

## Tuesday Focusing: Sixty Online Sessions of Focusers amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Hong Kong saw the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic as we celebrated the Lunar New Year in 2020. Our Focusing teacher Chee-seung then suggested that his Focusing students meet online for mutual support. More than a year has passed, and we have held more than 60 online meetings. Some members of this informal group know each other, but some do not. Some people joined the meeting for a few times and then dropped out, while some have been devoted participants since the very beginning. The Tuesday meetings via Zoom start at 7:30pm, but people can join or leave anytime. Arriving late or leaving early is well accepted. Discussions are sometimes heated, but there are also moments of dead silence. Members are different in age, occupation, religious belief and political views. The link between us is Chee-seung: we are all students of his Focusing class over the years.

“Chee-seung is the baker’s yeast, we the flour. We are raised like a leavened dough. When he is with us, we feel trust, we feel the support.” ~ Winnie

“I agree that my role as a core is important, but the participation of everyone is what counts most. How the group has made its way is quite beyond my expectations.” ~ Chee-seung

“Chee-seung’s interventions are minimal and yet with great precision. Only when necessary would he act – in a moderate, appropriate and timely manner. Remarkable indeed.” ~ Sing

### An Anchor in the Waves

It is not very accurate to say that Chee-seung has facilitated the meetings. What he has done is to send out the Zoom link before the meeting, and to press “start” on time. He seldom speaks or intervenes. We can hardly say that the people joining this meeting are friends. We organized face-to-face gatherings two or three times when the number of COVID infections was low, but shortly afterwards, our online meetings resumed. People do not meet up from time to time in their real life—like what we expect of “friends.” But it seems that we enjoy this “distance” among us. Since our shared social circle is only Focusing, we can speak freely about our work, our colleagues, our families, etc. Riding through the social movement, the pandemic and the rapid change of the Hong Kong society in the past two years, this feeling of “closeness with a distance” serves as an anchor in the waves.

“I just feel like ‘going home,’ returning to my insides, returning to my family, so warm, so close, so much at ease.” ~ Grace Ko

“With a bond in Focusing, through sharing on our Tuesday gatherings platform.... I found ‘you’ in my journey. Your full presence, companionship and deep listening.... made me ‘feel at home’ in this time of turmoil, when we’re suffering from all kinds of ‘loss’ in the pandemic, social upheavals and mass emigration..... Grateful that we cherish everyone here, ...we cherish..... each other.” ~ Grace Ho

“A feeling of being with my family. Sam feels like a brother to me - he’s such a sweet guy. Winnie feels like a mother, not a nagging mom, but one who is free and liberal. There are others who feel like an uncle or a brother to me. It made me sad when someone in the group would be leaving Hong Kong, but they continue to show up every Tuesday, just like they are still around! That’s great, this family remains intact.” ~ Sing

“Sometimes I wonder if this online friendship is true. We have been meeting up face-to-face, but other than the Tuesday gatherings our lives never crossed. Friends, old schoolmates, ex-colleagues would get together because of shared interests and things in common. But here we’re just going all out for ‘Focusing.’ We talked deeply, we shared our innermost thoughts and feelings. Yet we’re not familiar with each other. We won’t say ‘Let’s go out for tea someday.’” ~ Celia

In this group, people can say what they want to say. There is no interruption, or stopping anyone from talking. No matter what people say, there is no judgement or comment. Even though there are disagreements at times, people will only share their views. There is no right or wrong, win or lose. People can choose to speak or to keep silent; to open the camera or to hide their faces. Being late or leaving early is no problem. And no notification is needed for absence.

