

# Meeting Your Body For The First Time: A Focusing Workshop

Colin Berg

Llama Cohort, Oct. 2023 – May 2025

## Part 1: Introduction

*“Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people, in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside.” — Gene Gendlin*

Early in the first year of the Certification program, this Gendlin quote set me on a path I have been walking all my life. When I was very young, I knew that the world is alive and aware. But I didn't tell anyone, because I was afraid that they would think I was crazy. As a young adult, when I was introduced to spiritual metaphysics, I experienced the wonder of inner dimensions as a reality both entirely new and wholly familiar, equally. When I encountered taijiquan and the practice of *wu wei* (“empty stepping”) as a way of using the whole body to listen to the *qi*, the life force, within all things, I recognized that a new and validating step had been shown to me.

But it was Gene's words, along with all the Inner Relationship Focusing training with its beautiful, gentle spirit of curiosity, compassion, patience and empathy that set me free to explore my body and its role... its meaning and presence... without constraints or reservations, limitations or apologies. It brought me here to this unfolding, emerging unclear edge of hope and possibility and wonder at what we are about and what we are capable of becoming.

Hearing Gene talk about the body's living interaction and relationship with... everything... set me really exploring who and what this organic

vessel/vehicle I've been traveling in for seven decades actually is. The ongoing discoveries are both confirming the knowing already known and radically altering my experience and understanding of reality.

When I started this exploration into my body as "a wonderfully intricate interaction with everything around you," as Gene said, I thought initially of stewardship: I saw that Inner Relationship Focusing is, essentially, self-stewardship. The way we, as Self-in-Presence, cultivate and nurture a safe environment that is spacious, intimate and accepting for *everything* that's here in, with and for us is the epitome of being a good steward.

So, I asked myself, if we can learn to develop the ability to be Self-in-Presence with all the turmoil and upheaval—all the change—inside us, how can I help bring that kind of care, compassion, patience and empathy into more of our relationships with each other and the planet? In teaching the self-stewardship of Inner Relationship Focusing, how can I help future students of mine *also* translate that into inter-personal and planetary stewardship as well? For example, might there be a way of presenting IRF to those who are passionate about the environment and activism as a demonstrably effective way of transforming *all* our relationships and informing all (or more of) our activism choices? Approaching present conditions from both inside-out AND outside-in might resonate and might make a real difference.

Stewardship became a driving concept in my Focusing sessions and the exploring that seemed to be pointing to my Project. One night as I was going to bed, words came flooding into my awareness: "If you're serious about self-, community- and planetary stewardship, you need to start with your body. If you want people to wake up to the living Earth, you need to wake up to your attitudes about and relationship with your living body."

That set my explorations into overdrive. I started doing Focusing sessions with my body very similarly to how we Focus with our parts and felt senses. That is, I turned to my body from Self-in-Presence and listened. One of the first things I noticed was that when I said or heard the words from the lead-

in, "Bring awareness to your body," I saw that something in me pictured that as if I was pouring water into an empty pitcher. And I heard my body say, "Wait a minute! I'm not empty here. I already have my own awareness."

Of course that would be true. But it was also shocking to realize that I had, in part, been acting from parts that didn't see or acknowledge that my body has its own awareness. That changed everything.

I started doing a series of sessions inviting my body to tell, show or otherwise share with me what it wanted me to know about it. This began from a general, systemic perspective. But over several months, it evolved into explorations of individual systems, organs and parts (e.g., the five sense organs, hands, feet, joints).

All of this was profoundly fascinating. Mind-boggling, really. And with each session, my Project seemed to be getting bigger, its unclear region more of a territory than an edge. Here is where the support and encouragement of my mentors, Ann and Paula, became so crucial. They gave me all the space I needed to explore where my body was pointing me, acknowledging that this kind of exploration can be a lifelong journey of discovery. AND they reminded me that the Project needed to be something more contained, more defined and reproduceable. Had it not been for their gentle guidance, their Self-in-Presence, I might still be wandering in the nether regions of esoteric spiritual anatomy. But with their help, I landed on an idea for a short-format workshop.

It's my belief that one of the deepest and most painful wounds that humans suffer is the wound of separation. Of *feeling* separate and alone. Disconnected. Many of our personal, societal and environmental challenges can be seen as outer manifestations of that inner loss of connection. I wanted to explore the idea that a simple, 4-week workshop introducing people to their body in new ways could enhance their ability to experience being connected to their body, their whole self, their

relationships and the world. And that like full Focusing training, this could be transformative.

