

FOCUSING, EMPOWERMENT AND THE NON-DUAL SELF

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*Wisdom is knowing: 'I' am nothing.
Love is knowing: Everything is 'I'.
Between the two my life moves.*

— Nisargadatta Maharaj

1. A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

1.1. A grand master with a huge heart

When I met Gene Gendlin in 1986 in Chicago and heard him speak on some Focusing related topic, skillfully handling the questions, objections and comments from the audience, I saw a grand master, full of wisdom and overflowing with knowledge. After a couple of sessions with him, I added to my original assessment 'with a huge heart', as he carefully and lovingly attended to my issues. Besides being great sessions, they were an eye-opener, as they showed me how to embody both wisdom and love — or, in this context, 'discrimination' and 'compassion, unconditional positive regard' — as mutually complementing principles. This inspired me to ideally want to keep the two in a harmonious dynamic equilibrium in my own Focusing sessions.

1.2. Both sides now

However, much in the Focusing literature is about only one of these principles: compassion and about how to embrace all parts of the psyche. However, to me, that is but one half, albeit an obviously important one. This article is about *discrimination*, the other half, not because I do not value the former — on the contrary, I hold compassion and its power in the highest regard. I even wrote an article in *The Folio* ('Focusing Touch', 1992) on augmenting compassion during Focusing. But because the 'other half' has not been fully explicated in the description of Focusing, it feels like a crooked picture that needs straightening out.

Within Focusing, the two 'halves' are inseparably intertwined throughout. The discriminatory faculties of our intellect with its cool logic dominate its first part in Clearing a Space, identifying the witnessing Self, the presence, the unchanging essence of our manifested existence. Later, the emphasis shifts to warm, receptive 'sensing into' and nurturing empathy attending to the ongoing process, which the ever-changing specific forms of our inner and outer world are part of. In the course of the session, we help the focusers expand *both* their ability to (1) differentiate and create psychological space, as well as (2) to come into close contact and communion with the various (especially unclear) aspects of their psyche.

1.3. Empowering the focuser

Thus, I will highlight and expand on what I believe is regrettably undervalued in Focusing: Its explicit and implicit view on — and its exquisite handling of — the *true* Self, especially in Clearing a Space. I see the *true* Self as that which we really are, as different from the false ideas about the Self that the majority of us were brought up with, and that to some degree still have a hold on our lives.

While I have been involved with Focusing for twenty-two years, for even longer I have been on a journey to understand this Self. After a series of ‘enlightenment experiences’, insights into absolute reality, I have taken more than thirty years to flesh out this awakening with intensive Self-exploration and comprehensive study and practice of various non-dual approaches. I regard understanding of the Self and its relationship to the psyche as a considerable contribution to the success of psychotherapies and other psychological self-help techniques. Facilitating the focusers’ understanding of the Self for me is the ultimate empowerment of them, as it encompasses understanding that their contentment, feeling full and complete (happiness, well-being, whatever word describes best the essence of that, which we ultimately want) can be entirely independent from the progress with the focusers’ issues. Paradoxically enough, while this contentment inevitably comes with ‘resting’ our attention on the witness, we will still want to continue to process the psyche’s states and conditionings. One reason being that the psyche has to ‘catch up’ to the ‘goodness’ that is already so; another being, that the ‘two halves’, the recognition of the Self and the processing of the psyche are mutually enhancing.

1.4. A path of logic and evidence

‘There are many paths up the mountain’ and mine is but one of the many. My path takes as criteria for the evaluation of certain prevalent notions about the Self whether they are logically inconsistent within themselves and/or if there is obvious evidence against these notions. It is my intention behind elucidating this particular philosophy of the Self’s nature to solidify Focusing’s theoretical underpinnings which I hope in turn will invite practical refinements of its values, intention and techniques.

1.5. The tendency toward contentment

Typically, Focusers’ intentions seem highly idiosyncratic and can range from precise goals like solving a particular problem to simply following life unfolding organically from the unknowingness of each Felt Sense. The intentions held might be geared toward achieving security or sense pleasures or contributing to a higher cause or something else all together. When we try to name the common denominator underlying any of the countless possibilities, we might arrive at ‘wishless happiness’ or ‘contentment’ or ‘peace’ or a rather unspecific wanting to get to ‘feeling good’, since: “*Your body always tends in the direction of feeling better*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.76). Rogers called it ‘Self actualization tendency’.

I personally like the term ‘contentment’ for ‘feeling good’, yet it is not introduced as a technical term to be narrowly defined, but as a loose, generic stand-in for the overall

direction in which people tend to head, and which you can substitute with whatever term fits better for you.

1.6. The significance of the Self for our intention in Focusing

Hence, assuming that Focusing is a tool we use to achieve ‘contentment’ or ‘feeling good’ in our lives and the lives of others, one obvious question is: ‘What, if anything, does knowledge of the Self have to do with achieving this?’

