

How to Echo Talk

Without a doubt the biggest challenge facing most people in the early years of their practice is dealing with obsessive internal chatter, also known as monkey mind.

Attempting to sooth the chatter through a mantra (as in T.M.) or carefully observing it (as in standard Vipassana) are among the coping strategies commonly adopted. The echoing process combines the strengths of both these methods in a clever way. (My motto is, “If you can't be disciplined, be clever!”)

The process consists of two steps:

Step 1

Clearly place your attention within your ear canals as if you were going to intently listen to external sounds, but instead listen inward, into your head, to the *sounds* of your internal talk. If at any time during the exercise you realize that your attention has been drawn away from this “talk home base,” gently reestablish it there. (You cannot hope to see the mouse unless you keep your attention right at the mouse hole!)

Step 2

Each time you become aware that you have just had a thought in words, mentally repeat the sentence or phrase. You may repeat it just once or several times as you wish. Thus you will be intentionally “echoing” the conscious part of your spontaneous verbal thinking process. You can echo the words in the same intonation you heard them or in an intentionally matter-of-fact, impersonal voice.

The echoing should have the following characteristics:

- *Pauses*
Pause after each syllable. During such pauses, focus on any subtle activity or silence that may be present. If there is competing clear talk in the pauses, ignore it if you can.
- *“Soundness”*
The first time you heard the thought you listened to its meaning. This time listen to its sound. Try to hear the sounds that make up each syllable (in other words, shift from “sentence content” to “sonic contour”).
- *“Mantric impact”*
When one does standard internal mantra practice, one usually notices a soothing, massaging effect from the mantra syllables. The idea here is to listen to the echoing of your self-talk as though it were a “mantra massage.” With practice this can become quite pleasant, *even* when the content of the thought itself is negative.

- *Slowness and gentleness*
It may be useful to slow down each syllable and to echo in an intentionally gentle internal voice.

What to do if...

...during echoing there is a lot of competing talk, comments *about* the process of echoing, mental games, etc.

All that's okay. Let it “do its thing” but focus on the echoing. The idea is “coexistence” — the random talk need not interfere with the echoed talk, and the echoed talk need not interfere with the random stuff. Also you don't need to intentionally remember thoughts that came up while you were echoing in order to echo them later. The next thing you echo is whatever comes up *after* the present sentence or phrase has been echoed.

...you forget what you just heard or miss stuff.

That's fine. Just echo whatever comes next.

...you get emotional feelings as a reaction to the process.

That is to be expected. Let it be in the background with equanimity.

...clear talk ceases.

Monitor the level of any subtle activity or listen to and enjoy the internal silence.

...you find it difficult to listen to talk as sound.

Try some standard mantra practice like mentally listening to “om, om,” “peace, peace” and so forth. This will sensitize you to what it is like to listen to internal sound. Then go back to the echo and try to listen to it like a mantra.

... you find it utterly impossible to do the exercise.

Usually this is because you are having a lot of feelings associated with the thinking. If you wish you can work with those feelings then return to the echoing.

Effects

You can practice internal echoing for any duration from a few minutes to hours on end. When you are done, drop the echoing for a while and monitor the general activation level of talk while continuing to rest your attention in the ear canals. You may notice the following effects:

- There is more silence.
- Clear talk seems to be slower, easier to observe.
- There is some “distance” between you and the talk. You are less involved in its content.
- You can hear spontaneous verbal thinking more in terms of its sound qualities.
- You become more aware of the subtle levels of activity that underlie conscious thought.