that other events occur, it's okay to let them pass unnoted. On the other hand, remember that noting is not synonymous with labeling. The maximum speed at which a person can label is perhaps one label per second. On the other hand, some people can note much faster than that. For such people noting becomes like a mechanized laser beam that zaps the somethingness out of each arising, however fleeting. If you happen to be one of those people, then go ahead and utilize your ability; nothing will get by unnoted. But if you're like most people, you're probably going to miss stuff. And that's okay – especially in the early stages of your practice.

### **It's okay to guess.**

You may not be quite sure exactly what category a given sensory event falls under. If so, it's fine to guess. Clarity comes with practice. For example, it's not uncommon for people to report having thoughts that don't seem to explicitly involve mental image or mental talk. In such cases it's a good guess that what's really going on is an extremely subtle level of activation in image space and talk space at the same time. Under that assumption, the label for this phenomenon would be See Hear.

Here's another example: a person might be experiencing something like body emotion but it doesn't seem to have any identifiable location in the body. In such cases what's probably going on is once again something extremely subtle – subliminal emotional sensation over the whole body. An appropriate strategy would be to zoom out and cover the whole body with awareness. If you're labeling, the label would be Feel.

### **It's okay to be (a little!) late.**

The eventual goal is that mindful awareness instantly accompanies each sensory arising. In other words, the sense event and the mindful awareness are "concurrent" (from the Latin *concurrere*, meaning to run in parallel, like two joggers matching strides). But in the early stages of practice the note may occur somewhat after the event. If the delay is a second or two, that's acceptable – at least initially. If the delay is more than that, don't bother retroactively noting. Just move on to the next event (which may be a judgment about the fact that your noting is so late). Statistically, the following pattern is typical: it's relatively easy to be concurrent with body sensations and external sounds; it's a bit more difficult to be concurrent with mental images; and it's hugely

difficult to be concurrent with mental talk. Don't be discouraged – skill comes with time. Regarding the challenge of mental talk, here's a big tip: spoken labels usually help.

### **It's okay to average.**

Sometimes events can occur in a rapid-fire sequence like a machine gun. For example, you might get a rapid sequence of fleeting mental images. If you're one of those lucky people who can note like a machine gun, then no problem. But most people cannot note that rapidly, and no one can label that rapidly. What to do? Simple: remember that it's okay to "average." If a dozen different images are arising every few seconds, (and assuming you wish to label), then just say or think "See...See...See" every few seconds. In this case the label represents an average of what you've been experiencing. The same principle would apply to any rapid-fire sensory event.

## **Common Confusions**

Here are a few other points that sometimes cause confusion:

### **Same damn thing.**

You may be pulled to the same sensory event over and over. That's okay. When noting, the point is to have an unbroken sequence of quality moments with something sensory. When your range is unrestricted and your contact stance is passive, it doesn't matter whether your attention is pulled around broadly or mostly goes to just one thing over and over. The magic is in the moment.

### **The need to create.**

Some people feel a need to intentionally create a sensory experience in order to "have something to observe." There can certainly be a place for that sort of thing – for example, when doing the Nurture Positive technique or when doing the special exercise called "Evoking." But the standard way to do See Hear Feel does not involve that. Just lie back and let things (including restful states) come to your attention or call your attention.

On the other hand, even when you're in a passive contact mode, there's one phenomenon that's always okay intentionally to create: physical relaxation. For example, during seated practice you can "stretch up and settle in" any time you want. So what's special about relaxation? Simple: although physical relaxation is a sensory event (a form of Feel Rest), it also functions to induce equanimity. Continuous relaxation (especially continuous whole body relaxation) is a relatively easy way to rev up your equanimity level.

### **Mind games.**

In the early stages of your practice, your mind may play a lot of games with itself. It gets caught up in analyzing the analysis, thinking about thinking about thinking. It finds trippy things to get confused about, finds ways to convince you that you're doing it wrong, comes up with clever philosophical quibbles, goes unconscious as you rehearse describing your practice experience.... Not to worry; at some point all that goes away and you settle into a matter-of-fact groove of observation.

### **Just imagining.**

Sometimes people worry, "I'm not sure if I'm really experiencing this or just imagining it." You need not drive yourself crazy with such questions. Here's a rule of thumb: if you think you're experiencing it, assume that you are. (Remember, with See Hear Feel, the only thing you're required to be confident about is which sense modality or combo you're focusing on.)

**Not spontaneous.**

Another common concern: “I’m not sure if this is occurring spontaneously or if I’m creating it.” In such cases ask yourself, “Am I willfully creating this?” If the answer is no, then you’re not creating it, so don’t worry about it. Just observe it. If the answer is yes (and you’re supposed to be in passive contact mode), then stop. If you can’t stop, then it’s not really under voluntary control so you don’t need to stop. Just observe it.

**Am I doing it right?**

People worry, “I’m not sure if I’m doing it right.” The remedy is simple: recall that as long as you’re labeling with an equanimous voice and an even pace, and the words are not just a mechanical mantra, then by definition you are doing the technique properly, indeed perfectly (see the section “Labels Aid Noting”).

