

# THE FELT SENSE OF SELF: A type of ‘mindfulness’ meditation

COURTENAY YOUNG

---

## Introduction

When we are feeling better about ourselves: then we hold ourselves differently; we walk differently; we feel differently; and we also see things differently – about others, and about ourselves. Then we ‘feel’ a whole lot better about ourselves; we ‘feel’ more like our Self; and we can begin to ‘feel’ a sense of our true Self. So, how can we get back to having this feeling, and/or how can we achieve it for ourselves more often? The ‘Felt Sense of Self’ is a concept that describes an internal bodily awareness that arises from increased awareness, often as a result of either meditational practices, or through psychotherapy, or psychotherapeutic techniques.

## Gendlin’s ‘Felt Sense’

The philosopher and psychotherapist, Eugene T. Gendlin, developed a type of therapy work that he called ‘Focusing’: this included a concept that he called a ‘felt sense’. This ‘felt sense’ functions as a result of a much better connection between the person’s mind and body. It transpires that people experiencing a ‘felt sense’ feel more in tune with their body and their bodily processes, and they often feel as if they can feel themselves as ‘being’ within their stomach or chest. While a ‘felt sense’ is partially proprioceptive and partly emotional, Gendlin characterized the concept as a combination of emotion, awareness, intuitiveness, and embodiment. Achieving a ‘felt sense’ means achieving a special kind of internal bodily awareness – a ‘felt’ bodily experience, and this is what gives a person an existential sense of greater meaning to one’s life.

The ‘felt sense’ is often initially quite unclear: at first, people cannot often verbalize specifically what they are feeling, but, instead, they often describe it as a vague awareness of internal ‘sensations’, ranging from old psychological or emotional traumas to burgeoning new possibilities.

## Focusing for Better Mental Health

Gendlin argued that an increased awareness of one’s ‘felt sense’ – and better mental health – can emerge from this sort of counselling and psychotherapy, and several mental health professionals and new age practitioners have drawn further upon his work in an attempt to increase the client’s bodily awareness, and to encourage people to trust their internal feelings more, and thus their intuitions.

In such situations, there is both a ‘knowing’ or ‘sensing’, and also a ‘not knowing’ – something that is ‘implied’ – by what is already there and also by what is emerging – by something that is ‘implied’

If we delve into our felt sense of the implicit, it begins to open up and "comes to imply more and more", revealing itself as an "unseparated multiplicity" (Gendlin, 1996). Thus, our experience suggests that the *“bodily . . . [the 'implicit'] can contain information that is not (or not yet) capable of being phrased.”* (Gendlin, 1996)

The process of Focusing is a more formalized process that encourages people to increase their bodily awareness, leading towards a proper ‘felt sense’. Practitioners claim that focusing can increase self-awareness and people’s comfort within their bodies, and these ‘focusing’ techniques may also work to help relax clients.

Focusing-oriented psychotherapists practice a therapeutic modality that draws heavily on the concept of the 'felt sense', and they encourage their clients to engage in focusing, both during and between psychotherapy sessions. Focusing practitioners, and/or other psychotherapists and counsellors, may also use journaling, or drawing, or relaxation techniques, or various different forms of what is now being called "mindfulness practice", all in order to help people to encourage the establishment of their 'felt sense' of self.

Doralee Katonah (2012) writes: "... by staying in my own felt sense in these situations and [by] paying attention to the felt sense of the other person, connection and explication of experience remained possible, when more ordinary language and cognitive functions were being lost".

### **Mindfulness – An increasingly useful technique**

A lot has been written and researched recently about 'Mindfulness' as a relatively new technique, adopted by Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), especially for people with anxiety; however, it is also a 2,500-year old Buddhist practice. The main proponents of these two methods, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) and Thich Nhat Hahn (1991) regularly write introductions in each other's books.

The primary concept in mindfulness is to practice just 'being-here-now': being or feeling as fully embodied as possible, bringing one's attention to what is happening in this particular moment, right here-and-now. In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is a practice used to develop self-awareness and wisdom, that gradually lead to what is described as 'enlightenment' – the complete freedom from suffering.

One does not have to sit in any particular way, though most people usually sit in an upright position, often with closed eyes (but not necessarily), and the initial focus is usually on one's pattern of breathing. You do not have to try to control or regulate your breathing, as in some meditations, or as in yoga; but, simply to be aware of one's natural breathing patterns. The focus of awareness on doing this one thing is what is important. Often, one's mind's attention will wander, or run off along other trains of thought, or follow various associations: if – or as and when – this happens, just notice that it has happened and then, in an accepting, non-judgemental way, return to focussing on one's breathing. There is no 'right way' to do this, except by maintaining one's focus of this sort of mindful attention, or concentrated, reflective, present-moment awareness.