There is, in fact, a direct correlation between this ‘striving for feeling good’, which is underlying most intentions in life in general — and in Focusing in particular — and knowledge of the Self.

1.6.1. Finding a constant source for contentment

For me, Focusing is an undertaking that has reaching contentment as its intention, regardless of whether it is practiced in a setting with a psychotherapist or guide, with a spiritual or pastoral counselor, or in a peer-to-peer exchange. Any concrete, specific goal ultimately has a wish for achieving contentment or the absence of discontent as its essence. In addition, during spiritual or pastoral counseling, or when dealing with bereavement, questions regarding death, the meaning or nature of life may come up, all of which are answered through knowledge of the Self. Consequently, we have to ask what a source of contentment is and how we can use Focusing to find it, before we proceed.

Also, personally, I want this contentment *in all situations, all the time*: I want it to be constant. I do not just want half a glass of it, let alone some puny sample with long and irregular intervals between unpredictable occasions. I want to know where the source is and to be able to fill my cup until it overflows whenever I see fit. I do not want contentment to be dependent on and controlled by somebody or something outside of my Self; I want to be liberated from any such dependency. None of my clients ever wants their daily dose of adversity — desperation or depression or any other less than pleasant feeling. They, too, would be quite agreeable to living entirely without it.

Hence, assuming that we want a constant source of contentment within our Self, the main question is: *Does the Self provide this source?*

1.6.2. Competing Narratives

The description of Focusing’s first movement might suggest an experiential ‘affirmative’ to this question. In Clearing a Space, you quickly glance over (without ‘getting into’) “*everything that is keeping you from feeling absolutely content right now*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.52). The way I understand this sentence, it subtly points at (and implies) what is to happen in Focusing, namely: First, find our Self, who or what we are in the absence of our ‘issues’ (and experience that we are “*feeling absolutely content*”). Then, in the rest of the session, process whatever right now is keeping us from experiencing this contentment.

Gendlin proposes that we already have what we want in our Self, but we cannot experience it, because something keeps us from it. As opposed to the familiar: We do NOT have what we want yet, and we need to pursue it to get it.

2. EXPLORING THE SELF

2.1. The epistemology of the Self

As a long time enthusiast of Focusing, naturally I am also a fan of ‘directly experiencing’ knowledge and deep meanings as they emerge from the felt senses. I had a hard time conceding that not all of the ‘big things’ important to me could be known from ‘being revealed to me experientially’ (I am not talking about physical things shown on an MRI and such). A little incident a few years ago left a big impact on me and would change that attitude for good.

2.1.1. A sunset goes south

I was watching the sun slowly ‘sink’ into the Pacific Ocean, when, for some reason, I had to think of the fact that, in reality, the sun does not set at all, but the earth rotates away from the relatively stationary sun. In an instant, my perspective on the scene shifted dramatically. What had started as a pleasant, but still ordinary sunset turned into an almost religious revelation. I was left sitting on the warm sand with a sense of wonder and magic, marveling at the perfection of life on this wonderful planet.

What had happened? None of the external elements of the experience had changed. The colors had not become brighter, the air not more fragrant, the temperature not balmier, the birds not singing sweeter and no beach beauty was offering to delight me with refreshments or her company. Nor had I put a particular emphasis on any of my perceptual faculties, by concentrating my attention on the intricate hues of the colors for instance. The change had initiated on an intellectual level and from there reverberated through my body, my emotions and further. My subjective perception had instantaneously been shaped by aligning with a scientific truth presented by my intellect and memory. It did not even matter that I had known this fact since grade school. Embodying this radical shift (to a relatively objective perspective) into my way of perceiving in that very moment resulted in my experience being nothing short of spectacular.

2.1.2. Theory enhances experiential practice

Similarly, this exploration will not offer new experiences at first, but interpret the ones we have in a different manner. What initially might sound a bit dry could eventually — just like in my sunset incident — result in both some good experiences and a radical shift in perspective to change how you conduct your Focusing sessions.

Now, the heliocentric nature of our solar system ultimately is still ‘observable’ through direct means of knowing — maybe not with the naked eye (which creates the illusion of the sun moving and ‘setting’), but with the right instruments. The Self as I see it eludes any such direct observability.

2.1.3 A paradox: I cannot know my Self as an ‘object’ or an experience.

For the exploration of the witnessing Self, our direct means of knowing, our sense organs — for simplicity’s sake, I group our ability to ‘sense’ emotions and subtle energy with them — are not fit for the job, since they are directed ‘outward’, toward the sense objects, and do not provide knowledge about me, the subject. I can only *be* my Self, I cannot have an *experience* of this Self; that is, if I understand the Self as the ‘perceiver/receiver’ of any experience. Hence, my exploration cannot be experientially based.

