

Embodyed Practice: Focusing and its gifts

I write this for many reasons: more personally I'd like to say something about what I have been up to the last few years, about why I find Focusing such a profound and magical practice. I also notice a growing interest in the body in meditation and in practice generally and know that Focusing could play an important part in that. I have also heard things about Focusing from those who perhaps think that they know it, and have realised that there are assumptions and ideas about it that are misleading. This article is a brief journey explaining Focusing and its relevance to me and to us as a community of practitioners in 21st century modern culture.

My path to Focusing

It happened on a retreat, a few months after my mum had died. Something turned around and has never turned back, a deep knowing emerged and I realised that I had to turn towards my experience and not run away. Well, it was more like the stark truth of my experience called me in a way that I could not ignore. I awoke every morning on the retreat with my body full of mysterious aches. In vain, for the first few days, I tried to ignore them and the huge pressure of unacknowledged grief inside, by trying to meditate them away. I desperately wanted calm and peace and found nothing but pain and loss.

What had I been doing in my meditation? How could it be that I could try to ignore the reality of my experience?... reality itself you might say. Looking back I saw that more or less most of the time in my meditation, and in my life, I was trying to create a better experience for myself. Unwilling to stay with the uncomfortable truths at all sorts of levels - I had used meditation and spiritual ideas to keep me away from myself.

Then I came across Focusing (thank you Suryacitta for this invaluable gift). I knew at once that it would be important and that I had been ignoring the one thing that had been crying out for awareness and empathy for years and would help me to heal and know myself: my body.

From there I have not looked back and have made it my vocation to teach this to others. Personally I have found it hugely valuable, the most integrating, freeing, accepting, insightful practice i have come across - in many ways it has given me the answers that I longed for in meditation, and much more. This is personal I know and in no way is a criticism of meditation. It's simply that Focusing did it for me.

What is Focusing?

There is a lot to say so I will keep it as succinct as possible. Like meditation, it really has to be tasted for oneself. Formally, it is a practice that can be done alone or more usually in a pair (where one person Focuses and the other listens or acts as a companion). In essence when we do Focusing, we spend time with something we feel inside that we know is there but can't yet be put into words or expressed. Focusers call this the felt sense and it can be easily overlooked and misunderstood. We all have this level to our experience. An example might help: in the middle of a conversation you feel an awkward and indefinable 'ugghhh' in your guts; something does not feel right inside and you don't know why? Maybe you are buying somewhere to live and you know, within minutes or even seconds that somewhere feels right... or not. Maybe you have unexplainable tensions and sensations in your body, you can sense something is not right but they don't go away. The felt sense is how we feel and sense the whole of any given situation inside of us and put simply, it has something to say to us. So how do we listen?

The Focusing session

In a formal Focusing session you go through various steps or phases exploring this level of experience. A session may last 10 minutes, but more usually longer, say 20 to 40 minutes, sometime longer. We start by taking some time to arrive and notice our bodily experience, just as it is. From this place we make an important invitation inside. We invite whatever wants awareness or wants to be known to come... to make itself known and we wait. (we can also take an issue we want to explore inside). This invitational nature is very important. We invite what wants to be seen not what we want to see and already know.

We wait...

Something comes: a sensation in the body, an image, we might remember a moment in the week or an image from a dream, it can start in all sorts of ways.

We then try and describe it - its texture, its qualities, we sense what it's like from in there.

We stay with it, like we might do with a shy animal or a friend who is not ready to speak yet... and we listen. We don't ask questions or demand answers, we don't tell it what it is or label it, we sense it. Like waiting in a cave lit only by soft light we wait and see what emerges and listen to it. If it feels safe, it will speak, not always in words, more often in metaphor and symbols, and it has something new to say about our life or the situation we are exploring .

As these symbols, words etc, emerge we check them back with our actual felt experience and allow that sense of fitting or not to guide us deeper towards the something in us that is there, we allow this resonating to guide us into a listening relationship with it. Then, and only then, will we hear 'its story'.

Many things come in this process - and we acknowledge everything as it arises. Memories, answers and insights arise, we re-contact deep emotions and feelings that have been locked up, We sense our life as it is, in a fully felt way... something moves and shifts. Something that has been, for whatever reason, kept out of awareness, is met with empathy again. The whole inner world changes, we feel softer maybe, more whole, more understanding comes. It might be a small shift: at last we feel what that lump in our throat was about... or a big shift: like we feel and understand why we have been so tight and held inside for all these years.

Then we thank what came and respectfully end the session.

Of course it gets complicated and it is much harder at times, We lose our way and get stuck in ideas and thoughts about our experience, but all that is ok and included in the process. There is a lot more to say about it... but that describes it in essence.

Presence and acceptance

One of the essential aspects of Focusing practice is to develop what some Focusing teachers call "Presence" or "self-in-presence". This describes a way of being or state in which we can be aware and responsive to anything, and I mean *anything* inside of us, without judgement or criticism, without an agenda. It is a kind of acceptance, not a cursory awareness but a full acknowledgment of what is present. It also has the qualities of interest, empathy and curiosity. It is something we all have the capacity to experience, it may be very familiar to you, like when you have been on retreat and you come back all

open and curious. It is different from just feeling or emoting something, it has the quality of company, of presence. Like we might keep a friend company.