**Am I doing enough?**

What constitutes “enough” is described in the document [An Outline of Practice](#):

- At least ten minutes of formal practice in stillness most days.
- At least ten minutes of formal practice in motion most days.
- Some “micro-hits” and “background practice” in daily life most days.
- At least one week-long residential retreat *or equivalent* each year.
- A big picture check-in with a competent coach each year.
- Duration training, trigger practice, and motion challenge sequences as needed to accelerate your growth.

Please read [An Outline of Practice](#) for details as well as the technical meanings of the terms used above.

**Suppressing.**

During noting practice people worry, “Am I suppressing? Am I getting in my own way?” Probably not, but, even if you are, just observe what part of the self interference is visual, what part is auditory, and what part is somatic.

**The ultimate conundrum.**

And last but not least, the King of the Heap, the Grand Poobah, the Mother of all contemplative conundrums: “Who’s doing this observing?” Answer in a sound bite: The habit of observing is doing the observing.

*The important thing to remember is that all of the common confusions mentioned above can only come up in the form of inner See Hear Feel activation. Just note them as such. The mantra here is: Recycle the Reaction.*

## Quiz

1. What are The Four Okays?
2. With practice, sensory events and your mindful awareness of them become concurrent. In this context, what is the meaning of concurrent?
3. Name a category of experience that (most people) are able to note without much delay.
4. Name a category of experience that many people are (initially) unable to note without some delay.

## Answers to Quiz

1.
  - It's okay to miss.
  - It's okay to guess.
  - It's okay to be (a little) late.
  - It's okay to "average."
2. They arise at the same time.
3. Body sensation.
4. Mental talk.

## Required vs. Allowed

People are often concerned with the question, “Am I doing my technique properly?” When you do See Hear Feel, that question is easy to answer. As long as you’re maintaining a basic level of mindful awareness you’re doing the technique properly, indeed perfectly.

But how do you know if you’re maintaining a basic level of mindful awareness? Recall that the labeling process impacts consciousness in three ways. The pacing guarantees a basic level of concentration power; the wording guarantees a basic level of clarity; the voicing guarantees a basic level of equanimity. Recall also that mindful awareness is defined as “concentration, clarity, and equanimity working together.” So as long as you’re speaking the labels at a comfortable pace, maintaining an equanimity voice, and using words that correspond to what you’re experiencing (i.e., the labels are not just a mechanical mantra), then by definition you’re maintaining a basic level of mindful awareness. And hence, by definition, you’re doing the technique properly, indeed perfectly.

After practicing with labels for a while you’ll probably get a sense of what that basic level of concentration, clarity, and equanimity “taste” like. You will probably also be able to reproduce that taste without intentional labeling. But if not – or if you forget for a while, or if you run into a big challenge – it’s fine to use mental or spoken labels. Noting without labels is not considered better than noting with labels any more than third gear is better than first gear. Whatever gear you use depends on the topography you happen to be driving through. Shifting gears is part of driving smart.

So the performance criteria for this technique are such that anyone can do it well enough after a half hour or so of instruction. The rest is a numbers game. The more you practice and apply, the stronger your skills become.

So what you’re required to do is rather modest. On the other hand, you’re certainly allowed to give yourself a more demanding task, to “up the ante” of your practice if that appeals to you. Here are a few ways to do that.

### Concentration Power

As you recall, the pacing of the labels fosters concentration. But there are other ways in which concentration can be exercised. One way is to work in a restricted focus range. Say, for example, that you decide to focus only on body experience for a while. Initially you may find yourself pulled away from your body again and again. Each time you get pulled away into sight, sound, or thought, gently bring your attention back to your body. Working against the force of distraction in this way is analogous to lifting weights. *Each rep builds concentration muscle.*

Another way to rev up concentration is to adopt an intentionally active or an intentionally passive stance during the focus phase of each note. Recall that a period of noting practice typically consists of a sequence: acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus.... Recall also that we have referred to the two parts of that sequence as the acknowledging phase and the focus phase (although in practice there’s sometimes no clear boundary between the two phases).

We’ll use the term focus stance to refer to whether you take a more active or a more passive role during the focus phase. There’s a spectrum of valid and potentially useful focus stances. On the most passive side, you sort of let each sensory event focus you, pulling you into intrinsic fascination. (This works particularly well for the



Focus Out family.) On the most active side, you can strongly thrust your attention into each sense event, attempting to “penetrate” it. In between these extremes comes an easy, intentional turning of awareness towards the experience. Any of these stance choices may help you deepen your concentration.

Say that you’ve decided to focus on body emotion for a while and that you’ve decided to employ an active, “penetrative” focus stance. Say also that you’ve decided to use spoken labels. In this case you would be developing concentration power in three distinct ways. The pacing of the labels would develop your basic level of concentration. But you’ve also significantly restricted your focus range and implemented a specific focus stance. Those two decisions would “up the ante” by requiring more of yourself than the minimum.

