

Jonathan Foust: Body-Centered Inquiry by Tami Simon

The following is the syndicated transcript of a SoundsTrue Insights at the Edge interview between Tami Simon and Jonathan Foust. You can listen to the audio version of the interview [here](#).

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Jonathan Foust. Jonathan is a senior teacher and former president of Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, as well as a guiding teacher with the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, DC, and a founder of the Meditation Teacher Training Institute in Washington, DC. A workshop and retreat leader for more than 20 years, he's been featured in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Yoga Journal, and more.

With Sounds True, Jonathan Foust has created the audio program *Body-Centered Inquiry: Meditation Training to Awaken Your Inner Guidance, Vitality, and Loving Heart*. He's a featured guest teacher at the ongoing Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program led by his wife, Tara Brach, and also Jack Kornfield, a program that's produced by Sounds True.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Jonathan Foust and I spoke about the technique of focusing as developed by Eugene Gendlin, and what it means to locate the felt sense in our experience, inquire into it, and then also experience a felt shift. We talked about applying body-centered inquiry to physical pain and how Jonathan has worked deeply for many years using body-centered inquiry to explore his own migraines, and what he's discovered—which might surprise you in the process. Jonathan also led us through a body-centered inquiry practice for making decisions. Finally, we talked about how to use body-centered inquiry to ask the question, "What's between me and being free?"

Here's my conversation with Jonathan Foust:

To begin with, Jonathan, can you tell our listeners, what is body-centered inquiry? For people who are hearing this for the first time, they've never heard of body-centered inquiry before.

Jonathan Foust: You know, there are a couple of ways I can do that, and one of my favorite ways is when I first ran across a byline for a massage therapist and they said, "Your issues are in your tissues." That was one helpful approach. The other one I find is when I first moved into an ashram, way, way back when, and I had just had the kind of discovery I had a body. I realized that for pretty much the first 25 years of my life, I thought the only reason I had a body was to make my head portable. But then I just started practicing and I started really looking at these perennial teachings that actually said that the body is the doorway.

What I found over the course of my own practice was, indeed, my issues were in my tissues; that when I could shift my attention from the story to actually how it lived on the inside, I could actually experience transformation of those particular issues, those particular emotions. So I began to look at different approaches to how to explore what it means to be in the body, and so forth.

TS: Help me understand the process of discovering the issues, and what's even underlying those issues that our body is holding.

JF: My study was influenced by Eugene Gendlin, who founded the technique of Focusing many, many years ago. He just passed a couple of weeks ago, in his late 80s, I believe. But he would tell the story of how after he completed his PhD in philosophy, he was realizing he wasn't complete, so he's working on his PhD in psychology at the University of Chicago. He was given this task to find out who were the best therapists and what's the best technique?

There was one moment that really struck me, which was really his lightbulb moment, when he was observing someone in the therapeutic inquiry process. She was saying to her therapist, "I am so angry with my sister." Then she closed her eyes for a moment, and then she opened her eyes and she said, "That's not it. I'm disappointed in my sister." For him, he thought, "What just happened?" You know, here's a story in the mind, but when she checked in with the body, the felt sense of the body, those words didn't resonate with what her body was telling her. And so from there he developed this technique called Focusing, which has been so influential in psychology and this whole mind/body exploration in our culture. So in many ways it really is this primary distinction between the story in your head and whether or not it truly resonates with what it feels like on the inside.

TS: I'm imagining many listeners who have been told, whether it's by a therapist or a friend, or they've maybe even heard about this Focusing technique, "Go inside and where is that in your body?" Their response might be something like, "Uh, excuse me? What are you asking me to do? Do you think my anger is in my thigh or, you know, my finger? What are you talking about?" Can you help that person, when someone says, "Where is that in your body?" how they actually can really reliably locate something that they can trust?

JF: That really is the issue. Sometimes I've invited people into that inquiry. "So when you think about that issue, you know, what do you feel on the inside?" They'll say, "Well, what do you mean, on the inside?" Oftentimes I'll say, "Well, you might want a sense in kind of the midline in the core of the body, the throat and the heart and the belly. So what do you feel?" They'll say, "I feel skin. I feel my belly going up and down." What we're looking for is something a little more subtle, and when we talk about this felt sense of how your body holds a thought or emotion or anything like that, what we're looking for is this energetic experience.

Again, primarily it's in the core of the body, but I like to think of it as showing up in three fundamental ways. One is where it will be strong and undeniable. That may be the lump in your throat, or the burning around your eyes like you're going to cry, or the ache in your heart, or that sick, kind of twisted feeling in your guts like something terrible has happened or is going to happen. Those are unmistakable. You can't miss them. The other possibility is they might flicker or blip. It's like when you're meditating and you might feel a little wave of sadness come through, but then you go back and you look, and you can't find it. It's sort of there and then it left. The third quality is where I find where a lot of the fruit lies, and that is that felt sense, it'll be amorphous and vague and unformed.

The analogy I keep coming back is from Joseph Campbell, where he talked about the big circle. Imagine a big circle and there's a line through it. Above the line is what you're aware of; below the line is what you're not aware of. From what I can tell, if you relax and pay attention, the line will move, and so you'll begin to—as you meditate or just practice non-judging awareness, you'll be more aware of the repetitive thoughts, you'll be more aware of sensations, and you'll be more aware of really what it feels like in the inside.

