

Focusing & Insight Meditation: an experiential comparison

by Gordon Adam

In this article, written for the Bristol Insight Meditation newsletter, I will assume that those reading it are familiar with Insight Meditation. I'll start with a brief description of what Focusing is and where it came from.

What is Focusing?

"Focusing is the process of listening to your body in a gentle, accepting way, and hearing the messages that your inner self is sending to you. It's a process of honouring the wisdom that you have inside you by becoming aware of the subtle level of knowing that speaks to you through the body." Ann Weiser Cornell

Focusing was developed by philosopher Eugene Gendlin and it emerged from pioneering psychological research conducted with Carl Rogers in Chicago in the 60's and 70's. The research, which involved analysing thousands of hours of audio recordings of client-therapist interaction, showed that psychotherapy was only truly effective in cases where the client was able to pause and access bodily information. Focusing was initially developed by Gendlin as a process to enable more embodied experiencing resulting in more effective psychotherapy. In Gendlin's philosophy we experience existence with our whole body – thinking & cognition are seen as only a small part of the total information available from the body. Focusing enables access to this much bigger field of information. Gendlin published his landmark book 'Focusing' in 1978.

Here are some of the key characteristics of Focusing – some similarities with meditation practice will be apparent and obvious:

Presence & Awareness

Focusing could be described as '*body mindfulness with a partner*'. In Focusing I sit (or stand or lie) with myself and my Focusing companion with the intention of bringing awareness to what is going on inside of me *right now*. The most fundamental prerequisite for Focusing is *presence* – *the willingness to be present to whatever is arising within me in this moment*. This is different to *being identified* with my experience, where I start to believe that *I am my experience*. Presence, supported by my intention and my companion, is like a large container or bowl in which experience can be held and witnessed.

Inclusivity, Felt Sense, & Radical Acceptance

Focusing is very much an embodied practice, so the emphasis is on becoming aware of *bodily experience*, but not to the exclusion of thoughts or ideas that might arise – in fact a second characteristic of Focusing practice is *inclusivity*, or the willingness to embrace (or at least acknowledge) *everything* that arises within me without judgements such as good, bad, right, wrong. If I do find myself judging what arises, then I can acknowledge this also as part of my experience and *include* the part of me that is judging my experience. The totality of my experience arising in any moment is called '*the felt sense*'¹, and the process of allowing and including all of my experience without reservation has been named *radical acceptance*².

"The point is not to change who we are, but to make friends with who we are already."
Pema Chodron

Putting words to experience

Having become aware of my inner experience, as Focuser I then find the words that most accurately describe the experience – these are then spoken aloud to my companion (who sits facing me). At

appropriate 'pause points' my companion reflects back the essence of what she has heard (& felt) me say, retaining the same descriptive words that I have used to convey my experience to her. This process of finding words, speaking them aloud, and then hearing them reflected back, supports a deepening and unfolding of my experience.

The Companion

The companion's primary role is to *support* the Focuser to be present with his experience. In practice this is achieved in a number of ways:

- Most importantly, by the companion herself being present in an embodied way both for the Focuser and for herself. So the companion also aims to include and hold both the Focuser's and her own experience in her presence or awareness.
- Giving the Focuser a guided verbal lead-in that could include a body-scan, or other verbal suggestion towards establishing embodied presence.
- Attempting to bring the quality of non-judgemental acceptance or '*unconditional positive regard*'³ to what arises for the Focuser (and herself).
- Empathically reflecting back the key descriptive words spoken by the Focuser. This can be described as 'active listening.'
- Holding complete confidentiality around anything that arises for the Focuser in the session – this is necessary to support a sense of trust in the process for the Focuser.

Positive change/Living Forward/Carrying Forward

In Gendlin's philosophy, my body, as well as being a container for experience, is regarded as being innately wise and intelligent, and if listened to and heeded it will lead me 'forward' – i.e. in a positive, creative, life affirming direction. This is an important point, and my relationship with my embodied experience is crucial – do I see what arises within me as some sort of problem, or am I willing to turn towards it and learn what the messages I'm getting from my body are trying to tell me. In other words do I regard my body as friend or foe?