“Here in this group, I think the unspoken rule is to refrain from being critical. This attitude is most important! I once called these gatherings ‘Meetings on Tuesday,’ but someone said: ‘Hey, how on earth could you come up with such an old-fashioned name?’ Well, I took that back. We can talk about anything, our family, our country, faiths..... that feel safe to us. At this time of turmoil, we have unknowingly consolidated something in this group. Chee-seung said it’s fine for anyone not showing up, or joining late..... this is a change that will carry on in our life.” ~ Elisa

“I am close to just a few people - my family, colleagues (of the same profession), and friends (there aren’t many). I don’t like to confide in others, but somehow, I speak a lot here. It’s such an incredible sense of relief! Keeping things to myself all the time stresses me out. You guys don’t know who I am, I can rest assured to speak freely. My mind is put at ease, my strength restored. I can get back to work again.” ~ Ivy

“I am intimidated by things that are authoritative, things that challenge a rational and inquisitive mind. When I first learnt of these gatherings and found a bunch of us attending, I was taken aback, wondering what the hell people were doing there. I know in this group there are experts and professionals from various fields. I was curious what made these people keep talking on and on. I thought they must be reading books or studying something. Until one day I asked Celia, ‘What are you people discussing?’ She said, ‘Nothing specific, we just talk.’ I wanted to come and listen, even for just a brief stay.” ~ Grace Ko

“I find that it is getting more and more interesting. I’m not here to listen to theories or lectures from experts. Each of us here is already an expert of our own. Everyone tells things that he knows well and knows best. Anyone can speak, others listen, what a bliss! Since we can hear a lot, learn a lot, our lives are grossly enriched.” ~ Gloria

The meeting usually starts with purposeless chit-chat. When the group began last year, we exchanged information about the pandemic, where to find toilet paper and other daily necessities. Some people never expected that halfway through their life they could switch to working and meeting online. We have shared big and small things in our daily life, sometimes with jokes and humor. When we touched on social issues, complicated emotions like anger, restlessness, worries and regrets, etc. emerged. And at times we did have disputes over different perceptions.

“We share, we listen  
We embrace, we support  
We connect with the inner self

We interact through resonance  
We keep company in silence beyond words  
We engage body and spirit to allow new scenes be unveiled  
What wonders and fun, bestowed upon each and everyone  
Quietly, without a fuss, we move one step forward” ~ Vanna Mak

“It’s very free here..... We used to practice with a single partner, but at these gatherings I feel like doing a group Focusing.” ~ Terence

We tried to share from our hearts, but it was not always smooth. We jumped from one topic to another, sometimes without any conclusion. Our discussions are illogical occasionally. Whether we understood each other or not, we kept listening; until the speaker finished with a smile, and thanked everyone for listening. The bigger society has its logic, but our minds wander freely without any boundary.

At the outbreak of the pandemic, one participant was stranded overseas while visiting his family there. Upon reading news about Hong Kong, worries, anxiety and feelings of loss came to mind. Joining this group, he found everyone was fully alive to Focusing. Here, we would not criticize but embrace each other. No matter what people said, he could feel the presence of the group. To him, safety and presence were very important, especially when he was abroad then. He loved the sense of ‘connectedness.’ With the group’s support, he no longer felt lonely. Here we could talk about different religious beliefs, be it the Bible or the Buddhist scriptures. Eventually he came up with a vivid image of a very big ‘container’ which could hold a lot of things. We were all inside this container, sharing a feeling of ‘respect.’

“In the early days of the pandemic I was out of work, running scared. Besides face masks, fetching household stuff like toilet paper also made me anxious. I felt awfully inadequate to cope but dared not tell anyone. Only once every 10 to 14 days did I go out to buy essentials. It was depressing, but I’ve never thought of seeking help. Thanks to Chee-seung for inviting me to join these Tuesday gatherings. At first, I just listened to the sharing from others, then I realized that what I have experienced - fear of the disease, worry over the supply of daily necessities and concern about my aging parents... were just ordinary, not because I was in any way incompetent. Though I seldom spoke, I took great comfort in seeing familiar faces on the screen and listening to others telling about their daily lives in the past week, knowing that I was not alone in facing the pandemic challenges. I began to have a habit of glancing at the calendar, again and again, looking forward to the next meeting on Tuesday.” ~ Fanny Lee

A listener in Focusing practice listens wholeheartedly with his/her presence. The accompanying provides a solid space for the Focuser to go into his/her inner self. But the listeners in Tuesday meetings may not be ‘present’ all the time. Like me, I often work and attend the meeting at the same time. People who work late eat their dinner while joining the meeting. When they heard something interesting, they jumped in, said a few words, then continued their meals. When the discussion was lively, we left our work or meal and joined the sharing.

