

IS “THE DEATH OF THE EGO” COMPATIBLE WITH FOCUSING?

An Integral Perspective

Stefan Beyer

MY OWN TRAVELOGUE

My journey began when I was about twenty. I read many books and tried many approaches, both psychological and spiritual, that promised a better life. In the end my favorites—those that worked best for me—were Carl Rogers’ person-centered approach and Focusing, some types of meditation, and certain bodywork techniques, especially Feldenkrais. It did not take long for me to understand Focusing, but in my explorations of meditation practices it took quite a long time before I understood ‘real meditation’, which for me is the realization of spiritual non-duality.

After having lived with both Focusing and at least glimpses of non-duality for many years now, I can ask myself what it would be like if I had not known, or did not know, one of the two approaches. In either case it would feel like something very important was missing. If I had only Focusing I would lack the global solution of non-duality as a frame for my experiences. It is comparable to walking on a long board which is twenty inches broad—it makes a huge difference whether that board bridges a canyon or is put on level ground. Having only Focusing without non-duality is like moving across the abyss. In the context of feeling that I am in a way ‘already saved’, Focusing assumes a more playful note. Spiritual ‘Self-remembering’ certainly did not nullify the effects of Focusing, it rather gave those effects more space—it ‘liberated’ them further.

Conversely, I can also ask myself, what it might be like if I had only the non-dual insight without Focusing and Gendlin’s philosophy. My answer would be that the phenomenal world that I would thereby embrace would be comparatively ‘rigid’ and ‘flat’. The transcended world would not fit as well to the unconditionality and openness brought about by the transcending. It would be like the existence of musicality without knowing how to sing or play an instrument.

The above relates, however, to being influenced by ‘living with both approaches’, which means practicing them at different times. I also experimented with doing Focusing and remembering non-duality simultaneously, but I found that to be difficult. A problem seemed to be that Focusing in the usual understanding addresses the person and the body. Even if we take the body in an advanced understanding as an “environmental interaction” (Gendlin), this idea of interaction is still different from the spiritual non-dual. My current preference for an ‘unforced’ simultaneous combination is therefore to address the non-dual Self instead. I will present suggestions for this at the end of this article.

FOCUSING AND NON-DUAL SPIRITUALITY ON ONE MAP

If I were to ask myself the “Thinking at the Edge” question “What do I know about Focusing that (most) other Focusers do not know?” the answer would be, “It should be complemented with true non-dual spirituality”. I call it “true non-dual spirituality” in order to distinguish what I mean from other common understandings of spirituality and non-duality.

I can best explain the difference by referring to Ken Wilber’s “Integral Theory”, especially to an early version of his developmental theory (Wilber, 1984, 1985 & 1987). I am using Wilber’s terms as a rough frame for what I want to say, perhaps not in accordance with him in every detail.

The Centauric and Subtle Realms

In an early publication Wilber relates Focusing explicitly to the level (“realms”) of “the centaur” (Wilber, 1984, p.162); later he called that level “vision logic”. A core issue on this level is the unity of mind and body, hence the name centaur. (A centaur is a mythological being with the lower body of a horse and the upper body of a human.) Humanistic Psychology belongs to this level, as do all psychologies and philosophies which are based on intentionality and meaning. It is the highest level of personal development, and its non-duality is of the kind “everything is connected with everything else”. Being is seen as a “being-in-the-world”. Of course the centauric realms include a variety of different approaches, and I would say that Focusing and Gendlin’s philosophy are the most advanced of these.

However, beyond this personal centauric level there is still a whole “tier”—the transpersonal, which contains three levels: the subtle, the causal, and the ultimate (non-dual). I would say that only the subtle level may still be in direct reach of Focusing, whereas the causal and ultimate levels are not. Let me explain this:

The subtle realms comprise a variety of phenomena, which can be divided into two groups: one group is of experiences in which the self is not experienced as the centaur, but as the so-called “low-subtle self”. Examples of this are out-of-body-experiences and paranormal phenomena. The other group, related to the “high-subtle-self”, includes archetypal references to an identity which transcends the centauric self in another way. An example of this is the spiritual visualization of deities. These archetypal references can also appear in some types of therapy.