It may sound simple enough but it is often not like this inside. Speaking personally, I found, even after years of meditation and self development, that I was actually very harsh and judgmental, with all sorts of critical voices and judging attitudes towards my experience. It can be very subtle, we use all sorts of labels and concepts to judge or move away from experience. We tell ourselves that certain feelings are not spiritual or skilful; we tell ourselves we are being childish or indulgent. Are these labels helpful? Do they help us get into relationship with what is happening? I think not. To truly accept ourselves is no easy task, but I have come to believe it is essential for growth and freedom

You may ask, why accept these difficult feelings, or even these un-spiritual selfish emotions? Well, it's about how things change, Put simply, how can something change if we cannot come into relationship with it? How can that rage that we feel and push away really change unless we explore it in some way; how can that deep feeling of being unconfident really change if we push it away. And it's not really about the emotion directly, but the quality of it, the felt sense of it... this is where the change comes from.

One of the delightful things about Focusing is how inclusive it is. It not only welcomes difficult feelings. It welcomes and gives embodiment to what we call positive and enjoyable experiences... and it also includes those parts of us that don't want to feel things.

Take this example: I am in pain and I am trying not to be. Perhaps you could say this is the human predicament, the first two noble truths even, We all do it and it is all too easy to say to yourself, "just accept it, embrace it, that is what Buddhists do or Focusers do!" The idea might be true but actually we might not want to embrace it, we might even hate being this way or having this experience. Focusing encourages us to welcome this too; the part of us that hates our pain, or is judgmental towards something. Just as the pain is not all of us, so too the pushing away is not all or us - what a relief! and how good it feels to acknowledge the being in pain and the not wanting to be... now I feel whole!

For me this has been one of the precious gifts of Focusing - to deeply accept and love myself, not that it is like this all the time, but my inner world, my sense of being me is completely different from before learning Focusing. What a relief it is not to be at battle with myself or my ego! War is not fun, on the inside or out.

It's good to say at this point that this acceptance is purely an inner thing - whether we act on it or not is a completely different matter, which I won't explore here. Also there are many tools and ways we can help ourselves to develop this attitude. It may be how you are with yourself already! Here is a quote that gets to the point...

"What is split off, not felt, remains the same. When it is felt, it changes. Most people don't know this. They think that by not permitting the feeling of their negative ways they make themselves good. On the contrary, that keeps these negatives static, the same from year to year. A few moments of feeling it in your body allows it to change. If there is in you something bad or sick or unsound, let it inwardly be, and breathe. That's the only way it can evolve and change into the form it needs."

Eugene Gendlin

He puts it pretty well, I think! And one of the things I love about it is the last sentence: that's the only way it can evolve and change into the form it needs. Maybe we can't direct

change in the way we think we can, by our will alone. Maybe change is much more mysterious.

On being listened to

Something I haven't mentioned yet is the role and purpose of the listener or companion in Focusing. Focusing can be done alone and incorporated into other practices, but most people find that Focusing with someone else makes the whole thing easier and deepens its effectiveness. In essence the listener keeps the Focuser company while they say something about what they are experiencing (the Focuser is free to say as much or as little as they want and keep things private if they wish). If the Focuser wishes, and many do... the listener reflects back the essence of what they have heard, without advice or interpretation, without questions even. The listener may, with sensitivity and some training, remind or guide the Focuser, but this is done only if asked for and after a lot of simple listening.

It is a lovely thing to do and give, just being there without the need to make things better or different for someone, to simply let them make their own journey and keep them company. It is just as lovely to be kept company and this company strengthens the sense of acceptance that we so need inside. Sometimes the presence of another human being in this way brings something completely new into awareness that has never been heard, by the Focuser or the listener. As a listener we can see that others are just like us inside, which is a profoundly useful experience in itself, and in being listened to in this way we come to feel and see that what we thought was shameful and unacceptable is in fact ok, and maybe more than that...

how do we really change?

How do we really change? Is it achieved through telling ourselves to be different? Or by having some ideas about change that are inspiring? In truth it is actually very mysterious, but one thing I have noticed is that I do feel very different inside now... I have changed from practising Focusing. At the core of Focusing practice lies this mysterious aspect of experience, the felt sense, and it is spending time with this that seems to bring deep change. There are many things that happen in Focusing sessions and all sorts of personal insights arise, but one common theme is what comes to us in Focusing are aspects of us that have, for whatever reason, been kept out of awareness. In making the invitation to our body, to something deeper in us, we make a space for things to be met with empathy that have perhaps never had it. And when it is met with empathy, it transforms - just like when we are really met, listened to and understood by a good friend. It is almost as if the body knows its own way to healing. We don't have to will a cut to heal, we might help it along, but it will do most of it by itself. It is the same with other aspects that need healing, if we give them the empathic space they need, they will change and heal. It is my experience that, a lot of our suffering can be caused by the weight of unmet experience we carry around. This is not just big experiences of Trauma, but anything big or small that has been pushed out of awareness to keep us safe and ok, Focusing helps us to meet that experience with the empathy and non-judgement that it has always wanted.