In other words, whereas the objects of the world (and the mind) as phenomena can be objectified, the noumenon, the Self, cannot be known as an object, as it is the subject, the ‘receiver’ of the objects of knowing, complicating the epistemology of the Self. At the same time, we are certainly most intimately familiar with the Self, as we *are* the Self. So we *do* always already ‘know’ the Self *in general*, albeit almost exclusively only in connection with mental objects also present, absorbing our attention, which makes the ‘recognition’, the ‘*specific* knowledge’ of the Self all but impossible.

2.1.4. Knowing through elimination of options

Consequently Self ‘recognition’ is not a question of adding more knowledge, more mental objects, but of removing these objects as obstacles in the way of the Self’s ‘revelation’. For this task to be accomplished we need to heavily rely on logic and common sense. As we examine intellectually and experientially ‘all that is’, containing both me (the subject) and ‘other’ (the objects), we need to *eliminate* choices from this — already ‘known’ — total experience to concisely extract the Self. We provide this opportunity when fully Clearing a Space, where the attention can remain on the Self alone, or rather ‘resting in itself’, as the Self is pure consciousness, pure attention, ‘prior’ to any mental divisions into ‘subject’ and ‘objects’. As the Self is self-evident (see 2.2.3.) no experience outside itself is needed (or wanted!) for its recognition.

2.2. Elucidating the Self

2.2.1. The Self is void of ‘parts’

In Focusing literature the central assertions on the Self are mainly implicit and explanations on its nature are mentioned mostly as an aside.

In the following brief and somewhat cryptic quotes, Gene Gendlin paints a picture of the Self that is dramatically different from what most of us are accustomed to envisioning. In so doing, he sets Focusing apart from the field of other psychological theories and makes it stand out:

And yet, let us observe carefully: Her ‘self’ is not this ‘part’ nor any other part of content. Rather, she is the one who senses it, can speak for it, understands it, and senses its all goodness. The self is not any specific content (Gendlin, 1996, p.35). And:

On a given day we often begin feeling immersed, AS IF WE WERE this or that problem or concern, but after a while of focusing we find that we are not our problems and experiences, rather we have (or touch or sense, or relate to) them. 'I' is here and our problems are there. We discover that 'I' is not this, and not that; rather 'I' has no content at all (Gendlin, 1999, p.3).

This leaves us with at least two major questions: If the Self is not any specific part or content or problem or experience, what is it? What are the 'parts', 'experiences', etc. in relationship to the Self?

To establish a clearer understanding of the Self, we will have to investigate if the deeper philosophical and logical implications of Gendlin's concept match our experience.

2.2.2. I am not my fleeting experiences, but the ever-remaining witness which is present to them.

Any concrete, specific experience — be it a very brief flash of anger with its accompanying thoughts; memories; a felt sense about a situation; a deeply engrained, frequently recurring habit; or a prolonged state of mind such as 'being in love' — is always an event occurring in time.

Let's say, I 'fell in love' and this state lasted about three years, during which I thought I had finally found the happy Self that I really was. Then this state of 'being in love' ended. If my Self really would be this specific state of mind, I would have to conclude that before this state occurred, I, the Self, was not there and after it ended, I was also not there. This is obviously not my experience. My experience is that I am the one who witnessed the whole thing from start to finish and even though I might have various thoughts and feelings about it ending, I exist without this experience.

The same can be applied to *any* experience, as all experiences are time bound: they appear, last a second or a few decades and then disappear. If I were my experiences, I would be gone when they are. However, I remain, present to their coming and going. *I am that without which I cannot exist.*

2.2.3. I am timeless, limitless existence/consciousness

The terms 'Self' and 'I' point to the same, the witnessing conscious, sentient being that I am. That the Self exists and is also conscious is self-evident or self-revealing, meaning that no evidence outside the Self is needed to know its existence. Self reveals itself without any help from anything else, and everything else is evident to the Self.

'I am' already means 'I exist and I am conscious'. If I did not exist, then there would be no 'I' to which to attribute consciousness, and if I existed, but was not conscious, I would have no knowledge about my existence. Hence, there would be no 'me' to assert 'I am'. Thus, the Self is always both existent and conscious.

One could object that in deep sleep the Self is not conscious. However, *it is* conscious, albeit not of any mental objects, as the mind is in (almost) unmanifest condition. It is only conscious of itself, the subject, so no subject/object relationship occurs.

The Self is also timeless. Another name for ‘timeless’ is ‘changeless’. The measurement of time in its simplest form originated in the change of the sun’s position, both during the course of a day as well as a year. Something not affected through time is changeless. When nothing changes, time stops. While the objects are forever changing, the Self, the subject remains invariable, unaffected, timeless.

