

Reflections on the differences between Focusing and Meditation.

Over the last 10 years of practicing Focusing, the question of how Focusing works with meditation has been asked many times. For me it is an ongoing exploration. Many times over those years, people have remarked that they are the same thing and to me that never felt quite right. It was usually offered by those who perhaps did not know Focusing so well. Either way I have felt keenly aware of the difference, so wanted to share my current reflections on this. This is really about honouring the unique qualities that Focusing offers that are different from meditation. Of course someone could easily write an article about the unique qualities of meditation and it would also be true.

There are three main areas of difference that I want to explore: the relational nature of Focusing, its origins and context, and finally its aims.

We have to start by saying a little a bit about what I mean by "Focusing" and what I mean by "meditation". I like this simple definition of Focusing by Ann Wieser Cornell:

The purpose of Focusing is to enable carrying forward of what is implied

The term 'implied' comes from Gendlin's philosophy, it would take pages to explain it so simply it could mean "that which the body knows". Focusing enables change (carrying forward) to come from the body's knowing.

Meditation is more complex because it carries many more public meanings than Focusing. For some it means calming the mind, for some it means achieving bliss, for some it means meeting God. Even within the Buddhist tradition, there are dozens of types of meditation. My experience of meditation is limited to Buddhist practice so I can only speak from my knowledge of this.

Some forms of Buddhist practice are a lot closer to what we call Focusing than others. Mostly these are the more receptive and body based practices. So how different are they? And to confuse matters further, I have had and witnessed focusing sessions that look like meditation and vice versa. Especially when focusing on my own. It seems when people take awareness to their experience many things happen that look a bit like both. Which is reassuring and not surprising as we all share the human body! Having said all this, I think it will be useful to make a simplistic definition.

Let's say for the sake of this article that what we mean by meditation is a practice that one does privately (not alone, as we do meditate with others), but we rarely share what we are doing at the time we are doing it... And herein lies the first key difference. The relational aspect of focusing.

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Focusing can of course be done alone, but more often than not it is practiced, at least formally, in pairs or perhaps groups. Other people are with you and not just in a token way. They really are with you.

Indeed one of the body's knowings is knowing that someone is present with us, something in us knows that without question. It also knows something about how much the person is listening to us and more importantly it knows the degree of empathy the other is bringing to the relationship. And if you have done any focusing at all you know the difference it makes to have someone there with you. There is something unique and profound about being listened to by another being, more so if they are in empathy with you. 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. To give an example, perhaps as a child we had to go through traumatic events alone (being alone is all too usual and almost a hallmark of trauma). Those places that need to be heard and heal are unlikely to show up in solo focusing, especially when we are newer to the practice. Those places need someone else to be there.

From birth, our nervous systems have been highly attuned to the presence of others (especially our care givers, but not only) - our survival depends on that. We sense the safety or threat of others at a deep and instinctive level. Our nervous system is hard wired that way. Our nervous systems are interacting and affecting one another all the time (think of a time when you knew a friend was upset about something but did not say). This is partly the mechanism of human empathy, the mirror neurones that resonate with another's experience. This resonance changes everything! It creates a field of interaction between Focuser and companion that is deeply profound. We literally go on a journey with our focuser and who we are and what we bring effects that journey. How many times have you noticed a synchronicity of themes with your partner to times when both of you drifted off at the same time? How many times have you sensed the shift in emotional intensity or their tears even with your eyes closed?

What I am saying is the presence of another person profoundly effects the process and how it unfolds. It often takes us into quite different territory than meditation; equally as valuable but different.

Something also fits here about how speech effects our experience, it just feels different to put things into words (or any kind of symbol) and share that with another. The very act of speech uses different areas of the brain, as does active listening on the part of our companion. It happens a lot that it is only when I actually say the words out loud that the meaning and bodily shift comes.

This is really the key difference. However I do want to touch on the origins of Focusing.

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Focusing as a natural, embodied thing goes back as far as humans, I imagine. But Focusing as a "formal" practice has its roots in humanistic therapy and philosophy. Gendlin is primarily a philosopher.

Whereas meditation, Buddhist meditation in particular has much older explicit roots, some of the meditations taught today could easily be recognised by peoples from two to three thousand years ago.

This history and roots makes a difference, that is hard to put into words, it's like the practices carry that in them somehow. And of course the context is part of this. Buddhist meditation evolved on the plains of Northern India in a culture hugely different to ours. Focusing as a formal practice evolved from psychological research in the fifties and sixties in modern USA.

The people and culture from which both emerge are quite different. I wonder if, for many, focusing would not actually be an easier way into meditation. It seems closer to the needs of modern people. That is... slightly mad disembodied people!

Finally I want to say a little about the difference in aims. This is more slippery as it makes a huge difference what kind of meditation you are comparing it to. As I said before, some Buddhist meditation looks very similar in terms of what you do inside. The key perhaps lies in that quote of Ann's. It's by really spending time with something in an embodied and listening way that certain changes come. So often meditators are encouraged to let go or see through their experience: that can skip the being with that happens in Focusing.

I have noted over the years that focusing often attracts people who have reached some kind of impasse with meditation. It simply isn't reaching something... And why should it? We need many approaches in our development, why should one practice offer all the solutions? We probably need more than just focusing and we need more than just meditation. I did.

To use a more focusing language, they feel different and bring subtle, unique and yet different qualities alive in us.

I love it that they do this, it's like the way reading a poem is different from hearing it read. The same words but a whole different experience.

Lastly to bring it all together again, I want to share that Focusing has touched places that take me way beyond my personal tangles and issues. It has opened up a deeper and richer appreciation of life. It would be a mistake to think that focusing is merely a tool for sorting out one's issues and that meditation was where we made the genuine spiritual progress. I believe insight can come in both practices. Both are held together by the light

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of self-awareness and in this light, many things can arise and transform. In the end perhaps it does not matter too much what we call it, simply being with what is, with openness and curiosity brings profound change. For some meditation really hits that spot, for some Focusing, but for many a bit of both goes further. Each has a gift.