

FOCUSING AND MEDITATING (*Tricycle magazine, 2011*)

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I had been a Buddhist meditator for 26 years when I happened upon a slight-looking mass-market paperback in an out-of-the-way used bookstore in Vermont. Filling the book's whole cover was a semi-abstract photograph of stones of different colors, shapes and sizes seen through the surface of a rippling stream. The book's title was a single word: *Focusing*.

I paid three dollars for the little book, and over the next several years it became the source of something that had been lacking in my life as a practitioner: a radically simple yet endlessly subtle contemplative practice that helped me to build a reliable and resilient bridge from the cushion of sitting meditation to the nitty-gritty of everyday life.

When I was learning Buddhist meditation in the 1970s, the standard response of meditation instructors when a student sought advice about any of the big three—work, sex, and money—was “Just sit!” It was good advice, too: not to fuel discursive complications but to give them a big space to settle out on their own. It would have been the perfect advice for a full-time monastic; but the emerging Buddhism of the West was not monastic. It was “householder” dharma, intended to be integrated with complex lives devoted to earning a livelihood, being in relationship, raising a family, and so forth.

Of course, the cultivation of mindfulness, awareness, and acceptance in meditation was already a great support in dealing with life's vicissitudes. What was lacking, though, was a method—a contemplative method—for constructively engaging and solving problems in the world. Focusing filled a gap between my practice and the rest of my life that I had been only dimly aware of but that became very clear in retrospect. Like the clear water rippling over the stones on the book's cover, it was a deeply refreshing resource.

The essence of focusing involves bringing gentle, mindful awareness to a subtle level of bodily experiencing known as the “felt sense.” Felt senses, which lie somewhere between physical sensations and emotional feelings, are a distinct kind of experience. In a certain way they are happening all the time, but for most people in our culture most of the

time they go unnoticed. Felt senses are initially unclear, somatic sensations. Typically they are found by bringing awareness to the central part of the body, the torso area between neck and bottom, and orienting our attention to what is going on inside that space.

When attended to with friendly but dispassionate attention, felt senses that start out seeming vague and unnameable can show up with greater clarity and precision—hence the name “focusing.” A felt sense can come alive and open what it already knows about life situations that you—the conscious, conceptualizing you—don’t yet know or have any way of putting into words. By entering into a process of inquiry with the felt sense, spontaneous flashes of insight and intuition can occur that generate novel perceptions and fresh understanding, often leading to fresh solutions to life’s challenges.

The technique of focusing begins with a step called Clearing a Space, one that is quite similar to mindfulness practice but features a more deliberate and sustained focus on the body. You settle and bring attention especially to the torso area. This process is described as “coming inside” or “dropping down” (that is, shifting awareness from the head-centered discursive mind down into the torso-centered domain of feelings and impulses). The practitioner, or focuser, brings a quality of attention known as the focusing attitude, a friendly and inquisitive but at the same time dispassionate and nonreactive way of sensing what the body is holding in the present moment. It has been evocatively described as “caring, feeling presence.”

Felt senses show up as bodily-felt places, textures, shapes or inner movements, with distinct physical qualities that may be described with words like hard, soft, jittery, sinking, thick, tight, warm, or cold. It is at this point that focusing really departs from traditional mindfulness practice. Instead of noting these internal sensations and returning to the breath, the focuser chooses to “be with” a felt sense or an issue, gently keeping it company—as one might do with a child or a friend in a state of distress or excitement. Eugene Gendlin, the father of focusing, outlines six steps in the basic process under the names: Clearing a Space, Felt Sense, Handle, Resonating, Asking, and Receiving. These steps are briefly described at the end of the article.

Let me give an example. If I pause in writing just now to bring my attention inside in a focusing way, what do I find? A vague squeezing . . . like a small sphere of

pressure in the center of my chest . . . and under that, a sensation like a warm rising wave. I'm giving all of this my receptive, interested attention . . . the pressure feels like something trying to constrain me, holding me back. There is some sense of danger. Now the image comes of riding a horse: the horse might go too fast and buck me off. I am squeezing the reins. . . Ah, now an insight comes: there is a fear of falling on my face that writing for publication brings . . . Is it OK to be with that? . . . Yes, now that I sense it more clearly, I can be welcoming there.