the perils of meditation and idealism

I want to say something more about my own path to Focusing and share some reflections on my meditation practice. To put it a bit simplistically, I found after 10 years of meditation that what I had been doing was mostly about ignoring my own experience and trying to create/have another one. This was largely unconscious; to be more kindly I could say that I

wanted to make myself happier through meditation, but did it in a way that ignored what was actually going on, especially in my body and emotional world. For me, meditation seemed like something you did with your head, to create mental states; the body did not get much of a look in. For good reason even I was unable to sit in my own true experience. Looking back with the knowledge I have now I think that was because I did not want to acknowledge the pain I was in, until it became so obvious that I could no longer ignore it. I do not blame meditation for this, or my teachers; I carried that tendency into my practice, perhaps many of us do. In my work as a Focusing teacher it is not an uncommon story to hear, and I see this over and over. It reflects the much deeper predicament I mentioned earlier: I am in pain and I am trying not to be. Focusing has given me the tools, a way of being with my pain and allowing it to heal and change.

On top of this I practised for many years with a strong idea or even ideal that I needed to make myself better, more spiritual... just different from how I was. Somehow I had got the idea that I was not ok and if I practised I would be ok. What took over 10 years to dawn was that maybe my experience was ok just as it was, that I was ok just as I am, more than that even. Yes, I did want to change in some ways but also that there was nothing wrong with me in essence. It was so easy for me to have the idea that I had to get rid of certain aspects of myself, such as “negative” emotions, or that I was essentially a bundle of greed, hatred and delusion, or that I had to battle “the ego”. I know this puts it crudely and in truth it is more complicated, but it is not far from the truth. I have benefited greatly from my years practising and living in this community/sangha. Meditation has certainly played a part in that and brought some clarity and awareness. It’s just funny that it took so long for me to realise that I could actually turn towards my experience instead of running away.

disembodiment and self worth

There are two things that make practice for us modern folk difficult: Disembodiment and lack of self worth. No wonder so many people find meditation so difficult! Culturally we live in a very disembodied age - much of our communication and interaction is mediated through little screens and machines, our lives are very different from our forbears and ancestors...we live removed from the patterns, the dangers even of nature and the elements, put simply, many of us live removed from our bodies.

As for self worth, many of us, myself included suffer from a chronic lack of self worth, and adding any message that says you are not good enough or awakened enough or not concentrated enough is, I would argue, not the most useful message to our beings. Focusing has taught me to accept all parts of myself, and not only that but also that there are no enemies within, no egos to battle with! Yes, there are aspects that have a limited way of doing things, that I might not act on, but in my heart I know these places will only change when they are met with empathy.

our individual heritage

One of the things I ignored for all those years was the legacy of what I had grown up through in my life and family. I had somewhere along the way adopted the idea that the Dharma was enough, that meditation was enough and that my own psychology and past were of little consequence. I thought that the way ahead was through rising up through the dhyanas and gaining insight in some abstract way. What I now see in myself and others is just how much we are conditioned by our families and even by what they grew up with. We are like old trees, broken and twisted about by our life...and these broken bits are actually a huge part of our life and pattern our experience for years or decades even. Much of what

I was avoiding in my practice was simply the unmet pain of my life. It has been such a relief to give voice and life again to those stuck and cramped places, pushed away into the non-spiritual areas of my inner landscape. Maybe those dark place hold something more than just pain, maybe they hold the key to self understanding, maybe some kind of treasure might be there. Maybe the body (I mean this, not literally, but more as a whole organism) knows a thing or two about wisdom, about how to live and how to die.

Living from the inside out

Someone asked me recently what I had gained from Focusing and the above phrase popped out (a neat focusing moment in itself). For years I had been searching for answers and wisdom, for love and acceptance from outside of myself. (It's not that I did not find anything outside, or that everything we need comes from within) What I have found through this practice is that I am finding richness within, finding symbols and connections to what I value and love. I am finding a way to sit in my own experience and make decisions that feel right, I am finding a way to know my own voice. In a way, I am finding my own way of practising the path, in my own language. It is similar to the difference between someone telling you that Avalokitesvara is a meaningful symbol of compassion and actually feeling and knowing compassion in your own body (which may well have a much more fitting symbol or expression for you). It's the difference between studying Dukkha as a concept/teaching and knowing and feeling its effect in your actual life as a reality.

So, to conclude, here is a summary of possible benefits of Focusing in our life and practice:

Genuine self acceptance of all parts of ourselves - allowing them to transform

Re-integration of unmet experience (bound up in my bodily tensions)

Understanding ones own condition and letting the pain from that flow and be liberated

Discovering how to really be there for oneself and for others

Learning how to listen to others in a deep way

Knowing what we truly feel inside, what we value.

Finding our own symbols and language for spiritual practice that resonate deeply.

Re-embodiment

Please feel free to get in touch with me about what I have written, For more information on Focusing see my website. www.livingfocusing.co.uk

Manjudeva 2009