

## Stop Thinking and Pay Attention

### *No-Mind*

Everyone thinks. It's part of being human. Reflection, in fact, may be our distinguishing human characteristic. Other animals have no such sophisticated mechanism. While it's true that other animals have memory, none but the human being can attend to so many, seemingly contradictory mental associations at one time. No animal, save the human being, has the ability to 'remember' things in so many ways, often missing the most important details of an event in a forest of thoughts *about* the event. No other animal can reflect to such an extent that it can miss the most obvious practicalities while speculating on meaning itself.

As the saying goes, the hungry mule, positioned exactly halfway between two haystacks will only stay hungry if he thinks like a man. The hungry mule, thinking like a mule, will simply eat some hay.

Buddhist *no-mind* is the way that we, as humans, can simply eat some hay. No-mind does not imply that we discard or disparage our human capacity for reflection and self-reflection, but that we put it in its proper place. In short, I take this Zen maxim as my starting point for this training: *If you want to truly understand, you have to stop thinking.*

It may seem that we're getting a bit deep for a course in the GRE. But we are, in fact, just deep enough if you, the test-taker, would like to challenge the permanence of your GRE scores. In general, thoughts tend to muddy the waters of our attention, particularly on tests like the GRE. In fact, this tendency of humans to be distracted, to follow the arcs of associations in their minds, is the hole from which The College Board mines a significant amount of material to generate a bell-curve on the GRE. Thinking in habitual ways will only get you on familiar paths that lead you to the same, historical results.

Allowing no-mind, the student is not so easily led. Allowing no-mind, the student will find that the GRE is a test of paying attention to detail, to noticing the whole and particulars of what is being asked. The GRE is not a test of how advanced you are in mathematics or reading, or of how clever or brilliant you are. It is, quite simply, a test of using what you know. Of just eating the hay.

But 'simple' tends to go against what we think, when we think of the GRE. After all, the GRE is an infamously tricky test. It is intensively and cleverly researched to get at – and exploit – the sticky wicket of how a student thinks about certain types of problems. In fact, its value as a multiple-choice test rests on its effectiveness in narrowing the universe of possibilities that can come into anyone's mind in response to any question – to a mere four or five options. We might say that it is *designed* to trap the test-taker into a familiar way of thinking – and so the familiar way of thinking for each test-taker often offers the most intimate betrayals.

On the easier questions, this isn't so much of a problem – even the least confident test-takers among us can tackle them with surety. The incorrect answer choices do not demand one's attention so much as offer weak, alternative suggestions to questions that seem altogether straightforward. But the staple that makes a difficult question difficult is its ability to lead us into thinking along the wrong lines – to follow the *arc of an association*, or a speculation and method, that will only lead us to an incorrect answer choice.

Fundamentally, the great trick in paying the most and deepest attention is to stop thinking, and the only way to change your GRE scores is to stop thinking in your familiar ways.

***No-Thought: The Roots of Understanding***

This idea that the end of thought is the beginning of understanding might seem counter-intuitive, especially for a population of students raised on an idea of education as *filling*. In school, we are filled with information before others recognize that we can have something important to say, about anything. Of course, this is just a reflection of our greater society, which thrives on credentials, diplomas – in which the number of letters after one's name confirms expertise, intelligence and social status.

But education – from the root *educ-*, which means to *draw out* – is about *drawing out* our natural intelligence. In a number of eastern traditions of spirituality and mind-training, the point of discipline is to clear the mind before any real work can begin. What those who practice such disciplines know is that our natural intelligence shines through in indirect proportion to the amount of information we have running around in our heads. With the mind clear, the attention is free to focus clearly. It is this clear, unencumbered focus that is the heart of natural intelligence – and everybody, by virtue of being a human being on the planet, has it.

I'll keep coming back to this idea, throughout this book: in every section, you'll notice how important it is to get what you know down on paper in front of you in order to clear the mind to focus clearly. In essence, your #2 pencil is a tool to direct and focus attention, to help reduce the chatter of what the Buddhists call your monkey-mind. Putting your pencil to paper ensures that your attention is focused, that you don't keep anything in the head – instead your mind concentrates on what is presently in front of you. As a general rule:

Answers always make themselves apparent when we pay most careful attention to the present situation.

We just have to get out of our own way in order to fully take advantage of this fact, to work in a way more in line with our natural abilities. Have you ever tried to design a house in your head? Have you ever tried to do a crossword puzzle by keeping all your squares blank, until the whole thing was done? Of course not. While not impossible, such feats require a spectacularly rare ability. But the ability to *understand* is universally human, and the real key to doing well on the GRE.

After all, the point of a test like the GRE is not to see how much you can hold in your memory at once. The point of the GRE is for you to use your mathematical, reading and writing skills to solve problems – not to remember anything in particular. This most often requires that you *free up*, so to speak, the mental faculty – understanding – through which problems are solved.

Not coincidentally, clearing the mind of all ‘notions’ as the Buddhists might say, is the simplest path to realizing what the Buddha described as Great Bliss, Joy, and Nirvana. Obviously, the full implications of this are beyond the level of this course in taking the GRE. But rather than philosophical and metaphysical, I mean (and the Buddhists mean) to be eminently practical. There is a very important fact in that the Buddha didn’t consider Nirvana someplace to get to, or destination to be reached. Nor did he ever describe something as elusive and often as crazy-making as *potential*. Rather, he taught that such Bliss is our nature the whole time, but not yet *realized* – our *Buddha-nature*.

It’s not that I’m trying to slip in full Enlightenment when you thought you were learning how to improve your GRE scores. But I want to make clear that learning to stop thinking about our interpretations, and learning to pay attention to the concrete facts are powerfully interrelated and exceedingly versatile skills. What makes it possible to free up this most important, human faculty is getting everything on the table in front of you – where you can see it and consider it. Our pencil represents, perhaps, the only real, positive contribution our species has made to this planet: the ability to articulate our conscious understandings through the material, phenomenal world, to display our knowing in order to reflect upon our selves and our creative process. In essence, our pencil helps us produce a mirror for the workings of our minds.

It’s not that *anything* written down in front of you, in any manner, will help you garner a perfect score, or even help you improve at all. Rather, what and *how* you write will be reflective of how you consider the problem: it can make apparent things and connections that are only vague in the space of the mind; it pulls into play a whole host of cognitive and psychological powers only hinted at in imagination. How you put something down in writing is at least as important as the fact that you wrote anything at all.

And although I expect that most readers of this book will have a basic command of the fundamentals of reading, writing and ‘rithmetic, I also expect that through the practice of clearly and effectively writing down what you know, of learning to not-think, of learning to watch the way that you pay attention and get distracted, you will significantly refine your basic skills in each of these areas while you’re improving your GRE scores.

Enjoy – and succeed. Remember, no old habit was ever broken, no new habit ever made, no skill ever built, without consistent practice and clear intention.