As I sit with this for a few more moments, a fresh insight comes: there is also something positive about this quality of constraint, it holds critical intelligence and a self-protective energy that I need. This brings a shift in the felt sense, a slight release in the squeezing sensation. . . . Now the part of the felt sense that is like a rising wave feels clearer. It is the creative excitement I experience in writing, and it is stronger now, because the reins have been loosened and there is reassurance in knowing I have an inner guardian who will keep the creative forces from racing off in wild directions. Now I can resume my writing with greater ease and confidence.

In this example, I started my focusing process with the felt sense itself. It is also common to start with a specific concern: a problem, a decision, relationship issues, anything that is presently occurring in our life, or about which present thoughts and feelings are occurring. In these cases focusing can generate not only new insights and energy but very specific action steps that we couldn't discover through our habitual thought processes.

Finding the felt sense is also a great support for analytical meditation or any form of contemplative inquiry that explicitly includes conceptual thought. The great problem with thoughts, as any meditator finds out the first time he or she tries to sit, is that one thought leads to another to another to another. This is what we call "discursive" mind, and nothing truly fresh can come of it. But thought itself is not the problem. Being able to drop awareness down into the body and check in with the felt sense keeps thoughts from gathering discursive momentum and invites intuitive knowing, or insight, as it is commonly referred to in Buddhism.

Contemplative inquiry is in effect a dialogue between the "I" of the mind and the "me" of the body that attunes us to the body's deeper knowing, its genuine experiential

wisdom. Unlike discursive mind, the body has no way of being anything other than genuine. In this process of dialogue, the I-mind can ask questions of the me-body and, if it is patient and lucky, can get answers. But this only works under two conditions: that a felt sense is actually present at the moment of asking, and that the I-mind refrains from answering its own question. The active “I” has no control over the felt sense, which (like a young child) may simply ignore the question. This is why focusing, like meditation, involves repeated practice. As we train the I-mind to be present in this special way, trust and sensitivity grow, and the felt senses come more readily and are more willing to open up and share their hidden wisdom. (Note that “hidden” here is just a metaphor; it would be more accurate to use Gendlin’s philosophical term “implicit,” meaning present but not yet given form.)

Focusing is a great way to begin or end a session of sitting meditation, especially in one’s daily practice. At the beginning it helps in clearing space and at the end it provides a bridge from the open receptivity of mindful awareness to the daily exigencies we face. Spacious clarity, spontaneous insight, and skillful action can arise together as we go about the business of our lives. Or we can mentally tag a problem or a felt reaction that comes up in the moment and return to it later when we can pause to give it some quality time. But as our felt-sensing is strengthened through repeated practice, it functions more and more spontaneously even in the heat of action.

Being able to access the felt sense is especially helpful in relationships. Lovingkindness and compassion meditations exercise the heart muscle but don’t always tell us what exactly to do when we are at odds with specific people in specific circumstances. The calm clarity of mindfulness and the caring warmth of compassion are great assets, but something more is called for: mindful and heartfelt *engagement*. This is the ability to consciously, skillfully respond rather than reflexively react and to allow ourselves to change and be changed in the process of relating. Letting go of the small self opens the way to moving forward from a deep, organismic sense of rightness. It is not just about having more space, but how to dance in the space!

And speaking of dancing, focusing is in fact also a powerful support for the creative process. Recently as I was walking my dog, feeling rather discouraged about

how persistently winter was holding on this year, I was struck by the dense green clusters of marsh marigold leaves pushing up through the crust of last fall's withered ones. This sparked the following haiku:

Late March, a cool breeze:
urgent green leaves surge up through
last year's withered brown.

Today, during my weekly hour on the telephone with my focusing partner of more than 10 years--focusing is commonly practiced in dyads in which the partners take turns focusing and listening--I was touching in on feelings of discouragement about my slow recovery from a recent episode of neuropathy and also sensing some fresh creative juices starting to flow. All at once my little haiku came to mind, and I understood that what I had responded to in nature reflected what I was going through in my life.