“You speak out, and find that you are not alone, someone is here to share your feeling. It is so powerful, just as in Focusing you bring out in words what is there inside you, then get reflected back, with resonance, and sharing. This is a good way to carry on, carrying on with our liveliness and vitality.” ~ Stephen

“As I don’t know most of you well, I was at first not sure if I could get myself involved. But then I found this group very inclusive. We talked about things in our daily life, so deeply and with lots of information. I remember I once mentioned my appointment at the hospital. When Sam (who was working there) told me that the hospital would be a safe place, it set my mind at ease. We’ve also discussed issues like vaccines, or compulsory quarantine at short notice, very practical, very real.” ~ KY

## Casual Talking is Clearing the Space

Our gatherings undergo a special process. We usually start with talking casually—no topic, no orientation, no aim, but somehow clouds will go away and a blue sky appears. People start to share something deep from their hearts, in a ‘Focusing’ way. In the early days of the COVID pandemic, people shared their worries and anxiety about the disease and the panic buying of toilet paper rolls. At some point, someone expressed her sadness for not being able to visit her mom in the elderly home and wept in distress. Another participant recounted how he accompanied his family member who suffered from emotional disturbance, and the ups and downs going through all these difficult moments. Words that are hard to say and the hidden tears just find their place in this virtual space. Sam described this process as a sort of clearing the space. We threw out the thoughts in our troubled minds to make way for the words from our hearts to come out.

“What is it all about, (a group meeting) for over 40 times? We kept chatting, each one of us, on anything and everything. When our conversation was exhausted, with nothing more to say, ‘something’ would emerge from our hearts. This usually happened during the last half-hour of our meeting. Maybe we have been ‘clearing the space’ by pouring our body and soul all out. When it was done, something would crop up, from within our hearts. There’s a space. It was fabulous the moment we got connected, just like one whole being doing Focusing. A dozen of us here, as if we’re parts of a whole, and a whole with all parts, doing Focusing. Loneliness has given way to a sense of oneness, especially in these times of pandemic and social upheavals.” ~ Sam

“It has a process... You didn’t plan to say anything, but at some point... just not knowing why, you speak. It’s not only the space, the bonds also give you energy.” ~ Eric

On one occasion, we touched on the topic of religious beliefs. In the group, we have people who believe in Jesus Christ, others who practice Buddhist meditation, and some who practice Taoism. One person said meditation has helped her to understand Jesus’s teachings, another person said he gets close to God through Focusing. We shared cross-religion spiritual experiences and practices openly without boundaries. I remember after one session, Chee-seung was much impressed that despite his services in the Church for so many years, he has never heard such a deep and open sharing about spirituality and religious practices. How amazing to see it happen in our Tuesday meeting, unexpectedly. We are all laymen. Like God divulges his deep teaching through a group of laymen. But spiritual pursuit is virtually a life assignment for each of us, isn’t it?

“Here you don’t need to explain... if you talk about ‘body sensations’ with other friends, you would be asked: ‘Are you playing tarot lately? Ha-ha.’ But here you don’t have to explain. We all understand.” ~ Eric

“It’s hard to find friends elsewhere to confide in. They would feel that it’s a burden, and just tell you that you’d be fine. But here, I can talk.” ~ Tina

“While we have diverse backgrounds in faiths, beliefs, stances and positions, we share one common ground in practicing Focusing. With Focusing we embark on an inner journey. We learn to be honest with ourselves, to face the feelings deep inside, then express them in words with courage and sincerity. One of us said he felt much at home with the group, I believe it’s because we act and speak truthfully. We don’t come here to talk just for the sake of it.” ~ Jenny

## An Unexpected Art Healing Journey

Three months after the outbreak of COVID-19, the pandemic slowed down. People started to go out. Our weekly meetings on Tuesday would be held every fortnight instead. We seemed to have run out of topics. Chee-seung thought it might be a good chance to connect with friends overseas. He then invited his friends from Taiwan, the UK, the US and Canada to share how they went through the pandemic. At that

time, COVID case numbers were very high in the UK, the US and Canada. With first-hand information from people around the world, we could understand the impact of the disease from another angle, which is very different from just listening to the figures in the news. A guest from New York was in tears when she told us about not being able to attend her mother's funeral in Hong Kong. Her sharing touched our hearts. Little we could do but to give each other a virtual hug, and to pray for people far away.