I am the timeless present or presence in which the concept of a seeming past and future appears. Everything I witness (including my sorrow and joy about memories of the past and hopes and fears about imaginations of the future), I witness in the present, as no other time than that exists other than in my thoughts. I do not need to bring my Self into presence, as I already *am* presence. Aligning the contents of the psyche, the focus of attention with present time I certainly love practicing in Focusing as well as with selected meditation techniques.

The Self is also limitless, has no boundaries, known as ‘one-without-a-second’, in some Eastern philosophies, or non-dual (simplified: the essential unity between observer and observed) here. It is individual, cannot be divided (into parts). While the primary means of knowing, our sense organs, certainly have a limited range with regard to sense objects, the witnessing consciousness is not limited. Whatever is put within range of the associated sense organs is registered in consciousness. There is a distance between, say, the tree I am looking at and my body, but no distance between this tree and the Self. The same is true for a pleasant memory. Both are objects that appear *in* consciousness, with no space or border whatsoever between them and the witnessing Self.

3. THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEMS

3.1. ‘False’ self is the cause of psychological problems.

If the true Self really is the source for contentment, then perhaps we confuse something else for our Self, which might account for the times we are discontented. When we explore and solve a problem in Focusing, we indeed find that, in most cases, it originates in two levels of errors: (1) *We accept only part of the psyche as Self.* And (2) *We accept only part of the whole universe, the organism, as Self.*

3.2. The first level error: We accept only part of the psyche as Self.

This is the level of error that Focusing, like other psychotherapies, mostly addresses. (The way I would like ‘psyche’ to be understood here, is as the totality of the mental objects that the Self *can* witness. These objects do not necessarily have to be consciously represented, so they could be repressed emotions or temporarily forgotten events. All processes of thought, emotion, memory, perception, ESP, dreaming etc. — also any fractions or complex and/or recurring composites thereof such as habits, traits, attitudes etc. — are included.) In the course of our psychological development, we learn to continually weave a multilayered

self-image from certain parts of the psyche (at the exclusion of others) with which we then identify. We split our own psyche in (at least) two factions: all the aspects that support my identification and the ‘others’ that do not fit the image that I have of myself. We invariably end up with a ‘false self’.

3.2.1. Creating a shadow

The numerous aspects of the psyche that we exclude become estranged, split off or exiled. They become our ‘shadow’ and disappear in the dark recesses of the unconscious. If the now disidentified-from aspects make themselves known at all, they are misinterpreted from the usually entirely opposite point of view of the imagined ‘self’. When we totally deny the existence of these aspects, they become a challenge to work with, as they now can almost only be perceived as a projection onto other people. The results are distorted perception and flawed processing of reality, leaving all sorts of psychological problems in its wake. The more limited and rigidly the self-image is defined, the more our world view becomes colored and slanted and the less adjusted we are to respond freely and intelligently to life’s challenges. The effects of attempting to define the Self as a limited part of the whole are similar to playing solitaire with only half a deck of cards — no solution is possible. Understandably, becoming complete, a ‘whole person’, is sometimes named as a — possibly not realistic — goal to be achieved.

3.2.2. Defending our threatened image

When the image we create of ourselves is threatened by others, we often make extensive efforts to prove that whoever plays the ‘offensive’ part in a given situation (spouse, coworker, etc.) is wrong, the cause for any possible problem and hence, the culprit. For example, if one has a self-image of being smart, decisive and thorough — which in many situations might in fact be so — it may be hard to concede that at times one is wrong, indecisive, and not thorough, at all.

Usually the progression of life itself destroys our chosen self-image. Our youth or beauty fades; we might lose possessions, job, or family. We then have an ‘identity crisis’, which in reality is a misnomer, as our identity, that which we really are, remains untouched throughout. The crisis is the crumbling of a notion of the Self that is not in alignment with truth.

3.2.3 If I am not my bad habits, then who am I?

Quite a few people who — despite a high level of motivation, and commitment to self-help work (therapy, yoga, spiritual practice, etc.) — have difficulty moving beyond the glass ceiling of ‘false identification’. Their sense of identity is often unconsciously tied into certain sets of habits — and altering those habits is often confused with losing their identity. This dilemma is difficult to solve unless the person is able go beyond the level of the original problem to tackle the underlying identification issue.

3.3. The second level error: We accept only part of the whole universe, the organism, as Self.

This second level of error is also addressed in Focusing literature, but sometimes more obscured and less recognized.

3.3.1. Feeling lacking, looking for completion

At times, people live in a state of restlessness, trying to find whatever they think will make them whole and complete. That could be the perfect mate, job, house, break-through in therapy. It is not uncommon to periodically consider ourselves imperfect, incomplete, lacking, not secure, dependent, insignificant, adverse to certain conditions and people, finite, time-bound, isolated, etc.

