

[Feeling Feeling: The Experiential Method Applied to Meditation](#)

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This is my latest (May 2010) essay in the area where philosophy meets meditation. The second part of the essay is about my meditation practice itself, and is self-contained and can be read on its own; it contains a section from the previous essay (Touching the Body with the Breath) but is considerably expanded.

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Introduction

In the book 'Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method', [Gendlin \(1996\)](#) writes about the major

avenues of therapy from the standpoint of the 'experiential method'. I would like to do the same for meditation.

However, in this first attempt, I am not surveying all the meditation styles that are out there and applying the experiential method to them. Perhaps that will be a future project. This more modest first attempt is to apply the experiential method to meditation generically, and by extension to how I think about and practice my own meditation.

This paper is thus a venture to make clear for myself both a context for meditation and a practice of meditation that rely on experience and feeling as their foundation. The conceptual analysis and belief systems surrounding my meditation (both context and practice) need to be derived from experience and feeling, rather than the other way round, which I find often to be the case.

In the [first part](#) of this paper I explore my context for meditation (why I want to do it, what I want to get out of it, and some philosophy behind it) by using the word 'feeling', examining how it is used, and how I want to use it.

In the [second part](#) I explore my meditation practice (how I do it). My starting point here is that breathing is more than air going in and out of the lungs. Much of this essay is then to inquire in what sense 'more', and what the value, if any, of that 'more' is. This second part can be read on its own as a portrayal of my own meditation.

I am led to think of 'meditation' as feeling feeling. This is in contrast to most meditation styles, where meditation is to realize some other - nirvana, god, true self etc.

In [part 3](#) I discuss focusing and meditation, and finish with a short section on the [purpose](#) of it all.

Part 1 - Context For Meditation, And Some Philosophy

The Experiential Method

In the experiential method as outlined by Gendlin (1996), theories and beliefs are used for their experiential value, rather than their truth content: '*...theories, concepts, and words mean the actual experiences they have brought up*'. For example, 'I believe in X' is normally judged as a true belief (if X is the case), or false. The experiential method, however, asks what it is *like* to believe in X, what is the experience of believing in X, how does believing in X *feel*.

One advantage to doing this is that one can usually think much further from the experience. Experiencing or feeling, in the wider sense I use it in this paper, are much more 'intricate and multifaceted' than concepts and logical thinking (although of course we do not want to lose the precision that the latter give). I amplify this below.

Another advantage of the experiential method is that we can use many theories and belief-systems. They may contradict each other, but the concrete experiences that each bring do not contradict. Gendlin (1996) uses this fact to look at the varied avenues of psychotherapy, and as I said in my introduction, I would like to do the same for the various styles of meditation, although this paper only looks at one style of meditation - my own.

I also wish to widen the phrase 'experiential method' to mean a relentless and unforgiving emphasis on experience and feeling as the source and touchstone of what I do, say and think. Conceptual thought is important also, but it needs to continually be immersed in my experience if it is not to become dry and

irrelevant to my situation. I have found that it is easy to pay lip-service to such a stance, but that in practice much of what I do, say, and think, is shot through with unexamined belief-systems - both mine and others. I have certainly found this to be true of meditation.

I sometimes think of this widened sense of the experiential method as the spirit of David Hume ([Hume 1739+](#)). There are many understandings of Hume, and what he was 'really' saying, and I find Hume scholarship can be dense and tedious. I reject the usual interpretations that his importance was either as the culminating British Empiricist (following Locke and Berkeley), or that he initiated 19th century Idealism by waking up Kant. When I read him directly in his own original words, one thing strikes me forcibly, that I have not read in many interpretations of Hume: and that is the centrality to his thought of feeling.

Hume is known as the ultimate empiricist, and commentators and Hume scholars talk of his empiricism, his reliance on experience and on custom for what is important to us, on sensation, on his 'mitigated scepticism', on his natural philosophy. But I don't often see in Hume scholarship the word that Hume himself used frequently - 'feeling'.

Feeling

The word 'feeling' has a wide range of meanings and usage. I will sketch some ways that the word is used. Wittgenstein could not define 'game', but could point to its usage, and held that native English speakers generally agreed in a given situation when it was appropriate to use the word 'game', and when not, even though the word may be indefinable. I suggest that the same is true of the word 'feeling', and here I start with an outline.

To 'outline' means to delineate the border cases, so I will start comparing feelings with sensations. If I look at a tree, I might say 'I sense the tree', but a more natural way to say it would be 'I see the tree through my sense of sight'. I would not say 'I feel the tree' while I am some distance from it and merely seeing it, although I might say that seeing the tree arouses in me feelings, if I know that particular tree well for example.

However, if I move close to the tree and sense it by touch, I would certainly say 'I feel the tree'. So some sensations are also feelings, but not all. In the same way, I would describe my bodily sensations as feelings - I feel pain as well as sense pain, I feel my stomach rumbling as well as sense it. The Greek Stoics spoke of Aristotle's 'common sense' as an 'inner touch' ([Heller-Roazen 2007](#)), and perhaps we can then say that when I sense what is close to me or what I am intimate with, I 'feel' it in addition to sense it - I am 'touching' it.

We often call our emotions 'feelings' as well - I feel angry, or I feel love, or I feel happy. An emotion (say anger) usually has a bodily sensation that goes with it. I will typically think of them as two distinct things - the emotional anger which I consider a state of mind ('I hate you'), and the accompanying bodily sensations (knotted stomach, increased heartbeat). But interestingly, I call them both feelings - I feel angry, and I feel my stomach knotted and I feel my raised heartbeat. I am suggesting this might be so because they are both close to me: I am intimate with both my mental emotion and my physical sensation, so both are 'feelings' to me.

I can extend this idea to other mental states that I would not consider emotional. I know the fact that the USA lies between Mexico and Canada geographically. Do I 'feel' that mental state, that cognition? Probably not, it is just a piece of general knowledge which has no close associations for me - it is neutral, I

am in no way 'intimate' with it. But I could say of other bits of knowledge or beliefs that I do feel them, and I would then be indicating I am close to them, I am intimate with them personally. That I am losing my job next week is a piece of knowledge, a cognitive state, but I am surely justified in saying that I feel it (intensely, as it happens) as well as know it.

David Hume wrote that beliefs are also feelings: *...belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind.* He held that our essential notion of necessary connections, most famously cause and effect, are primarily feelings generated by 'custom'. He even held that beauty is a feeling: *Beauty, whether moral or natural, is felt, more properly than perceived.* [Burton \(2008\)](#) can be regarded as a recent scientific update on Hume. He writes: *I have chosen to lump together the closely allied feelings of certainty, rightness, conviction and correctness [as]...the feeling of knowing...* and he argues cogently for this view.

I would also add 'understanding' and 'drive' to this list: I may know a fact but not feel it, for example that the three angles of a triangle add up to two right angles. But if I follow the proof closely and with interest, I may actually understand that fact, which is surely then a feeling - a familiarity, a feeling of rightness, an 'aha' moment - which leads me to suggest that understanding is a feeling - knowing plus the feeling of knowing. And in the same way, the spring of our activity, what drives us, is surely something that we apply the word 'feeling' to as well. If we have a purpose, but do not feel it, would it drive us? I would say not; a purely intellectual or conceptual purpose which is not felt would drive us hardly at all, and to drive us far needs not only to be felt, but passionately felt.