Once I had the idea of that basic structure, my own inner experiences began to accelerate. My body, in particular, became much more animated. It *loved* the idea that we were going to be telling its story; but more importantly, it loved the idea of sharing the body's nature, role and meaning to the whole of who we are.

"Body wisdom" is a term we hear a lot. It seems to acknowledge some of the gifts that the body brings to the table. But in the final weeks that I was designing and developing the workshop, my body became more and more insistent about being involved in that process. And I became dissatisfied with "body wisdom." It felt static, rigid and inanimate. As if the body had a library of accumulated knowledge that it could offer as a reference when needed. My body was increasingly telling me that it's alive. And that's when a different term came to me: body sentience.

As soon as those words came, my body sat up and said, "Yes! That's it!" So, I have been practicing relating to and with my sentient body. Once I did, one of the first things my sentient body said to me about teaching the workshop was, "Listen first. Speak second." Later it added, "The bodies of your students and I are actually going to be your teachers. Your job is to be our student. Listen to us; and then speak for us so your students hear."

During a session in the days before the workshop began, my sentient body laid out all its constituent parts—systems, organs, cells, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles—and acknowledged all my parts as well as my whole Self-in-Presence and said, "We are a conversation."

It rocked my world to the core of my being. And fit perfectly with Gene's quote about being "part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people, in fact, the whole universe."

Not just "we are in a conversation." We *are* a conversation. In the fluid, multi-directional, ever-changing reality of a conversation, being awake,

aware and Present is important. We don't know where it's going to go. We have to learn to pause, turn toward, be with and listen. And in that world, having a sentient body not just as a passive mode of transportation but as a conversant travel companion is a decided plus.

So, that's what I set out to offer: An introduction to the amazing, sentient travel companion the workshop participants have been walking around with all their lives.

## **Part 2: The Design**

My original idea for the workshop was to offer it in four 1-hour sessions. I wanted the process and the presentation to be simple and easily assimilated. Ann wisely suggested that within a short format, I might also consider some extra time to allow for more discussion. So, I expanded the course design to four 90-minute sessions.

Ann was absolutely right, and I'm really glad that I did add those extra 30 minutes to each class. In fact, even with that extra time, I often felt during the month of the class that we could have benefited from 2 hours each week. That was confirmed with the evaluation reports I received from several of the participants who wished there had been more time for discussions, especially in the smaller group breakout rooms. Next time...

My target audience for the workshop was primarily people who were new to Focusing. I sent out an email along with a 1-page course description to 13 people. Most were former taiji students of mine (three of whom had also been my guided Focusing practice clients); one was not a former taiji student, but was a former guided Focusing practice client.

Of those 13 people, 10 signed up for the workshop. Three of those referred friends who also signed up. My wife, Elizabeth, also attended. Three of the participants let me know they would not be able to attend any of the live classes. But since I was going to make the video recordings of the sessions available, this was not a problem, as I had pointed out in my introductory email.

The kernels of Focusing that the workshop used as its framework were these four elements: Pause, Turn Toward, Be With and Listen. All four were repeated as an interrelated unit multiple times throughout the four sessions. Each of the four were also the primary thematic emphasis of one of the lessons. The basic outline for the four sessions was as follows:

### **Week 1: It Starts With A Pause**

The theme of the first session was intended to invite the participants to pause and assess: 1) What some of the body's easily overlooked abilities are that they're already familiar with; 2) What qualities are most helpful in cultivating a deeper, more collaborative relationship with the body; and 3) What their attitudes and feelings about their body are right now. To accomplish this, I borrowed two Focusing games included in *The Focusing Teacher's Manual* (the Two Person Exercise and the Shy Animal at the Edge of the Woods) and created two attunements—one a simple lead-in and the other a more in-depth exploration. There were discussions after both the games and the second attunement.

- Pausing: Cultivating a new relationship with a familiar companion—your body
- Entering the experience with curiosity, compassion, patience and empathy
- Learning to Pause, Turn Toward, Be With and Listen to what's here for you now

**Homework Invitation:** Remember to Pause. Turn Toward. Be With. Listen.

## **Week 2: It's Not A Part, It's A Partner**

The theme of the second session continued the core message of "Pause, Turn Toward, Be With and Listen," while emphasizing Turning Toward. And specifically *how* we turn toward.

- Turning Toward: Strengthening your new relationship with your body
- Paying attention to HOW we turn toward what we become aware of
- Inviting your body to 1) Let you know what it wants you to know about it; 2) How it wants you to be with it; 3) What brings it joy

**Homework Invitation:** You might stop for one minute each day this week: Pause and check how you're Turning Toward what's here for you in the moment.