These considerations are appropriate as an assessment of the transient organism. They are not a misapprehension of a deranged mind that is in serious need of psychotherapy. As a part of a whole — namely the universe — the organism *is* incomplete and can never become the whole; to pretend this possibility exists is either a gross misunderstanding or a vicious deception. A living organism does need and depend on a lot of things for mere survival, which is a never-ending maintenance project, often being threatened or consumed by some entropy or other. Death looms over our heads like the sword of Damocles, ready to strike at any time. This is a fact, a truth that does not require correction.

The error here lies in mistaking this organism for the Self. No wonder we do not feel good, when we assume we are subject to its limitations. Here are a few reasons why the organism could not possibly be the Self:

3.3.2. The organism is not an isolatable entity.

As Gendlin frequently points out: The organism is not a separate, isolated unit, independent from its environment — it is a living process, which includes its environment. The body is continually transformed in an ongoing exchange of ‘matter’ with its surrounding environment and needs air, water, food, shelter etc. Without the environment it withers in no time.

The psyche, as well, is entirely dependent for its existence on something outside of itself. It is not unlike a massive computer, mostly programmed emotionally and cognitively by a motley crew of people — parents, siblings, relatives, peers, teachers, TV, movies, books, internet, etc. — so it should not come as a complete surprise that not all programs are compatible with each other. We spend a good portion of our time trying to work out the bugs in the software (or at least most Focusers do). Who or what determined large segments of these programs lies in the distant past and outside the organism. The language for our thoughts and the cognitive, emotional, behavioral patterns originate outside the psyche, affected by the people who surround us with their vastly differing skills, backgrounds, interests and motives. Even if the psyche is performing well, its content continually changes on several levels dependent upon what is going on around us.

3.3.3. The organism is in constant flux.

The whole organism is an open system, in constant flux, with all cells exchanged in our body every so often, and thoughts, emotions, and attitudes always changing, as well. To mistake the organism for one's Self would mean having to find something unchanging within it and pin one's identity on it. That, of course, is impossible as there *is* nothing unchanging about the organism.

An identity being needed and the real one unknown, we create an illusory 'self', consisting of images, which we then believe and perpetuate. We hold on, get attached to these images and mind sets, which through our attachment seem steady, more or less, and the thought of losing any of them is considered a threat to one's identity.

3.3.4. Exactly which organism is supposed to be the Self?

It is not even possible to figure out which organism is the Self, since both its components — the body and the psyche — are forever in flux, are open, dynamic processes and not a closed, stable system. The organism is alive; it is being born, growing up, maturing, decaying, dying. Both physically and psychologically the various stages of the organism — baby, child, adolescent, adult, aging — differ greatly from each other. Is the 'real organism' the one at 5, at 15, at 25, at 45 — or even at 65, and 85? Is the 'real organism' the one who is in the shower, or on the phone with a friend? Is it the one who has just had a meal or the one buzzing with sexual hormones? What about us is essential? What is incidental? Given that everything concerning the organism is incidental, does that mean '*There is nothing essential about us*', or rather that '*We are not the organism*'? 'Nothing essential about us' would mean, 'no Self surviving time'. This is not our experience, as our sense of 'me' remains through all experiences, thus leaving us with the realization that '*the Self is not the conditioned organism*'.

4. CLEARING A SPACE — CONTENTMENT AND THE SUBJECT

Now that we have more clarity about the root of the problem, let us turn to the solution: How using Focusing in its current form has the potential to be at the leading edge of providing an alternative view of the nature of the Self and a method for obtaining a reliable source for contentment. Three effects of Clearing a Space can be distinguished:

4.1. Creating psychological space for a 'positive set'

I begin a regular, 'classic' Focusing session with Clearing a Space, which, in more ways than one, for me is the heart of Focusing, as it lays the base for everything else that is to follow. Let me walk you through it:

I instruct the focuser to: "*Let all these problems come up and out: everything that is keeping you from feeling absolutely content right now*" (Gendlin, 1978, p.52). I have him imagine making a list of the problems, or stacking them in front of him, or putting down the weight of them. No matter how I go about it, the first goal is to get the body "*uncramped*",

to get immediate relief from being overwhelmed by a state of emotional upheaval, and to produce a temporary calming of the agitated mind which the focuser may have brought into the session. I help create psychological ‘space’ or at least ‘some breathing room’ from a plethora of issues he might feel within the body, either by having him move them out or simply list them (more on which of the two to use later). I also introduce (or remind him of) the fact that the witnessing Self is *not identical with* what is witnessed. With each item, I can get him started on becoming more aware of the witnessing Self. “So *there* is that tightness in the stomach about your sister, and *here* you are ‘being a witness to this tightness *there*’ (or ‘the Self, noticing what is over *there*’ or something similar).