I take all these points as further indication that what is important to me personally, what is intimate or close to me, what touches

me, I then use the word 'feeling' of it, whether it be a sensation, an emotion, a drive, or a cognition. My example of physically sensing the tree is an exact analogy: the tree over there, which I see from a distance, I am not close to so I do not feel it, only sense or experience it; but when I am close to it, reach out my hand and touch its bark, then I am intimate with it and so I both sense and feel it.

Can feelings be unconscious? Do I have to be aware of a feeling for it to be a feeling? While many definitions of 'feeling' in my dictionary suggest that awareness is a necessary ingredient, not all of them do. Certainly the phrase 'unconscious feeling' is used (it has over 38,000 hits on Google, many more if you couple 'feeling' with 'unaware' and cognates) and I believe that it makes sense to talk of my having feelings that I am unaware of. Feelings can drift in and out of my awareness on a spectrum, and it makes sense to say that a feeling was on my threshold of awareness, for example; or that I am now aware that this strong feeling is driving me, as surely the same feeling was also driving me just a moment ago when I was unaware of it.

I am suggesting that the salient and essential feature of the word 'feeling', across all its meanings and usages, is that I use it of what is important, intimate, close and 'touching' me. Nothing is more important, intimate, close or touches me, than my inner life, my being and becoming, who I am and what I do. When I introspect, the word that sums up best what I find is 'feeling' - not just one feeling, but a whole 'mass of feeling' (the philosopher F H Bradley's phrase, [Bradley \(1893\)](#)).

And yet not just an undifferentiated mass of feeling, but a mass which has a rich order and structure to it, what Gendlin calls 'intricate'. My feelings seems endlessly patterned, rather like a fractal that no matter how much you go into it you see yet more structure and strands; but unlike a fractal which, though endlessly

patterned, is mathematically determined, the feeling mass I am referring to has further detail in it which is often a surprise and exceeds my thoughts. That, of course, is the whole point of the experiential method, since I am then challenged to think further and more precisely by this excess.

I therefore put feeling at the heart of being human. This intricate mass of feeling is the driving force behind my behavior, surely much of it beyond my awareness, rather like the ocean where I see the waves and the surface features, but they are the product of deep forces in the ocean that I cannot see - but it is all ocean (the ocean waving, as Alan Watts would say).

Who am I?

This question 'Who am I?', or similar, features in many spiritual systems and is often the title of the starting chapter in self-help books. It is sometimes posed as *the* question which any seriously thinking person must get to grips with. In the previous section I advocate that we use the word 'feeling' of what I am intimate with, or of what touches me in the widest sense, physical or mental.

So who or what is this 'I' or 'me', or the 'person', who is touched and so feels? Following the spirit of David Hume and the experimental method of Gendlin (1996, p.286ff), I will attempt to point to it, in the same manner as I did of 'feeling' above.

In normal English usage, we use the pronoun 'I' or 'me', or the word 'person', in at least two ways. One is to include the whole human, their body and mind, traits, characteristics, contents etc. We say: I am smart and that person is stupid, I am English and you are American, I am male and she is female. The second way is to use the word 'I' and 'person' of something inside a human: I am in here thinking these thoughts (I am not the thoughts), I *have* feelings (I am not the feelings); there is a person inside that

hunched up body, struggling to live, behind those eyes looking out; we are just sitting together having small-talk, I want to be with *you*.

In this paper I mean 'I' in the second sense, as the person that has feelings, thoughts, etc. But note that this is an experiential pointing, we need make no metaphysical, ontological, or scientific, theories of what the person that looks out through the eyes actually is. We can think of a person as a spiritual essence, or a kind of homunculus in there, or the collective result of a bunch of neurons firing in the brain, or anything else. The *experience* of someone in there behind those eyes is what I am trying to point to.

The sense of 'I' or personhood is, however, notorious for being difficult to point to. Both David Hume and the Buddha of the Pali Canon said that however they introspected, they never found an 'I' or self. Wherever I point, 'I' is what is doing the pointing, so in a logical sense 'I' cannot be what is pointed at.

An analogy of this dilemma is looking at a landscape painting. There was a place in the landscape where the painter put his easel and made the painting, but that spot was not, and can never in fact be, in the picture. We know nothing about that place from which the painting was made (was it a grassy knoll, a parked car, a concrete office block?), only that there was such a place, and that from it the landscape looked like *that*. ([Baggini, 2005, pp.161-2](#)) (Some painters have played with this idea, as in Velázquez's 'Las Meninas' and Magritte's 'The Human Condition I')

So my attempt to point to the 'I' or person experientially may strictly fail, in which case I will have to say that 'I' am what is doing the pointing. I don't believe this makes much of a difference: when I look at myself in a mirror and into my own eyes, there is someone *in* there looking out, whether I can point to it or not, and

that is me. And similarly when I look into your eyes I see *you* in there, if I look closely and lovingly.

Sentimentality, Relativism and Sense Data

If I am embracing and including what drives me (in this experiential sense of me), what is closest to me, and what I am aware of when I introspect, all under the umbrella of 'feeling', or feeling mass, then I need to deal with an obvious objection. This objection can be expressed several ways, but is in essence that I must then lead an isolated, subjective, almost solipsist, life where my guide to what is real is 'merely' what I feel. Not only am 'I' in here somewhere, but I am trapped behind my eyes and can be nowhere else, and can only interact with the 'outside' world removed from it, and can only judge reality by what I perceive in my own skull in a state of cranial loneliness.

Since I use 'feeling' as a more intimate form of sensing, let me start with the old philosophical example of my senses deceiving me when I see a straight stick as bent in water (Plato, Republic, Book 10). Yes, my first glance at the half-submerged stick will lead me to mistakenly see it as bent. But then I can correct that mistaken impression, and how do I do that? By using my senses further: I take the stick out and see it straight, then I put it back in the water slowly at different angles and to different depths, and in very little time I see (sense) the fact of light refraction in water, and I arrive at the truth of the matter.

Recently I had a similar experience with touch. I was washing a dirty egg pan, I thought I had it clean, and under the water I was feeling the inside surface to check. I felt a small lump which I at first took to be a remaining piece of egg, and so I thought I had not cleaned the pan properly. Did my feeling deceive me? Yes, since I then felt some more, and I felt the lump to be in fact the

slight protuberance where the handle is fixed to the pan, and so I concluded that I had washed the pan satisfactorily after all.

In this example I would say something like I corrected or made more precise my feeling. I realize that many people would make a distinction between the 'sense datum' and my interpretation of it; they would say that I 'felt' the same bump, but that my interpretation of what I felt changed from my thinking it was a piece of dried egg to the handle fixing. I do not accept this. Experience and interpretation of experience are first one thing, and only afterwards divided into two for thinking. My 'feeling' was not a feeling of a lump, but a feeling of a lump of dried egg, and later a feeling of the handle fixing. I do not see bits of shape and color (sense data) and from them construct an image of a bent stick: my seeing the stick is primary, although to think about it, and form scientific theorems about it, I may need to break that one primary operation of sensing into distinct pieces, but that comes later after the act of seeing or sensing the stick itself.

