

Practising and Teaching Yoga in a Focusing Way

Carolann Samuels – 2015

Focusing and Yoga both defy neat descriptions, and yet each is powerful in the areas of self-discovery and personal growth.

Eugene Gendlin, who after years of research developed and described the practice of Focusing, says *“it is a process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness”* which he calls *“a felt sense”*¹. Anne Weiser Cornell calls it *“a way of tapping into your vast emotional intelligence through the messages of your body”*², and *“a body-oriented process of self-awareness and emotional healing”*³. It is something that some people do instinctively without labelling it; and many of us used to do it but we may have forgotten and need to be reminded and re-learn the skills.

Peter Blackaby, an osteopath and Yoga teacher, says that *“Yoga is largely an experiential practice and its benefits are sometimes difficult to articulate. Of course it is reasonably easy to explain that an ache or pain has disappeared. More tricky to explain, however, is the feeling of spaciousness in the body, or the clarity of mind that many people associate with Yoga practice.”*⁴

Yoga is an old practice, maybe 5,000 years old. Originally it was passed on orally, and then about 2,000 years ago Patanjali, a scholar and seer of ancient India, gathered together what was then known and wrote the Yoga Sutras, in which he described the working of the mind and emotions and the path to fulfilment.

We understand that early Yoga practitioners used the physical practices to strengthen their bodies to enable them to sit for lengthy periods in meditation, turning their focus to the ultimate goal: the sight of the soul. And so the physical health benefits were a by-product of their goal of freedom and holiness. Yoga practice included Raja Yoga, the science of mind, Jnana Yoga, the science of intelligence, Karma Yoga, the science of duty, and Hatha Yoga, the science of will – expressed in the postures with which we are most familiar in the West today.

A practice as old as Yoga will evolve and change according to the needs of the era. Currently in the West, emphasis is generally on physical benefits – which are many, and are well documented, and are an excellent reason to practise. In today’s world fewer Yoga practitioners use their practice to look within themselves in the way that Focusing does (although mindfulness, one meditation technique, is gaining in popularity). Nevertheless, many benefit greatly from Yoga’s physical practices, and some go on to explore its other aspects.

Yoga and Focusing are powerful and profound practices each in their own right, and in this essay I propose that they can complement each other, and each is richer for the

¹ Eugene Gendlin, “Focusing” P 10

² <http://focusingresources.com/>

³ Ann Weiser Cornell, “The Power of Focusing” P 2

⁴ Peter Blackaby, “Intelligent Yoga” P17

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awareness and practice of the other. Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon chose to use Focusing as a tool for spiritual growth. In their book *Bio-spirituality*, they say “*you get out of your mind by getting into the body*”⁵. Later they say “*For centuries various spiritual traditions have identified a blocking experience of the mind as **the** central issue in spiritual growth. The problem of seeking to use the finely honed power of reason to control everything in one’s life seems to be the primary issue faced by anyone serious about spiritual growth. The omnipotence which we grant to the power of intellect becomes our downfall. This magnificent potential of reason was never meant to be a tool with which to control absolutely everything that touches human existence.*”⁶ And I would suggest that they would agree with Yoga’s multi-faceted approach.

Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning union and is derived from the root ‘yuj’ meaning to join, yoke or concentrate one’s attention on.⁷ Yoga practice has traditionally included moral and ethical codes, self-discipline and spiritual observances, breath control, posture work, withdrawal from the senses, concentration – all of which aim to lead to meditation and eventually transcendence of the self. Having said all that, the most common reason students in western countries practise Yoga today is to strengthen their bodies, become more flexible and learn techniques to relieve their minds and bodies from the effects of stress. They’re often unaware of the many-layered teachings of Yoga.

In his book “*Focusing*”, Gendlin suggests that if a person “*cannot get a body shift*” when Focusing, they move the body in any way it wants to “*let your body give you a taste of what it will feel like to feel right.*”⁸ People generally practise Yoga, not because of any ‘duty’ to keep fit, but because it makes them feel good. This hints that more people might benefit from combining the two practices.

As part of this project, I asked a number of Yoga teachers and students their reasons for continuing to practise Yoga. Many reported feelings similar to those described by focusers. Most of the people who volunteered to learn Focusing with me are also Yoga students, and I found that they quite easily learned to focus. This showed to me that I was not the only one to experience links between Focusing and Yoga.

Sending out this invitation meant I also needed to clarify my own reasons for practising Yoga. This hasn’t been easy as Yoga has been a part of all my adult life, and I simply don’t know how my life would be without Yoga. And, like many students, my reasons have changed over the years.

