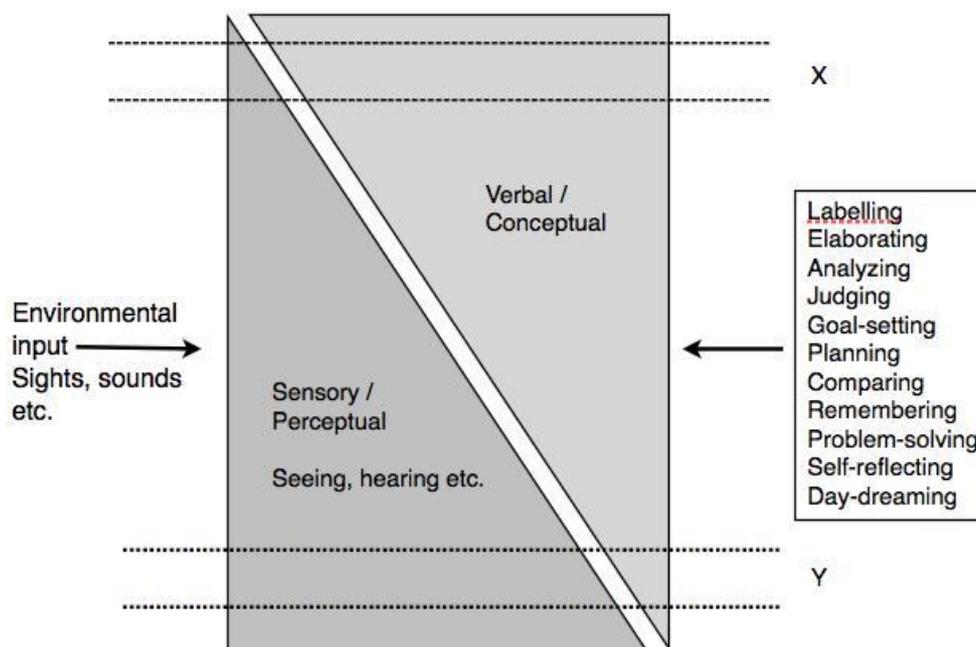


Sensing More, Thinking Less

One of the things you may have noticed on this course is that meditation consists largely in being aware of – *experiencing* – the body. This is because we're trying to have a direct experience of life, rather than one mediated by thoughts and ideas. In the diagram below* the left hand triangle represents our direct experience of the world - the world we see, hear, touch etc. The right hand (upside down) triangle represents our conceptualization of that world - the way we label every experience, and then think about, analyze, compare, judge it etc.



Most of us tend to spend quite a lot of time in the upper half of the diagram - in the band marked X - with some awareness of our direct experience, but quite a lot of thinking *about* it. This results in our being one step removed, as it were, from experience.

In meditation though, we try to move towards the lower end of the diagram, with a more direct experience of the world, and less (fruitless) thinking. The band marked Y at the lower end of the diagram represents a high degree of sensory experience with very little thought. This is where we become absorbed in meditation, absorbed in the sensory experience of the breath.

To have this experience we don't have to make an effort to think less; if we pay attention to our direct sensory experience there will simply be no room left in our mind for thinking *about* it.

The value of directed thinking

It's not that we're aiming to live all the time in band Y - sometimes it's appropriate to think after all - we're just trying to live from a more direct, immediate experience of the world.

In fact thinking can be immensely valuable if it is fully conscious and directed. What we're trying to do in meditation practice is to avoid getting caught up in those stray, random, distracted and semi--- conscious thoughts that just arise unbidden in our mind most of the time. When we get carried away by such thoughts we could say that we are not thinking so much as being thought – the tail is wagging the dog!

Sometimes it can be valuable to think something through, to come to a conclusion if possible, or at least to realise that a conclusion is not yet possible. For instance we may have a decision to make that requires us to think about the possible consequences in following through a certain course of action. In trying to think this through we will probably become aware of stray, random thoughts that distract us from our task. In that case our object of mindfulness would be the thoughts connected with our chosen topic, and the other thoughts that 'intrude' upon this topic we simply notice them and let them go. The Mindfulness of Breathing therefore helps us to think in a more directed, conscious way.

Insight Meditation

Everything written above refers to the first great stage of Buddhist meditation – *samatha* or calm. Once we have some experience of meditative absorption we can then move on to the second stage – *vipassana* or insight. Here we introduce a subject that we can contemplate in a concentrated, undistracted way. This entails some thinking, but it's informed by the deeper, sensory absorption of *samatha*. In other words, we're thinking with the whole of our being, not just with our head. So in *samatha* meditation we move down the two triangles to a more direct, sensory experience of ourselves, and in *vipassana* meditation we move back up a little to reflect on our experience.

* Taken from Professor Mark Williams' paper *Mindfulness and Psychological Process*.