## Sensory Clarity

The only thing you’re always required to be clear about is which modality or modalities you’re focusing on at a given moment. But it’s possible – indeed probable – that you’ll be aware of much more information than just that. Say, for example, that your focus range is unrestricted and you’re doing mental labels with exclusive emphasis. A visual thought arises and you label it See. This gives you basic clarity because you’re aware that you’re focusing on a visual event. But you’ll probably also be aware of much more detail than that. Without necessarily thinking about it, you’ll probably be aware of the spatial location of that image and whether it’s stable or flowing. You’ll probably also be aware of what kind of image it is – a person, a place, a physical object, a symbol.... And you may even detect the instant when it vanishes.

Say the image vanishes and the next thing that arises is a body sensation. You note it as Feel. This label gives you basic clarity but, once again, without intentionally thinking or analyzing, you’ll probably be aware of its size, shape, location, and intrinsic qualities – itchiness, pressure, fear, joy, heat, cold, etc.

Being clear about such detail, getting interested in it, even intentionally looking for it ... all of these are allowed, but none of them is required.

*In general there are two contrasting, but equally empowering, themes that may come up spontaneously as you do See Hear Feel. Redefining two technical terms from Jung (and Leibnitz ☺), the two themes are:*

### Differentiation and Integration

Within the context of our work, differentiation means making finer and finer distinctions. Integration means finding deeper and deeper unity. Both are aspects of clarity. Although they may seem opposite they’re actually part of the same process. Subdividing gets you down to the vibrating pixels that are the universal substance of each sensory event. The whole sensorium integrates into an arabesque of energy: rich, fulfilling, empowering, and insubstantial. Against that uniform background, finer and finer distinctions can be detected which in turn break up into an even deeper unifying flow.

So as you note you may be drawn to interest in detail of the sensory content. If so, fine. On the other hand, you may lose interest in details of content and get fascinated with the overall contour. That’s fine too. The separate pieces recede into the background. The envelope of energy occupies the foreground. Qr: neither of those themes may call; you’re just tracking the modalities as per the instructions. Any of these scenarios represent doing the technique perfectly.

## Equanimity

Basic equanimity is guaranteed by the equanimous (ee-quá-ni-mus), welcoming labeling voice. Beyond that you may find that maintaining continuous (and, ideally, whole body) relaxation also helps deepen equanimity. Also some people find it useful to intentionally create a welcoming attitude towards each arising, or to infuse each arising with Loving Kindness.

Regarding equanimity, the most important thing to remember is this: the deepest training of equanimity comes not through things you do to create it, but from clearly noticing when you spontaneously drop into it. That's one of the reasons why it's good to do duration training and retreats. It's a numbers game. The longer the practice period, the more likely you'll eventually fall into equanimity.

## Quiz

1. With the See Hear Feel technique, how can you be sure that you're doing the technique properly?
2. True or false: The proper way to note is with Direct Awareness. Labels are no more than training wheels.
3. In addition to the pacing of the labels, name one other way to develop concentration power. (Extra points if you can name two.)
4. In addition to the voice tone, name one other way to develop equanimity. (Extra points if you can name two or three.)
5. What is the most important mechanism by which equanimity is learned?
6. As you note you might get fascinated with the theme of detail and distinction. Or you might become disinterested in detail and distinction and instead get fascinated with integration and unity. Or you might not be particularly drawn to either of these themes – you're just tracking the modalities as per the instructions. Is one of these possibilities preferable relative to the others?
7. What is meant by focus stance?
8. Give an example of an active focus stance.
9. Give an example of a passive focus stance.

## Answers to Quiz

1. Use mental or spoken labels with a comfortable pace and an equanimity voice tone. The pacing guarantees a continuity of concentration. The matter-of-fact tone guarantees a base level of equanimity. The wording guarantees that you'll be clear about which sensory modality you're focusing on at that moment.
2. False.
3.
  - Restrict your focus range.
  - Establish a well-defined focus stance (it could be intentionally active or intentionally passive or something in-between).
4.
  - Establish and maintain relaxation (if possible over as much of your body as you can).
  - Maintain a welcoming attitude towards whatever arises.
  - Infuse loving kindness into whatever arises.
5. Clearly noticing when you spontaneously drop into it.
6. No.
7. The attitude you take during the focus phase of each act of noting. It could involve active aspects, passive aspects, or both.
8.
  - Intentionally creating a sensory experience then focus on it (for example, during the Nurture Positive technique).
  - "Penetration": pouring awareness into or thrusting awareness towards the thing you are noting.
9. Let the event being noted focus you – i.e., let yourself be enchanted by it.

# Exploring the Five Themes

## About the Grid

A key feature of Basic Mindfulness is its Table of Sensory Elements (known affectionately among aficionados as The Grid).

		THEMES				
		<i>IN</i>	<i>OUT</i>	<i>REST</i>	<i>FLOW</i>	<i>SPACE</i>
MODALITIES	<i>SEE</i>	<b>See In:</b> Mental Images	<b>See Out:</b> External Sights	<b>See Rest:</b> Visual Rest	<b>See Flow:</b> Visual Flow	<b>See Space:</b> Visual Spaciousness
	<i>HEAR</i>	<b>Hear In:</b> Mental Talk	<b>Hear Out:</b> External Sounds	<b>Hear Rest:</b> Auditory Rest	<b>Hear Flow:</b> Auditory Flow	<b>Hear Space:</b> Auditory Spaciousness
	<i>FEEL</i>	<b>Feel In:</b> Emotional Body Sensations	<b>Feel Out:</b> Physical Body Sensations	<b>Feel Rest:</b> Body Rest	<b>Feel Flow:</b> Body Flow	<b>Feel Space:</b> Body Spaciousness

Notice that this table cross classifies sensory experience in terms of three modalities (the rows) and five themes (the columns). This parallels the way the Periodic Table of Chemical Elements cross classifies atoms in terms of periods and groups. (*Optional and Just For Fun:* (1) Learn to draw the Grid on your own correctly labeling each row, column, and box as shown here. (2) Explain the general concept of the Grid to at least one other person.)