I enjoy feeling how muscles and joints react when I give them permission to stretch or relax, and the effect this has on my mind. I enjoy imagining what is happening when I squeeze then release my internal organs in a twist, and how that feels too. I like to notice

⁵ Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon, “*Bio-spirituality: Focusing as a way to grow*” P50.

⁶ *Bio-spirituality: focusing as a way to grow*, by Campbell and McMahon P 51

⁷ B K S Iyengar, “*Light on Yoga*” P. 535

⁸ E Gendlin: *Focusing* P 107

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the gradual relaxation of tight muscles, and how on different days, my body reacts differently. I love the expansiveness of some postures, the energising that comes with backbends and the calming feel of bending forwards, sensing inwards. Inverted postures help me to learn courage. The unfailing support of the ground beneath me gives me confidence. And then there is the paradox of learning to become still while balancing on one leg, and in doing this noticing the parts of me making constant small movements of adjustment. In making these tiny adjustments I learn about inner stillness, because to be totally static brings deadness and there is no learning about balance, about resilience, and how inner stillness helps us deal with what shows up in our world each day. I also practise other aspects of Yoga, and Pranayama⁹ and meditation practices have served me well.

Because Yoga strengthens our bodies and helps preserve them from illness, this enables us, if we choose, to give our attention to what's going on inside – our inner world – without the distraction of physical pain and discomfort. And since Yoga can be adapted for anyone, people with disease, pain, discomfort or disability can practise safely and pay attention to these imbalances and often improve their health. One of my students said of Yoga that *"it's one of the few things that makes me feel together/whole"*, and another practises *"to become more in tune with myself and my body. It's great to stop and focus on my body, which I would never do otherwise!"* Another student's reasons have changed over the years from a focus on meditation, to building core strength, then to *"being better in charge of my ... body... and enjoying a greater understanding of the importance of breathing and the impacts of my thoughts on my body"*.

Campbell and McMahon say that *"while Focusing, one does not introduce any of the more traditional approaches used to gain meditative attention. One sets aside prayerful considerations, the reading of scriptures, using a mantram, mandala or koan, the Jesus Prayer, one's own breathing, or any other physical action"*¹⁰. I agree with this; however I would add that the previous experience of practising bodywork such as Yoga can sometimes help a focuser to sense inside more readily than someone who has never given their body much attention. This was illustrated by some of my early Focusing volunteers who are also Yoga students. They are so used to listening to their bodies, that inner awareness was already a natural habit for them. My contribution in our sessions was to companion them as they listened more closely to the felt senses and images that arose for them, and go forward in a Focusing way.

One evening at my regular Yoga class, just a few arrived - and all were experienced. They needed no teaching, we all did the postures together. One posture flowed into another. Little was said by me or the students, and it felt to me as though the class was practising as one. Our bodies knew what to do, and I felt the students were all sensing

⁹ The science of breath control.

¹⁰ Bio-spirituality by Campbell and McMahon P53

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inside just how much each wanted to work: some were extending themselves, others being more gentle with their bodies.

And so it is with Focusing: when I ground myself, when I am fully present, my attention knows where it needs to be. I have learned to trust my body in Yoga and in Focusing. And I trust when it is okay to take risks in both.

In Yoga, perhaps practising a neglected posture, or working with a familiar posture in a new way, I trust that my body will align itself and work safely, and then I am open to possible revelations of new things about me – in my physical body and my inner self. Sometimes I get moments of clarity and those ‘aha’ moments we all love to have. And so it is with Focusing: as I trust my felt sense, I am open to new things when they come, and that I will be able to deal with them. My enthusiasm for Yoga has never palled in forty years. However, never did I anticipate how much Focusing would add to my joy, and how I can integrate the two to deepen the experience of each.

One of the most important aspects of learning Yoga is recognition of the non-competitiveness of the practice: we are not trying to match another student’s achievement, nor even our own. The fact that I easily stood on one leg in the Tree Posture last Tuesday, has no relevance on how my body is in that same posture today. I am interested in how my body reacts in this moment, and if there is disturbance or resistance, what this is telling me. Can I sense into a way of releasing this, into a way of finding that spaciousness and that stillness? Or is there another insight that my body will trust me with? In my teaching I’ve always tried to impart this, and now with my Focusing approach I find I am more easily able to really ‘know’ this, and try to encourage my students to find their own awareness.

