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The Difference Between Focusing and Self-Hypnosis

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Very different processes are valuable in human life, therefore defining differences does not at all mean denigrating one in order to recommend the others. It seems quite clear that no one modality of attending to, or working with oneself is enough. In recent years more and more people are becoming able to be quite specific about inward activities. A vast terrain, once esoteric has opened up to people generally. Specific differences can also illuminate that terrain.

Focusing is the process of attending to the bodily sensed "edge" of a problem, situation, or concern. People and their living are not made up of discrete defined units. There is always more to us, more is always involved in any bit of living, than we can clearly say or think. There is more than those few, rather familiar inward "contents" on which we can clearly reflect. There is also always a directly sensed complexity which is not at all clear.

People could not change, problems could not be solved, if one works only with what is already clear. Any problem can be shown to be irresolvable, any difficult situation can be shown to be impossible, if one is closed to the implicit complexity, if one wants only to work with the already cut and defined pieces.

But it is difficult, and unfamiliar to pay direct attention to what is as yet only sensed, only a bodily unease. One's attention must descend into the body. It requires some degree of relaxation, and quietude. On the GSR something like the same increased skin resistance is found, as with hypnosis. There needs to be a cessation of thinking at least for some brief periods. Then, after some time (half a minute or a minute) during which a person's attention is with the sensed complexity, there is what we term a "felt shift." A directly sensed bodily easing, relief, release, is unmistakably experienced, and thereafter the problem is also different. This felt shift involves a further relaxation. The similarities with self-hypnosis are therefore considerable. Some research comparing focusing and hypnosis (Platt, 1971) also found some relationships, as well as differences .

In specifying the differences we can hope to understand both focusing and self-hypnosis more exactly, or at least we can hope to formulate some new questions.

In focusing one speaks to one's inwardness, but then one waits for the bodily response to that. One expects that response to be different than what one said. For example: "I think it's fine to go ahead and reach out to someone, to begin a relationship with a stranger." In saying this, in focusing, one would wait, and expect to sense one's whole problem with this. Having said that it's fine, the sense of "not fine" will come, in a wholistic way. I will explain this more exactly later.

In hypnosis, by contrast, one also speaks to one's inwardness, but one expects one's "suggestion" to be taken on by the body, and obeyed. In self-hypnosis one stills the body first, one narrows the sense of the whole situation so that the suggestions can enter.

Such suggestions by-pass the usual wholistic sense of the context and all its difficulties.

Of course one may do hypnosis just for the relaxation, and a broadly helpful effect is claimed just from that, and is quite probably true. Also, to be able to relax deeply in certain tension-arousing situations can be helpful. But there is a marked contrast between self-hypnosis and focusing. In hypnosis, either everything is dropped so that there is no focus on a specific concern, or the direction in working on a given concern is all from the conscious to the body, whereas in focusing the direction goes both ways.

One might focus on a broad life problem, perhaps "My whole experience with human relationships," or it might be very specific, "That funny way Jim said 'I'll see ya,' what was odd about that?" Either way there will be a great complexity sensed all in one whole, involving much past experience, many other people, what one was trying to do just then, or trying to avoid, what led up to that moment, and so on.

Focusing stems from psychotherapy research—a series of studies found that clients can be predicted to fail even from a few tape-recorded segments early in the case, if the EXP level is low. The EXP Scale measures the extent to which the person on the tape exhibits direct sensing of an as yet unclear complexity. One can observe this, for instance, when someone says something, then falls silent, then says: "No, that isn't what I said. I can't say it yet, but it isn't what I said." Metaphoric ways of speaking also refer to "that odd sense it gives me, when . . ." and there are other observable marks. The challenge of the research finding was to teach failure-predicted clients to engage in this crucially lacking process.

Everyone can say much about any problem. Also, given certain states of relaxation, much content comes. But focusing specifically requires the bodily sensed complexity, in a wholistic way. When one attends in a certain way, one can sense this, and it often has meanings quite other than those one has been telling oneself.

A second difference: focusing requires attending at a level "lower" than the ordinary, but not as "low" as hypnosis. Focusing might be said to be at the entry level to hypnosis, if such a way of speaking can be used. Let me explain this more exactly: In hypnosis, it is well known that going in and out is very unpleasant, almost torture. It is all right to go into hypnosis and soon back out again and perhaps in again, but going back and forth very often in a short time is painful. In focusing, on the other hand, one is not as deep, in fact not "deep" to any degree. Rather, one stands, fully in ordinary consciousness, just at the doorway to altered states. One lets the sense of the whole concern come and this letting-come is a relaxation of ego control. But the next moment one is fully present, in an ordinary and active way, to receive whatever came. There is not an oscillation between a deep place and a return to another, more ordinary place, rather one stands in one and the same "place," alternately letting, and being active .

