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FOCUSING

A PRACTICE TO COMPLEMENT MEDITATION

BY DAVID ROME

Focusing, sometimes referred to as "felt-sensing," is a way of allowing our bodies to guide us to deeper self-knowledge, to psychological healing, and to working more skillfully with the difficulties with which life presents us. Many meditators, after learning the practice of Focusing, remark that it feels like a "missing link" in their contemplative practice. That was certainly my own feeling when I discovered Focusing after 25 years of Buddhist study and practice. But what kind of link is it?

Focusing practice helps one to recognize and engage buried feelings and unconscious misapprehensions that may not show themselves in the course of meditation practice. It allows us to uncover and work through hidden wounds and deeply embedded fears lodged in our bodies. This in turn provides vital help in loosening recalcitrant habitual patterns, blocks to action, and other sources of personal suffering.

A risk for meditators is what has come to be known as "spiritual bypassing." Spiritual bypassing means using meditation practice—and specifically the skill it cultivates in noticing thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them—to avoid and repress painful and uncomfortable aspects of ourselves that keep us stuck. Meditative letting go may provide some short-term relief from deep-seated psychological and emotional pain, but in doing so it can block healthy development and realization of our full potential.

Focusing was developed by American philosopher and psychologist Eugene Gendlin, who died in May 2017 at the age of 90. Gendlin's term for spiritual bypassing was "process-skipping." His method for overcoming process-skipping provides a powerful contemplative technique for recognizing and working with the inevitable internal and external problems that face each of us. While meditation gives us a way of detaching from emotional turmoil in the present moment, Focusing works to change specific and persistent elements of our thinking, feeling, and behavior that inhibit spontaneity and a fuller experience of life.

Buddhist meditation developed to dispel ignorance, overcome the clinging and grasping tendencies of ego, and realize full spiritual awakening. Meditation aims not so much to solve a person's particular *problems* as to solve the *person* altogether. Focusing, on the other hand, provides a pragmatic tool for surfacing and unraveling personal sources of our individual suffering, which tend to be based in our specific life histories.

The practice 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. Typically, they are found by bringing awareness to the central part of the body, inside the torso area, and orienting our attention to what is going on inside that space.

Most felt senses show up as unclear, subtle or transient 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, cold*, and so forth. Rather than merely noting these internal sensations and returning to the breath, as in mindfulness practice, the Focuser chooses to "be with" a felt sense of an issue, gently keeping it company as one might stay with a child or a friend in a state of distress or agitation.

In traditional mindfulness practice, one learns to let go, over and over, the thoughts and feelings that arise, no matter what they are. That itself is the practice. By contrast, in Focusing we consciously *choose* to stay with a felt sense. Staying with it, "sitting beside it" with a friendly, gentle and patient attitude, we help the felt sense—which starts out as murky or subtle or evanescent—to emerge with greater clarity and stability. As if adjusting a pair of binoculars, we help it to come into better focus. Something that was vague, barely on our radar at all, becomes more present and distinct. At this point we can be in relationship to that something, that part of us, and begin a process of inquiry that allows the felt sense itself to open and give us fresh insights and energy with which to release places that are stuck.

Focusing is notoriously hard to describe in words, so let me give a personal

example. In addition to providing the missing link for me to become more in touch with my feelings generally, Focusing gave me a contemplative way of working with certain habitual patterns and aspects of my personality that were detrimental. One of the issues that I worked on, and continue to work on, is a particular pattern of avoidance.

When I'm doing something, or about to do something, and I get interrupted, I naturally try to resume work. Often, though, I feel like I've lost the thread and can't get it back, and I begin avoiding the activity. The avoidance shows up as something in me that says, "I'm too tired, I can't do this anymore, I have to take a break, I have to go get a snack." With Focusing, I now know to create a pause in my reaction to these impulses and sense into my body, noticing how it feels "in there." What I usually notice is a squeezing or shivering sensation in the middle of my chest, an anxious feeling that I hadn't really been aware of.

Of course, anxiety is not what I am wanting, but being able to recognize and feel it in a bodily way gives me a stepping-stone. As I stay with it, allowing the squeezing feeling in my chest to actually become *more* present, after a while it starts to change. It gets looser, freer, less potent. Soon I find I can come back to my work and engage it with full attention and energy.

That is an example of "Focusing in action," applying it in real time to overcome an immediate block to one's activity. To find the deeper sources of such persistent issues, we need to dedicate time to more formal practice, which is often done with a partner. Understanding that every felt sense is a portal to the body's holistic way of knowing, we choose to stay with, in this example, the anxious feeling. We take the time to make a relationship with it, as we might do with an interesting person we have just met. Once that inner relationship is stable, we can ask the felt sense directly about hidden layers or aspects of the anxiety.

When I do this with my own felt anxiety, it takes me to deeper insights, such as fear of failure or of not meeting other people's expectations. These insights over time have rendered the anxiety more transparent and brought about more fundamental change. I find now that anxiety can be transmuted into confidence. I have also learned to differentiate psychological resistance from simple fatigue. In the latter case I now know to take a 10- or 15-minute chair doze. This is usually enough to regain energy and mental clarity for the task at hand.

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Meditation is, of course, a powerful and invaluable resource. Learning to really notice what goes on in us and sensing who we are at a deeper level brings more space and possibility into our lives. It can be emotionally challenging at times, but if we keep to the practice, gradually things become less threatening and more workable.

Focusing can complement meditation practice. Through Focusing we invite and welcome what has been hidden from view—especially the sources of our personal discontent and confusion—to show itself, like a shy fawn stepping out of the forest. What emerges into this welcoming space can be very uncomfortable, but we don't have to react against it or shut down. We can just be with it, as if we are sitting with a friend who is suffering. It can be hard to sit with another person who is going through a difficult time, but we can do it by being gently present and not afraid

Dropping the Story Line

A key step in Focusing is letting go of the mental version of a problem and finding a bodily felt experience of it.