As we begin a Focusing session we sense into the body, staying alert and present, noticing and acknowledging whatever comes, encountering resistance at times, at others enjoying the spaciousness that might unfold, being alert and aware to the felt sense as it moves and changes. And as in Yoga, we notice what is happening within our bodies now. *“By simply taking time to become aware of your body as a whole, its connection with the environment and your aliveness as felt inside, your body awakens and ‘becomes alive as a whole’. Being aware of the grounded aliveness of your whole body connects you with an Intelligence that not only moves through your own body but also pulsates throughout the whole Universe”*¹¹. Addie van der Kooy and Kevin McEvenue here are talking about Wholebody Focusing. And so it is with Hatha Yoga. I challenge anyone to remain engaged with Hatha Yoga without bringing awareness into the body; however, this awareness can be limited to muscular and skeletal, unless we choose otherwise. Feldenkrais, in his book *“Awareness Through Movement”* relates a Tibetan parable. *“According to the story, a man without awareness is like a carriage whose passengers are the desires, with the muscles for horses, while the carriage itself is the skeleton. Awareness is the sleeping coachman. As long as the coachman remains asleep the carriage will be dragged aimlessly here and there.*

¹¹ Addie vane der Kooy and Kevin Mcevenue, “Focusing with Your Whole Body” P5

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Each passenger seeks a different destination and the horses pull in different ways. But when the coachman is wide-awake and holds the reins the horses will pull the carriage and bring every passenger to his proper destination."

Teaching Yoga means that we must bring awareness in a different way, and bring empathy to our students' practice. I know how a posture feels to me; I know where I need to engage or relax a muscle or where to shift my weight – I 'know' without always knowing what and how. Teaching Yoga makes me examine this more carefully; bringing Focusing to it takes it a stage further, brings another dimension. Some postures challenge us. Until one has developed sufficient flexibility and strength it can be difficult to align the body safely and to balance and enjoy them. Until the student can bring that deep awareness into the body, holding a pose can take a lot of energy, and the body can feel heavy, the breath might be erratic and uneven, and the challenges might occupy all of our attention. Once the mechanics of the pose are understood – the knowledge of the pose – then we can begin to look within and notice and explore the 'edge' of the pose.

As we pay this particular attention to the body in a Yoga pose, the body can "imply its next right step¹²". Gendlin wrote this about Focusing and about how the body can, "*after it has absorbed language and humanly sophisticated knowledge*", imply something new. This can apply to Yoga too. In the context of Yoga, the 'next step' might in a literal way be what is the next posture, or it might be settling into the pose and listening to what the body wants to say. I also find that over a period of time, Yoga practitioners sometimes change their lives in subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways, by embodying what is happening within them as they practise. Life often becomes calmer; some people make different life choices. The courage we learn on the Yoga mat as we move into more difficult postures, such as some of the inversions, goes with us into our everyday lives. Some of the students' responses to my earlier question emphasise this:

I have found the breathing and meditation vital in supporting me in times of stress

I experience freedom in my practise

Yoga helps me tune into my spirit

It is a constant voyage of discovery ... it is a journey which constantly takes me deeper into discovering who I am ... journeying inward to the very centre of our being

I enjoy the calming effect it has on me mentally. I also find it is good for improving focus and trying to live in the moment

Yoga is good for every part of our being

Yoga has given me relief from stress

¹² Three assertions about the body – E Gendlin www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2064.html

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Yoga is my weekly chill, better than medication (for mental health problems) ... Yoga also tunes you into your own body

The body sometimes holds what the mind cannot

Yoga so often responds to my different needs whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual ... emotionally it invariably calms me, sometimes energising, sometimes restoring ... it involves so much more than just the physical postures. Yoga encompasses our whole being, enriching our experience and restoring our beings.

It is a very good entrée into silent prayer and meditation

Focusing helps our Yoga practice and Yoga helps with Focusing. Yoga helps us pay attention. As we pay attention to what's happening in the body, the sensations of muscle tension and extension, pressure – both external and internal – our contact with the mat, the floor, the wall, the chair, our breath and how it is and how it changes, they tell us so much and we have options. What does the body need today? Do we want to notice the felt sense too, and focus on it? (At the end of this discussion I have recounted some experiences of my own of combining Yoga and Focusing - see pages 8-9.)

The breath is integral in Yoga; if we pay attention to the quality of the breath, it can tell us if we are relaxed in a posture, if we are working energetically, or if we are straining. As we get used to paying this attention, it might want to tell us more. The breathing muscles cover most of the central part of the body, from the nose and mouth in the face following down through the chest into the abdomen. Many muscles are associated with the minute-by-minute, second-by-second movement of the life-giving breath. Even when I'm sitting still and silent in meditation, the breath can be a guide to how I am even when I might not know consciously if something is bothering me.