Now I know that this description as I have given it, and what I will further say, raises a number of questions about how hypnosis should be conceived. I am glad to raise these questions. I don't wish to make any assumptions or conclusions about hypnosis. Therefore, if my description shows me to be thinking about hypnosis in some way that is controversial, let the question be raised and not necessarily answered in this paper.

Focusing does not work when relaxation is at all deep. For example, when one has difficulty falling asleep, and one wishes to focus on what is keeping one tense, one must sit up in bed. Focusing can not be done while lying in that state which I describe as: "Every part of you is asleep. . .except you. You are wide awake inside." In that state, although one feels wide awake, there is a great degree of relaxation. Similarly, when

during focusing something like sleep comes, one has to set the sleep aside. Also, sometimes during focusing, there is a wish to slide, a suction toward being totally passive. This needs to be noted, accepted, one must actively be friendly to this wish, one must say: "Oh, yes, there is that suction to just slumping." But one must not slump. Else focusing stops. I will show more exactly why that is.

Meditation, also, despite being a fully alert state, involves something like the kind of relaxation I am describing: one cannot usually focus within meditation, one must move one's shoulders a little, open one's eyes, wait till the sparkles wear off. Then one can focus on whatever it is that has been disturbing the meditation. (Of course, the word "meditation" is often used so that it could include what I here called coming out of meditation.)

The second difference I wish to discuss is thus, that focusing is at the entry point to, but not in to, altered states, of which hypnosis is one.

So far it might seem that all is quite clear. Focusing is on a bodily way of living a particular concern, and it is on the entry level, not deeper. Now I wish to use these differences to lead to rather central questions about the nature of hypnosis and about focusing.

What is this "active receiving" which focusing needs, and why does it need that? Why does hypnosis make this active receiving impossible? And is there only one continuum of "lower" or "deeper"?

Let me first explain this active aspect of focusing. As an example, let me discuss just the first (preparatory) movement of focusing, something that is often but not always done before one focuses on a specific concern.

The first movement of focusing is called "making a space." Rather than working on the problem that bothers most, and rather than working on anything at all, one senses in the body whether or not one is feeling all fine about life. Everything is going well. Now, it just about never happens that one finds this true. Nearly always there are a few things the body is carrying, a few "cramps" that come, at such a question, and essentially say, "No. Not fine. This way."

Once one knows focusing, it becomes remarkable that we go about, all day, carrying stress and tension with us, the body retaining some life problems and some trivial things too, hour after hour, routinely.

Having asked "Do I feel all fine about my life," the first unease has come. "Oh yes, that." Making space consists in putting what has come down, in a friendly way. "Oh, yes. That's there. That is a problem. Can't fix it all at once. Might work on that later." One makes a space, quite near oneself but at some distance, where that whole thing can wait. Usually one gets a breath, some relief. This might be as one is putting the whole thing down, or at the next moment. At the next moment one asks: "How would I feel if this weren't a problem, or except for this, aside from this, how would I feel?" One must wait, of course. It takes a few seconds, then there is a change in the body, a breath, a movement of new energy.

Feeling much better, one again askingly says,

"I feel all fine about life, except for that. . .?" and another thing comes. Perhaps it is small, some silly thing one had said earlier in the day. "OK, that still bothers me. Right. Yes. Uhmhm." Again one makes a space for it to be in, maybe later one will come back to see what still bothers. "Except for that, am I fine?"

Sometimes there is also a background feeling, some way one constantly feels, always gray, always trying hard, always running scared. If that is taken out too, and placed as a "something," and again the shift in the body is experienced, there is usually—at the end of this series—a very large fresh wide open space, that has spiritual overtones.

Throughout this first movement of focusing one does not work on anything. Sometimes what comes does give one a step or two, but that is accidental. One is only "making space." Thus the first difference we cited, between focusing and hypnosis, doesn't seem to apply. This first movement is not about one problem or concern. Especially the wide space reached at the end is not about anything. Yet it is different from self-hypnosis. Let me be very specific about these differences:

First we notice that attention is focused in the body , in the middle of the body, and about life or how things are going. (It isn't merely body attention, not just some fluid feeling here or there that isn't related to anything.) In hypnosis, on the other hand, one loses one's sense of the body. For example, if one cannot get completely comfortable in the chair, soon one no longer feels the discomfort, as the warmth of hypnosis spreads and anesthetizes. Similarly, if one comes into hypnosis tense from the day's events, these are not taken out of the body. Instead, one loses track of the way the body is cramped by them.