Sitting in a comfortable position, bring attention to your body. Take a minute or two to do a body scan, noting any places that feel tight or painful, or any unusual sensations. Whatever you find, just notice and move on.

Now have a sense of your body as a whole. What does it feel like to be in a body, to be an embodied being? Become aware of the weight of your body as it rests on your seat. Feeling the trustworthy support of whatever you are sitting on, let go of any tenseness in your body. Settle and sink more into that support. Have a feeling of being really grounded on the earth, relaxed, trusting its solidity to hold you.

Next, bring awareness to your body from the neck down through the upper and lower torso. Try to feel this whole area from the inside. Try to soften your chest, heart and abdomen (but don't slouch).

Think of a situation in your life that is a problem or challenge or is just making you feel uncomfortable in some way. Recollect and think about this situation for two minutes, three at the most. You don't have to go through it all in detail, just enough to bring the overall feel of it into your awareness.

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to bear witness to their pain.

In Focusing we develop the ability to find the right "distance" between ourselves—our aware presence here and now—and an uncomfortable feeling. We disidentify from tangled thoughts and emotions that have us in their grip. If powerful feelings or panic are threatening to overwhelm us, we learn that we can step away from them. We train ourselves to modulate difficult feelings, either bringing them closer to experience more intimately or creating distance when there is more intensity than we can safely hold.

As vague body-feelings come into clearer focus, we can begin to inquire into them with questions like "What brings this kind of felt sense?" or "What is this needing?" We boycott what we already know and wait for an answer from the felt sense itself. Moments of sudden intuitive insight happen—"aha" moments in which we experience a bodily felt release or shift that signals change at an organismic level.

Focusing also cultivates self-compassion. In this respect it is similar to Buddhist compassion practices like *metta* (loving-kindness) and *tonglen* (sending out positivity and taking in negativity). In Buddhist practice, compassion is aroused in a general way for all sentient beings, oneself included, whereas in Focusing self-compassion is applied "as needed" when particularly painful or difficult feelings arise. It is compassion for oneself as the person bearing this particular suffering at this particular time. As self-compassion grows, compassion for others naturally follows. The Focuser also learns how to recognize and defuse the "inner critic"—the part of ourselves that makes negative self-judgments, causes us to doubt ourselves, and throws up all kinds of obstacles to accomplishment and fulfillment.

Let me give another example here, this one from my friend Rose Sposito, a recently certified Focusing teacher in Boulder, Colorado. She was exploring the question of how to bring Focusing into the world in a way that aligned with her own unique personality and way of expressing things:

> During my Focusing session there arises a deep feeling, mostly in my chest and lower belly, of unease. I see an image of a wall, along with a deep feeling of frustration about my inability to express something creative, something alive. The wall feels solid, thick, dark, and immovable, like a stern and very critical authority figure telling me not to bother with all of this if I'm not perfect. With this, I sense a tightness in my chest and throat. I place my hand on this constricted place, feeling empathy for myself. Tears come.
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> Now I sense another part in my lower belly, a small part that is tentative and scared. It feels constricted, like a small animal hiding in a cave. I invite this small part to let me know what it's so scared of. It tells me that it doesn't want to feel criticized or to have to be perfect. It has hidden itself from fear of being ridiculed. Now I gently invite it to let me know what it is wanting. It lets me know that it is really wanting for me to just be and to play. I acknowledge this. As the words "just be and play" resonate in me, I feel the tightness in my chest and the constriction in my belly resolve into a deep breath and relaxation. Right here is the message, the shift, the treasure: *just be and play*.

As you become more familiar with Focusing practice, you are able to stay present with more intense feelings, like shame and fear. You develop a larger window of tolerance in which traumatic experiences can be experienced and disarmed of their potency. We discover that the places that scare us don't have to be so scary after all. Not only can we tolerate difficult feelings, we have much to learn from them.

If meditation shows us how to move from habitual consciousness, with all of its discursive thinking and emotional ups and downs, into a place of stillness, insight, and timeless wisdom, Focusing brings us more into our own particular time and place, with the skills we need to overcome specific obstacles and to survive and thrive in the "marketplace," the world of everyday activity. Focusing gives us a key for *operationalizing* wisdom and compassion in our own unique, individual lives. ▼

For more on how to practice Focusing, watch our Dharma Talk series with David Rome: https://tricy.cl/2r7vetJ.

David Rome is the author of *Your Body Knows the Answer: Using Your Felt Sense to Solve Problems, Effect Change, and Liberate Creativity*. www.mindfulfocusing.com.

Now drop the story line. Let go of the verbal account and specific details of the situation, shifting all your attention to inside your body. Notice if there is any feeling, such as tightness, jitteriness, hardness, softness, heaviness, or lightness, that might be connected to the issue you were thinking about. You are sensing for the body-feel of the whole thing, without actually thinking about it.

The felt sense may be very subtle or unclear, but if you notice something bodily, welcome it with friendly attention. Be gentle with the feeling, especially if it is uncomfortable or negatively charged in some way. As you sit with it, allow this felt sense to become more present and definite.

Perhaps some fresh insight about the situation arises spontaneously, but in this step of Focusing it is only important that you allow one or more felt senses to be present as you patiently recognize and gently hold them in your awareness. From here you will be able to move on to the further steps of Focusing: bringing the felt sense more "into focus," inviting it to show you new facets of the problem, receiving unforeseen insights that allow you to "have" the problem in a new way. You may also see a way to make changes that carry you beyond the old, stuck pattern.