My own very first one-to-one Focusing session provides an example of where an experience of the subtle category might occur within Focusing. It was about 30 years ago, at the Focusing summer school in Germany. I attended a workshop where we beginners were paired up with people from the advanced group for work in pairs. As there were more beginners than advanced participants, I had a session with the workshop leader, Friedhelm Koehne, with Martin Siems sitting in as an observer. At the beginning of the session I felt nervous and tense, so it was suggested that I close my eyes and Focus on how this nervousness felt in my body. After feeling the tension for a short time, I had an image of a sun, which then changed into the fantasy of merging with that sun, so that for the rest of the session I *was* the imagined sun. I remember thinking that this experience was not exactly Focusing as

described in Gendlin’s book, and therefore apologized: “This is probably not Focusing, but it feels very good.” I was told that it was quite ok to stay with that vision and when I opened my eyes after half an hour of ‘being the sun’, Martin remarked that my eyes were shining.

Whether the sun in a vision is really an experience of the subtle transpersonal, depends, of course, on how it is understood. The sun can also have a special personal meaning, which wasn’t so in my case—questions in that direction “did not fit”. It becomes an example of the subtle transpersonal if it is taken as somehow ‘archetypical’. Sun or light are often used as symbols for Awareness or the Absolute—see for instance Plato’s famous analogy of the cave.

After my session it was suggested that my sun experience might have been a way of “Clearing a Space” by my body. This comment begs the question of how to classify “Clearing a Space”, a Focusing step that typically leads to a feeling of not being burdened by problems, with an imaginary space between the problems and oneself. Space is, of course, another symbol for Awareness. In a way “Clearing a Space” transcends specific situations, and it may give rise to spiritual connotations, such as “a feeling of unity and spirituality”; “a sense of a larger self”; or “a sanctuary” (Klagsbrun, 2008, p.217, 218 & 223). I assume that especially with these connotations, “Clearing a Space” may belong on Wilber’s subtle transpersonal level. However, for me, “Clearing a Space” is clearly not what the spiritual Awareness-teachings speak about. It is still a phenomenon. (By phenomenon, I mean anything that is perceptible, thinkable, feel-able or experience-able in any way as an object.)

Focusing can reach the subtle realms, because the subtle realms are still phenomenal, they can be experienced. Focusing asks for and heeds only things which are *experience-able*.

The Causal Realms and Ultimate Non-duality

The core issue on the next level, however, cannot be experienced as a phenomenon. In the metaphor of Plato’s analogy of the cave, one has to turn 180 degrees in order to look at the sun, instead of at the shadows in the cave. Instead of asking, “What is this felt sense like?” one would have to ask, “What is perceiving this felt sense?” If I look at something, it is not about what I look *at* but what I look *out of*. This approach is called Self-Inquiry. What I find is not a ‘thing’, but *Awareness*.

Usually I think that I am identical to my body-mind, but on taking a closer look I can dis-identify from all phenomena related to my body-mind—from parts of the body, as well as from thoughts and feelings. That from which I cannot dis-identify, and therefore that which I must be identical with, is Awareness. Awareness is not a phenomenon that I can perceive as an object—I can only recognize it by *consciously being it*. As the traditions put it, Awareness is self-luminous: it knows itself from the inside, through self-identity.

This is the causal level of spirituality. The new kind of non-duality which is realized on this level is that of body-mind and environment, as both are equally phenomena. (This non-duality is, however, very different from a theory of interconnectedness.) Yet, there is still a new, subtle duality between ‘pure Awareness here’ and ‘objects of Awareness there’. There is still an element of ‘deception’ or ‘ignorance’, still a subtle ego. That is why there is a further step which leads to ‘true nonduality’.

We Focusers know a similar procedure to the above disidentification from the body-mind. We call it “becoming Self-in-Presence”. For instance, when I find that I am Focusing with a pushing attitude, instead of identifying with this attitude, I can dis-identify from it by saying, “Something in me wants to push” or “There is a wanting to push”. It is said that Self-in-Presence doesn’t have an agenda. Since “Presence” is also a synonym for “Awareness”, one might think that Self-in-Presence is a causal experience. I would, however, disagree. “Self-in-Presence” doesn’t have an “agenda” in the sense of a *content agenda*. It does have a *process agenda*. No one has the idea (and I would not suggest it in the context of Focusing) of dis-identifying from *it* by saying things like, “And then there is the thought of dis-identifying from the pushing”. From the causal perspective, Self-in-Presence is—just like “Clearing a Space”—thoughts and feelings happening in Awareness. Self-in-Presence needs to be created, whereas Awareness is already given. Self-in-Presence is temporary, Awareness is ever-present. This also distinguishes Awareness from deliberate attention. Even if I am not attentive, for instance in day-dreaming, there is Awareness. Otherwise I would not know the content of my daydream, and would not be able to talk about it afterwards.