It is my contention that the body nevertheless retains the "cramp" of each such problem, despite my losing consciousness of it (or never even getting a consciousness of it). I don't mean that exactly the same "felt sense of the problem" is in the body, as forms during focusing. No, that wholistic body sense forms during focusing, it isn't just there, waiting. But the bodily condition from which it forms, that is there. It is perfectly possible to "relax" in one respect, and yet retain the cramp in the body in some other respects. But this distinction, if correct, is of great interest to us in thinking about this whole terrain!

Just as a person might be very relaxed, and nevertheless too tense to fall asleep, so also one can be in meditation or in hypnosis, not be thinking about the problem at all, and yet it might color the experience and be part of the bodily process.

In fact, during altered states an endless string of representations, instances, even amplifications of something unresolved can continue to come, whereas a few minutes of focusing could release the body from carrying that.

The bodily attention is therefore basic, at least until there is a release, a change in the body in relation to that concern. Only then is there not just a non-thinking about it, but also a concretely bodily released kind of relaxation.

I do not know if this is so with every problem or concern that the body carries. Perhaps some are released in hypnosis, others not. There may even be times when one fails to focus successfully for some reason or other, and self-hypnosis or some similar process does release the body's tension. I am sure only that there are times when the color and quality of a relaxed content-less state is burdened and affected by what the body still carries, despite a deep state of altered consciousness and relaxation.

We must therefore begin to make distinctions even though they are new and cannot as yet be quite clear or correct. There is not just one "up- down" continuum. This was already shown for meditation by those studies that found meditation masters able to be fully alert despite deep meditation, while novices were certainly also deep along some continuum, yet not alert on another continuum. And there may be more than two continua here.

We already know that sleep and hypnosis differ. One can be very deep in hypnosis and it is nothing like sleep. In some very important respect one is fully alert in hypnosis, but in another respect one is not.

Let me leave this question of different continua open.

I want to continue my discussion by taking up the question of active and passive. One can be fully alert, but passive. Let me say exactly what I mean. When passive, more content can emerge. One can find imagery, feelings, memories, odd states coming . (My word "coming" always indicates that something comes of its own accord, uncontrolled, not deliberate.) But although more comes, one can do less about it. That is what I mean by "passive." Much "goes by." In contrast, notice the "active" procedure of making a space, asking deliberately within the body, how would it feel, if. . . , deliberately waiting. . . My point is that only in response to these deliberate moves does the felt shift in focusing come – although of course it does come of its own accord. One must let it come, but the setting into which it comes is quite deliberate.

Similarly, when something has come, what do I mean by saying that "passive" means one cannot do anything about it? What is there to do about something that has come? There is a quite deliberate receiving, a stance one takes toward what comes, much as when someone came to one's door. "Come in," one would say, "have a seat. Wait here. I'll be right back." Actively one would direct the visitor to a chair, place the visitor there, indicate that the visit is welcome, assert oneself as separate from the visitor, go back into the house to finish what one was doing, and return again.

So also, when focusing on a problem. The second movement of focusing is to let a felt sense of the whole problem form. Again, this isn't just there, it requires the active asking and the making of a setting. "Do I feel all right about this whole thing?" (Of course one doesn't. One knows that. It's a problem. But trying it out, within the body, in this way, soon brings.) Something that comes in the body is the answer. It is a wholistic sense. The whole thing is "not all right" in just this uniquely sensed way. It forms in the body as a new whole.

This wholistic felt sense doesn't form, if one is lying wide awake but nearly asleep in other aspects. One can ask, but nothing happens. There is nothing in the body that comes, and then shifts.

When the felt sense has formed, the next move is to "get a handle on it," that is to say an image or a word, or a phrase. And when one has that, the next move is to "resonate" this "handle." Here again the active character of focusing is very marked: Of course one remembers one's word or phrase or image, which one has gotten just a moment ago. But it is something else to "resonate" it. This involves saying the words, or placing the image as it were once more freshly before oneself (or, one might say, placing it before one's body), and attending in the body, awaiting what signal, what response, what shift will come there, in the body. Usually, if the "handle" fits, there is again a bodily response,

a slight or major easing, a stirring, something shifting. And this is what one cannot do in the more passive condition of self-hypnosis, so far as I know it.