Later that day I returned to the haiku, and now my felt sense told me that the word *surge* wasn't quite right. I had liked its echo of the sound of *urgent*, but the feel of it didn't really fit my experience. I tried substituting *emerge*—“urgent green leaves emerge through / last year's withered brown.” While this had the virtue of preserving the internal rhyme, it still wasn't true to either my experience during the walk or what I had uncovered in focusing. After some more tapping and resonating with my felt sense, the words “casting aside” broke through, and right away there was a sense of relief. My felt sense was happy. I gave up my attachment to the rhyme (and serendipitously got back a new and subtler one, “cast / last”), and now my little haiku gave expression to something that felt true to my direct experience:

Late March: a cold breeze.
Urgent green leaves cast aside
last year's withered brown.

Not Basho, perhaps, but something in me had moved a little and my life was better for it.

An Introduction to Focusing: Six Steps

Most people find it easier to learn focusing through individual instruction than through simply reading about it. The actual process of focusing, experienced from the inside, is fluid and open, allowing great room for individual differences and ways of working. Yet to introduce the concepts and flavor of the technique, some structure can be useful for those who have not found a certified trainer. Although these steps may provide a window into focusing, it is important to remember that they are not *the* six steps. Focusing has no rigid, fixed agenda for the inner world; many focusing sessions bear little resemblance to the mechanical process that we define here. Still, every focusing trainer is deeply familiar with the six steps listed below, and uses them as needed throughout a focusing session. And many people have had success getting in touch with the heart of the process just by following these simple instructions.

Think of this as only the basics. As you progress and learn more about focusing you will add to these basic instructions, clarify them, approach them from other angles. Eventually—perhaps not the first time you go through it—you will have the experience of something shifting inside. If you want to try them out, do so easily, gently. If you find difficulty in one step or another, don't push too hard, just move on to the next one. You can always come back.

Clearing a Space

Be silent, just to yourself. Take a moment just to relax. Now, pay attention inwardly, in your body, perhaps in your stomach or chest. See what comes *there* when you ask, "How is my life going? What is the main thing for me right now?" Sense within your body, and let the answers come slowly from this sensing. When some concern comes, do not go inside it. Stand back, say "Yes, that's there. I can feel that, there." Let there be a little space between you and that. Then ask what else you feel. Wait again, and sense. Usually there are several things to note even at this early point.

Felt Sense

Select one personal problem to focus on from the things that come up. Do not go inside it. Stand back from it. Of course, there are many parts to that one thing you are

thinking about—too many to think of each one alone. But you can *feel* all of these things together. Pay attention there, where you usually feel things, and in there you can get a sense of what *all of the problem* feels like. Let yourself feel *all of that*, even though it will be an unclear sense.

Handle

What is the quality of this unclear felt sense? Let a word, a phrase, or an image come up from the felt sense itself. It might be a quality word like *tight, sticky, scary, stuck, heavy, jumpy*; or a phrase, or an image. Stay with the quality of the felt sense until something fits it just right.

Resonating

Go back and forth between the felt sense and the word (or phrase, or image). Check how they resonate with each other. See if there is a little bodily signal that lets you know there is a fit. To do it, you have to bring your attention back to the felt sense there as well as the word that arose. Allow the felt sense to change, if it does, along with the word or picture, until they feel just right in capturing the quality of the felt sense.

Asking

Ask yourself: what is it about this whole problem that makes this quality (which you have just named or pictured)? Make sure the quality is sensed again, freshly, vividly (not just remembered from before). When it is there again, tap it, touch it, be with it, asking, “What makes the whole problem so _____?” Or ask, “What is in *this* sense?”

If you get a quick answer without a shift in the felt sense, just let that kind of answer go by. Return your attention to your body and find the felt sense again, freshly. Then ask it again.

Stay with the felt sense until something comes together with a shift, a slight “give” or release.

Receiving

Receive in a friendly way whatever comes with the sense of a shift. Stay with it a while, even if it is only a slight release. Whatever comes, this is only one shift; there will

be others. You will probably continue on after a little while, but stay here for a few moments.

If during the course of following these instructions you have spent a little time sensing and touching an unclear holistic body sense of this problem, then you have focused. It doesn't matter whether the body-shift came or not. It comes on its own. We don't control that.

Adapted from "The Focusing Manual," chapter 4 of *Focusing* by Eugene T. Gendlin, © 1982. Published by Bantam Books. For more information go to www.focusing.org/