My Yoga teacher-training emphasised guiding the student to move towards the perfect 'shape' of the posture, listening to their bodies, and being alert for signs of pain, strain or over-stretching, and also embracing the possibility of stretching more than they might have thought they could. My teaching has been subtly shifting ever since, as I trusted my intuition more and more. The Focusing approach means that I now emphasise listening more than before, inviting students to decide for themselves what their bodies need. Over time I can see changes in my students' practice and a greater willingness to adopt or ask for alternatives for postures that don't feel right for them that day.

Victor Frankl said "*Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*"¹³ We know this in Focusing; we know that as we invite the felt sense to emerge, and we give it space and attention, then the body can respond with knowledge that the mind alone does not know.

¹³ Victor Frankl: "Man's Search for Meaning"

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Often without knowing it, many of us use the body to bypass the mind. Our mind wants to keep things as they are and it resists change. In Yoga this can be seen as pushing the body on to more challenging postures, or practising at speed when it is almost impossible to notice what is happening inside. Michael Lee recognises this. He says *“In a way, our body is a map. It was there with us during every significant event, feeling, trauma and celebration. It was not a passive bystander, it was involved.”*¹⁴ Lee has developed a system of supporting people, through practising Yoga with conscious awareness, to recognise and then release body-stored memories, fears and trauma. He calls this system Phoenix Rising Yoga, and it can also be recognised as Focusing. He describes how our body sometimes holds on to these feelings, long after the situation has disappeared, and that our bodies are another doorway through which we gain access to ourselves. In the form of assisted Yoga he has developed, he finds where emotions such as anger, fear, self-criticism, non-acceptance and others, are in the body, and by supporting the student, he witnesses people *“getting in touch with a deeper self – that self who reflects their inner wisdom”*¹⁵. He has discovered that his approach of practising Yoga in this way enables our bodies to support us *“in embracing ourselves in those aspects of being that get lost in our external world”*¹⁶. His method encourages students to notice that as they engage a stretch, they come to an edge, with the choice of pushing through, easing off, or staying with the edge. Staying with it often brings insight and awareness – sometimes physical, sometimes other awarenesses arise.

Most of the Yoga practice I have discussed so far is about one person practising Yoga and Focusing alone with the felt sense. A number of Focusers do Focus alone, but most Focusers report that they find that Focusing with a companion enriches the experience – even if that companion says very little, or nothing. The experience of having a supportive companion is sufficient for most focusers to stay with the process, and as Gendlin says, it’s *“like talking to a person who makes your experience expand”*¹⁷. Lee’s work involves two people, partners exchanging assisted postures and then sharing their experiences. I have occasionally introduced into my class Lee’s method of working in pairs. There is usually a period when the students worry about the exact position of where their support should be, and how they should stand or sit, etc. As I encourage both partners to go within, listen to their bodies and trust that the partner will support them, and that the receiver will guide the supported partner as to how much support they want or need, then both partners are able to focus. The conversation slows, and both partners sense and discuss quietly what each of them needs. This is an approach which I would like to explore further, both working one-to-one with students and facilitating partner work in classes.

¹⁴ Michael Lee, “Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy: A Bridge from Body to Soul” P37

¹⁵ Ibid P 3

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ E Gendlin, “Focusing” P 115

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Feldenkrais would seem to agree with Lee's premise. He said "*There are two major roads for changing a person's behaviour – either through the psyche or through the body. However, real change has to be brought about in a way which allows both the body and the psyche to be changed simultaneously. If the approach is not integral but either through the psyche or body separately, the change will last only as long as the person has not lost the awareness of it, and has not resumed spontaneous habitual patterns of the unwanted, habitual muscular function some time before it occurs and can either inhibit or facilitate it by an act of will*"¹⁸.

Feldenkrais' technique differs from Lee's approach to Yoga, and he is more focused on the physicality of acquired body habits that cause pain and discomfort. However both practices emphasise the importance of the awareness that the body has been a witness to what has happened to the person in the past, and that the key to releasing unhelpful or difficult reactions or behaviours of a person, lies within the body. Choosing to notice what is happening in the body helps us, as Viktor Frankl said, to choose growth and freedom.

Of course many people Focus without ever having practised Yoga, and vice versa. I hope to open to people the possibility of enriching their experience through practice of them both.

I would like to conclude by describing three separate solo sessions of my own, using Focusing and Yoga. I have supplied audio recordings to accompany the following paragraphs.