It is quite important not to be confused about mere words and names. If someone wishes to use the word "hypnosis" in a broader way, then I have no objection at all. Perhaps any "descent" in this general way is hypnosis. Perhaps there are then different kinds of hypnosis. Similarly, I am aware that the word "meditation" is often used for anything whatever, that one does, while "sitting" with a meditative intent. Especially with meditation, it helps to use the word that way, so as not to get involved in worrisome issues as to whether one is "really" now meditating or not. Used broadly, focusing can certainly be a kind of meditation. But the distinctions we need in order to understand this whole terrain better, must be clarified anyway.

Finally, the last movement of focusing is to "ask." Using the "handle" to bring the bodily sensed whole back again, one asks it what it is. Of course it must first return, or one cannot ask it . To get that return is again an active move. "Can I still feel it, if I say . . . (whatever the handle was) . . .?" Then one must wait, till, "Oh, yes, there it is again. Now what is that?"

Of course I cannot here present all the specifics of focusing. There are many other moves one can make here, if this general asking fails to produce a shift. We have worked out just what to do for certain difficulties (a number of which occur pretty regularly for different people). There are many specifics covered in my new book (Gendlin, 1978). But my point here is, that the asking move is again active in this specific way I am defining here. Even the awaiting of the shift, the sensing and waiting to see if there is one, is an active, deliberate, controlled move. But then, of course, the "answer" is not in words (or, at first it isn't in words). Rather, it is a shift that comes , a change in the felt sense itself.

Currently it is fashionable to extol the right brain, to denigrate thinking, to believe in letting, in passivity, in the self that is wider than the ego. And, indeed, as I said at the outset, change is not possible only with what is deliberate and under the control of the ego. Indeed, one must let. But this alone is an oversimplification.

Focusing is not a process of the right brain, but—if you like—a conversation between the right and left brain in which each must relate to the other. Focusing is not an absence of thinking, but a responsive thinking, in which what comes bodily is each time received, and responded to.

Indeed, what comes must be let come, it cannot be manufactured, manipulated, controlled. But a flow of events going by is not focusing. The other side is equally needed, from the start, in a focusing process.

The fascination with altered states should not deter us from understanding the central entry level. I do not claim for focusing that it is ultimate, it is not. I care very much for the spiritual dimensions that open from the wide space that focusing leads to. But that entry level is a crucial central location in this terrain.

It seems to me that the sense of "active" which I have defined in terms of focusing moves, is obviated as one enters further or deeper into altered states. I am not certain of this in every way. I am judging from too few cases, and from ordinary people.

The relation to bodily awareness has to be studied; how does hypnosis relate to it? Breathing deeply can involve bodily awareness, certainly. In focusing it is what comes in the body in regard to a certain problem, concern, or topic. It might not be a problem. It can be "what I would like to write," if I am about to write a story. It might be simply what bothers me just now, without any preparatory first movement. But I believe that just turning away from it all, not thinking about it, and letting one's mind float, is fundamentally different from the released open space focusing can open.

EEG correlates of the felt shift in focusing (in one published study [Don, N.S., 1977] that needs replication) were those known to accompany deep imagery (theta) but with a beta pattern indicative of the fact that there was not imagery. Theta is one end of the alpha scale, but differs from the usual alpha very importantly. Theta goes with imagery emerging from deep "unconscious" layers, whereas alpha in its usual range is associated with merely floating, thinking of nothing in particular. Thus the EEG bears out that difference. Would it bear out a difference between self-hypnosis and focusing? I think the beta part of the pattern would.

Some years ago, in a theoretical piece on Personality Change (Gendlin, 1964), I wrote that ordinary recognition and reaction depends on our having a fully ongoing experiencing process that gives an "apperceptive mass." That old-fashioned term was meant to name the stock of past experience from out of which we recognize anything that comes along. This "stock" doesn't consist of separate file folders, of course, not of separate units, but of past experience functioning fluidly , seamlessly, to give us an appropriate sense of the present . Yes—I intend this sentence. One ongoing experience is both past experiencing functioning now, and it also is our experience of the present. (Otherwise the present would be obstructed by images and memories of the past. One would miss what is going on now.)

As experiencing is narrowed, as interaction is narrowed, this apperceptive mass is narrowed as well. In dreams, in hypnosis, one does not always have the full context, the fully ongoing apperceptive mass. Therefore words are often taken literally during hypnosis, while taken normally otherwise; for example, tell people in hypnosis to "raise your hand," and they will lift their hand from the wrist. Normally, of course, it means lifting up one's arm. In dreams quite often words are used literally. Self-hypnosis rarely descends to levels where this becomes dramatic, but even a little stilling of ongoing interaction is enough to prevent the whole felt sense forming. That whole sense requires for its formation the fully ongoing experiencing process.