So feeling can be wrong, and feeling can be corrected. The charge of relativism, that whatever I feel goes for me simply because I feel it, does not hold. Of course, people say things like 'You tell me Elvis is dead, but I feel him to be alive, so for me he is'. That use of feeling is close to sentimentality, where you stay with your first feeling about anything, and you do not allow it to be corrected however excessive, maudlin, or mawkish, it might be.

I regard sentimentality as being like the first sight of the bent stick in water. You can take as real that first impression, that the stick is actually bent, but you can also use your sense of sight further to correct what is in fact an illusion. Similarly, I can go to Graceland, and surrounded by the hype and Elvis-is-alive fanatics, I can feel him to be alive; sentimentality is then staying with that feeling, whereas what I am arguing for in this paper is to

use feeling further to make more precise my feelings and correct them if necessary.

But first I discuss how to think about (and from) this intricate feeling mass.

Conceptual Thinking And Distinctions

Like 'feeling', the word 'thinking' has a wide territory of usage. In this paper I use 'thinking' to mean conceptual thinking, which means thinking with distinctions.

Every life form makes distinctions. This can be a definition of life, or of living, as that which makes distinctions. Even cells make distinctions - the amoeba distinguishes between food and not-food, between a harmful environment and a safe one. But humans do more than separate the world into distinct categories like the amoeba and all other life forms do, we use distinctions to think with - one of those distinctions even being ourselves as the thinker about which we think.

Thinking further is to make further distinctions, and I need to do the same. Here I make a distinction in the actual concept of 'distinction' itself - I distinguish between stable distinctions, and unstable or fluid distinctions.

Stable distinctions are what we normally mean by 'distinction' - an object or concept that is stable over the timespan that is relevant. The table is a stable distinction, an object there that I sit down at and on which I place other, distinct, objects. Stable distinctions are the building blocks of most commonsense everyday thought, including science and logic.

Boole's 'Laws of Thought', Frege's 'self-identity', Lakoff and Johnson's 'container logic', Gendlin's 'unit model' are all attempts

to conceptualize concepts based on stable distinction, and are founded on the idea that to think of an entity X as stably distinct can be summarized as: it is X (self-identity), it is not non-X (non-contradiction), and of any other entity Y that X is either Y or not Y (tertium non datur, or the 'law' of the excluded middle). Note that only Gendlin highlights the fact that what he calls the 'unit model' consists expressly of stable distinctions (the 'units'); for the others it is all assumed. Frege, for instance, thought that to speak of an object as not being 'self-identical' (stably distinct) was nonsensical.

However, even in classical times stable distinction was questioned. The famous saying of Heraclitus 'It is impossible to step into the same river twice' can be thought of as suggesting that while the concept 'river' might be stably distinct, the river it refers to is not - it is always changing, the world is in flux. Certainly for Cratylus that was case. Aristotle tells us that for Cratylus you could not even step into the same river once, and that he ended up not speaking, and merely pointed to things. I am not suggesting such an extreme position, where words must falsify reality by introducing stability where there is none. There surely is stability and stable distinctions in an everyday sense in our everyday world.

Fluid Distinctions

But if there are distinctions other than stable ones, what might that mean, and where might they be found?

You can of course always push stable distinctions so that they become short-lived, vague, or dependent upon viewpoints - in other words, in a sense unstable. For example, I would surely consider a tree a stable distinction, yet you can dissolve that distinction in several ways: you can consider the tree in one of those nature movies where everything is speeded up, where you

see flowers open and shut in their diurnal rhythm in a few seconds - speed it up some more, so you see a hundred years of the tree's life in few seconds of movie time, and see it spring up and die in seconds. In geological time, the tree's existence is a momentary flash, almost unnoticeable. Or go further to embrace the Mahayana Buddhist idea of 'emptiness', where all seemingly distinct objects are contingent on the rest of the universe, and have no independent existence at all.

Again, I see the object as a 'tree', but a biochemist will see cellulose, an atomic physicist a group of atoms, and an ecologist will see the 'tree' as extending beyond the bark and leaves to include a large area of the forest. And I see a different tree to you, even if for no other reason that we must be standing in different places, and so see the tree from a different point of view.

All these ways of trying to shake the stability of a commonsense everyday distinction are well-known philosophical exercises. However, my starting point is everyday experience, and like David Hume, I do not want to be enticed out of it. So from where I stand, in my normal experience, does the concept of an unstable distinction have any meaning or validity? I would say: Yes - in my feelings.

Feelings themselves can feel vague. What this usually means is that I have a feeling at a point in time, but I don't know what to call it. I will say things like 'I feel kind of funny about going there, excited but nervous at the same time - I feel it as a knot in my stomach.' This phenomenon of having 'a' feeling, but feeling further that it exceeds my thoughts and words about it, and that it is both a mental state and a physical sensation, is very common and I think very important. It is one entry point into Gendlin's Philosophy of the Implicit ([Gendlin 2006](#)).

I am not going to summarize Gendlin's philosophy beyond this one paragraph (in Gendlin 2006 are many references and online

papers of his work). Gendlin says that the body functions implicitly as an unseparated multiplicity; this redefines the body as lived-in, not only an object that is thought about objectively and studied scientifically. Much of human thinking and activity is 'zig-zagging' between the unseparated multiplicity pointed to by a felt-sense in the lived-in body, and the explicit thinking and logic of the 'unit' model. Each thrives off the recognition of the other.

An example of this 'zig-zag' is common speech. I do not think about the words I am going to say - I feel what I am going to say (implicit), and I open my mouth and appropriate words come out (explicit). If I do think about the words too much, I am tongue-tied, or my speech is stilted and artificial. A common occurrence is to be wanting to say something in a group, impatiently waiting your turn, and when your turn to speak comes, you have lost it! You say you have 'dried up' (a British expression). What do you do? You try to feel what you wanted to say - reading notes might help you to get that feeling back, but reading notes is just reading, not speaking. When and if you manage to feel 'it' again, then the words pour out.

I am going to take what of Gendlin's philosophy I want for my own purposes and for this paper. I am calling my body-as-lived-in an 'intricate mass of feeling'. When I introspect, this phrase best expresses what I experience. I am calling Gendlin's 'unseparated multiplicity' fluid distinctions. Note the phrase 'fluid distinction' - fluid alone denotes no distinction, so the phrase 'fluid distinction' is saying more than the sum of the two words, just as Gendlin's phrase 'unseparated multiplicity' says more as a phrase than the two words. My mass of feeling is not a solid mass with no differentiation; yet nor is it a collection of stably distinct feelings, although often I can pick out such feelings and call them stably distinct.

I have to say that the feeling mass I feel has distinctions, but many of them are fluid, perhaps like my ocean analogy of waves and currents in the ocean deeps that are only known by their effect at the surface. Note that when I say I 'introspect', I am feeling the feeling mass, and the phrase 'fluid distinctions' seems to me most apt to describe an important quality of this mass of feeling or feelings that I feel. Note also that I don't know whether it is a mass of feeling (singular), or a mass of feelings (plural) - I will use either as I feel.

