

Focusing and Meditation

by Stefan Beyer

As I see it, meditation is the experience of an “existential” dimension, which may be called Awareness, Now-ness, or Aliveness. Focusing can also be understood as related to this dimension (especially to Aliveness) but does not provide a direct experience of it. Once the organism knows the knack of meditation, Focusing can be a meaningful complementary practise and can help towards an organic spiritual development. Let me explain all this:

First of all, what is the “knack of meditation”?

You may have seen Gestalt pictures like the image of a vase or of two confronting faces, or another one, which can be seen either as the image of an old or a young woman. Once a viewer has a stable opinion about the image, it is hard to see the other option. One needs to tell him things like: Look, what you see as a nose of an old woman can also be seen as the chin of a smaller young face. In the same way, meditation is a change of view. What you experience as a person confronted with a world can also be experienced as an Awareness containing *both* a person and the outside world.

There is a popular non-radical understanding of meditation which does not challenge the conventional view of the person either. It asserts that meditation is a form of deliberate attention, as if being aware is like using a mental muscle. When you try to be aware of your breath or your passing thoughts or whatever, you will usually find that you succeed for some seconds or minutes, but then it seems you become unaware for some time and you start day-dreaming. In the popular understanding it is recommended then to pull your attention back to what is “here and now”.

But what is happening in those moments when you day-dream? You are aware at those times, too, although not in the sense of a deliberate awareness. If you say “now I am not meditating, I am day-dreaming,” that means something in you knows you are day-dreaming. That part which knows is aware. There is an effortless awareness in the background all the time. Instead of pulling

yourself out of the apparent non-awareness of day-dreaming, you can remember the natural uninterrupted effortless awareness in the background. I have tried that and it works and seems to be an advance on practising deliberate attention.

“Here-and-now” is not a quality of certain objects in the world. In a certain physical sense all objects are “there-and-then”: for instance it takes time for light and sound waves to travel to the eyes respective ears and it takes further time to process them in the body; when we look at the sun we see it as it was a few minutes ago. But “here and now” is a quality of Awareness and all aware objects have this quality because of that. It is like with a TV screen: The screen is always now, and therefore anything it shows is now, even if it is a fantasy, a science fiction movie, or a historical event set in ancient Rome. To be present, to meditate, means to remember the screen, it does not mean to change the content of the movie.

That’s why we can access ever-existent awareness also by heeding ever-existent Nowness: Assume you are in a situation which does not significantly change within a few minutes. Let’s say the situation now is roughly the same as five minutes ago. But there is a fundamental difference, and that difference is a sensible quality of Now-ness. (Can you feel that? Do you like it?)

To come back to the change of view as with the Gestalt pictures: Awareness/Nowness/Aliveness can also be seen as my real Center, as “I”. What I conventionally take as constituting my identity: thoughts, felt senses, and body sensations, are now objects, parts of the movie. It is possible to disidentify from them, to see them as “things over there”. But I cannot disidentify from Awareness or Nowness, I cannot look from a non-aware place and see Awareness as any kind of thing. It is always at my side, it is never what I look *at* but always what I look (or hear or sense) *out of*. The experience of Awareness as my real Center feels like abiding in It and as being the whole situation at any given moment.

Although living from another transpersonal center may seem as a move against the organism, in a way it turns out to be maximally carrying forward. On this level everything is paradoxical: giving up a certain involvement with the

person turns out to be person-centered, as embracing, loving, serving the person in a new way. This principle of helpful dis-identification is also used in Focusing in several versions. However, although I think that Gendlin's life work means a revolution in philosophy and psychology, Focusing in my opinion cannot provide the first experience of meditation. Presence or awareness in Focusing is usually understood as an attitude, as something we temporarily *do*, not as what we eternally *are*.

But there is something which Focusing assumes as naturally existing all the time and on which it relies, and that is the life process. So I think the common "deep structure" of Focusing and meditation is rather Aliveness, which I think is another synonym for ever-existing effortless Awareness (How do you know that you are alive? By finding yourself aware). But again: In Focusing we don't ask for the direct experience, we don't ask "What is aliveness?", we "only" use it. And since "we" don't stand above Aliveness, separate from it, one might say Aliveness uses it in us.

There is a cartoon of a Zen master saying to his disciples: "The road to enlightenment is long and difficult, which is why I asked you to bring sandwiches and a change of clothing". As well as sandwiches and clean clothes, it seems that complementary methods that deal with empathy, helping others (and oneself!) or beauty are useful on the road, although (or because?!) these are approaches which take the personal entity seriously. Unconditional love is another intrinsic aspect of Awareness, which is developed this way. I think this is the place where Focusing fits best. Spiritual traditions often start with compassion for others at the expense of oneself, whereas in Focusing we start with self-compassion, which may naturally imply or extend to caring for others. In other words: Many traditional ways recommend to push oneself into a compassionate attitude, whereas in Focusing good qualities arise naturally and are real.

Also helpful as complementary to meditation is contact with people who are stable in abiding in Now-ness (this contact is called Darshan or Satsang), because this state is contagious for those who wish to be affected, just as

yawning or laughing is contagious. Certain kinds of physical exercises or body work can also make it easier to rest in Awareness.

I personally find that I may have an intense interest in meditation for some days or weeks, and then it has no appeal for weeks or even months. I then switch to bodywork methods such as Feldenkrais or to Focusing/TAE or to no special methods at all and then come back to meditation.

Once “the body” has had the experience, Focusing can help to decide when it is time to pursue it or what else to do first. Using the two together, I think one can have a spiritual development in an organic and integrative way.