How is it possible, that in focusing there is this fully ongoing interactional living, even though focusing too requires quiet, and pulling out of ordinary interaction? There is a different kind of process here, fully ongoing "interaction" in a new sense.

Focusing stems from psychotherapy and was long used just for personal problems. More recently it has been used in creative writing (to focus on the sense of how one wishes to come across, before beginning to write), before meditation, before job interviews, in healing, and in many other settings. Children in school can be helped with their most difficult subject, by focusing on their sense of difficulty. ("I have no trouble at all with this subject . . . right? . . . Ah, there's that queasy feeling . . .")

Focusing can be very deep (Mayer, 1976; Olsen, 1976) and can bring up contents very like those found in hypnosis, autogenic imagery, and other states. More usually, it involves imagery but of a more immediate kind. Either way the whole person's reception,

recognition, and stance in relation to what comes, is always vital and immediate. In hypnosis that aspect, called "integrating," has to be done later.

But might we turn our examination of this relation around? Is there perhaps some hypnosis involved in focusing, even if focusing is a more specific and elaborate process? All this "coming" during focusing, is it not a result of the suggested expectation that something will come? Do the body-signals and the felt sense come because one expects it to? Once learned, is it not through self-hypnosis?

Platt (1971) found that anything but a slight bit of relaxation obstructs focusing. I have tried to show why. How much relaxation is 'slight'? I would say one criterion is whether it is an effort to come out or up again, to the level of ordinary responding which one needs to receive and place what has come. If that is difficult, there is too much relaxation of the sort that obstructs focusing. It could very well be that this is only one kind, and that there cannot be "too much" of some other kind of depth along these continua. (I think there are several, as I have explained.)

Muramoto (1971) had focusing instructions read to subjects while under hypnosis. He found focusing instructions "made hypnosis more productive and refreshing" in comparison to a control group that received only hypnosis. He used the Osgood and a tree drawing before and after. In his study, therefore, some effect of focusing was possible during hypnosis, or more exactly, the focusing instructions had a measurable effect on the pre and post tests.

Weiss-King (1979) found meditation significantly helpful to the learning of focusing. These two studies throw doubt on my contention that one cannot focus once one has gone into relaxation further than the entry level. But Platt found the effect I am thinking of, since in her study only very slight hypnosis was helpful. Muramoto does not have evidence that focusing occurred during hypnosis, only that there was some effect of the focusing instructions. And, certainly, in order to learn meditation one must learn a "coming down" which is part of focusing.

Many meditators have an initial difficulty with focusing: at first they go "straight down all the way," as soon as they begin. I sometimes advise them to stand leaning against the wall, to help them remain at (what I term) the entry level, rather than going on down. There is another metaphor I use for this entry level: It is like opening a trap door and then sitting on the edge with one's feet dangling down. Anything can come up from beneath, but one is staying on the ordinary level, to receive it and place it.

But if there are several continua of "down," can we begin to distinguish them? The first distinction might be that between the masters and the novices in the famous study I already cited. One learns to remain ordinary and active on one of these continua, while going down on the other. My trap-door image makes that distinction in a way, since being open is all the way down in one sense, and staying on the entry level in another.

How the body is sensed is another difference. On one continuum, if one opens all the way down, one senses the body more finely and more meaningfully. On the other, "going down" means becoming impervious to the body. And just this is one of the major differences between focusing and hypnosis as usually done.

Finally, let us look at the difference in terms of the question of defenses.

In hypnosis the defenses are circumvented by narrowing the ongoing process and thereby stilling the interpretive apperceptive mass. Content comes, but one does not fully appreciate its meaning. (That has to be done later, after hypnosis.) Suggestions are effective because the usual interpretive apparatus is by-passed.

In focusing the defenses are obviated by the creation of a space in which one can "stand next to"—not the problem as usually felt, but something new: the newly formed felt sense of the whole, a bodily sense, a palpable unease. Then, when recognizable content comes from it, one fully recognizes that content, one has remained active and able to do so. Also, one again "places" what comes in a space, as if to let it wait. ("That's more than I can handle all at once . . .") Being "next to" what comes enables one to live differently in relation to a problem even before the defenses have changed. Therefore one can engage in focusing at a time when one could not yet "deal with" the problem in any other good way.

I hope this discussion can help us map this whole terrain with more distinctions. At any rate I feel sure that the level on which focusing occurs, the entry point to altered states but not yet into them, is a crucial central spot in that terrain. One has control of the door, one can let it be open, a new space can be created in which the bodily sense of a whole concern can come, & can shift and there is an opening to a very large space too.

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