## **Week 3: Your In-House Adviser**

The theme of the third session again reiterated the core message of "Pause, Turn Toward, Be With and Listen," while emphasizing Being With. And specifically, being with the body in a way that acknowledges and respects the body's sentience.

- Being With: Including your body in the conversation of your life
- Treating your sentient body as an advisor
- Consulting with your sentient body on decisions small and large

**Homework Invitation:** Go grocery shopping. Before entering the store, take a moment to bring awareness to your whole body... feel your feet, your breath... the inner areas of your body... invite your sentient body to come grocery shopping with you.

Once in the store, visit the areas you normally do, but this time, as you approach an area (e.g., produce, meat department, dairy case) invite your sentient body to let you know what feels nourishing to it. You still are the one who gets to decide what you buy, if anything. And there's no judgment of any choices. This is not an exercise to steer you toward one thing and away from another. It's an exercise in pausing, turning toward, BEING WITH, and listening to your sentient body as a resource, advisor and fellow traveler. Play with it. Have fun!

#### **Week 4: Your Living Connection**

The theme of the fourth and final session repeated "Pause, Turn Toward, Be With and Listen," as an interrelated whole, while emphasizing Listening. Here, we considered listening not simply as an auditory exercise, but as a full sensory attunement, especially of the body's deep connection to all living things.

- Listening: Letting your sentient body speak for itself
- Checking how your sentient to body feels about how you've been relating to it over the last four weeks
- Experiencing how your sentient body relates and is connected to minerals, trees, animals (including humans)

Since this was an online workshop, in the final exercise, I used photographs of a beach stone, a Sitka spruce tree and a deer to guide the students into exploring their sentient body's connection to all kingdoms of life. Here's what that looked like:

- Let your eyes focus softly on the picture of this beach stone



- Let your awareness sense its shape... its texture... its solidity... its consciousness
- Now sense your sentient body and its response to, its connection with the stone
- Listen with curiosity and patience as human body relates to stone body, life to life... Pause with that... Then...

- Let your eyes focus softly on the picture of this tree



- Let your awareness sense its shape... its textures... its height... the depth and breadth of its roots... its consciousness
- Now sense your sentient body and its response to, its connection with the tree
- Listen with curiosity and patience as human body relates to tree body, life to life... Pause with that... Then...

- Let your eyes focus softly on the picture of this deer



- Let your awareness sense its shape... its textures... its size... its consciousness
- Now sense your sentient body and its response to, its connection with the animal
- Listen with curiosity and patience as human body relates to animal body, life to life... Pause with that... Then...

Very gently bring awareness to your feet and what they're touching, your hands and your whole, connected self here in the room.

**Homework Invitation:** When the weather allows, go outside to a park or other outdoor locale and 1) let your feet touch the earth (do this with bare feet, preferably, but shoes are allowed); 2) sitting or standing comfortably, sense how your body connects to the body of the earth; 3) sit or stand near a tree, sense the tree's

body (including the roots), sense its “tree-ness” and sense your body’s connection to the tree; 4) watch animals (domestic or wild) and sense your body’s connection to them; 5) when you’re at home, pause and sense the “body,” the structure(s) of your home. Sense your body’s connection to the body of your home. Take your time to really pause, turn toward, be with and listen to your body, to the body of your home, and to how you’re all connected. Be curious.

Each session included teaching components, discussion (with the whole group and in breakout rooms), and attunement exercises. Each of the sessions also included a homework invitation to encourage further practice and exploration. The last three sessions also included two simple qigong exercises to help amplify and ground the inner experiences while cultivating more intimacy and play with the body.

After each class, I posted the video recording of the class on Google Drive. I also sent via email a text synopsis of the lesson in pdf format that covered the key themes, the basic steps of the attunements, instructions for the qigong exercises, and the homework invitation.

NOTE: Regrettably, I forgot to turn on the recording for the fourth lesson, so there was no video of that last class. I did still provide everyone with the pdf synopsis.

