

David Rome

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

Week One: “Finding the Felt Sense: The Inner Relationship”

April 2, 2022



Welcome. I'm David Rome, and this is “Focusing for Meditators: Accessing the Wisdom of the Felt Sense,” four classes as part of an online retreat for *Tricycle* magazine. As meditators, we spend a lot of time on the cushion developing mindfulness, awareness, lovingkindness, and other contemplative faculties. Focusing is a complementary contemplative practice that allows us to build a bridge from what we're doing in our sitting practice to what's going on in the rest of our lives. This is because focusing works directly with the wisdom of the body and specifically the quality called the felt sense.

The felt sense is a subtle level of experience that's nonconceptual. It's felt in a bodily way, but it's not just physical. It's the way in which the body holds or knows our situations, and really, the body knows much more than the mind knows, or much more than we can say about our situations, because the body represents our entire life history and, in some sense, the history of our species. The felt sense is quite subtle, and most people aren't even aware of it. Being able to access it by inviting it to come into focus allows us to have a dialogue with the felt sense, which is the source of a great deal of wisdom and intuitive insight that can be very valuable in working with problems and challenges, whether in relationships or in work settings, and releasing blockages and discovering fresh energy for moving forward in our lives in positive ways.

I'd like to jump right in with a short contemplative exercise, which I call the GAP, standing for Grounded, Aware, Presence. This is a way of really becoming present, coming into our bodies, similar to how one might begin a session of meditation. Bring your attention to your body right now, the shape that it's making, and especially your contact with the chair or the cushion, whatever you're sitting on, which ultimately is the earth. We're all sitting or standing or lying on the earth. If you'd like, you can close your eyes. Bring your attention to your bottom, where it rests on the earth. Really feel a sense of being grounded. There's something very trustworthy about the solidity of the earth, that it will always support us. We can relax with that and appreciate that quality of groundedness.

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Next, bring awareness up into the head and the sense perceptions. You can keep your eyes closed if they're closed. In fact, emphasize the sense of hearing. Put your attention into the sound environment, noticing any kind of sounds: ambient noise, a refrigerator humming, something occurring in the next room, or if it's simply silent, then really being with that silence. Here, we're emphasizing the quality of awareness: aware, alert, alive. Finally, bring together the groundedness from below and the awareness from above in the center of the body, the heart region, with a sense of really being present. We are embodied, we're aware, we're here just now. We're present: present to ourselves, present to our own experience.

This is the GAP: grounded, aware, presence. Staying with your awareness in the body, and especially in the torso region, sense into what your bodily experience there is like just now. The idea here is not to get discursive, not to take off on a stream of thinking, but really to be with the physically felt quality, even if it's quite vague or unclear, of what your experience is just now. Ask yourself inside: How am I? How am I feeling? How am I doing just now? Try not to answer from the head or to answer conceptually. Just see what response comes in the body. What's the texture of your experience in this moment, whatever it may be? It will be different for everyone, and it will change over time. One way of thinking about it is as if you were in a certain landscape, a certain terrain. How would you describe that in one or two words? Bumpy, smooth, calm, bright, gray. What we're doing here is already contacting the felt sense. Whether or not we have found a felt sense yet is not so important, but it's this quality of the gentle sensing inside that is important.

There are two key concepts in this first class that I want to convey. The first one is the felt sense itself, and we'll be working with that throughout this series. Again, it is the way in which the body knows or holds or has our life, our experience, or any particular situation or challenge or problem that we may be working with. The second key concept is called the focusing attitude,

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which is the intention or attitude with which we approach the felt sense. In this case, the focusing attitude is the subjective—where I’m coming from, where you’re coming from—and the felt sense is the object of our attention or awareness. The focusing attitude, quite similar to the attitude of mindfulness, is very gentle, patient, welcoming, and at the same time nonreactive. It’s just a friendly presence toward whatever may arise. My Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche described meditation as making friends with yourself. That remains my favorite definition of meditation practice, and it is equally applicable to focusing. Focusing is a further way of making friends with oneself, and therefore the attitude has to be a very friendly one, nonjudgmental and not pushy but receptive, open, gentle.

I’ve said that the felt sense is felt bodily. It’s physically felt. And yet it’s not simply a physical sensation. The next exercise that we’ll do is to try to differentiate between what’s purely physical and what we mean by felt sense. If somebody steps on our toe or spills hot coffee on us, there’s an immediate strong physical sensation. That’s purely physical. Felt sense is more vague or unclear. It’s about something more than just the sensation itself, but often, it’s not clear what it’s really about until we really spend time with it in this gentle and welcoming way.

Again, come back to your body, your posture, the sense of being present, as much as you can, dropping thought. Now, begin by noticing physical sensations that are simply physical sensations. We can start by noticing the feeling of where our body is contacting the chair or the cushion or the ground. Usually, we don’t pay attention there, but if we bring our attention to that part of the body, there is some sensation there. Then move your attention around the body and notice any other places where there are physical sensations. Right now I’m noticing that the tips of my fingers are cold and I have an itchy spot on my back. Do this for yourself. Notice and perhaps briefly name these physical sensations, but don’t dwell on them. Recognize them and then sense if there are any others that are present for you right now, aches and pains, whatever it might be.

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Now, bring your awareness more into the central region of the body, from the neck down to the bottom, and really try to sense into the inner space there. This is a three-dimensional space, and it's a very sensitive space. You may find purely physical sensations in this space also, like if you have a stomach ache or a torn muscle or a pain in your back. But now try to change the quality of your attention in a certain way so that it is more sensitive to the subtle texture of your lived experience as it is going on just now in your body. Sense a particular part of the body. There might be different felt senses in different locations. The chest, the heart region, and the breathing contain a lot of feeling about what's going on for us, as do the stomach and the gut when we talk about gut feelings. Explore around and see whatever is there for you just now.

This week, until the second class, I want to encourage you to do these exercises on a daily basis if you can. They don't need to take very long. 10 minutes is plenty—or even less. You could do them more than once. The two exercises that go together are GAP, becoming grounded in the body, aware, and present, moving the attention from your base to your head to your heart, and then once your attention is in the center of the body, taking time to notice any purely physical sensations and making an inventory of what you feel physically in that particular moment. Then shift and soften the quality of your attention to something that is more receptive and inviting and empathic. Really, this is a process of self-empathy. Sense what's there in your felt experience. That is, it is physical, but it's not just physical. It's also a kind of a texture, perhaps like a mood, but it has a location. It may have a shape. It may have some movement. Just notice whatever you notice, and don't get hung up about whether it is a felt sense or it isn't a felt sense. That's not so important. It's cultivating this quality of sensing inside. That is the key to the practice at the beginning.

This completes the first class. I invite you to make comments or questions by email. I'll be looking at those and responding to some of them. Next week, we will go on. The title of this first

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class is “Finding the Felt Sense: The Inner Relationship.” Those are the two sides: the focusing attitude and the felt sense. In Week Two, we’ll be welcoming the felt sense, dropping the storyline. I hope to be with you next week. Thank you.