Awareness is like a guesthouse, and Self-in-Presence is like a temporary host in that guesthouse who cares, for instance, for felt senses as the guests. In a way the host is different from the guests because he or she is more connected to the guesthouse than the guests are. In another way, the host is just another person in the house, like the guests, and very different from the house.

So what can still come beyond the causal level, after the realization of ever-present Awareness? In the next step to true non-duality, one realizes that Awareness, now freed from its identification with a part of the whole (usually the body-mind), is indeed ‘the whole world’ in the sense of everything that is given in each situation.

If I investigate the distance between Awareness and objects of awareness, there turns out to be no distance. The relationship between Awareness and objects is different from that between a coin and my hand, if I have a coin in my hand. We say, “I have it *in* my hand”, but in reality it is only *on* my hand. There is the hand, and then the hand ends, and only then the coin begins. But when I am *aware* of a coin, it is not the case that somewhere there is Awareness and then Awareness ends and the coin begins. The coin is truly *in* Awareness, not separate from it. A traditional metaphor for this relationship is that of an ocean with its waves. The waves are part of the ocean.

Now if I am Awareness, as I have realized on the causal level, and Awareness is one with what I am aware of, it follows that I am all that I am aware of: the tree, the clouds, as well as my body, my thoughts and felt senses. It doesn’t necessarily mean that I am other people in the sense of being able to read their minds, but I am them in the sense of being what appears of them to me. I perceive and know by being the so-called perceived and so-called known. In other words, in this perspective there is no perceiving and knowing, only being.

This is not only a logical conclusion. The resulting experience is really that of *being everything* which is given. Some descriptive words for me are ‘being distributed all over the place’, all over the individually perceived world. My resulting mood is—which is quite

typical—a sense of freedom and unconditional contentment. To be ‘distributed’ does not feel as crazy as it may sound—rather it can feel as if I am coming out of a craziness and suddenly, for the first time in my life, starting to feel really ‘at home’, ‘at peace’, ‘centered’, ‘clear’ and ‘sane’.

In a way it means a global solution—I realize that not only my own present situation is self-luminous Awareness being what is given, but *all* situations, past, present, and future, of *all* sentient beings.

I need to add that the way I have described non-duality here is rather the Indian Advaita version of it, which speaks of a “true Self” or “Atman”. In the Buddhist version it would tend to be expressed in negative terms, as what it is not or no longer. One would say there is “anatta”, which means no self, no ego, and there remains just “what is”. There are also traditions which call it “God”.

In order to get an impression of the Buddhist version of this identity shift, you might first imagine that you as your body-mind have disappeared—say you have died—but the world would still go on without you. As a second step you might apply this view of the world additionally to your body-mind. Imagine the body-mind is also still there, with all its sensations, thoughts and feelings, even the “I-feeling”, but “it is going on without you” (see Rajneesh, p. 71).

Focusing cannot reach the true non-dual insight, but it can reach, as we have already seen, symbols or expressions of it. It can also reach its effects; it can recognize that the non-dual insight can carry forward. Tony Parsons, a kind of “teacher” of non-duality (he denies being a teacher), bears witness to this effect. In a recent video interview (Parsons, 2013) he talks about the reactions of his listeners. He says that the ego—the apparent separate self—fears its death, but its death is also its greatest yearning. “The separate self—the me—longs for its own absence”. And then he adds, “When this message is presented from nowhere...in the body...(there) is a sudden Aha”. As I understand it, he means that when the message about “the death of the ego” is presented—not by an I, and therefore “from nowhere”—listeners may have this “Aha” reaction.