The row headers (modalities) group all sensory experience into three broad types:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Somatic

The column headers (themes) provide finer distinctions.

- “In” is short for Inner Activity—thoughts, emotions, and such.
- “Out” is short for Outer Activity—the physical senses.
- “Rest” is short for Sensory Rest—tranquil, relatively undifferentiated states that occur in a specific modality. These are sometimes referred to as restful states.

- “Flow” is short for Sensory Flow—change, energy that occurs in a specific modality. These are sometimes referred to as flow states.
- “Space” is short for Spaciousness—the openness around and/or the thinness within what you see, hear, or feel.

Each column is associated with a family of range options—ways you could restrict the See Hear Feel technique for the purposes of exploring that theme.

Say for example that you want to explore thoughts and emotions. Four natural ways to do that would be:

Work with individual elements:

- See In – Note mental image only.
- Hear In – Note mental talk only.
- Feel In – Note emotional body sensation only.

Work with all the elements:

- Focus In – Note mental image, mental talk, and emotional body sensations but ignore physical sight, physical sound, and physical body sensations.

And likewise for the other four themes.

Notice that the columns are ordered to create a natural progression. Themes 1 and 2 are about sensorially appreciating Self and World. Themes 3, 4, and 5 represent progressively deeper ways to integrate and transcend Self and World.

THE FIVE FAMILIES	THE MAIN EFFECTS
Focus In Family	Frees you by untangling the strands of self.
Focus Out Family	Expands your identity through merging with surrounding scene.
Focus on Rest Family	Attenuates inner and outer world into rest states.
Focus on Flow Family	Dissolves inner and outer world into energy.
Focus on Space Family	Shows you the perfection that was always there.

## Quiz

1. What are the three modalities?
2. What are the five themes?
3. What are the abbreviations for the five themes?
4. What are “The Five Families”?
5. Advanced Question: List each of The Five Families and its basic effect.
6. Advanced Question: Draw The Grid

## Answers to Quiz

1.

- Visual experience
- Auditory experience
- Somatic (body) experience

2.

- Inner Activity
- Outer Activity
- Sense Rest, aka restful states
- Sense Flow, aka flow states
- Spaciousness

3.

- In
- Out
- Rest
- Flow
- Space

4.

- Focus In Family
- Focus Out Family
- Focus on Rest Family
- Focus on Flow Family
- Focus on Space Family

5.

- Focus In Family: Frees you by untangling the strands of self.
- Focus Out Family: Expands your identity through merging with surrounding scene.
- Focus on Rest Family: Attenuates inner and outer world into rest states.
- Focus on Flow Family: Dissolves inner and outer world into energy.
- Focus on Space Family: Shows you the perfection that was always there.



6.

		THEMES				
		<i>IN</i>	<i>OUT</i>	<i>REST</i>	<i>FLOW</i>	<i>SPACE</i>
MODALITIES	<i>SEE</i>	<b>See In:</b> Mental Images	<b>See Out:</b> External Sights	<b>See Rest:</b> Visual Rest	<b>See Flow:</b> Visual Flow	<b>See Space:</b> Visual Spaciousness
	<i>HEAR</i>	<b>Hear In:</b> Mental Talk	<b>Hear Out:</b> External Sounds	<b>Hear Rest:</b> Auditory Rest	<b>Hear Flow:</b> Auditory Flow	<b>Hear Space:</b> Auditory Spaciousness
	<i>FEEL</i>	<b>Feel In:</b> Emotional Body Sensations	<b>Feel Out:</b> Physical Body Sensations	<b>Feel Rest:</b> Body Rest	<b>Feel Flow:</b> Body Flow	<b>Feel Space:</b> Body Spaciousness

## Can't Go Deep

If by “meditation” we mean systematic practices that develop concentration, then mindfulness could be called a form of meditation. But it certainly does not conform to the popular stereotype of that word. In the popular image, meditation is something you do sitting on the floor with your eyes closed, withdrawn from the environment and intentionally seeking a deep, tranquil state. Of course, mindfulness can be practiced sitting still with eyes closed, but it can also be practiced while driving your car, pattering around the house, carrying on conversation, eating a meal, making love...some people are even able to maintain it on the job, in effect, monasticizing their workplace.

But what about those deep, tranquil states? Do they have a place in mindfulness practice? Definitely. Visual, auditory, and somatic rest states can be objects of mindful observation. The more you attend to them, the clearer they get. This creates a positive feedback loop that takes you deeper and deeper into tranquility.