The body is in "an ongoing interaction with its environment" (Gendlin, 1996) and this explains how the felt-sense could access "a vast amount of environmental information" and how new creative work can possibly emerge from it.

Various studies from within the NHS have found that mindfulness programmes, where participants are taught mindfulness practices across a series of weeks, can bring about reductions in stress, and also improvements in mood: people can benefit physically, emotionally and mentally, from learning these mindfulness techniques. They can also contribute to greater peace of mind, better sleep, greater productivity at work, can bring about reduced absenteeism from work; as well as can contribute to feeling happier and to having better relationships with others.

### **A Mindfulness-based Meditational Exercise**

This particular exercise – developed from both a Mindfulness and a Body Psychotherapy background – is designed to help you (the client) get back to being able to feel a 'felt sense' of your own Self: a sort-of 'feeling of embodiment'.

This exercise is in three Sections, and each section has three Parts. The whole exercise should take about 20 minutes. But, when you first start, please only do the First Section for about a week – about 2 minutes on each Part and therefore about 6 minutes in total. Then, in the second week (or a bit later), do the First Section and then the Second Section, only: i.e. about 12 minutes – 2 minutes for

each Part, and 3 Parts to each of 2 Sections. In the third week (or a bit later), you can do all three Sections: this will take about 18-20 minutes.

You can do this exercise anywhere: and at any almost time; though obviously not when you are working, or driving a car. You can do it on a bus; or on the train to work; or during your lunch hour; or in a layby, on the way home. It is probably best to do it whilst sitting down, rather than lying down. You can do it whilst walking – say on your morning exercise route, or when walking the dog. It is also best to practice this regularly, until it becomes more like ‘second-nature’: until the exercise becomes your usual, ‘proper’ Felt Sense of Self.

This exercise, if you start using it on a regular basis, is – of course – just one way. There are, equally, many other ways to find your true Sense of Self, but these usually involve other people or special events. This exercise, you can do for yourself, by yourself, quietly and regularly. It is essentially just paying greater attention – and thus experiencing – to more and more of your own inner, subtle, intricate feelings and sensations.

There are numerous bodily sensations and feelings: - those physical feelings of pressure, tensions, pains, tinglings, itches, or the feel of clothes against the skin; and those of temperature, size, shape, weight, motion, speed, texture, colour, mood, sound, taste, smell or absence; - those more emotional or existential feelings - of belonging; of purpose; of rightness; of grounded-ness and of centred-ness and the ability to confront others healthily; of being ‘in tune’ with everything that is around one.

As you do this exercise regularly, you will gradually build up your own set of meanings, changes and modifications – so that it works properly for you, for yourself! As you do this regularly, you should find that you will build up an increasing feeling of your Felt Sense of Self.

## First Section

\* **First Part:** Become more aware of your breathing. You are (obviously) breathing all the time: every moment of every day: but how often are you aware of your breathing? We breathe basically in two different ways. There is the belly-breathing method that is encouraged in Yoga. This is where your belly moves in and out and – because of your diaphragm – the movement in the belly draws air in, or pushes it out, of your lungs: so it works a little like a bicycle pump. The second basic method of breathing is a ‘bellows-type’ of breathing. You often do this if you have just run up a couple of flights of stairs. This is where your chest expands and your rib cage expands, and the air is drawn in and out of your lungs by a bellows-type of action. When we are very anxious or afraid, our breathing becomes quite shallow and quite ‘high’; panting a little, with most of the breathing action happening in the throat. When we are anxious, we also tend to breathe in and hold; and then breathe in and hold: we take more air in, but don’t breathe out very much. When the fear or stress or tension goes, then we breathe out a lot and start to relax. So, how are you breathing now? How much, how often, and where? Just become aware of your pattern of breathing. Spend a couple of minutes re-connecting with your pattern of breathing.

\* **Second Part:** You are not just breath: you also have a body. So, spend a couple of minutes becoming more aware of your body. You are probably sitting on a chair: become aware of the chair against your back and bottom. You may be sitting in a particular position: arms folded, or not; legs crossed, or not; become aware of this position. You may be wearing a watch, or a belt, or a necklace, or something like that: become aware of the physical sensations of wearing these objects. Become conscious of the feeling of your clothes against your skin: your shoes may be a little tight – whatever! We receive all of these sensations into our body, all of the time: but we often phase these out; now – just become more aware of all of these sensations. Become aware of your body as a living,

functioning organism: you have quite an amazing body: it mostly works very well – most of the time: about 60-70 years of non-stop functioning. Appreciate it a little now: spend a couple of minutes being amazed!