Summary Of Part 1 - Context For Meditation, And Some Philosophy

The 'experiential method' stresses the importance of *experience* in using theories, beliefs, concepts and words in addition to their truth content or explicit form. I take the word 'feeling', and from common English usage, take it to be experience which is important, close, intimate, or touches me.

When I introspect, what I experience is best described as an intricate mass of feeling; it is the most intimate knowledge of my humanity - indeed my existence - that I can find. Any strand of feeling I separate out from this mass, with its own identity, can open up further into the intricate mass with many more strands and possibilities available (this is the meaning of 'intricate' here). Although these can be many, they are not arbitrary, but are offered precisely. I can think and form concepts from them, and then re-immense my thought into the feeling in a process which is at the heart of the 'experiential method'.

Part 2 - The Meditation Practice

Meditation

The word 'meditation' is from Latin *meditari* (to consider) which is from the Indo-European root *med-* meaning 'to measure' (compare Greek *medon* = a ruler, Latin *modus* = measure, Sanskrit *midiur* = estimate). You can say that the word 'meditation' is merely an inaccurate 19th century English translation of an ancient Indian, Chinese and Japanese practice known as *dhyana*, *chan*, *zen*, respectively - just as 'mindfulness' was the first (and inadequate, but it has stuck) translation of the Pali word *sati*, by the early western Pali scholar T.H.Rhys-Davids, who had in mind the Christian payer to be 'mindful of others' ([Thanissaro 2008](#)). But that highlights the first point I want to make about my meditation practice: I put no faith in practices simply because they are ancient and hallowed.

It may well be that I have an experience in meditation, and I then look around for a conceptual system with which to explain and to think about that experience, and I pick on an ancient Eastern belief-system for this purpose. However that may be, I am wary of it becoming the other way round, where I pin my faith on a belief-system and then try to make my meditation practice fit that belief-system. I have in fact done exactly that for forty years, meditating in a Hindu-Bhakti style following a guru, and in various Theravada Buddhist styles, which I have written about elsewhere ([Finch 2009](#)). So yes, I admit to being prejudiced against being told what to believe and how to meditate.

I go further: I do not believe you can be taught meditation; you can only learn it. I find the phrases 'meditation teacher' or 'spiritual master' contradictions. You can no more be taught to meditate than you were taught to walk or how to ride the proverbial bicycle. At most, all such a 'teacher' can do is make suggestions, and provide a context, within which the other learns and discovers.

This point is as important for veteran meditators as for novice ones. In my experience, most meditation is trying to actualize what ajahn X or roshi Y or guru Z told you. It is the taking in of someone else's belief-system (the explicit) and trying to make your implicit understanding conform to it. That is not to say that others' ideas and beliefs can not be constructive and helpful, but only if I check them into my own implicit understanding and let them emerge into the explicit as my own, which is exactly this point I am making.

With that out of the way, I return to the etymology of the word 'meditation', and I find that its root meaning of 'to measure' fits well with what I am trying to do - measuring (evaluating, handling, touching) what I feel. So my short definition of what I mean by meditation, might be touching my feelings, and since I equate touching and feeling with intimacy, I can describe my meditation as the title of this paper - feeling feeling. (Note that *dhyana*, *chan*, *zen*, come from root *dhya-* = to see).

Although I step away from traditional forms of meditation practiced in monasteries and retreat centers, my practice can look very like them. I sit stationary for long periods, for example, but I need not - I also meditate, in my sense, both for short periods (a few minutes) during the day, and while living my everyday life. I am meditating now as I type these words.

It might also seem to a veteran meditator that 'feeling feelings' is an unambitious meditation goal. Shouldn't I be striving to attain nirvana or the Void, or to see God in my heart, or to find the undifferentiated pure light of awareness beyond all my feelings, or to realize my real Self behind my personality? My answer is No. Meditation goals phrased like this are what I am trying to get away from. They too often represent grandiose goals taken from an off-the-shelf belief-system, and are in many cases the opposite of the

'spirit of David Hume' - that reliance on my own experience and the touchstone of my own feeling that I am embracing.

Another very grandiose goal is to have no goals at all. Often meditation teachings emphasize that you must not have an immediate goal - no expectations, no thinking, no trying for a near-term result. Instructions such as 'just be aware of what is', 'let it be', 'relax and let go', 'be choicelessly aware' and 'don't listen to the mind/ego' proliferate. While such instructions have their place, they are not starting points.

I have three starting points. I am not quite sure whether to call them starting points - they are that, but they are also ending points as well. I will explain them below as three meditation phases. You can take them as steps if you will, where you move sequentially from phase #1 to #2 etc. Or you can take them as merely three headings which I need to explain what I do and how I do it.

I call this 'my meditation' because it is actually how I meditate. Perhaps I could think of it as a new style of meditation, and call it something like 'Experiential Meditation'. But I consider more that it is the experiential method as applied to meditation, as I say in my title. So I will continue calling it 'my meditation', because that is what it is.

Phase #1 - Feeling Loving Stillness

The first phase, or starting point, of my meditation is to use my breath to feel what I describe as a loving stillness, or even my home. I need to create a calm or still place first, in which I am loved or feel at home, where I feel good, and from which I feel comfortable to do whatever further needs to be done.

One way to create a feeling is to use the breath. It is easy to observe that your breath is affected by how you feel - if you are agitated or flustered, you breathe fast and shallow, for instance. But the reverse is also true, and you can breathe for an effect. For example, take three quick staccato in-breaths, and immediately you will feel speedy, the beginning of the fight or flight reaction; take a long expansive out-breath, like a deep sigh, and immediately start to feel relaxed.

I do not have specific instructions on how exactly to breathe to create the good feeling I call 'loving stillness' (if you feel it does not yet exist) or to touch it (if you feel that it does already exist). As I have said above, I do not believe you can be taught this, but you can experiment and find out for yourself how to do it - perhaps something like a koan. Not a traditional or mental koan, however, from the Zen tradition ('what is the sound of one hand clapping' etc) but a body koan, or as my friend Will Johnson calls it, a somatic koan.

Here as an example is a simple somatic or body koan: Stand or sit as upright and tall as you can, and as relaxed as you can (a common meditation instruction). These appear superficially to be opposites: if I sit as tall as I can I will typically make effort and strain my muscles to do so; if I relax, I will typically slump. How to do both at the same time? There are lots of detailed instructions by bodyworkers and meditation teachers how to do both. I personally find them confusing, and I always end up straining to relax. But if I stand or sit with this suggestion (be as tall as possible and as relaxed as possible) and just give this suggestion to my lived-in body, and ask it to sort it out for me, I find I can contain bodily as one whole what my mind thought of as two opposites. I can feel how I want to feel, and my body and mind cooperate, and I edge and feel my way to stand or sit straighter, and be more relaxed, at the same time.

I am not suggesting that sitting or standing like this is necessary for meditation; I only mention it as an example of what I mean by 'body koan'. The body koan that I *am* suggesting is necessary is this: find a stillness in the breath's motion.