"Realize that this very body, with its aches and its pleasures... is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, fully alive." Pema Chodron

In practice, opening to embodied experience in a Focusing way and allowing experience to deepen and unfold invariably leads to a sense of lightness, release and expansion. So I have learned that listening to my body is good for me and does indeed lead to enlivenment and does carry me forward in life.

Similarities and differences of Insight Meditation & Focusing practice

Common to both practices is the intention and willingness to sit with my experience from a place of presence, acceptance, warmth and curiosity. In Focusing there is more emphasis on going more deeply into my experience and allowing it to unfold or 'tell me a story', whereas in meditation I might be content to just acknowledge or 'label' any experience arising and be happy to then let it go and then let something else arise into my awareness.

In its inclusivity, and the notion of the felt sense, Focusing has more emphasis on the bigger picture of what is happening inside me, rather than discrete parts of my experience. This is not to say that I can't Focus on parts⁴ in Focusing, but I am interested in how the different parts relate to each other within a bigger whole body context where the sum experience of all the parts constitutes the felt sense.

From my own experience, I am more likely to bring a subtle agenda to my meditation practice – i.e. I am doing this in order to... be more relaxed, or to be more mindful, to be more spiritual, or even to reach enlightenment. With Focusing I would say the emphasis is more on *being with* whatever arises as an end in itself, knowing that the being with, in itself leads to a 'living forward'.

The most significant difference between Focusing and meditation is ***the presence of the partner or companion***. The presence of another brings a different, almost palpable, quality or *field of interaction* to the process. I am no longer practicing on my own, but in the presence of, and being heard and witnessed by another person, who is bringing an intention similar to my own, of presence and acceptance of my experience. Put another way, the companion supports me in 'being who I am'.

This empathic presence of another human being is very powerful and enables new possibilities of experience for the Focuser – experience that may not be possible to access in solitary meditation practice.

"It is my strong sense that certain kinds of processes will not happen at all unless there is someone else there. The loving company of another invites things that will not feel safe otherwise."
Manjudeva⁵

The second major difference between Focusing and meditation is ***the use of spoken words*** in Focusing. As I have written above, the use of words to convey my experience to my companion, then hearing the words reflected back, enables more single minded attention to be given to my experience which in turn leads to a deepening and unfolding to happen.

Why Focus? Why meditate?

"Both are practices based on increasing our awareness, or attention, with the result that different parts of ourselves 'wake up' or come alive as we practice."

"This gradually effects everything about us – our thoughts, feelings, behaviours, attitudes, responses, impulses and so on. Then our trust in our practice grows. This trust brings with it a sense of meaning, purpose and direction. It is firm ground to stand on. We know, increasingly and instinctively, where we fit within the universe; we feel our intrinsic belonging in a world that is not really other than us. It's a kind of coming home to ourselves." Locana⁶

My own comparative experience of Insight Meditation and Focusing

I think the first thing to mention is my observation that practicing in some form of partnered practice suits me – *for me, working with a partner has the effect of significantly enhancing my ability to be present and to stay present with my inner experience, which leads to deepening, unfolding and insight*. This runs through my experience of different partnered practices that I've done through my life, including Co-counselling, Interactive Inquiry, and Insight Dialogue, as well as Focusing.

I find that irrespective of whether I am the Focuser or companion, I am more present, more interested, and much less easily distracted than in meditation practice. After a Focusing session I invariably feel more present and enlivened – this does not always happen with meditation in my experience. I find that I get all of the benefits that I got from meditation practice from Focusing, but with some 'extras'.

I fully resonate with what Locana has written above – I would say that my life has changed significantly with both practices, and that my meditation practice has provided a good *foundation* for Focusing. In terms of observable change, I would say that this has occurred more obviously, and more powerfully and deeply with Focusing, particularly in the areas of compassion, and acceptance of myself and 'what is'.