\* **Third Part:** So, you now are a breathing, aware body. Now, become aware of the environment that you are in. There are lots of things around you: sights, sounds, smells, textures, temperatures, qualities of light, noises outside the house, etc. Spend a minute or two becoming aware of your breathing body in the environment that it is in, at this moment in time. Become more aware of the sensations and affects of the environment around you: the smell of the room you are in; the hum of the computer (if there is one); the noises in the street outside; birdsong perhaps. Spend a couple of minutes ‘being’ in the environment around you. This is all part of You being You, and becoming more your Self, in the Here and Now.

## Second Section

\* **First Part:** You are not just a body in the here-and-now: you also have feelings: lots of them. There are those feelings that are more on the ‘surface’: easily accessible. Today, you are reasonably happy because ... (hopefully) ... the sun is shining; or not so fine because you have just had an argument with your partner or child or work colleague; or someone who you thought liked (or didn’t like) you said something nasty (or nice) about you; or you are looking forward to the weekend, and so forth. Spend a little time, a couple of minutes, in just contacting and being more aware of all those different ‘surface’ – here-and-now – feelings.

\* **Second Part:** Underneath the surface feelings, there are lots of other – often contrasting – feelings. People that we basically like, also have some irritating (possibly infuriating) habits; whilst we may love someone, we can also really dislike ‘this’ or ‘that’ about them, or dislike them when they do ‘this’ or ‘that’; we love our children dearly, and we are also sometimes really infuriated by them; we may really want to move to another town, but we are also scared to lose our friends here. We are basically a nice person, and sometimes we can get very angry, or jealous, or we can have mean thoughts. We have to become aware of these ‘mixed’ or ‘secondary’ feelings, and then perhaps we can work through, or with, some of these conflicts. Spend a couple of minutes just allowing your awareness of some of these conflicting emotions: you won’t be able to sort them out in these few minutes, so just notice them, and hold your awareness of them. Let them bubble up, and then breathe and let them go on out.

\* **Third Part:** Below these conflicting emotions, there are our deeper, basic feelings: our ‘gut’ feelings. These are beyond dispute: they cover things like the horror of warfare; the fear of violence; the basic human desire for peace and calm; a love of gentleness and beauty; the pleasure that we get from being in nature – those things that touch us all deeply. We may never, ever vote Conservative – or Labour: that is just not who we are! We are deeply religious, or we are agnostic! It probably won’t change. These ‘gut’ feelings don’t often change: they help to form something of our identity. Sometimes we have had a crisis, or a near-death experience, or something – and that is when some of these feelings do change. This level is where we can feel our common humanity; and our connectedness to all things. These deep feelings go to confirm our identity, and, from here, we can also begin to feel something of our spirituality. Spend a couple of minutes at this level, just contacting these deeper feelings. You can come back here, anytime. However, you can’t short-cut the process and omit the second part, the conflictual bit. People try to do this all the time, by joining a political party, or by following a sect, or getting a guru, or by joining a movement. Only by going through these emotional conflicts, can we really make sense of these things, and retain a sense of the deeper

understanding.

### Third Section

You are not just a body and a set of feelings. There is much more to you than that. Who you are now is who you have become. There were many influences throughout your life; you made decisions along the road, and there could have been different choices, and there were missed opportunities, and so on and so forth. You may have a frustrated musician inside of you, because you had to give up piano at age seven when your family moved house; or there may be dreams of crossing the Gobi Desert on a camel, or of climbing Kilimanjaro. What might have happened (or not happened) if you hadn't gone to that party? This section deals with these parts of the whole You. This is a 'You' that is not being manifest at this particular point in time. However, you don't want to be too precise, because otherwise you may indicate something that isn't there, or you may inhibit or overlook something that is there. You will have to 'feel' your way into this section, over time, and definitely through repetition.

\* **First Part:** This first part of the Third Section is to do with your dreams and aspirations. You may feel you deserve to be the branch manager, or the section head: you may have fantasies about how you would do 'this' or 'that'; or you might have always wanted a child, or another child – or the girl that you have always longed for, or the boy to carry your name forward. These thoughts, dreams, hopes, aspirations, are absolutely fine: all of these are just possibilities; they may (or may not) happen; whether they do, or not, is relatively irrelevant; all of this part is a manifestation of your present potential, of you trying to exert yourself, to move forward, or do something more relevant in your life. This leads you gently forward from the 'here-and-now' towards some new possibilities. Take a couple of minutes for this part. Dream 'your Self' up a little – live a little of this dream for a moment or two.

