

David Rome

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

Week Four: “Fulfilling the Felt Sense: Action Steps”

April 23, 2022



Welcome back. This is Week Four, and today’s class is called “Fulfilling the Felt Sense: Action Steps.” I hope you’ve been practicing the GAP exercise, grounded, aware, presence. Let’s just do that together silently. I will do it and you can do it with me.

Last week we worked with the felt sense, welcoming the felt sense, inviting it to become more present and clear by naming its qualities, and then entering into dialogue with the felt sense, asking and receiving and perhaps experiencing a release, a felt shift. But that’s not something that we can force. That comes on its own, and it may or may not come in any particular session of focusing. Focusing starts out in quite a similar way to mindfulness meditation. But it differs in that we choose to stay with a certain content, whether it is the felt sense itself or the situation that we’re trying to work with. It’s a way of staying in a contemplative space, so it is a space of mindful awareness. But instead of just noticing and letting go of everything that arises in our experience, which is typically what we do in meditation practice, here we choose to be with some content, some situations, some part of ourselves in a special way.

The key concept that I would like to emphasize and leave you with in this last class is what Eugene Gendlin calls “life-forward.” What that means is that as living beings, there is always a life-forward direction in us, but that life-forward direction can be blocked. It can be stopped. If we take a very concrete example, if you’re hungry, then the life-forward direction is to find food and consume it, and then your hunger goes away. But sometimes for us, as for all animals, the food isn’t readily available, and so then the hunger, which is a kind of felt sense, increases, and the life-forward process, which is eating, digesting, and being nourished, is stopped. It’s blocked until we succeed in finding food and consuming it, and then the hunger goes away.

That’s very simple common sense. But this is also true of many other aspects of our lives and our life process. In our needs, our wants, and our creative activities, there is a life-forward direction. It is implicit, as we spoke about. What that direction is—what food we’ll find, so to speak—is

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not yet known. It's not clear, and it's not predetermined by any means. But it is implicit in the life movement. Even when the felt sense is holding a kind of blockage or stuckness, at the same time, it has a knowing about what the life-forward direction is—what would allow the energy to flow again and help the life process to move forward.

For our final exercise, I want you to think of a situation where you feel somehow stuck, blocked, frustrated, uncertain, indecisive. It might be a situation that you've already worked with; it might be a new one. It may be a fairly small matter—like which side of the family we're going to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with—or it may be a place where we experience being stuck or blocked again and again. One of the important things about focusing is that we're not really looking for a big breakthrough, an all-at-once solution. Because these issues are implicit, they are not ready to be fully solved all in one blow.

I think that's one of the reasons that we get so frustrated and remain very blocked off: we're looking for that one final solution that will make the problem go away. But very often, that's simply not available. That doesn't mean that there can't be some kind of movement in the problem, in the situation, in the lived experience of it. But those movements tend to be very subtle. And that's really what happens in focusing: being sensitive to this more subtle level and being open to and inviting small changes, small movements, insights, and action steps. These steps are things that we can do that won't solve the whole problem, and yet somehow they move in the right direction: maybe something that we need to say to that person that is a next step or something that we need to do in terms of some pattern in ourselves that we're working on that we would like to change. It won't change all at once, but we can find through this intuitive process a next step that moves us in the right direction. It may take many, many steps before there is a larger change in that situation. But we have to be willing to be patient and gentle with ourselves. As we learn to appreciate these small steps and small shifts, then we become more comfortable with being patient and we don't feel as completely stuck and immobilized.

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Think of a situation where you feel somehow stuck. You can tell yourself the story, remind yourself about the aspects of the situation, the history of it, and maybe the way that you've tried to work with it but hasn't really worked. Try to feel the whole of this particular problem, and see if you can get a felt sense in your body of the whole of this problem, challenge, issue. Be very gentle with it and welcoming, but also don't let it get too big. Don't let it overwhelm you. If it seems to be becoming too big and too threatening, then you have to step back and leave a little more space. But on the other hand, if it's something that you're not able to be with normally, then you have to open to it and be friendly toward it and invite it to be present. So there's a kind of balance there that we find.

Find a word or a phrase or an image that captures the quality of the felt sense as you're experiencing it just now. Do your best here. Everyone's process is different, so it's not really possible to guide your internal organic process. But I'm trying to give you an indication of how it might go. When you have found a handle, a description that seems to fit the felt sense, and the felt sense has become more vivid or more in focus, more present, you can try asking it: In this stuck, blocked, frustrating situation, what would feel right as a next step? What would feel right to the felt sense? What is it wanting? What would allow it to move, to shift? Be open to something quite unexpected, something very different from what you would get if you just ruminate and think about the problem. Sometimes what comes is seemingly unrelated. But be very open and receptive to whatever comes. What could you do? What kind of step could you take that would feel right to the felt sense that would bring some shift, some release or relief to the felt sense? It probably won't solve the whole problem. That's alright. What we're looking for here is some kind of movement in this life-forward direction that begins to soften or unblock the energy of the situation and give us some more creative options.

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Find a place to pause in your process. You can always come back to it on your own later. I hope that these classes have given you some insight into this process called focusing, which is a contemplative practice. It is a particular way of working with feelings, content, issues, and challenges and making a bridge between the mindful awareness of sitting meditation and the activity and the specificity of the lives that we're living. I wish that we could have a spontaneous back and forth. It's a little frustrating for me as a teacher not to be able to hear from you directly, but I will still be looking at email comments for the next week.

Let me mention some further resources. If you are inspired to explore this practice further, there are a great many resources. One place to go is to the website of the Focusing Institute, [focusing.org](http://focusing.org). It has truly a vast amount of information about focusing. It has the six steps, which we have kind of followed, although not so explicitly in this class. The six steps are how Eugene Gendlin originally presented focusing. It doesn't have to be in six steps, and that's a point that he himself makes. But that's a very helpful place to begin. You may want to get a copy of his book called *Focusing*, which is a classic. It's a little mass market paperback. There's a bookstore on the Focusing Institute website, and you can order it there, or you can get it from Amazon. You can get a used copy for a couple of bucks. There are a number of other books by excellent focusing teachers. One that I would recommend is called *The Power of Focusing* by Ann Weiser Cornell, who is a wonderful, very senior experienced teacher of focusing based on the West Coast. Ann also offers a lot of training courses, many of them by phone. Also, at the Focusing Institute website, you'll be able to find programs and trainings, either to actually go to in your area (there are good focusing teachers all over the world and certainly all over North America) or to do further training from the comfort of your own home by participating in a telephone series that will be able to go into more detail than what I've been able to do here and also that will allow you to work with a partner.

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Typically, focusing is done by two people together taking turns. One is the listener or the companion to the other, who is doing the focusing. That presence of the listener, who is holding the focusing attitude of friendly, interested, nonjudgmental presence, really empowers the focusing process. Most people find that it may be awkward at first, but actually having the presence of this other person holding the space makes it easier to go in and to go deep and to be with the felt sense. You can find out more about focusing partnering at the website of the Focusing Institute. The last thing that I'll mention is my own website, which is called Mindful Focusing, [mindfulfocusing.com](http://mindfulfocusing.com). There you'll find a schedule of whatever teaching events I'm doing, as well as phone classes that I offer from time to time that would allow you to have a deeper experience of everything that we've been exploring in these four classes. Thank you very much. I hope it has been helpful, and I wish you all the best as you pursue the life-forward direction of your life. Thank you.