

David Rome

*Focusing for Meditators: Accessing the Wisdom of the Felt Sense*

Week Three: “Consulting the Felt Sense: Intuitive Insight”

April 16, 2022



Welcome back. This is Week Three of “Focusing for Meditators.” This class is called “Consulting the Felt Sense: Intuitive Insight.” Let’s come into our bodies again, become present, drop down, and really experience our connection with the earth and the physical sensation of sitting on the earth and the support provided by the earth. It’s really important that we appreciate our bodies not so much from the outside in terms of our looks, which is where we usually obsess, but from the inside of being embodied beings. Cultivate this quality of awareness, which for the purpose of this exercise I’m associating with the head, with the sense perceptions, and especially with being aware of the sound environment. There are many sounds that we typically may not notice, but if we really listen, we can notice them. I hear the distant horn of a train going by. Now, let the attention center around the heart with a sense of being present. Grounded, aware, present.

Last week we emphasized the movement of dropping down, dropping the storyline and dropping down out of the head and into the felt experience of the body. Dropping down is one metaphor. Another way of saying it is coming inside, or you may have still another metaphor that feels right to you. But there is some kind of shifting of the focus and the quality of our attention so that it’s more inward, receptive, spacious, and sensitive, especially to these subtle textures or experiences that we’re calling felt senses.

Today I want to talk very briefly about the background of the focusing practice. It was developed over the last 30 or 40 years by Eugene Gendlin, who is a wonderful philosopher and psychologist who spent most of his career at the University of Chicago. He’s retired now. His philosophical work concentrates on what he calls the implicit or the philosophy of the implicit. This is a very important underlying concept of the process of focusing. You don’t necessarily need to understand the philosophy, but it’s helpful. What it’s saying is that there is a great deal more in our lived experience than what is present explicitly, what is actually occurring. The implicit is a level of experience which has not yet taken shape or taken form, but it constantly gives rise to

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novelty, to fresh forms, fresh patterns, fresh experiences. If we remain just in our heads and our thought process, we spend a lot of time recycling the same thoughts, the same habitual patterns, and we don't experience anything really fresh, novel, alive. In order to do that, we have to be able to connect with this implicit level of experience, the level of experience that is present in some real way but isn't yet shaped. It isn't yet given form.

The felt sense is the source from which something fresh can come, whether it's an insight or an action step. But in order to access that, we have to be comfortable with resting in the unknown, in the murky, the cloudy, the not yet clear, the not yet in focus. We're inviting something that is not in focus to come into focus, to become more present and more clear. In order to do this, we have to be willing to really be with whatever presents itself in our experience.

As I talked about last time in terms of the inner critic, there's a lot in our experience that we would rather not see or rather not touch. When it shows up, we want to push it away or withdraw from it. Now, I'm not saying that we should be overwhelmed by negative aspects or negative feelings. But we have to be able to provide some space of awareness in which we can get to know them and say hello to those parts of ourselves that we may not like. Carl Rogers, the great American psychologist, said, “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.” I love this statement. That really is the dynamic that we're talking about with focusing: finding, accepting, and being with different parts of ourselves, and by virtue of really being present with those, then something can shift. Something can release. Something can move.

Let's do another exercise. Come into your body. Be present. You can either drop in and begin with a felt sense that you find, or you can start, as we did last week, with a situation or a problem, and start by telling yourself the story. If there's a felt sense that's already there, you may know what it's about, or you may not. It doesn't matter. You can be with that felt sense directly, or you can work with a problem or a story. But then at some point, drop the storyline

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and come into the body. Sense how the body is or what’s happening in the body in connection with this story or problem. In order to encourage the felt sense to come more into focus, it’s like meeting a person and being with a person. In order to establish a sense of friendship and intimacy, you would call them by their name. You would recognize them. We can do this with the felt sense. This is where there is a very fruitful relationship between the conceptual mind, or the word-making mind, and the nonconceptual felt sense.

After we’ve sat with the felt sense and kept it company for a while, then find a word, a phrase, or an image that seems to fit the quality of that felt sense. This goes back to what we did in the first class when you asked inside, How am I? I said to imagine it as a kind of landscape. How would you describe the landscape that has the quality of how you are just now? You can use descriptive words like hard, soft, jittery, warm, cold, round, sharp, sinking, fluttering. There are endless possibilities, but we’re trying to find a word. Eugene Gendlin calls this the handle that names or fits the felt sense. The interesting thing is that as we try out different words, the felt sense, just like a person, knows what its own name is, so to speak, and so if we try a description and it doesn’t really fit, then the felt sense doesn’t feel comfortable with that. It’s always the felt sense that is primary, so we adjust the handle, adjust the phrase. Gendlin calls this process resonating. It’s a kind of moving back and forth between the verbal conceptual realm and the nonverbal felt sense. The goal of it is not so much that we are going to come up with a clever phrase but that through this process of naming, labeling, and giving a handle, the felt sense will respond and become more present.

I’ve just said a lot. Let me be quiet for a minute. Work with this however you can in terms of what’s going on for you just now: the felt sense, finding a handle, and resonating. When the felt sense is more stable, vivid, and present, as you feel ready, you can actually enter into a kind of dialogue with the felt sense. You can put questions to it. When you ask a question, you want to stay with the felt sense and not answer it from your head or from what you already know. Just as

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if you were with a young child who has trouble verbalizing what they're feeling, you might ask a question and this kid might not say anything, so you just have to be there and wait. You're friendly, you're supportive, you're encouraging. But you can't make anything happen. That's the attitude toward the felt sense. And so what kind of question might you ask? If the felt sense has to do with a problem or a situation, you can ask what it is about this problem or this situation that brings this quality. You can use the handle here. It might be this jumpy quality. What makes it jumpy? And you wait. Sometimes, you may get a little flash of insight, something fresh that pops out there. When that happens, there's actually a subtle shift in the felt sense itself. It's like something that has been blocked is able to move a little bit. This is the quality of intuitive insight.

There are many different questions you can ask, any question you can think of. But once you are with the felt sense, a very good set of questions is to ask what it is wanting, or even what *you* are wanting, as if you're in dialogue with this inner child. What are you wanting? Or what are you not wanting? What do you not want to happen? A lot of our felt senses have a protective function, but when we can experience directly what it is that we're not wanting or that a part of us is not wanting, then it gives us a lot of space to either say “Yes, that's true, I really don't want that,” or “That's kind of old news. Maybe that's something from earlier in my life,” and there is a way of working freshly with this situation.

For the next week, try to work with this. You can begin with the GAP and dropping the storyline, dropping down, trying to find and welcome and be with felt senses, and, if it feels right, going to this next step of finding a handle, a very simple description, a word, a phrase, or an image that describes the felt sense. Again, if it feels right, you can experiment with posing a question and seeing what comes from the felt sense or what the body response is. When you get a body response, or any kind of felt shift, really appreciate that. Receive that. Take it in. Don't just rush

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ahead. Body process is slower than mind process. Just be there with whatever comes. And then after a bit, you can inquire, Is there more? Is there something else?

Next week will be the final class, which is called “Fulfilling the Felt Sense: Action Steps,” how to really carry this into your life. Thank you.