Previous developments become integrated

“Death of the ego”, which actually means the end of a false identification, may sound ‘anti-personal’, but it is actually a ‘trans-personal’ step. One can perhaps compare it to the step from before the centaur to the centaur level: On the so-called “mental-egoic” level one doesn’t feel oneself as a body-mind-unity, but only as a mind that needs to control the body. One does not feel like a centaur, but like a rider on a horse. On this level it might appear either useless and stupid or dangerous to ask the body about a problem. One might object to Focusing: “But if I rely on the body, does this not mean giving up all control? Will I not become a victim of bodily drives and go insane?” What would you answer?

I would say that if you know Focusing, there can still be conscious control, as before, if necessary. In Focusing conscious control gets a new role by being used for process interventions—not for deciding, but rather for allowing the unfolding of parts which are relevant

for a decision. And in this way, Focusing means ‘more real control’ over one’s life than before.

In a healthy development, Wilber says, the previous levels are in some way kept and integrated within the higher level. Each level is already a so-called “holon”, a whole, and each subsequent level is a new holon which contains the previous one as a part. It is comparable to a molecule, which is a holon of atoms, but can itself become a part of a cell, which is a new holon. The cell can in turn become part of an organ as a new holon, and so on.

In this respect Wilber’s theory is very similar to Gendlin’s developmental theory in “A Process Model” (Gendlin, 1997). According to Gendlin’s model (in extremely abbreviated form), plants evolve into animals, but animals are still somehow plants (tissue process). Animals evolve into humans, but humans are still animals and also plants. Gendlin’s theory can even more clearly express than Wilber’s in what way the previous levels are “kept” and in what way not, and what a “healthy development” would be. Former developmental stages are, of course, the past of the organism. One might say that in the healthy version everything of the past which is relevant for the present is working implicitly, and only that which is relevant. If something of the past dominates the present experience, the person suffers an unhealthy structure-bound experiencing.

Take for example a conversation with another person—if everything of the past were to be cut off, you would not understand anything. You would not even know the meaning of the words the other person is using, since you learned those meanings in the past. Your present understanding is based on having lived in similar situations as he. But you need not remember the past learning situations explicitly—they work implicitly. On the other hand, an example of structure-bound experiencing would be a conversation in which some of his words trigger a memory of a traumatic event that so overwhelms you that you cannot listen anymore. (For a more exact explanation of the relationship between past and present see chapter IV-B in Gendlin, 1997.)

In Wilber’s theory, correspondingly, an unhealthy development might mean that a developmental level tries to dominate other levels. He calls the dominating level an “arrogant holon” (see Wilber, 2002, p.121-123). Lower levels can become arrogant as well as higher ones. So-called “spiritual by-passing”, when the transcendence of the personal is misunderstood or used in an anti-personal way, can be an instance of the arrogance of a higher level.

Since what is relevant of the previous levels is kept, in the transpersonal stages only the *identification* with the body-mind as “what is my ultimate or true identity” is dropped, but *distinctions* between the body-mind and the environment can, of course, be kept. In the context of the non-dual experience, going for a walk to me often feels like “I am walking through myself.” This sentence expresses both the distinction and the unity of the body and the landscape.

I hope it has become clear that “the death of the ego” is not incompatible with Focusing. “The death of the ego” is another way, a very interesting version, of carrying forward. The fact that the source of that carrying forward is not in direct reach of Focusing need not bother us too much. There are many individual developments for which specific approaches

other than Focusing are needed. For instance, for certain changes of movement patterns, bodywork methods such as Feldenkrais are needed. Once such approaches and their effects have been experienced, the experiences can be part of the body’s implying and therefore be taken into account by Focusing.

If Focusers are interested in as many options of carrying forward as possible, or in as complete a carrying forward as possible, I would recommend trying some of the specific approaches to true non-dual spirituality. A lasting plateau-experience of it is not easy to attain and therefore very rare, but glimpses are not that difficult. Two teachers who I think are very clear on the subject are Rupert Spira and Douglas Harding. Douglas Harding has designed some very simple experiential Self-Inquiry “experiments” that work for many people at least as a first step (www.headless.org).

If one prefers to keep the identification with the person, or if one does not understand spiritual non-duality, there are also other options for crossing Focusing with spirituality. You might for instance imagine the Divine as ‘another’, as God, with the additional idea that He or She has a person-centered attitude (in Carl Roger’s sense) and can be your Focusing companion. You can also try to “offer” your current experience to that Divine. Especially if there is suffering, you can give it to God as a present. The idea is that God can bear it easily and will be happy that you thought of Him or Her (see Meera, p.78-80). By the way, I would say, with those practices the non-dual Self is projected outwards.