\* **Second Part:** This part is slightly vaguer, as it is to do with your unrealised potential. You have millions of brain cells that you don't use very much: what might you be like if you were using them - all? With a bit of a push in a particular direction, and with some determination and specialist training, you could be (or have been) ... a musician, an astronaut, a university professor, a lawyer, ... whatever! You chose differently, which is fine, and yet all that potential is still there: latent within you. You could tap some of that potential now, if you wanted to. It is like a bank of reserve batteries, waiting for you to use them. Spend a couple of minutes in this part: tapping into this potential. Letting your mind go!

\* **Third Part:** This is the place, or the level, where you can go to contact 'That' which is 'greater' than yourself: that which is 'Other'. This is your personal connection to God, the Universe, or where You can be at One with Everything – however you envisage this. There are not good words for this part: it is almost beyond words. But most people can connect with something they can call their Higher Self, or their Guardian Angel, or that part of Them that touches the 'Other', or God, or Allah, or whomsoever you pray to: 'That' which is greater than your Self. I am sure that you know what I mean. Spend a couple of minutes 'being' here with the 'Other'.

### Conclusion

This whole exercise should have taken you about 20 minutes: three Sections, with three Parts to each Section, and a couple of minutes spent on each Part. See if you can find the time to do something like this regularly: once or twice a day; or at least 3-4 times a week; as a part of your regular relaxation

routine, or as a quite meditation in your lunch break, or (as I said) on the bus or train to work. As the weeks unfold, your sense of your Felt Sense of your Self will increase and deepen. And **that** is what this is all about!

In the interim, you may experience various ‘parts’ of yourself; or partial aspects of your ‘Self’ – as some aspects of yourself that can show up from time to time, or at specific times, and which are often recognisable or familiar. Yes: these are a part of you, but they are not ‘You’, nor are they all of You. There may be a bossy part, or a lazy part, or a pushy part, or an angry part, or a part that wants attention or admiration, or a part that is scared of being seen, etc.: but all these various parts are not all of You! These are just some of the various parts – and we all have a number of different parts – inevitably, for they are what makes up our unique richness; and these parts can also change, like eddies in a river, in a moment of time. What stays solid and central and at a core is more the sense of our truly Felt Sense of Self.

There is therefore a whole bundle of ‘stuff’ in there, inside of your Self; a compilation of your various ‘selves’. We need to allow ourselves to feel these; to know these; and to be able to let them go; and, as we do, we get a sense of our ‘core’. So, we also need to be able to discriminate between these various ‘parts’ of our Self, and who we really are – in our fullness, or totality – our true unique Self. There is therefore a ‘process’ of owning (and/or rejecting), or of filtering, these various aspects (parts) of our Self, as we move towards the more static core, or towards a sense of completeness, towards our true ‘Felt’ Self.

This ‘process’ of filtering and discrimination, we have to do again and again. As we do so, so we become more in contact with our “Felt Sense of Self”. This is a process and a goal.

*What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

## References

- Cornell, A.W.** (1996). *The Power of Focusing*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Cornell, A.W.** (n.d.). *A Felt Sense: Know Buddhism*. Retrieved from <http://www.knowbuddhism.info/2009/02/about-felt-senses-ann-weiser-cornell.html>
- Embodied situated cognition:** *The Felt Sense*. (n.d.). *Embodiment*. Retrieved from [www.embodiment.org.uk/topics/felt\\_sense.htm](http://www.embodiment.org.uk/topics/felt_sense.htm)
- Hahn, Thich Nhat** (1991). *Peace Is Every Step*. London: Rider.
- Gendlin, E.** (1962). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning. A philosophical and psychological approach to the subjective*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Gendlin, E.** (1978). *Focusing: How to gain Direct Access to your Body's Knowledge: How to Open Up your Deeper Feelings & Intuition*. New York: Bantam Books. See also: <https://www.wikihow.com/Focus-and-Get-a-Felt-Sense>
- Gendlin, E.** (1996). *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J.** (1990). *Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation*. New York: Pliatkus.
- Katonah, D.G.** (n.d.). Felt sense and cognitive function. Focusing.org. Retrieved from [www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/felt-sense](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/felt-sense) and [www.focusing.org/cognitive.html](http://www.focusing.org/cognitive.html)
- Mindful Call:** [www.mindfulcall.co.uk/body/felt-sense/](http://www.mindfulcall.co.uk/body/felt-sense/)