On the other hand, people who have mostly done calming forms of meditation are often disappointed when they first try See Hear Feel. The noting process – even without labels – may initially seem very busy and more akin to thinking than meditating. In the worst case scenario it may seem like the opposite of meditation. It prevents them from “going deep.” I can commiserate with this perception because I myself went through a period like that. (Before I learned to note I had mostly done breath focus, mantra, and visualization.)

In the traditional Buddhist analysis, “meditation” is conceived of as a balance between two complimentary aspects: *shamatha* (concentration/tranquility) and *vipashyana* (observation/clarity). The ultimate goal is to go deep while staying clear. During the initial phase of learning See Hear Feel, you may not be able to access the deep states you typically enter during meditation. That’s okay. It’s just part of a learning curve. If you’re patient, clarity and depth eventually come together. But because you achieved that integration through noting ordinary experiences, you’ll be able to maintain it even while going about ordinary activities. The ordinary becomes utterly extraordinary.

So you may be unable to go deep for a while as you rev up clarity through noting. That’s okay. It’s a small price to pay relative to the long-term reward. The long-term reward is the ability to abide at the Stillpoint throughout all your comings and going.

## Quiz

1. Name at least one way that tranquility can develop within the framework of Basic Mindfulness.
2. Say you're teaching See Hear Feel to a friend who has practiced T.M. for years. They find the experience almost the opposite of the nice state they're used to. What might you say by way of explanation and encouragement?

## Answers to Quiz

1. Do any one or combination of the following options: See Rest, Hear Rest, Feel Rest, Focus on Rest.
2. During noting practice, you may initially find it difficult to “go deep” into tranquility. But if you’re patient you will get there again – and this time with much greater clarity. The ultimate goal of noting practice involves going deep and staying clear. This balance may be difficult to achieve at first. But once you do achieve it, you’ll be able to maintain a deep state even during ordinary daily activities.

# Noting In a Nutshell

## Summary of Noting

A period of noting practice typically consists of a sequence of acts of noting. An act of noting usually consists of two parts:

- 1) Acknowledging phase: An initial moment of acknowledging.
- 2) Focusing phase: A moment of focusing on what you acknowledged.

Thus, noting typically consists of a sequence: acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus, acknowledge, focus .... Associated with each thing that can be noted is a word or phrase—its label. As you note something, you have the option to think or say its label. When you speak the labels out loud, intentionally use a low, gentle, matter-of-fact, almost impersonal tone of voice. When you think the labels, create the same tone in your mental voice. The tone of voice helps put you in a deep state. (The two-phase formula given above can be useful for describing the process of noting: Phase 1 - Acknowledge: contact a sensory event and Phase 2 - Focus: Know that sensory event in a full and loving way. In practice, however, the two phases may merge into a single act.)

The relationship between noting, labeling, and mindful awareness is as follows:

- Labeling can facilitate noting.
- Noting can facilitate mindful awareness.
- Mindful awareness is a key skill for achieving True Happiness

Noting need not be accompanied by labeling, and labeling may be mental or spoken. This gives us three possibilities:

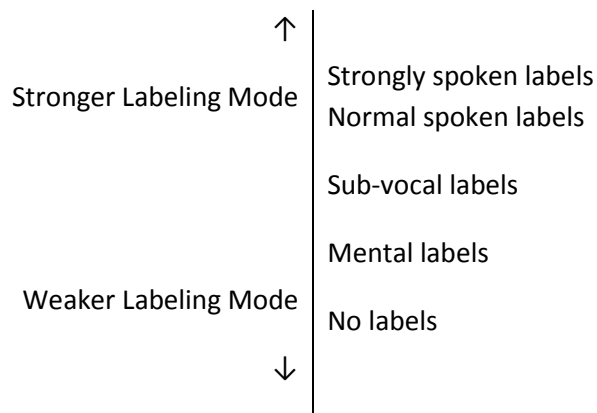
- 1) Just Noting without intentionally labeling.
- 2) Mental labels accompanying the noting.
- 3) Spoken labels accompanying the noting.

Within the spoken labels there are three sub-types:

- 1) Sub-vocal labels (mouthed, whispered, or sotto voce labeling that would be inaudible to people near you.)
- 2) Ordinary spoken labels.
- 3) Strongly spoken labels.

Obviously the latter two can only be done in appropriate environments. This gives you a spectrum of five possibilities analogous to gear positions in a car. We will refer to these five possibilities as labeling modes.

You can freely shift back and forth between labeling modes. You may shift frequently or seldom as circumstances dictate. By circumstances, I mean what is going on inside you (how focused or scattered you are) and what is going on around you (whether there are people you might disturb, etc.). As a general principle, as soon as you get spaced out or caught up, immediately shift to a stronger mode of labeling. Once you get well focused, you can drop to a weaker mode of labeling if you so desire.



The labels can come during the acknowledging phase, or the focusing phase, or both.

In addition to the label options, you have options regarding Emphasis, Re-noting, Zooming, Stance, Gone.