Here are more suggestions (note: strictly suggestions, not instructions):

-- First, try concentrating on the breath with a targeted central beam of attention, surrounded by a wider expansive halo of awareness. Initially I find a central point to concentrate on: a movement in my body due to the breathing - belly motion, midriff, chest, or throat; or the feeling of air in my nostrils, throat or upper lip; or the sound of air coming in and out. I attend to that point, but simultaneously be aware of the breath and body around that central point using my concentration's diffuse wider halo, with the suggestion to my organism (body + mind) that I breathe so as to be still. If my chosen point does not work, I try another one.

-- Pretend that you are breathing through parts of the body other than the nose or mouth; for example, breathe with the whole body through the skin's pores

-- Feel the abdomen as a sponge: accentuate your out-breath to squeeze this sponge in, and then let go and feel the in-breath as a natural result of the sponge expanding.

-- Feel the stillness at the end of the out-breath and make no attempt to either breathe or not breathe; let your body take the next in-breath (the sponge expanding) on its own.

-- Experience being breathed, rather than being the breather.

-- Breathe slower, longer, deeper, and quieter (Andrew Weil's suggestion).

-- Think of the breath as your friend wanting to teach you.

- Think intimately of the breath as an inner lover caressing you.
- Think expansively of your in-breath as the universe's out-breath into you; your out-breath as the universe drawing its in-breath.
- Experiment with other metaphors of the breath, and different ways of relating to it; for example, riding the breath, surfing the breath, dancing with the breath, entering inside the breath.
- Feel your breath falling in and out of you.
- Be a connoisseur of the breath, like of fine wine.
- Sense your weight being supported by the ground or the earth or the chair or the cushion, and your breath interacting with that support.
- Breathe from your uttermost depths. (Alan Watts' translation of Chuang Tzu: 'The pure of old breathed through their heels').
- Learn some basic anatomy concerning the lungs, diaphragm, chest, and belly, and try to feel it in operation as you breathe. Or just knowing it without even trying to feel it can make a difference. (Example: many people have stiff necks or muscle pain in the shoulders area. Just knowing that the head is supported on the spine at a point approximately midway between the ears - the atlanto-occipital joint - can often help. Most people think of the head as supported much further back; just knowing its correct position, without trying to do anything with that information, can often dramatically loosen the neck and shoulders area.)
- Instead of attending to one point, try two points at once, say the sound of the breath and the belly movement, or the feel of the breath in the nose or on the lip and chest movement, or in the head and at the base of the spine (the perineum).

-- Try putting your attention on two processes (rather than two points); for example, on the in-breath feel the *outward* and expansive movement of your trunk (belly, chest, back) at the same time as the *downward* movement of your breath through the nose or mouth into the lungs, and the diaphragm's move down into the belly; on the out-breath, feel the *inward* and contracting movement of your trunk at the same time as the *upward* movement of the diaphragm and air out of the lungs and through the nose or mouth.

-- Try counting the breaths: either a set number of out-breaths (say four or ten) and start again when you reach that number; or continue counting and see how high a number you can get to.

-- Hear the sound of ocean waves or water lapping in your breathing.

-- If being with the breath is just too confusing, drop it and try body-scanning. Give your attention to parts of your body in a predetermined sequence, say feet on up, or crown of head on down. You can scan the body surface, your skin (perhaps your lover is caressing you); you can scan the body inside, perhaps following each bone one after the other, even naming them mentally as you do so, or each muscle group, or try to feel the visceral organs; you can scan your body in horizontal (transverse or axial) slices, like a hospital scanning machine (Goenka's method).

-- Feel free to move and squirm around. There is no need to maintain an unmoving rigid posture. Stand up for five minutes (if you are sitting) half way through your session.

-- A good length of time for a meditation session is five minutes longer than you are comfortable with. But feel free to give up before that. If nothing works this time, perhaps it will next time - particularly if you are gentle with yourself, no need for heroics.

-- Don't demonize the ego/mind. There is nothing to conquer or overcome. There is only a request to your organism as a whole (body+breath+mind) to fulfill the somatic or body koan to find a spacious and loving stillness in the breath. If it doesn't comply, it doesn't; try again later.

-- Above all, experiment; this is both an accepting process (being with what is) and at the same time an active one, rolling up your sleeves to try things out and discover for yourself what works for you.

-- There is no right or wrong way of meditating, as I mean it in this paper, as far as following instructions including of course these suggestions. The only right and wrong is from the whole body+mind's feedback relating to the overall goal of becoming spaciously and lovingly still.

Buddhist Interpretation

I digress for a few paragraphs for the benefit of Buddhist readers. What I have described above as 'phase #1' of my meditation is in the spirit of what the Buddhist Pali Canon calls the 'first *jhana*', where the practitioner aims for:

...rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal. Just as if a skilled bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder - saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without - would nevertheless not drip; even so, the monk permeates... this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of withdrawal. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal. (Samannaphala

Sutta, Digha Nikaya 2, Pali Canon, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

I replace 'rapture' and 'pleasure' by my phrase 'loving stillness'. The 'withdrawal' in this context means withdrawal from sensual interaction with the outside world - in other words, you are in meditation ('withdrawn' - eyes closed or half-closed, etc). The equivalent image of kneading bath powder with water for us would be kneading flour and water to make dough for bread, where the feeling of loving stillness permeates 'this very body' like the dough - no water drips, and no particle of flour remains dry, each permeates the other completely.

In other parts of the Pali Canon, it is made clear that using the breath is the easiest and most direct way of obtaining the first *jhana*. The breath is used for a purpose: 'one trains oneself' to be sensitive to the whole body and the mind, and to calm the bodily and the mind, and so on, by breathing appropriately (Anapanasati Sutta). It is never spelled out how exactly to breathe to accomplish these goals, but again it is clear from the Pali Canon that you have to figure this out for yourself. There are no instructions - there cannot be any instructions - you breathe and feel your way into the feeling you are aiming for, which I call loving stillness.

This is further suggested in the quote above, where you meditate with 'directed thought and evaluation'. There is considerable debate among Buddhist scholars what is the exact meaning of the Pali words (*vitakka* and *vicara*), but I follow Thanissaro's interpretation, where *vitakka* means 'directed thought', concentrating, giving your attention to; and *vicara* is best translated as 'evaluation'. In other words, the meditation has an element of concentration and directed attention, but at the same time you have a more expansive area of awareness, rather like the halo of diffused light around the strong central beam of a

flashlight or torch, where you evaluate your feeling, and adjust and tweak it appropriately.

This idea of giving your attention but at the same time pulling back to evaluate how you are doing is also made explicit in the Pali Canon:

Just as if one person were to reflect on another, or a standing person were to reflect on a sitting person, or a sitting person were to reflect on a person lying down; even so, monks, the monk has his theme of reflection well in hand, well attended to, well-pondered, well-tuned by means of discernment. This is the fifth development of the five-factored noble right concentration. (Samadhanga Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya 5.28)

This quote is even more powerful if it is the same person, and not two, so that you can imagine a person sitting and that same person also standing and reflecting on their own sitting.

This is a skill that most gifted performers have: the violin virtuoso can be absorbed in her performance, but still a part of her is objectively monitoring it so she can do better next time; and the athlete 'in the zone' is concentrating effortlessly on enjoying his record-breaking run, but is simultaneously evaluating it for future improvement.