In Focusing, having at least *some* space from the experiences is not negotiable, as the distinction between the *witnessing Self* and the ongoing experiences is key to the process. This distinction gets initiated during Clearing a Space and is continued with ‘Finding the Right Distance’ throughout the session.

Gaining psychological space sets the tone for the remainder of the session; I might propose, “*You give yourself what might be called a ‘positive set’. You put yourself into a state of mind and body in which the other focusing movements can take place freely. (...) until it is done, the rest of the work can’t begin at all*” (Gendlin, 1978 p.71). Two remaining achievements weigh in even more heavily, which is why we need to attend to them in quite some detail.

4.2. Discovering a constant source of contentment

As we proceed through Clearing a Space, the focuser starts to unwind. There is increasing contentment, now that he shifts the attention from the issues to the witnessing Self instead. Once each and every issue has been ‘put out’ or ‘listed’, I invite him “allow yourself to have the attention ‘on the witnessing Self, (that which notices everything) which alone remains’ (or ‘rest in itself’ or ‘turn inward, toward the source of consciousness’, or whatever wording works best” for that particular client). The wording here becomes tricky as ‘attention’, ‘source of consciousness’ and ‘witnessing Self’ are really only various expressions for the same thing. It is important to keep in mind, that, since it is the *subject*, the witnessing Self cannot be addressed as an *object*, so the guiding instructions have to be phrased accordingly.

In a workshop, where this and other logical steps have already been taught *before* I do this exercise, this step is quite a bit easier than with a client who is just here to work, say, on his relationship with his sister, and where I might weave the logic into the interaction over a period of a few sessions.

I continue with: “Notice, what comes in the body *in reaction* to ‘spending time with the witness alone’” (or any wording that matches the one I have used before.) If the focuser reports anything less pleasant such as tension or anxiety, something might have come to the fore from some remote recess. I simply have him do another round of ‘clearing’ with this ‘something’ that is still in his space.

I should point out that, unless in a workshop with an emphasis on awakening to the true Self, focusers do not always go all the way with Clearing a Space, including a possible

“background feeling” (Gendlin, 1978, p.78). More often than not, people are drawn to some issue’s felt sense and eager to get on with it, as session time is precious, literally or figuratively. The first time I was able to have only the Self remain in my own sessions was because that day I really did not have much weighing on me, and I would have canceled the session, if it had not been for my therapist’s cancellation policy. What at first looked like a waste of money enabled me to “arrive at an opening out, a sense of vast space” (Gendlin, 1978, p.79).

Once the focuser has in fact proceeded until all that is left is the witnessing Self, the felt sense forming in response — while varying considerably — reflects something along the lines of: The body is relaxed, the thinking is calm, and he or she feels happy and at ease with him or herself. It is irrelevant how big the problems are or how upset the people were when they started the process; they do arrive at some individual expression of contentment, something ‘feeling good’.

Why is that so? Because when the space is cleared of issues and concerns, what remains is their very own Self. Focusers find out for themselves experientially (and, given some necessary logic, also understand intellectually), that this Self is not just temporarily causing this contentment, but can be a constant source of it, *if* and as long as they keep their attention on it; that, admittedly, is a substantial ‘if’ and not immediately achieved by everybody. The ‘intensity’ of the subjectively experienced contentment can go all the way to bliss and even ‘off the chart’ and is directly proportional to how much attention can be focused on the Self alone. Also, while the recognition of the Self is instantaneous, this insight is not necessary steady or stable, but at least the Self has been ‘registered’ experientially as a source for contentment. Still, maintaining a focus on the non-dual perspective of the Self and garnering the resulting contentment is something that requires practice, especially in less conducive circumstances, when the space is not clear, like in the midst of an emotional upheaval.

4.3. Empowerment through learning

Not usually looking to the Self for their contentment, finding a constant source for it there is like a revelation for many people. *Guiding people toward this discovery (entailing all the far-reaching, liberating implications) in my view is the greatest empowerment of them that Focusing can deliver.*

Enabling this outrageous revelation for me is similar to teaching some of the other basics — such as finding a felt sense or recognizing a felt shift — differentiating Focusing from other, more strictly non-directive, techniques. It is something that my clients would highly unlikely have gotten to by themselves; fortunately, finding the Self and the resulting contentment through Clearing a Space is a skill that can be learned, should the focuser be interested.

4.4. Why do we distinguish the Self through isolation?

When you place a perfectly clear crystal on a piece of red velvet, it will appear red; on green velvet it will appear green, etc. Even though it *appears* red or green, in reality it

has maintained its clear transparence. Similarly, whatever we bring into proximity of the witnessing Self will be apparently ‘coloring’ it with its respective qualities, making the true Self difficult to detect unless we isolate it.

