

Focusing integrates the left brain with the right brain

notes of presentation at Seattle conference July 2015

You know you have a left brain and a right brain, but what's the significance of this? Is it possible for them *not* to be integrated? Can practicing Focusing achieve a better integration?

The divide between the two cerebral hemispheres is a striking anatomical feature. And beneath the hemispheres (cortex), much of the rest of the brain (subcortex) is also anatomically divided left and right. Even when there is no anatomical division (as with the brainstem, on top of the spinal cord), there is a functional divide between left and right.

The terms 'left and right hemispheres' and 'left and right brains' are not synonymous because of the subcortical areas, but for simplicity's sake I will use them interchangeably here.

But our experience is generally of having one mind and therefore one brain. At times, however, we may feel we are in two minds and at war with ourselves, and this may have something to do with the left and right sides. Focusing is a way to try to resolve such inner conflicts, and to restore us to being of one mind. It gets the two brains talking to each other.

Pop psychology claims that the left hemisphere is rational and the right is emotional. If there's a glimmer of truth in this, it's not much more than a glimmer. This simplistic polarity is a good example of the sort of false dichotomy the left hemisphere just loves. The truth is subtler, more complex and more interesting: both hemispheres are needed for us to be rational, and both hemispheres are involved in the expression of emotion.

Iain McGilchrist's 2009 book *The Master & His Emissary* brings together a mass of research findings in a detailed study of the differences between the two hemispheres. It amounts to a major advance in the understanding we have had up to now. He links the science to philosophy, culture and the unfoldment of western civilisation. Much of what follows draws on his work.

the cerebral hemispheres: two minds humming different tunes simultaneously

Some neuroscientists think the difference between left and right hemispheres is to do with the development of language in the human brain. But we need to go further back in evolution to find the roots of the left/right separation, long before the human brain started talking.

Sentient creatures need to have foreground and background attention. A bird pecking in the dirt for bits of grain to eat requires focused attention, but must also be alert to danger, such as a cat that is also interested in eating, that requires 'global attention'. Having two sides of the brain makes it easier to have these two different sorts of attention simultaneously, and the bird can switch from one to the other in an instant. Evolution has built on this arrangement, culminating in our human minds.

Both hemispheres are always engaged and both take part in most things we do. They co-operate exquisitely, but their differences also lead to problems sometimes – for example, when we feel we have become 'out of touch' with ourselves and our bodies. And then we may be drawn to practices such as Focusing that promise to re-connect us with ourselves.

If you are left-handed: probably you have the same left-right arrangement as right-handed people do, or you have the mirror opposite arrangement, in which case the outcome is the same. A minority of left-handed people have what's called 'abnormal patterns of lateralisation'.

left and right hemispheres may look symmetrical but in reality they are asymmetrical

Their shapes differ slightly, and their neurochemistry differs to some extent – slightly more dopamine, linked with motivation, in the left and slightly more noradrenaline (norepinephrine), linked with mental energy, in the right.

There is more grey matter (short connections between brain cells in an area) in the left hemisphere, and more white matter (long distance connections between cells in different brain areas) in the right. This makes the left hemisphere more of a collection of separate areas, each with a specialised function, and the right more of an interconnected whole whose functions are integrated. Nature doesn't prefer one approach over the other, it goes for both and gets the best of both worlds.

The hemispheres are asymmetrical in their relationship. The left hemisphere is more dependent on the right than vice versa, because the right experiences the world as it is (pre-reflective experiencing), whereas the left stands back and sees the world as an observer.

the right hemisphere forms an ensemble with the body – the left hemisphere doesn't

The right brain controls movement in the left side of the body, and vice versa. Each side of the brain maps the other side of the body – brain mapping is dynamic and the map is forever changing. But the inside of the body, the viscera (organs etc.) and internal milieu (hormones etc.), is mapped only in the right brain, not in the left. This means that, for example, when we are talking, the right brain coordinates heart rate with the nonverbal aspects of communicating with others, while the left constructs our sentences – a brilliant division of labour.

The right hemisphere has more pathways to and from the subcortical areas below than the left hemisphere does. And subcortical areas connect directly with the body. So the right brain forms an ensemble that includes the body, whereas the left brain is one degree separate from the body.