- Emphasis.
  - Exclusive Emphasis – Note just one element of a co-occurrence.
  - Inclusive Emphasis – Note all elements of a co-occurrence.
- Re-noting. Intentionally re-note each thing for a set number of times (unless it vanishes before you reach your quota).
  - Double note
  - Triple note
  - Quad note
  - Note ‘til gone. If you note something once, continue to note that very same thing until all or part vanishes. The note ‘til gone option does not require that you note the same event until it completely vanishes but it does require that you stay with the same thing until all *or part* of that thing vanishes.
- Zooming. Control the spatial scope of your focus during the note.
  - Zoom In. Shrink the scope of attention to just one area within what you’re noting.
  - Zoom Out. Extend the scope of your attention to cover the entire area of what you’re noting.
  - Zoom Beyond. Spread your attention beyond the boundary of what you’re noting to find the openness around it. That openness might just be a little sense of space or it might be a vast extent of space.
  - Zoom Both Ways. Shrink your attention to a local area of intensity while at the same time zoom out as far as possible.
- Stance. Ways in which take an active role or a passive role as you note.
  - Contact Stance. Ways in which you take an active role or a passive role in contacting a sensory experience.
  - Focus Stance. Ways in which you take an active role or a passive role after you have contacted a sensory experience.
- Gone. To explicitly note the moment when all or part of the thing your noting vanishes.

- Explicitly note Gone.
- Don't bother to note gone.

## FAQ on Noting

1. **Question:** Noting makes me think a lot. I think about if I'm doing it right. I think about what to look for next. I think about thinking about thinking. What should I do?

**Answer:** Just be patient. Those are common initial reactions. They tend to go away with time because: (1) tracking experiences becomes more second nature for you and (2) your mind gets tired of playing games with itself. Remember also to intentionally make your noting voice impersonal and matter-of-fact. That may help reduce the "tripping out on yourself" aspect you're reporting.

2. **Question:** It seems that a lot of my labels are just guesses.

**Answer:** That's okay. You have to start somewhere. Confidence comes with experience.

3. **Question:** It seems that my labels often come late, after the fact, especially when I'm trying to track mental talk.

**Answer:** That's to be expected at the beginning. You are still much more alert than you would be otherwise. With practice, noting becomes concurrent with the arising of each experience.

4. **Question:** The noting seems to interfere with or change the thing I'm focusing on so I can't detect what's really there.

**Answer:** Sure you can. What's really there is whatever was there plus any change produced from the act of paying attention to it. Any sensory experience is a valid candidate for focusing on, even if that experience has been caused by or modified by the act of focusing itself.

5. **Question:** Noting seems to reinforce a strong sense of an "I" doing the noting.

**Answer:** That's natural at the beginning. At some point the Noting goes on autopilot.

Here's a metaphor. After lots of initial practice, you learn to do the complex task of driving a car without needing much of a "driving self." In the same way, eventually you will be able to quickly and accurately label complex phenomena without needing a "meditating self."

6. **Question:** I just keep labeling the same thing over and over again. What's the point?

**Answer:** Remember that noting is not just noticing. Each time you note something you focus on it and open up to it. The magic is in the moment-by-moment focusing and opening. In each moment, you are learning a new way to process sensory experience. You are not wasting your time even if you just note the same seemingly banal or even uncomfortable event over and over. Each note is a new turn at bat—a chance to experience a moment of completeness.

7. **Question:** Why should I note and label?

**Answer:** There are many reasons. Here are a few:

The gentle loving tone that you create in your voice as you label can be very powerful. Your own voice can put you into a deep state of reassurance, safety, and self-acceptance. We'll refer to such a state as equanimity.

Noting allows you to focus on just what's present in the moment. This reduces overwhelm, which in turn reduces suffering.

Noting allows you to break experiences down into manageable parts and deal with them one at a time. A 500-pound weight will crush you, but ten 50-pound weights can be carried one at a time.

Some of the things you'll be noting represent windows of opportunity—pleasant aspects of experience such as rest and flow. These are often present but usually go unnoticed and, hence, un-enjoyed. Sensory categories used in Basic Mindfulness are set up to call your attention to such windows of opportunity.

8. **Question:** I cannot seem to separate mental image from mental talk. Any suggestions?

**Answer:** It depends on what you mean by "separate."

If by separate you mean preventing image and talk from happening at the same time, or stopping them from interacting back and forth, then you're right. Neither you nor anyone else can separate them in that sense. However, the good news is that there's no need to separate them in that sense. Even when mental talk and mental image are intertwined, it is still possible to experience them as qualitatively and spatially distinct sensory events.

Qualitatively speaking, mental images are visual. Mental talk is auditory. Spatially speaking, images tend to be centered more forward; for example, in front of or behind your eyes. Talk tends to occur further back, usually somewhere in your head/at your ears.

Just as you can distinguish external sights from external sounds, you can "separate" internal images from internal conversations.

9. **Question:** Can you summarize some basic guidelines for the labeling process?

**Answer:**

If you are noting without labels and are getting spaced out or caught up, start to mentally label.

If that doesn't help, intentionally modulate your mental voice to be more gentle and matter-of-fact, even if that seems artificial and contrived.

If that doesn't help, speak the labels out loud in that gentle and matter-of-fact tone.

If that doesn't, use strongly spoken labels.