Once all mental objects have been placed outside its immediate proximity, Clearing a Space is a wonderful venue to experience the intrinsic purity and clarity of the crystal-like witnessing Self. It is an important first step which later serves a central function — both in a person’s process and in his or her life in general — almost like the lighthouse beacon that guides ships to safe harbor, especially when lost in bad weather. Without all those mental objects crowding the inner space, the person can come home to the real ‘I’.

4.5. Differentiating the witnessing Self from our experiences

Exactly how far to take Clearing a Space obviously depends on what the client wants. Even outside of workshops, some of my clients who know about my background specifically bring up ‘spiritual’ issues and are open to learning and exploring, while for others, those would be the last things on their mind. What is appropriate can usually be easily ascertained, but sometimes it might be a judgment call on the spur of the moment: A couple of years ago, I conducted a few sessions with a new client, an elderly woman somewhat concerned about death, “bringing her affairs in order” and “losing the mind before losing the body”. She was neither religious nor spiritual, just very bright and sharp. In one of the sessions, we ‘Cleared a Space’ for a long time, and since there was not much time left anyway, it came to me to have her go past distinguishing her issues from her Self. I invited her to even distinguish from the Self various perceptions that she reported, like high-pitched sounds in her ears, the way that her back felt in the chair, and such. Just as with the issues, I had her simply list each perception *there* and contrasted that with ‘and *here* you are, noticing that sound (or feeling or whatever)’. At some point she became very still for a long time. Then she sighed deeply, opened her eyes, and simply stated: “Now THAT CANNOT die, can it?!” From the way she said it, it was clear that she had just understood something extremely profound. I just smiled at her. Her relief was clearly visible, and her whole face shined. She never once mentioned death after that.

For those focusers interested in philosophical and spiritual matters, it is important to realize in Clearing a Space that not only are they none of their problems, but they are not even any of their experiences; they are the unchanging witnessing presence which is aware of them. This additional clarification aids in getting an intellectual grasp on what the Self is, which in turn, aids in how they perceive their issues.

4.6. Creating space when something does not want to ‘go out’

However, there is another situation where a differentiation of the Self from all experiences is helpful: when a particular bodily feeling does not want to ‘go out’ or lessen in intensity. Here my best bet is to point out the difference between the witnessing Self and these issues, as I guide the focuser to identify them and get some *psychological* space from them. ‘So that tension is right *there* in the stomach that does not want to budge and *here* you are, the witnessing presence, which is aware of all that going on *there*’. If this is a recurring

situation with the focuser, before we get started (or even after we have finished), I might even briefly point out: “*Under all the packages each of us carries, a different Self can be discovered. You are not any of the things you have set aside. You are no content at all*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.79). ‘You are *not* the experiences, not the bodily sensations, not the emotions, not the thoughts. You are the (witnessing) Self, the subject, which is aware of whatever objects arise in consciousness. On one hand, *here* is the subject, the Self, which is timeless/changeless, limitless, absolute existence/consciousness; on the other, *there* are the objects of the world/of consciousness, including the body-mind organism, which are forever changing, limited in space and time, not absolute, but utterly dependent on the witnessing Self without which they enjoy no reality whatsoever’.

The psychological space that is created (and experienced!) once the focusers understand that they and their experiences are in two distinctly different categories/orders of reality can even be more robust than when simply making a list, stacking them in front or putting down the weight of them.

4.7. Starting the session on the right foot and ‘keeping the eyes on the prize’

Because the Self is unchanging, it is not only utterly invulnerable, regardless of what might happen in the psyche, but it also cannot be improved — which brings yet another type of relief. It is *already* the source of contentment, the sense of feeling full and complete. Consequently, once this is understood, the intention in Focusing is shifted from unnecessary attempts to make the Self ‘whole’ to resolving the issues that draw attention away from enjoying the contentment of which it is a source and the wholeness which is its very nature.

Approaching an issue while trapped in delusions of lack or inadequacy attracts and/or creates more of the same. Instead, when we know our Self as the formless, changeless witness, sense the contentment which comes when we rest our attention on it and remain rooted in (or at least always return to) its compassion that is an integral part of impartiality, we reinforce the positive tone we set for the session. From this home base of contentment we are in a strong position to create and foster more contentment in the world of form, specifically in those aspects of the psyche stuck in sorrow or turmoil. Establishing this home base is yet another important function of Clearing a Space.

4.8. Special considerations

There is no need to ‘move things out’ (which is, admittedly, not suitable for everybody) — it is only one of the possibilities listed in *Focusing* (pp. 71-82), anyway. Compile ‘things’ in a list, if preferred. For some, recognizing they are not ‘these things’ affords them the most space and comfort. People, especially those dissociated from their feelings, appreciate finding out for themselves that the Self is *always* invulnerable; it makes them feel safe enough to come in contact with their feelings. It is, of course, possible to process issues without attuning the psyche to the Self, when short on time. However, whenever we DO take the time, the reminder that we are truly much bigger than our issues or experiences greatly enhances our clarity and compassion in the rest of the session, if not transporting us into an entirely different realm of life altogether!