The left brain says 'I have a body' while the right says 'I am my body' – two different views, both of them valid. The inside of the body and the right brain is where we go to see how we feel inside in Focusing. The left brain has to turn to the right for us to listen to our body.

the bridge that links the two hemispheres is also a wall that keeps them apart

The corpus callosum connects left and right hemispheres so they can co-operate. But it also keeps them apart so they can play their different roles without interference from the other.

Either hemisphere can use the corpus callosum to inhibit the other, but the left does it more and better than the right. The right likes to share its contributions (emerging feelings, images etc.) with the left so they can be expressed, whereas the left likes to shut the right out (e.g. the sensations of heart, lungs and intestines) so it can focus undisturbed on what it does best – such as arranging, categorising and clarifying our ideas and what we have to say.

The shifting balance of left/right activity and inhibition is reflected in our changing moods. I may start the day feeling gloomy and having negative thoughts about what I am doing, but towards the evening I may feel upbeat and much more positive about how my work and life are going.

In Focusing, we take the wall down and cross the bridge. Our left brains turn inwards to consult our right brains. Something surprising comes (the left brain is clueless about the right), and our mind goes off in an entirely new direction.

Gendlin's 'body' is the right brain!

If you want to howl in protest at this statement, it may be because your view is skewed towards the left hemisphere – as we all are in the western world at present, it seems. The left hemisphere struggles to think of the right as something very different from itself, an ensemble with body and environment, less in awareness. So it thinks the body is where felt senses arise and wisdom sits.

And because the right brain and body form an ensemble, the right brain/body distinction is often immaterial and your left brain is kind of right anyway. I'm just being technical here.

When we take our attention into the body in Focusing, our left brain turns towards the right brain–body ensemble. It's a big place – no wonder so many different experiences can happen. The right brain may be emotionally aroused (with fear or grief, for example), it may be overwhelmed in a state of depression, it may be 'dis-integrated' in a dissociative state – or it may be none of these and is doing what it usually does, which includes having a felt sense of what is happening.

This is why sometimes we find physical sensations, while at other times we have just a vague inkling of something. The felt sense is the way the right hemisphere feels what's going on when our level of emotional and physical arousal is moderate rather than high.

Gendlin's concept of 'body' is not the physical body as such, rather, the body is the doorway to the world of the right brain–body ensemble. Often there is mystery, subtlety, something fuzzy that comes into focus only slowly (in the left brain). You have to practice Focusing to understand this.

His writing is stuffed full of a rich intuitive account of how the right brain works, and of what happens when the two hemispheres work in an integrated way – the emissary returning to the master. Now that we have a scientific account, we don't need the philosophy so much but, nevertheless, another perspective on such an important aspect of being human has a value of its own.

the nervous system needs to feel safe enough for us to have a felt sense

Polyvagal theory describes how our nervous systems (body and brain) are in one of three states when we are with each other: the safety of social engagement (in which we can work together and enjoy

each other's company), the danger of fight, flight or freeze (where we stop listening and argue or escape or become silent and scared), and the 'life threat' state of submission or dissociation.

We have to feel safe enough if we are to experience a felt sense. We can maybe tolerate a little danger, but only if there is a sense of safety at the same time – for example, being able to express your feelings and listen to others' feelings despite being in conflict with them.

We work hard to set up the focusing–listening exchange to enable a sense of safety. Focusers can be quite particular about where their listener sits, how much they say back, and whether suggestions are offered – all this is in the cause of supporting the focuser in keeping their nervous system in a state of safety and social engagement.

it takes two brains to make a wholesome experience

While the right hemisphere is busy in the background keeping the inner world of the body in tune with the outer world (affect and somatic regulation, empathy, nonverbal communication etc.), the left hemisphere grasps what is foreground and fits it into our personal world.

Focused attention and global attention. In Focusing, we go global to see what wants our attention (right), and when something comes to light we place our focused attention on it (left).

More conscious and less conscious. Because our awareness tends to be with our focused attention, we are more conscious of what our left hemisphere is up to. We are less conscious of what our right hemisphere is doing – the background regulation and implicit communication stuff. We are not *unconscious* of this stuff, but you can see how the term 'unconscious' can easily attach to aspects of our experiencing we are not used to paying attention to (if we are loose in our use of language).

Context and detail. The right brain does the context (e.g. body, listener, other people), while the left does the detail (e.g. articulating felt experience). Pausing in our talking and thinking helps us to re-connect with the context after being immersed in detail, shifting between one and another.