## **Part 3: What I Learned From My Students' Experiences**

After completing the workshop, I sent a 15-question course evaluation form to all the participants. The first seven questions were multiple-choice evaluation questions. The remaining eight were narrative questions that asked the student to express in more detail about their experience. Those eight narrative questions were:

- What was the central theme or message in this 4-week workshop?
- Has this course changed how you think of, feel about and/or experience your body? If so, in what way(s)? If not, what would have been more helpful to you?
- Are there things you've learned in this course you can take with you in your daily life? If so, please explain.
- If monthly, 30-minute "Family Meetings With Your Body" were offered for continued support of a deeper, more collaborative relationship with your body, would you be interested in participating? If so, what would you find most helpful to be included?
- If this course were offered again, would you recommend it to your friends? If yes, how would you describe it? If no, what would have needed to be different in order for you to feel comfortable recommending it?
- What did you appreciate most about the course?
- Was there anything you would have preferred to have more of... or less of... in the course? If so, please explain.
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?

For me, the central question was, "Has the course changed how you think of, feel about and/or experience your body?" Here are some of their responses:

Lynne H.

Extremely helpful!!! Reminding myself to "Pause" then "Turn Toward" and "Be With" has increased my depth of understanding, empathy and appreciation. It has also increased my awareness of a given situation and helped me to respond in a manner that not only nurtures my mind/body but prevents me from making a mistake.

Regina F.

Honoring how I feel! We are so often expected to ignore ourselves, mind and body, and keep doing what needs to be done, or what is asked of us. Finally, in this course, I feel like it's ok to respond to my limits and to what makes me happy!

Maria J.

This course has made me aware of the body as a sentient organism. How to give it more respect as a great resource and a way of knowing self and the world. It supports me being rather than doing.

Joan M.

I am understanding the importance of listening to my body.

Marjorie J.

Yes, it has. I pay more attention to how I feel & I don't ignore my body messages near so much. I still need more practice to overcome a lifetime of not paying near enough attention to my body.

Lisa S.

Definitely! I was able to incorporate the info immediately into my daily life, stopping occasionally to ask my body how it's feeling, feeling those feelings, and asking what it needs, instead of trying to ignore/suppress my feelings. Appreciating my body in a new way.

Christie M.

I sense that my body and my mind are quieter, more clear and deliberate in communicating with each other and working together.

What was also clear from all their responses was that they universally appreciated the supportive community... the connection... that was established in our six hours of class time over the four weeks. That's why I included the question about whether they would be interested in participating in ongoing, 30-minute, "Family Meetings With Your Body." And given their positive response to that, I will be scheduling the first of those for April.

## **Part 4: What I Learned From My Own Experience**

I rediscovered that I love teaching! I love the creative part of listening and letting the form of the class and the words that come be the result of listening to the students. It's like my body said to me before the workshop started, "The bodies of your students and I will be your teachers. Your job is to be our student, listen to us, and then speak for us so that your students can hear."

I came out of the first class so happy. It had been some time since I'd taught a class that I designed. I was delighted to discover that I still love to teach and that there is still teaching I can and want to do. And I was deeply appreciative of the fact that Inner Relationship Focusing is so meaningful, enriching and accessible for so many people. It makes all the difference when what you have to teach has such depth AND is so approachable.

It was also deeply humbling to me to see that the connections I have made with taiji students—some as long as 40 years ago—are still alive, intact and thriving. It feels like a confirmation that we are, indeed, a living conversation, and that as long as we stay open, stay listening, we can

sustain and deepen our connections continuously. That gives me hope for the future in so many ways.

This experience also confirmed for me the value of this short format. Its flexibility and adaptability makes it an ideal access point for people to explore Focusing gradually, while being a really effective entry into the longer form Focusing courses, when people are ready for more.

## **Part 5: Conclusion**

Teaching this short, 4-week workshop changed my life. I believe it also introduced change energy into the lives of my students. But I *know* it changed mine. It was a clear and undeniable confirmation that I am doing what I am here to do. That I am a teacher. And that what I do matters. It's a joy to realize that from Self-in-Presence, without false modesty or false pride, but with simple recognition.

My sense is that Meeting Your Body For The First Time could be an ongoing program, offered periodically. It could also include spinoff variations or expansions, including explorations of beauty, food, interpersonal connection, communication and a whole array of topics tied to being human in a complex world.

Everything about my experience in teaching this workshop strengthens my sense that how we conceive of, experience and interact with our body has a material impact on how we live and how life interacts with us. We are a conversation. The underlying structure of life... including us... is flow, even if we often stumble, stagger or stagnate. Our body's corporeal form is only part of its story, and it's eager to share more of that story with us.

I want to thank Ann Weiser Cornell and Paula Gamble-Grant for their unwavering support during the whole process of my Project and my Certification journey. It is truly a gift, a blessing, to have such guides and travel companions. The beauty of conversation is that it's a shared experience. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!