FOCUSING IN A NEW BROADER CONTEXT

Focusing can support transpersonal realizations

It already follows from my “travelogue” that I would not only recommend non-duality to Focusers, but also Focusing to people who are on the path of non-dual spirituality. “Non-dual” people, however, often have an objection to Focusing and actually to all psychological methods because they think they might only strengthen the ego. They would ask, “Why should one decorate a prison cell if one wants to leave it, or maybe has already left it? Decorating, making yourself comfortable in it, turning it into a golden cage, will only delay one’s escape.” To this I would give the following answers:

First, there are very few people who have a permanent plateau-experience of non-duality—I would estimate less than one in a million. Most people who consider themselves to be on ‘the Path’ are either only interested in the non-dual and maybe understand the message intellectually, but not experientially, or they experience it only temporarily. Taking myself as an example, I would say that I experience non-duality for some minutes now and then. Typically, I have it and then a personal problem arises which draws me back into an identification with the body-mind. Theoretically there would be the option to repeat Self-Inquiry in order to dis-identify again, but this often either doesn’t work or works only for a short time, and it appears as a fight. In the religious literature it is sometimes referred to as a “holy war”.

For me, working on the interrupting problem with Focusing is a much better alternative. I would say Focusing in this context is comparable to a safety net for aerial acrobats in a circus—the net prevents a further fall, and it is also resilient, a bit like a trampoline, so

that the acrobats bounce back into the air. The alternative to doing Focusing is not (as the objection of the non-dual people against Focusing would imply) to remain in the non-dual, but in effect to drop into a deeper and longer lasting identification. Starting from the centaur level, Self-Inquiry can become easier and more effective again.

In a similar vein, Ken Wilber strongly recommends “shadow work” as a part of his “Integral Life Practice” (Wilber, 2008). He emphasizes that shadow work is an original contribution of Western psychology, and that no traditional spiritual path has anything like this to offer.

Progress on the spiritual path in general is also dependent on personal motivation. It is often said that one would get enlightened instantly if one were to wish for it whole-heartedly. In the beginning of the spiritual quest this is, of course, rarely the case. As we have learned from Tony Parsons, “the I” both fears its death and yearns for its own absence. Something in me wants the freedom and contentment of the non-dual, and something in me wants the pleasures of a separate self. The motivation will change with more experiences with both modes. In general, the motivation will change the practice and experience, and the experience will change the motivation. There is (usually) a gradual development, and Focusing could potentially support this in an optimal way—we can, for instance, explore what is implied both in the fear and in the yearning.

The personal relationship to non-duality can also appear in one’s dreams. James Swartz is someone who teaches non-duality in a rather orthodox (Advaita) version, but who is also working, in a less orthodox way, with his dreams—there is a section dedicated to this on his website (www.shiningworld.com). When he dreams, for instance, of a landscape or even of his father, he takes both as symbols of the Self, and the dream as conveying something about his relationship to the Self. Symbols for Awareness include the landscape, the sky, a mountain, the sun, the ocean, a diamond and everything which is more or less eternal and/or above things. This might be useful information in connection with Gendlin’s dream work question #16 (Gendlin, 1986, p. 191), which explores connections to spirituality. Of course the mentioned meanings are only hypothetical; they need to be checked by asking the felt sense of the dreamer.

If all goes well, with a “healthy development”, the insight of enlightenment does not just transcend the existing personal aspects but crosses with them to a ‘new person’ or individual. But this will happen more readily if the personal aspects are already capable of this crossing, as opposed to being structure-bound frozen wholes. A previous practice of Focusing will help this condition to be met. In this sense, non-dual realization complemented with Focusing can be seen as a further development compared to ‘only’ non-duality.

‘Integral Focusing’

When a problem draws me back into identification with the personal, it will be adequate to start from the conventional Focusing perspective. For Wilber “shadow work” also means a re-owning of something that has become marginalized by the person, and therefore a temporary re-identification. However, for people who already know non-duality to some

extent, the traditional formulation of Focusing may indeed feel restricting. In the conventional formulation, Focusing addresses the person as if the person were the ultimate identity, and in this sense it does strengthen the illusion of the ego.