Novelty (what is new) and routine (what is familiar). The right hemisphere is the source of the surprises that come in Focusing. The left hemisphere fits what comes from within into what we already know – and then says "wow! that was a surprise, I didn't think that was there."

Categorising and noticing discrepancies. The left hemisphere puts things into categories, the right hemisphere notices discrepancies – something doesn't quite fit here. When people learn focusing, their left hemispheres often say "oh, this is like X" as they find a category to put what they are hearing into. And we hope they stay around long enough for their right hemispheres to experience focusing and how it's also *not* like X.

Persona and 'real self'. The right hemisphere is the home of who we really are, our vulnerability and contradictions. The left hemisphere is where we construct a social self to present to others. In focusing we have to be willing to let go of who we think we are in order to find out who we really are – which is probably why not everyone wants to learn focusing.

Self and other. The left hemisphere is the basis of the self I believe myself to be, while the right hemisphere is where I find other parts of myself and where I take in the sometimes different perspectives of other people (and of the natural world).

Presence and re-presenting. The right hemisphere gives us the experience of presence, while the left 'represents' this experience in words – and in guidance to help other people find it.

Purpose and vigilance. The left hemisphere wants to 'get something' by learning Focusing, but it only does so if we let go of this aim and turn to the right hemisphere's primordial capacity for vigilance so we can just be – with our antennae out.

Explicit and implicit. Merely and really. Focusing steps and focusing attitude. Unit model, process model. All of these focusing ideas reflect the different perspectives of our left and right hemispheres.

the process of integrating

The more our right and left brains can hum along together in an integrated manner, the more we can enjoy in life. There is a lot of scientific research to do into the nature of this integration.

What I think we can safely say is that when inner and outer worlds come together in a new way in the right brain, then both sides of the brain will be able to co-operate at a new level of integration too. For example, first you become aware how someone treating you in a way you don't like makes you feel inside (rather than you avoid them or fight back reactively so you don't become aware); then you

stay with the feeling; then your left hemisphere decides that the general category of anger fits quite well with this feeling, and your right hemisphere doesn't disagree; and finally you find yourself able to tell the person that when they do X you feel angry inside. In doing so, you of course risk how *they* will then react to *you*.

Integration within the right brain, between left and right brains, and finally between you (self) and the person (other). With luck, your relationship with the person may survive the exchange, and it might even itself evolve into a new level of inter-personal integration.

right-left-right: the steps in the unfolding dance of life

New feelings and images and thoughts arise in the right hemisphere. Then the left hemisphere registers them (if we are open to them, as we are in focusing) and finds ways to articulate and express them. Then what? is that the end of it? are you now ready to write your self-help book? You can go down this route, and carve what has unfolded into tablets of stone.

But even better... send the whole lot back into the right hemisphere for digestion, and wait for further steps and elaborations to arise in time. A process that continues to unfold... and your self-help book will be all the better for not being a fully finished, buy-this-book-and-you-will-never-have-to-read-another-one-ever-again sort of product, but one with open edges that engage the reader.

and since the felt sense is just around the corner...

In the right brain, that is. So felt senses don't form inside us, they are already there. It's just that it takes a moment or two for our focused attention to hone in on what's cooking in the field of our global attention, so it seems to us in our more conscious left brains that it forms. When the felt sense receives our focused attention, it may shift a little there and then – everything is an interaction.

The felt sense connects inner and outer worlds. As Gendlin says, it's always *about* something, even if we (in our left hemispheres) don't quite know what. So it's not just my personal emotional life, it's the people in my life and the world I inhabit and nature, the earth and the cosmos.

The more I can withstand a degree of conflict with others without going into full-blown fight or flight, the more my felt sense is available to me in life.

Ditto with tolerating a degree of chaos in my life and in my mind. If I can step back from the attractions of panicking about something, I will have the intrinsic order of my felt sense to help me sort out the chaos that confronts me.

Finally, we know that you don't have to learn Focusing to focus naturally and refer to your felt sense as you navigate the waters of living and relating. Might it be that some well-integrated people listen to their right brains most of the time and at a speed that focusing people might consider indicates that they cannot possibly be focusing – but that is actually a sign that they don't have to go through all the pollava that we do in order to benefit from the wisdom of their felt sense? Let us be humble about our magnificent practice, not arrogant.

Peter Afford, August 2015

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