4.9. ‘Recognition of the Self’ and ‘Processing one’s Issues’ improve one another

In Clearing a Space the psyche learns about its relationship to the presence we call ‘I’. In order to know the effects that attending to this presence has on the psyche, we do what we always do in Focusing and what we do best with Focusing: Spending time with, paying attention to something unclear, allowing it to be as it is and becoming aware of (at first maybe only vaguely perceptible) bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and whatever else appears in connection to it. Focusing is the process through which we (1) first become clear on the subject, the witnessing Self, before we (2) become clear on the various objects, the issues, and (3) make sure we do not confuse the two with one another throughout the duration of the session (or of life, for that matter).

In many cases, one or more of the issues will demand the focuser’s attention with such vehemence that it is not possible to continue to go all the way with Clearing a Space. Progressing with one’s issues makes a more complete Clearing a Space in subsequent sessions possible. Conversely, Clearing a Space until only the witnessing Self is left seems to provide an empowering ‘higher’ perspective from which it is easier to process these issues. I consider recognition of the Self and processing one’s issues in the remainder of the session as very different, yet mutually enhancing parts of Focusing, *both* of which are necessary.

4.10. “A more effective and different way”

Hence: “*The mess will still be there and you will still have to clean it up*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.73). However, there is already a major shift in the perception of the nature of ‘the problem’ and its possible solutions, thus influencing the direction in which we are headed with the rest of our Focusing session. “*You have made yourself capable of handling it in a more effective and different way*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.73). We have seen how the organism becomes naturally and inescapably relaxed and full of contentment once the attention rests on its source. “*Let your body return to its natural state — which is perfect. The body can feel completely at ease and natural every moment. Just let it. Once your body is allowed to be itself, uncramped, it has the wisdom to deal with your problems*” (Gendlin, 1978, p.75). Indeed, with Clearing a Space, we have already helped the focusers achieve several things right at the beginning:

- Psychological space from the inner turmoil associated with their issues, creating a ‘positive set’
- Finding their true Self and with it a constant source of contentment
- Differentiating the Self from their experiences

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary

Already during Clearing a Space, Focusing can point to an alternative to the ‘pursuit of happiness’ and liberates us from seeing our contentment as dependent on fickle forces outside of our control. When we distinguish the true Self from its experiences, a major realization happens, as the Self turns out to be a constant source of what we always wanted — a

welcome relief. Consequently, now firmly based in a ‘positive set’, we might stop using our sessions for chasing contentment outside of our Self and instead focus on resolving issues stand in the way of our enjoying *the Self’s all goodness*. This involves welcoming and reintegrating ‘exiled parts’. The more our understanding becomes rooted in the non-dual Self as an unchanging source of the contentment we seek, the more conflicts and problems stemming from trying to achieve contentment outside of our Self become resolved. Problems stemming from clinging to outdated habits as part of our self-image vanish, when we use Focusing as a process to correct various errors in Self identification.

To what degree this article is able to unlock the unspeakable bliss available through the true Self remains to be seen; it might take sessions and/or workshops to succeed with that endeavor.

5.2. A brief outlook — Non-Dual Focusing

To complete the rendering of the Self and its oneness with all objects, it will be necessary to further describe their reality (and especially the nature of their relationship with the Self) and the implications this has for the ‘wholeness’ (in which we are interested). A more comprehensive description in turn, allows us to advance an evolution within the body of Focusing knowledge, as well as within the sessions of a single focuser beyond ‘relational’ (while still retaining it) — which describes duality, as it takes two to tango — to ‘non-dual’ — which describes an *essential* unity which is not to be confused with the frequent non-differentiation, the ‘mergedness’ of the witness with his experiences.

In Non-Dual Focusing — once the nature of both the subject and the objects is understood as that between essence and form — the focuser can explore any felt sense from within it, *as though* ‘becoming this specific form’ or ‘being it’ without even the slightest chance of any harm as they ‘exist’ in different orders of ‘reality’. ‘Entering’ into and ‘being’ the felt senses in question accelerates the process of aligning the experiencing and functioning of the organism to the wholeness, which is not something to be achieved, but rather, of which the organism is already an integral part.

Understanding and incorporating the *whole universe as Self* eventually leads to dramatic shifts in lifestyle, as ‘living for the benefit of the whole’ is adapted as a value reflecting this appreciation. We compassionately embrace and warmly welcome home *everything*, all aspects of our fleeting experiences, knowing they all are ‘I’ in this continual creative process of becoming.

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