Another guest is Ka-yee, who is a counselor living in the UK. She gave a talk about the development of the left and right brain and how it affects our creative growth. We enjoyed her talk very much, and immediately invited her to give a talk again. After that, Ka-yee used Julie Cameron's book *The Artist's Way* as a framework and facilitated a three-month online art healing course. We learn to treat ourselves as precious gifts, to let our inner children play and have fun, and to dialogue with our inner selves through drawing and writing. We are all creatures of God/the universe, and we are all born artists. As we pick up creative work, our hearts open slowly. We have experienced an exciting journey which is full of inspiration and joy. Thank you Chee-seung!

“Doing morning pages and drawings in Ka-yee's Artist's Way class, I've come to talk to myself more. When facing harsh challenges, there are times I am the only one who understands it but can't express it. Yet I can deliver it on my morning pages and in my drawings. I spent a lot of time struggling with myself, dealing with my own issues. I find myself, a clearer picture of myself, especially my old pattern. When there is a challenge, I would be aware of it, take a pause, to find myself.” ~ Ching

“What touches me most is that when social contacts are grossly cut in the wake of the pandemic, we are still able to gather on this internet platform, whatever the distance between us. The Artist's Way class of Ka-yee, in particular, has broadened my horizon to find that art is accessible to me.” ~ Mak

### Growing Up Never Stops

Before we know it, we have met for 60 times. Throughout the meetings, we have grown up and changed a lot. It sounds strange, though. As adults, many of us even retired already, every moment can be a new lesson for learning. If you are convinced that each person has an assignment to be completed, that assignment is life itself.

“It happened a few times, just when something came up to my mind, I got relevant messages from this group. You guys said I am a good cook, I have always found it difficult to accept compliments from others, but now I can accept them with ease and pleasure. That's my own growth. I have experienced such kind of growth three or four times in this group.” ~ Eric

“All along, I didn't just listen, I talked to my inner self at the same time. I was moved, I count myself lucky. I remember I felt absolutely wretched at the outbreak of the pandemic. I am a guy who loves meeting people, and it was a hard time then. I was very angry, I resented having to eat takeout food. But now I would buy takeaways so as to join this meeting. Most importantly, I feel my existence here. Deep down I have a dire need for a sense of existence, for being recognized. Just as I am talking now, you hear me. Even if I am not talking, you still know that I am here. I'm heard, I'm seen, I exist.” ~ C

“There is a space here, which allows me to make attempts to express myself... For more than a year, I've been in good company. I also found that in the past I have missed a lot in the processes. The experience of going through the processes is also important.” ~ Ken

“I can feel that we have heart-to-heart sharing, something I have long been yearning for. Many of us here are doing it. We’re on the path of growth. If we are not sharing from our hearts, we’d better keep our mouths shut. These gatherings are therapeutic.” ~ Sing

There is an observer in our Tuesday meeting—she is Hoi-han, Chee-seung’s wife. She seldom joins our meeting, but in our review session, she said, “This platform is really wonderful, you are all wonderful. You guys articulate the process from vagueness to reality.”

The pandemic is still going on, and our lives must go on. I remember Eugene Gendlin once said, “Don’t just do Focusing!” What he meant is: Focusing is not life itself, action is. Let’s meet on Tuesday!

“Focusing should be combined with everything that ever helps anybody. But the one I am concerned about is action. I see too many people Focusing, something like sitting on a motor, and everyday revving up this motor, but with no wheels, and not going anywhere. Don’t do that!” ~ Eugene Gendlin <sup>1</sup>

Note:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dD6Bx9C0HHk>