Some experiences of others with both practices

Here are some verbatim quotes of others comparing their experience of both Focusing and Insight Meditation:

"In both practices there is a greater sense of presence to whatever is going on, which, in itself, helps me to be more accepting of what is happening in my life. For me acceptance is such an important process, which can help me gain a deep sense of inner peace, no matter what is going on in my life. And of course in Focusing the loving presence of the Focusing partner really helps that process."

"(compared to meditation)... Focusing helps me feel more connected with others, who have similar experiences, and to the world around me."

"I first started Focusing 'naturally/spontaneously' during a 3 month retreat when difficult experiences arose during meditation. I would turn towards the parts in me that were struggling and offer attention, kindness, acceptance, and a kind of adult holding. What happened was transformation, insight and a deep letting go. This profoundly altered my relationship to myself in a way that I've never really lost but rather developed."

"I feel the practices of 'presence' in Focusing and awareness/'being with' in meditation are two different ways of practicing the same thing. They have given me so much more inner strength/trust/ground and given me faith in my Buddha nature. This is very different from the doubting, fearful and raging inner critic that used to dominate my world."

"Focusing is as beneficial as prayer or meditation to me—spending time with me and another. It's come at a stage of my life that involves an integrating of body, mind and spirit that I haven't explored before in this way. It's a very fundamental tool."

To learn more about Focusing

For further information about Focusing, including articles, teacher & course info, retreats, books, DVD's, etc, see the *British Focusing Association (BFA)* website www.focusing.org.uk

Recommended first reading would be *'Biospirituality – Focusing as a Way to Grow'* by Ed McMahon & Peter Campbell, and *'The Power of Focusing'* by Ann Weiser Cornell.

To experience Focusing, come along to one of the monthly meetings of **Bristol Insight Focusing Group** – see elsewhere in this newsletter for details – no prior experience of Focusing is needed and new people are welcome and often attend meetings.

References

- 1) *'The felt sense'* is a phrase coined by Eugene Gendlin to describe the totality of one's embodied experience of any situation.
- 2) *'Radical Acceptance'* is the title of a book written by dharma teacher Tara Brach. *'The Radical Acceptance of Everything'* is a book on Focusing experience by Focusing teacher and writer Ann Weiser Cornell.
- 3) *'Unconditional positive regard'* is one of Carl Roger's *'Core Conditions'* for therapeutic change. The other two are *'Genuineness'* and *'Empathic understanding'* [see *'Way of Being'* by Carl Rogers]
- 4) A *'part'* in Focusing means an identifiable aspect of myself, a bit like a sub-personality, that has its own perspective and *'agenda'*.
- 5) *Manjudeva (Peter Gill)* is an ordained Buddhist, Focusing teacher and Somatic Experiencing (SE) practitioner. Quote from an article *'Reflections on the differences between Focusing and Meditation.'* (2013)

- 6) *Locana (Dr Elizabeth English) is an ordained Buddhist, writer, Focusing teacher, and a teacher of Nonviolent Communication and Mindfulness. Quotes from an article 'Focusing & Buddhism' (2012)*

Gordon Adam has been involved in Buddhist practice for about 30 years. He has been an active member of Bristol Insight Meditation since it started in 2003, and edited the BIM newsletter for 7 years from 2005–2012. Gordon has facilitated Bristol Insight Focusing Group for the last 7 years. He works as a Homeopath, Homeopathic teacher, and Focusing teacher in Bristol and the Southwest. He also leads 5-day 'Focusing & Meditation' retreats in Devon and elsewhere. Contact: gordonadam@blueyonder.co.uk

Gordon and Manjudeva will be co-leading a one-day retreat for Bristol Insight at St Michael's Hall on the theme '**Embracing Interconnectedness through the Bodily Felt Sense**' on **Saturday 9th July**. See the BIM website for more details.

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