*If the effort to speak the labels causes uncomfortable reactions (resistance, emotion, and so forth) label those reactions. (Those reactions are proof that you're doing the procedure correctly. The stronger labeling mode is forcing you to go toe-to-toe with the unconsciousness itself!)*

10. **Question:** I don't like to label.

**Answer:** The solution is easy. You don't have to! Labeling is an option within the apparatus of Noting. But if it's a choice between effortful labeling on one hand and being grossly spaced out on the other, go for the labels!

11. **Question:** How should I deal with my incessant mental chatter?

**Answer:** As it stands, this question is unanswerable because it lacks a critical piece of information. Something needs to be specified before a helpful response can be formulated. Can you see what's lacking? What's lacking is the context.

Any question like "what should I do about X" (where X could be anything), needs to be stated in one of two forms:

- Generic context: Broadly speaking, what are the ways of dealing with X?
- Specific context: I'm doing technique T, using options P, Q, and R. I'm experiencing X. How should I deal with it?

The generic format is asking for a complete algorithm – the full spectrum of possible technique and option choices for dealing with X, along with some guidelines as to when to use which. That's a lot of information. The specific format is asking for considerably less.

So let me ask you: would you like a complete summary of ways for dealing with mental chatter or are you asking me of how to deal with mental chatter within the context of a specific technique and focus range?

The student responds: The context is that I'm doing See Hear Feel Everything.

In that case, just note the talk as Hear. Using spoken labels with an intentional, loving, equanimity voice may help. If the talk comes in distinct bursts, explicitly note the end of each burst as "Gone." Also be aware that mental talk sometimes triggers emotional body sensations. When that happens, detecting and equanimizing that may help reduce the drivenness around thinking. Since your focus range includes everything, you can note emotional body sensations as Feel.

If your focus range had been something like Focus Out or Focus on Rest, then I would have been said: Let the mental talk come and go in the background. Let equanimity surround the mental talk but but direct your clarity and concentration to things that are in your focus range. The ability to let something come and go in the background is an aspect of equanimity that I call "background equanimity." Just keep pulling away from the mental talk and coming back to things in your focus range. You'll either be able to do that or not. If you can't, that's okay. In that case, shift your focus range to include or be the mental talk.

By the way, your *explicit* request was for a strategy around dealing with mental talk. But, I sense behind it is an *implicit* request – a request for *reassurance*. You’d like to know, “Will this incessant chatter ever go away?” Reassurance is a legitimate request. Let me say this ...

*If* you implement all of the rather modest suggestions described in the article *An Outline of Practice*, and *if* you keep that up for your entire life, then yes, there’s a high probability that at some point the incessant chatter will more or less fade away –i.e., you’ll essentially become free *of it*.

*But* long before that happens, you’ll become free *within it*. By that I mean that you’ll learn to experience it so fully it ceases to be a source of suffering.

## Quiz

1. Let's assume that you're a mindfulness coach. How would you respond to each of these questions/reports? Compare your answers to those on the FAQ.
  - Noting makes me think a lot. I think about if I'm doing it right. I think about what to look for next. I think about thinking about thinking. What should I do?
  - It seems that a lot of my labels are just guesses.
  - It seems that my labels often come late, after the fact, especially when I'm trying to track mental talk.
  - The noting seems to interfere with or change the thing I'm focusing on so I can't detect what's really there.
  - Noting seems to reinforce a strong sense of an "I" doing the noting.
  - I just keep labeling the same thing over and over again. What's the point?
  - Why should I note and label?
  - I cannot seem to separate mental image from mental talk. Any suggestions?
  - Can you summarize some basic guidelines for the labeling process?
  - I don't like to label.

## Answers to Quiz

1. See the original FAQ.

## Organizing Your Practice

In the article [An Outline of Practice](#), I describe all the “ducks” you need to line up in order to maximize success in mindfulness practice. Please read that document for details, as well as the technical meanings of the terms that appear below. Here’s an overview for reference:

- I. Maintain a day-to-day rhythm:
  - A. Some formal practice in stillness most days (recommended minimum: 10 minutes).
  - B. Some formal practice in motion most days (recommended minimum: 10 minutes)
  - C. Some life practice most days.
    - “Micro-hits” (at least 3-6 per day).
    - “Background practice” (no specified minimum).
  
- II. Maintain a season-to-season rhythm:
  - A. Periodic retreats: At least one week-long residential retreat or equivalent each year. (Many people can’t get away for a week. Fortunately, monthly participation in the Home Practice Program is doable for just about anyone and sustaining that for a year counts as the equivalent to a week-long residential program.)
  - B. At least once a year make contact with a competent coach for a check-in on the big picture of your practice.
  
- III. Use optional accelerators as needed:
  - A. Duration training.
  - B. Trigger practice.
  - C. Motion challenge sequences.

In terms of what you do during formal practice, you have three choices.

1. Always or almost always use the same focus method.
2. Go through a set sequence of focus methods (perhaps once or perhaps cycling through several times).
3. Freely shift between focus methods.

Here are some examples of the first possibility, mostly do just...