Phase #2 - Feeling Movement

You will have your own name or description for the feeling generated or touched in phase #1. The main point is that it should feel good, something that refreshes, a place where you want to be. In my own meditation, it *feels* to me as if I am loved, and I *feel* still, so a phrase that fits for me is 'loving stillness'.

But of course I am not literally still. Physically my heart is beating, and however stationary I try to remain in my chosen posture, there will be micromovements at least, and probably a little squirming around and occasional readjustments. Perhaps the most noticeable movement is the rhythmic motion in the trunk of my body in response to my breathing, and this is what I call phase #2 - to feel the movement of my body as I breathe.

Some people might want to consider this the first step, and the feeling of stillness to come out of it - in other words, to switch my phases #1 and #2 round. Since these are not instructions, but only suggestions, then of course that is fine. The reason why I have them in the order that I do, is because I am interested in quite subtle body movements, and these can only come naturally, and for me this means they come out of my feeling still.

First, there are the obvious movements, the most obvious being the movement of the belly or abdomen when you breathe deep and slow. That is caused by the diaphragm moving down as you breathe in, and with a little attention you can be aware of other movements in the body trunk - perhaps the ribs moving a little, and the chest. With attention lightly on those movements, you can soon start to feel other movements in the trunk area as well.

There are many breath philosophies and breathwork practices of all kinds which start at this point and move in their respective directions. Some, such as yoga pranayama, manipulate or direct the breath for some effect. Others like Alexander Lowen talk of the 'natural breath' where you feel the breath like a wave in the whole body. A well-known Buddhist practice is to train yourself to 'breathe sensitive to the whole body' (Anapanasati Sutta, Pali Canon) with many variations on that theme. Ilse Middendorf has been the source for a number of schools of breathwork, all with emphasis on the gentleness and naturalness of the embodied breath.

However, I am suggesting that no specialist knowledge in breathwork is necessary, but that from the loving stillness in phase #1, it can be a natural progression to become aware of more and more subtle motion in the body as you breathe.

Starting with the obvious motion of the abdomen or belly as you breathe, one way to be aware of more subtle movements is to pay attention to two breath movements at the same time. On the in-breath, I pay attention to the *outward* expansion of my belly (and indeed my whole body trunk), and at the same time to the *inward* and downward movement of the air and diaphragm. They appear contradictory, but after a short time practicing this any contradiction disappears, and I see they complement each other, and combine to give a deeper awareness of my breathing body. On the out-breath my body trunk moves *inwards*, and the diaphragm and air move upwards and *outwards*.

The primary suggestion I have is that the movement is not to be forced. The chest or abdomen is not moved directly, hoping the breath will follow, but the breath itself is attended to and the accompanying movements noticed. Even so, one cannot be dogmatic about it, as this is an interaction and a learning experience that I have to feel out, and perhaps at some points I do need to move parts of my body-trunk directly. But in general my primary suggestion holds of allowing the breath to dictate how my trunk moves.

With practice, I then find that the natural breath-induced body movements extend beyond the belly, ribs and chest. The next places to feel the breath's motion are probably the perineum and sitting bones below. If I am sitting, then it is easy to feel the pressure of the chair, stool, or cushion, on my sitting bones. As I allow an unforced breath in, with my attention on my sitting bones, I feel them move - sometimes I feel them actually widening a small amount, but more usually there is just a shift in the pressure

on them from the chair or cushion. In other words, there is bodily movement beyond the usual belly-chest axis, and I can feel it. The challenge of course is to notice when I try to will my sitting bones to move directly, wanting to make it happen as a sign of 'progress' perhaps. Then I need to feel and work around it, since the movements I am looking for are caused by my breath, and not by my directly trying to move those muscles.

Not only can I feel movement below my abdomen, but I can also go further up beyond the chest, and feel the breath's motion in my throat, face and head (as distinct from the flow of air through the nose, mouth and throat).

I have a friend who is a craniosacral worker, and who works with the very subtle movements of the body, and particularly the skull. I spent a weekend once on a craniosacral workshop with him, and even in three days I was amazed at how much and how subtle a motion I could learn to feel with my hands. He and I have experimented, and with his hands on my skull, he says he can feel my breath (when I allow it to become natural) in my skull and face. This confirms to me that such a motion is actual, even though it may be as small and as subtle as the craniosacral wave and other phenomena such therapists work with.

I find a huge value to feeling out these fine body movements as I breathe. They play a part in my phase #3 below, but they also help phase #1 mature and allow me to feel loved (perhaps because I feel massaged by them) and to feel still (perhaps because the motion I can detect is so refined, on the border of stillness as it were). And yet I nonetheless call this phase '#2' because without feeling good first I find it hard to feel into what is at first tenuous and indistinct in my breath and body's motion.

Phase #3 - Feeling Feelings

Phases #1 and #2 of my meditation suggestion are often what I am looking for: To feel in a good place, to feel warm and loved inside, to feel the gentle motions of my body as I breathe peacefully. These are all wonderful, and often that is enough. But there is a third phase to my meditation.

Feeling drives me. In my meditation sitting this morning, I had a strong feeling. When I became a little still, I realized that my background stress and strain was significant and important, and I gave it my attention. Within a minute or so it had coalesced into a strong physical feeling in my stomach area (like a nervous hunger, but not hunger for food; a jittery feeling) and a strong emotional feeling like despair or sadness.

I cannot adequately describe this feeling, apart from my tentative 'jittery' (physical) and 'despair' (emotional) labels for it, but they do not do it justice. The feeling does however have an identity - it is *that* feeling - and just now I stopped typing for a few seconds and was able to feel *that* feeling again, and now I feel it clearly even as I type.

Not only does that feeling have an identity, it also has power. I see that it drives me, and in fact could easily overwhelm me today, like a large wave on the ocean over which I have no control - I can only try to surf it skillfully or I will be swamped. Most of my major decisions today will come from this feeling, whether I am conscious of it or not. How I react to people, how I write my emails, what I do and how I do it, will all be driven by this feeling. It is like the base rhythm in a piece of music that will drive my dancing and movement, no matter what melodies I play on top of it.

There are many ways to try to deal with this kind of situation. What I actually did this morning was feeling the feeling more. I felt I was on the edge of something big, that here was where the action is, that all my philosophies and understandings and ideas

and beliefs were like straw blowing in a powerful wind, and it was the wind (storm even) itself where I should put my attention. In fact, I feel like on the edge of a tempest or hurricane, huge powers churning in my life - sounds overly dramatic perhaps, but that is what it is - so of course it demands my attention.

When looking at a storm, it is useful to have a point of reference, a fixed point like the top of a tall building or the top of a tree against which to view the swirling wind and sky. My reference is my breath, or more precisely, the natural movements of my body produced by my breath. So I need the skill of holding two processes in my awareness at the same time, and be fully aware of that feeling, and at the same time be aware of my breath. No matter how big and overwhelming whatever I am feeling, I am still breathing (if I am not breathing, then I have a much bigger and more immediate problem). My breathing may be jagged and awkward, and significantly altered by what I am feeling, but it is still there.

In my example the feeling is one of 'despair' (I inadequately called it), or even pain, but of course feelings can be beautiful, calm, still (my phase #1), fearful, angry and many others. They may just be physical (indigestion) or life-changing turmoil (what I feel I am going through today), but they have an identity (named or not, conceptualized or just felt) and they need to feel relevant, important perhaps, dominant even - at least attention grabbing.