Focusing as I practise Yoga

In my Yoga practice I am aware of the alignment of my physical body, and the early part of the commentary is quite a normal, but usually silent, aspect of my practice. Early on I notice that my knees feel closer together than they actually are, and this makes me curious. It feels like a lead-in to something else - which turns out to be quite precious.

At one point I perceive tightness in my shoulders which I describe as a rigidity. This is more than my usual Yoga awareness – it is a result of a Focusing attention. Soon after this I notice that something in me is not allowing my head to be perfectly balanced. This leads to deeper Focusing – definitely deeper than a usual Yoga practice. In some postures certain aspects, such as a tightness or restriction, take my attention away from other aspects of the posture. After the beginning, the postures were led by my Focusing, and I found it easy to Focus. A clear image came in this same area in my back, developing as I moved through the rest of the postures in this session. In particular, a strong twist seemed to allow the image to develop even more – which was delightful! And it wanted to be noticed – more in some

¹⁸ Embodied Wisdom: the Collected Papers of Moshe Feldenkrais

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postures than others. The image got muddled at one stage by my head looking one way, and my legs another – it felt disturbed – as though not understanding my body in that way. And the image lasted through the Savasana (relaxation) at the end of the practice. It was illuminating how an area that at first seemed like tension, turned into a ‘sweet reminder’ of – something, a beautiful image, then becoming a self-adhesive sticker of an image that was waiting for me for whenever I was ready.

Since learning Focusing, my Yoga practice has altered, almost without me being aware: I notice some things about my body differently than before. Even so, to consciously focus in this way as I practise the Yoga postures, sometimes reveals things in yet another way. Especially when I stretch and move my body in ways particular to Yoga. The image in my back opened up when I was twisting with my feet on the ground, even though I was bending forward; there was quite a different response when in a seated twist – this time my body almost felt disturbed. Then Savasana allowed everything to come together, and allowed the whole of me to realise part of what the image was trying to tell me¹⁹.

A solo Focusing session, followed by Yoga practice

The Focusing session helped me identify that my mind was scattered, and strong images accompanied my Focusing. My mind was feeling very active, and my body was needing something restful, and felt resistant to anything energetic. I noticed that some parts of my body objected to some postures, or parts of them. Focusing made me more aware of these resistances, and my body ‘led’ my practice.

Before I learned Focusing, I would have said that my body was then leading my Yoga practice – meaning that I was responding to my body’s needs. Since I have incorporated Focusing into my Yoga, I am aware that my body responds differently – Focusing helps me to more finely tune my Yoga to the postures and the way that I approach them (energetically or less so, for example). It might seem a subtle difference, but the combined effect is more than the sum of the two. I notice more than I am accustomed to noticing. And the noticing helps me to release tension that I knew was there, but sometimes seemed unable to release with just the Yoga. Images that came in my Focusing session reappeared as I was practising Yoga, and some of them made more sense than earlier. It felt good to acknowledge more clearly where there was tension in my body, and how well the Yoga enabled me to notice and then release the tension.

After Savasana it became clear that the Focusing session before the Yoga helped me to really sense what my body was needing.

19 (and I apologise for the creaky floorboards on the recording!)

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Yoga practice followed by a solo Focusing session

The stretching open of the torso in the preceding Yoga practice helped me feel an expansiveness (as Blackaby described earlier), as though there was plenty of room for something to come in (in Focusing). It seemed easy to locate energy, and a 'wide-openness'. I find that 'something' always comes when I'm Focusing, and practising Yoga beforehand in a way 'invites more to come'. Indeed Gendlin says *"When you first learn Focusing, the bodily responses can be very slight. There is a barely 'unhuh' in your body, when something comes that is just right. Learn to let your body take more of a shift. Try exhaling a deep long breath. Try nodding with your head. Try relaxing your whole body as if you had been sitting stiffly. This shift allows you to melt. If you do this purposely a few times, your body will learn to express itself more freely."*²⁰

All of these methods of combining Yoga and Focusing opened the processes up for me. I find that the method that works best for me is to practise Yoga and focus at the same time. Since I have learned Focusing, I have found that Focusing when practising Yoga comes naturally now, and I don't think I would want to do it any other way. And when I'm teaching Yoga, Focusing helps me teach from intuition, deciding moment by moment what postures and variations would be of most benefit to my students. Combining Focusing and Yoga has changed and enriched my Yoga practice: I practise Yoga in the way that my body needs, and gives my practice an extra dimension. For years I have encouraged my Yoga students to listen to their bodies. Focusing has given me another way to do this, and to encourage my students to do the same.

²⁰ Focusing by E Gendlin Page 103

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