- See Hear Feel Everything
- Focus on Feel
- Focus In
- Nurture Positive Emotion in Talk/Feel Space
- Do Nothing

Examples of the second possibility are:

Do a Modality Blast:

- Focus on Everything

- Focus on See
- Focus on Hear
- Focus on Feel
- Focus on Everything

#### Do a Theme Blast

- Focus on Everything
- Focus In
- Focus Out
- Focus on Rest
- Focus on Everything

#### Do a Visual Blast

- Focus on See
- See In
- See Out
- See Rest
- Focus on See

#### Do a Focus In Blast

- Focus In
- See In
- Hear In
- Feel In
- Focus In

An example of the third possibility might go something like this.

- You start with Focus on Everything.
- After ten minutes or so, you notice that there's not much activation, so you go to Focus on Rest.
- That goes well for a while but then the guy in the apartment next to you starts to blast his stereo, causing a Vesuvius of rage, so you shift to a customized version of Focus In. You use strongly spoken labels with inclusive emphasis, zoom out, and explicitly noting Gone.
- After about a half hour, your reaction becomes quite flowing and your equanimity deepens. You decide to try Nurture Positive in Feel Space using the flow to radiate lovingkindness to your neighbor, yourself, and all of creation.
- It's time to wind up.

Regarding decisions about what techniques and options to use, it will be helpful to remember the following Seven Basic Principles for choosing focus methods:

Choices can be motivated by...

1. Interest
2. Opportunity
3. Necessity

Choices should not be driven by...

4. Craving
5. Aversion
6. Unconsciousness

And most important of all...

7. You need not make a big deal about choices. Every option develops the same core skills—concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity.

## Quiz

1. What are some of the elements usually required for success in mindfulness practice (i.e., the “ducks” you have to line up)?
2. Details regarding such matters can be found in what article?
3. What are the Seven Basic Principles for choosing focus methods?



## Answers to Quiz

1. The ducks are:

- Maintain a day-to-day rhythm of formal practice in motion and stillness, and life practice (micro-hits and background practice).
- Strive for a season-to-season rhythm of periodic retreats and checking in with a competent coach.
- Utilize accelerators, such as: duration training, trigger practice, and motion challenge sequences.

2. *An Outline of Practice.*

3.

Choices can be motivated by...

1. Interest
2. Opportunity
3. Necessity

Choices should not be driven by...

4. Craving
5. Aversion
6. Unconsciousness

And most important of all...

7. You need not make a big deal about choices. Every option develops the same core skills—concentration, sensory clarity, and equanimity.

## Appendix: Our Options Have Changed (But Not Really)

In the pre-2015 form of Basic Mindfulness, noting practice was organized into a complex grid of techniques. The new system is essentially similar but the bulk of the noting techniques are now integrated into a single, simpler approach called See Hear Feel. The Grid is still there (indeed, it has been somewhat extended). But it's hidden within a simplifying paradigm.

The breakthrough innovation that makes this possible is flexible labeling, one of the main subjects of this article. The discovery of flexible labeling is an example of simultaneous expansion and contraction. Relative to the previous system, the flexible approach covers more territory. On the other hand, it requires far fewer words. Of course, as with any change, there's a price to pay. It may take some practice before you get used to the new system (essentially you just have to learn how to drop the specifiers "In," "Out," "Rest," etc.). On the other hand, if you strongly prefer the old bi-syllabic system, you should feel free to use it or teach it. You know my philosophy regarding such things: the "right" way to practice is whatever works.

In addition to flexible labeling, the current formulation offers several new features:

- A standardized starting point.
- A new theme called Spaciousness.
- Simplification of the Nurture Positive technique.
- Explicitly noting Gone is now an option (whereas before it was a standard feature of the noting process).

Also:

- The old bi-syllabic terminology (See In, Feel Out, etc.) still has a place.
- Do Nothing is still part of the system.

Here are the specifics:

### A New Theme: Spaciousness.

This involves one or both of the following:

- Contacting the space around each of the three modalities – a form of expansion.
- Contacting the thinness within each of the modalities – a form of contraction.

### Simplification of the Nurture Positive Technique.

The previous six themes have been reduced to four – the four that I've found to be most useful:

Old Nurture Positive	New Nurture Positive
Affect	Affect
Behavior	Behavior
Cognition	Cognition
Ideal	Ideal
Situation	
Other	

An acronym for the new themes might be ABCD. D for ideal (or, à la Vajrayana: deity yoga).

**Old Terminology Still Has a Place.**

Terms like See In, Hear Out, Feel Rest, and such still have a place in the new system – not so much as labels, but more as convenient shorthand for the longer explicit phrases. Once you get used to it, “See In” is easier to say than “mental image” and sounds cooler ☺. But what about using such terms for labeling, like in the old system? Well, as mentioned above, it’s no longer “standard,” but it’s still perfectly okay. The old system is upwardly compatible with the new one.

**Explicitly Noting “Gone” is No Longer an Automatic Feature.**

In the old system you were encouraged to note gone whenever you noticed anything vanish. In the new system, noting gone is treated as an option like re-noting, zooming, or restricting the focus range. So, if Gone is readily available and you so desire, you can explicitly note it. The label, of course, is “Gone.”

**Do Nothing is Still Part of the System.** Its instructions remain unchanged.