The essence of this phase #3 is then to simply be aware of both at the same time - my breathing, however agitated it might be, and that part of me that has a clear feeling, and where in my body they interact. I have found that each affects the other for the better. Of course, if my breathing is strong and wholesome, then that alone will powerfully cause a change; but in this kind of situation it often is not, it is disturbed, shallow, and rough (as it was for me this morning).

While that part of me in pain (in my own example here) might be like a crying infant, then the breath is like a parent or babysitter holding it. But the parent or babysitter (my breath) is as I say agitated, and might even be in as bad a way as the crying baby. But a distraught parent or babysitter, in the act of loving the distraught baby, are themselves loved and soothed by their own attempt to love the baby. It is an interaction: the crying infant is affected for the better by the parent/babysitter's attempting to love it, and the disturbed parent/babysitter is affected for the better both by the infant and their own attempt to love it.

My breath is also in my body (obviously) but I can feel it moving my body, and moving in my body, and that is the important point. One suggestion I make above is to be aware of the outward and inward movement of my body trunk on the in- and out-breath, and then on to subtler movements. Without forcing it, I can usually feel my bodily movement due to my breath interacting with the bodily location of the feeling (baby, pain, knot), rather like the in- and out- waves of the ocean might lap round a rock on the beach. That is the heart of phase #3.

The feeling will often open, transform, heal, move, as well as the breath around it become deeper and subtler. Many things can happen from this.

One common occurrence is I that have a feeling in meditation, I give it my attention as I describe above, and later - my next sitting a day later possibly - that same feeling comes back with a meaning attached, a pointing to further thinking or feeling. Note the two aspects here: 1) it the 'same' feeling, I identify it as the 'same' without necessarily a handle; and 2) after say twenty-four hours it has a 'meaning' or it points to something.

Sometimes there is no need to wait at all, I can have a profound 'aha' thought immediately within my meditation sitting (yes, I allow myself to think in my meditation), or think from that feeling further

when I get up off the cushion. Sometimes problems are solved, often dramatically, sometimes I just feel a sense of 'rightness' about things. Sometimes I feel a step has been taken in an ongoing process, sometimes a whole new process is started. Whatever the result, it is almost always life-enhancing, and allows me to live richer.

The feeling may also be purely physical, with no obvious emotional or meaning content. I suffer from sinusitis occasionally, where my sinuses behind my nose and my eyes get puffed up and can be very painful. I have found that when I spend some time to meditate, and become deeply spacious and still, my breath movements becomes very gentle but also powerful, and I can feel my sinuses 'popping' and clearing with the catarrh breaking up due to a motion deep in my face and skull that I could never cause to happen by direct will. If my subtle breath-movements can cause such a dramatic physical change, they surely can do the same for other strong feelings, of any type, that I hold in my body.

A Proviso

A word about pain, or a strong feeling. I have found that I benefit from incorporating most feelings - strong and otherwise - into my meditation as I describe above. But of course some strong feelings, including pain, are the body's signal for action - sometimes instant action. If I am sitting meditating and I smell smoke in the house, I do not stay sitting feeling the smoke-smell, but I get up immediately and investigate.

Often during long meditation retreats, people suffer from aching knees through sitting long periods. A common instruction is to stay sitting and 'go through' the pain. Well, yes, sometimes the pain is mind-induced or psychosomatic, and that works; but sometimes the pain is the body indicating that a tendon or joint is

severely stressed, in which case the skillful thing to do is to get up and stretch the joint, or take care of it somehow.

Likewise with emotions: even so-called negative emotions can be a call to action, and have a legitimate purpose, and should not just be 'meditated away'.

So I am not advocating my phase #3 meditation as the one and only way to deal with pain and strong feelings, or even an acceptable way at all for some pain and strong feelings. I would hope this is obvious, but in case it is not I felt compelled to spell it out here.

Summary Of Part 2 - The Meditation Practice

Breathe to feel a loving stillness. From there feel the movements of your body as you breathe, both obvious and subtle. Or feel the movements first, and use that to generate a loving stillness. Or zig-zag between the two.

If a feeling gets your attention, or if you go looking for a feeling and find one, mix that feeling with the movement of the breath, and allow each to cradle the other. You can do this even with feelings which you consider mental or emotional, since they usually have a physical correlate.

I have found this interaction of feeling and breath-movement is always positive, in many different ways, some of them surprising and powerful.

Part 3 - Focusing And Meditation

My own thinking in the last three or so years has been greatly influenced by Gene Gendlin, and I want to acknowledge that here,

and to thank him both for his [large body](#) of well-written work that he has made easily accessible, and for the personal meetings and interaction I have had with him.

I have already stated that what I mean by 'intricate feeling mass' and the fluid distinctions in it, are developed from my reading of Gene, and his concept of the implicitly functioning body, the unseparated many, and the process of implying and occurring which follow from it.

The most well-known practice which attends Gene's philosophy is called 'focusing' ([Gendlin 1982](#)).

One difference between focusing and meditation is that focusing is often formally presented as being concerned with only a subset of feelings, which Gene terms 'felt-sense'. A felt-sense is a feeling that is a 'direct referent', a feeling of the implicitly functioning whole, a feeling of 'all that', a feeling that may be vague and murky round the edges (and usually is at first) but which is a sense of the whole issue (problem, situation).

My meditation is concerned with all the meanings of 'feeling' that I have outlined above, and as the word is used in normal English usage: intimate or close sensations, touchings, emotions, beliefs (if you accept Hume and Burton), drives, 'raw feels', transcendental presence, understanding, and of course Gene's felt-sense.

A concern of some focusers is to distinguish between feelings that are felt-sense, and those which are not. For example, is that queasy feeling in my stomach indigestion, or a felt-sense? If it is the first, then it is ignored in a focusing session (although you might then focus on the feeling you have about your having indigestion), whereas in my meditation I give my attention to the queasy stomach if it is a dominant feeling, whether it be indigestion or a felt-sense or anything else.

In focusing 'thinking' (meaning conceptual analysis and explication) is usually distinguished from feeling the felt-sense. In general English usage, in fact, thinking and feeling are often contrasted and considered the two main types of everyday mental activity. This is a distinction that serves us well, but in casting the net of 'feeling' as wide as I have done in this paper, I take there to be a substantial overlap. I can feel concepts (some of them, some of the time). I have already given an example of an intellectual conceptual activity such as a geometric proof becoming a feeling as well, which we might designate 'understanding'.

Comparison between Therapy, Focusing and Meditation

I have just highlighted some perceived differences between the inner practice of focusing and my own 'feeling feeling' meditation. I often hear from meditators in other meditation styles what is different about focusing and meditation in general. Those who have both a committed focusing practice and a committed meditation practice are often at pains to make the distinction clear between these two practices.

Certainly they (and now I include therapy) appear to be different from the outside: therapy is two people in a room talking; focusing is often also two people talking, either in a therapy situation (client and therapist) or in a focusing partnership; and meditation is usually sitting still for long periods, with eyes closed or half-closed, often in a distinct 'meditative' posture (sitting cross-legged, or perched on a chair or stool with straight back).