However, the same is true for everything we do with the idea of being a separate self, even for sitting in meditation. That’s why Zen-Buddhism recommends that one regards meditation not as a path to enlightenment (with the implicit false assumption of being unenlightened), but as an expression of enlightenment (with the assumption of already having it). The Advaita teacher Rupert Spira responds along similar lines to a question about whether physical exercises like yoga and qi gong would not strengthen the identification with the body. He replies that it depends on how we understand those activities. If they “are undertaken as an offering of the body to the open, loving, transparent presence of Awareness in which they appear, or indeed to express, share and celebrate its [meaning Awareness’s] effortless, inherently free nature, they will not strengthen identification.”

Spira’s insight supports the option to do Focusing as an Integral practice—‘Integral Focusing’ if you like—in the way Wilber recommends doing physical exercises. Instead of identifying with the body-mind and then moving the body, you can remember your non-dual identity and then move. Wilber claims synergistic effects for this—not only will the exercise be physically more effective, but also your realization will deepen. The general idea of Wilber’s approach is to let every aspect of our empirical, relative existence help us on our way to enlightenment, and afterwards to let enlightenment express itself in all of those aspects.

The understanding of Focusing as an extension, expression, or ‘descent’ of the non-dual would mean a formulation of Focusing that should absolutely satisfy the non-dual people who have objections to the traditional formulation, which is addressing the centauric self.

A New Vision of Focusing

This is my vision of Focusing in that context: When the Self, which is Awareness being everything that is given, manifests as a problem, it may pray to itself by becoming a Focusing question and may answer itself by becoming a felt sense. It may express its Love by becoming an explication of that felt sense and it may celebrate itself by gratefully receiving it. It will do it like this only if it fits, which now, in this new context, means, if it fits for the Self. Therefore “if it fits” is identical to “if it happens”.

In this vision, the new Focuser is the Self (Awareness) and the new body is the Self. Everything is the Self. If there is a Focusing partner, they, too, are the Self. Therefore consciously abiding as the Self is a new kind of accompanying, which can be called communion. It is the non-dual version of “intimacy”. Out of it “right speech” and “right action” may arise.

REFERENCES

Gendlin, E. T. (1978). *Focusing*. New York: Everest House.

Gendlin, E. T. (1986). *Let your body interpret your dreams*. Wilmette: Chiron Publ.

- Gendlin, E. T. (1997). *A process model*. New York: The Focusing Institute. See also www.focusing.org/process.html.
- Klagsbrun, J. (2008). Finding sanctuary in a stressful environment: The use of clearing a space to enhance learning for college and graduate students. *The Folio. A Journal for Focusing and Experiential Therapy*, 21(1), 213-225.
- Meera, M. (1991). *Answers*. New York: Meeramma Publications.
- Parsons, T. (2013). Wonderfully gloriously meaningless. Interview with Sabina. www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kg8WHzKidiw#at=108. Retrieved 05.10.2013.
- Rajneesh, B. S. (1985). *Das orangene Buch*. Koeln: Rajneesh Services Verlags-und Handels-GmbH.
- Spira, R. (2010). Embodiment vs transcending the body. http://noduality.rupertspira.com/read/embodiment_vs_transcending_the_body. Retrieved 06.10.2013.
- Wilber, K. (1984). *Wege zum Selbst*. Muenchen: Koesel. [English: No boundary]
- Wilber, K. (1985). *The atman project. A transpersonal view of human development*. Wheaton/Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House.
- Wilber, K. (1987). *Das Spektrum des Bewusstseins*. Bern, Muenchen, Wien: Scherz Verlag. [English: The spectrum of consciousness]
- Wilber, K. (2002). *Das Wahre, Schoene, Gute*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag. [English: The eye of spirit]
- Wilber, K.; Patten, T.; Leonard, A; Morelli, M. (2008). *Integral life practice. A 21st-century blueprint for physical health, emotional balance, mental clarity, and spiritual awakening*. Boston & London: Integral Books.

Stefan Beyer has a university degree in educational sciences (Diplom-Paedagoge) with additional trainings in person-centered counselling and Focusing. He wrote a book in German on person-centered dementia care. Contact: sensingbeing@yahoo.de