The reasons for practicing either are also often different. Therapy and focusing can be thought of as a psychological unfolding, working with personal or emotional issues in everyday life, enhancing self-esteem or the sense of 'I', what [Welwood \(2002\)](#) calls looking for 'horizontal shifts'. Meditation is often contrastingly considered a spiritual unfolding, an attempt to transcend ego,

personality or sense of 'I', looking for a 'vertical shift' into something quite other (satori, enlightenment, nirvana, heaven, void, true nature, real self, buddhanature, non-duality etc).

However, when I consider the experiential results of each, the feeling tone, then I do not find so much of a difference. When I hear from my meditating friends who also focus what is the difference, it is usually theoretical and it is the conceptual analysis of both which differ. I hear comments like 'I focus to get centered, and then I meditate to touch undifferentiated or non-dual awareness.' But when I try to probe experientially, both in my own experience and in what I hear from others, I don't feel a difference - being 'centered' and 'touching undifferentiated or non-dual awareness' feel the same, although the expectations and belief-systems around each explication are very different.

Here is a test: suppose I have a problem with chocolate - I eat too much and I cannot stop. Most people would agree that this is a problem to be addressed by therapy or focusing. To suggest it could be addressed by meditation is a no-no. I may need to solve my chocolate addiction in order to meditate better, but to try and solve it through meditation itself is a serious *faux pas* or gaffe, a damaging mixing of modalities or aims, what Welwood (2002) calls 'spiritual bypassing': using a spiritual practice to avoid dealing with some personal or emotional issues.

I am coming to a point in my thinking of rejecting this. It is a kind of spiritual snobbery, a belief that spiritual and meditation practice is beyond personal issues and is only concerned with some great and noble 'other'. There is of course a value in separating out aims, concepts, explanations and beliefs. But my own belief and observation is that much spiritual and meditation activity relies too much on the thinking about it, at the expense of the experience or feeling of it. Interestingly, I find that many spiritual and meditation practitioners would pay lip-service to this view, but that then often

becomes part of the thought *about* one's meditation only, and does not carry through into *actual* experience.

So I both think and feel that the *experience* of successful therapy, focusing and meditation are each not as different as is normally held. And in that case, I would hope that my meditation practice will help me with my chocolate addiction, and I feel no problem in using it with that outcome in mind, although I probably would not use meditation as the only method for that purpose.

A final point: It is said that meditation relaxes a person too much to enable them to focus. I am sure that is correct with some meditation styles, but not, I think, with the meditation that I am outlining in this paper. The image of 'relaxation' being a one-dimensional line, a spectrum where you can only be at one position on it at a time, can be misleading. In my meditation I can feel very deeply relaxed, and yet also alert and sensitive to bodily feels.

Two Meanings of 'Focusing'

I think 'focusing' as used by Gene needs to have two meanings distinguished. First, focusing has a wider expansive meaning, which you can say is near to the whole Philosophy of the Implicit. In this first meaning, I take focusing to be the recognition that there is an intricate feeling mass (implicit functioning, body wisdom, unseparated multiplicity) which can be felt, and a mind which thinks logically and explicates, and that the two can (must, should) enhance each other (zig-zag, implying-occurring).

The second meaning of focusing is as an actual practice of the first meaning. Gene's own 'six focusing steps' is one example, Ann Cornell's 'inner relationship focusing' is another, and there are many more.

Gendlin (1996) writes of any experience that you can seek the felt-sense of that experience. I have been using the word 'feeling', so I will rephrase to say that of any feeling you can seek the felt-sense of that feeling. The felt-sense is often felt to be behind or underneath the feeling, and yet it is not just something already existing waiting to be discovered, but forms freshly as a bodily feeling when appropriate attention is given.

This can be rephrased to say that 'focusing' in the first, wider, sense can be thought of as 'stepping back from a feeling and then turning to it' (Gendlin, private meeting). The 'turning to it' can take many forms, and is what defines the various focusing *practices* (the second meaning). For example, you can ask the feeling how it feels (inner relationship focusing).

In my own feeling of my own feeling, I need to decide how to relate to the initial feeling or experience. For example, do I place the experience over there, trying to be outside it, to see it as a 'that', and then generate a secondary feeling *about* the first one? Or do I go *into* the first feeling, trying to feel it deeper, immerse myself into it? Or do I try to go *through* it to open it up or find a secondary feeling of perhaps more richness? (Note that I do not use 'secondary' to denote less important, only to distinguish from the initial feeling or experience that I am trying to focus *on*).

I find that phase #3 of my meditation covers all of these possibilities, and more. The identifying of *that* feeling is itself the stepping back. The relationship with the feeling, the 'turning to it', is cradling the feeling in my body-breath movement - a form of love, you could say. From that step of love which can be very intimate - the lapping of the breath-waves around and through the feeling - then as I have said, many things can happen.

It is as if I can move easily from such an intimate relationship with my feeling outwards, as it were, to any more distant relationship -

feeling about, feeling into, feeling through, suggesting a handle, and much else.

Purpose

What is the purpose of feeling your feelings as I describe here, of my whole project that I lay out in this paper and elsewhere?

I have many answers, composed of three categories of answer. My first is that my purpose is a feeling that cannot be satisfactorily explicated. If I have a purpose, it is my purpose to feel my purpose. So 'feeling feeling' is an activity that in doing reveals its own purpose.

Then a second category is the many different answers that try to encapsulate or describe a purpose as a task to be accomplished. Here are my two current favorites:

One is that my purpose is to move between the only two certainties that I know, in the most efficient and beautiful way possible. Those two fixed certainties are: one, the undoubted fact that I am alive now, breathing this actual breath right this minute as I type these words; two, that at some point in the future this breath will stop, and I will die. My life is a river flowing from the first certainty to the second, and there is nothing I can do about it, except for the manner in which I make the journey. My ideas in this paper express my best shot at how to make the journey.

Another answer I like is from the Roman Seneca, who wrote two thousand years ago:

You cannot control your desires, and you cannot fulfill them. What do you do?

Although expressed as a question, it is also an answer, in that you can say it strips the human condition down to its barest essentials. You can say then that the purpose of life is to answer this almost koan.

My third category or strategy of answering is that for any purpose which I express in words or thought, feeling my feeling is how to accomplish it. This applies to any expressed 'secret of life' or purpose, not just one's own. As an example, I will quote philosopher Daniel Dennett:

*...one of the best secrets of life: let your **self** go. If you can approach the world's complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to **proper** size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is not easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay **centered**, and **engaged**, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural. ([Dennett 2006](#), page 303 - emphasis in the original).*

Who can argue with Dennett's vision? It consists of noble sentiments, and I would live a wonderful life if I lived like that. The question, though, is how to do it? His vision is predicated on letting your self go, staying centered, and being engaged (all of which he emphasizes, but does not suggest how to accomplish, except to say that it is 'hard') - my question is: How do you do those things?

This paper is my suggested answer. And in fact my answer how to fulfill and carry through any such expression of noble purpose.

So quite independent of any purpose my project of feeling my feelings in my breath may have, it enables me to better make real whatever purpose I may choose to have.

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