So the magic word is “something.” When I think about that phone call that I've got to make on Monday that I'm dreading, there's something kind of clenching around my heart—and that word, “something,” can open up possibilities to sense the subtlety of what's there. Part of the beauty of this is when you pay attention and language it, you can get a better sense of what's actually in there.

TS: Now you've said several things, Jonathan, that I think are really interesting. One is you might start with the Focusing process by working with the core of the body: the throat and the chest and the belly. Why is that? Why is the core of the body going to be the most responsive?

JF: It seems to me that that's primarily where we tend to hold emotions. We know in the gut, the enteric nervous system has got a huge amount of intelligence to it and we know the gut feel. The development of hara, in Japan—where you talk about someone having strong hara, they've got that strong gut feel. And all the different forms of intuition: some of us process visually, some of us process more through audio, you know, how things sound. But I find that the most reliable and the most kind of challenging intuitive connection is the kinesthetic—what it feels like on the inside. You know, those times when you just know. You just have a gut feel. You feel it in your bones. It's really paying attention to that realm that can open up so many possibilities.

TS: In looking for the felt sense in the core of the body, the three different possibilities you mentioned, I certainly can imagine someone saying, “Yes, strong and undeniable. You know, a big lump in my throat. I get it. Oh, I get the flickering quality too. It's coming. It's going. Maybe it's something in my heart. I feel a sense of contraction. It comes. It goes. I get that.” But now we get to this last category when it feels amorphous and vague, the felt sense in the body. How do you help people when that's what they're experiencing and they're trying to find the intelligence in the felt sense, but they're saying, you know, “Gosh, I don't know. I could be making something up. I'm not really sure I'm feeling—what? Something? I feel more like a kind of vague—I'm not sure”?

JF: Yes. It's so, so subtle. There are a couple of analogies and one of them I think comes from the school of Focusing, is to think of that felt sense as a wild animal at the edge of the woods. It's like when you see a deer at the edge of the woods—you can't chase after it, you can't seduce it in, but you can let it know that you see it, and there's a very subtle connection that begins. The other is to sense this something as a child who doesn't have words, or as an animal that you're holding that can't communicate through words, but you can tune into it through a feeling tone. That's kind of a primary way of coming into contact with that which is below the line and wanting to come up to the surface.

TS: I'd also love if you could make explicit the connection between what's below the line, what we're not aware of, and our body itself. I mean, this phrase that you started off with, you know, “The issues are in your tissues.” How do you understand that about what's below the line, what we're not aware of, and how that's held in our bodies?

JF: For many, many years I felt—just like when you have a low-grade fever, I realized I had low-grade anxiety, that there was this something in the background that seemed to color everywhere I went, that either brought in a subtle sense of distress, ranging up to a more profound sense of dread. I think for many of us, we have that sense of, “There’s just something here that is between me and feeling free or feeling happy.”

One of the things that I have found very helpful through my study of Focusing and one of the things I most appreciate about Dr. Gendlin in particular is that he and his cronies were real anarchists. They were basically saying, “If you’re not creating on your own model, then you’re not doing this correctly.” Through my own practice of practicing through the lens of yoga and through the lens of Buddhism, I really began to see this connection between these two wings of awareness—one wing being wisdom, the capacity to see clearly, and the second, this wing of compassion, the capacity to be with.

Just as when you begin to slow down and pay attention to what it means to be present, what I find is I notice all the ways I’m not present. But in that same way, when I really pay attention to what it means to be free or to be happy, I start to become aware of where I’m not. Inevitably, that’s a big part of this process, that just as in the Tibetan tradition they speak of shenpa—there this clench. When there’s—what I find in my own practice and working with others, that when there’s a sincere desire to be free or a sincere desire to open into happiness, it automatically begins to heighten all that which is between you and feeling free or feeling happy.

TS: Well, I want to take this example you shared from your own life story of feeling this underlying sense of anxiety. I think a lot of people probably can relate to that, and if it’s not an underlying sense of anxiety, it’s an underlying sense of always being kind of focused on the future, or solving a problem, or some sense of not being free, happy, and present. How did you use body-centered inquiry to go into that pervasive feeling of anxiety below the surface in order to understand what’s really going on here, what’s really the root of this?

JF: Yes. Yes. The model that I find so helpful through my own practice and my own study is the model, it uses the acronym of RAIN, R-A-I-N. The R is to recognize or realize what’s happening, the A is to ask if you can allow it, the I is to investigate, and the N is to nurture what you find with empathy and compassion. In my own practice, when I discovered that something inside is between me and feeling free, that first step, of course, is just to recognize it. Primarily where I recognize it is in my mind. You know, the hallucinations of all the possible things that could go wrong and so forth. But when I can begin to shift my attention of the story to the inside, then I can begin to sense where that unease lives on the inside—maybe the restriction of my breath or a chronic sense like deep in my gut that just won’t quite relax.

I find sometimes, when I can see that, it’ll begin to shift just because I notice it, but oftentimes it’s a little more chronic. That sort of leads to the next inquiry; can I allow this? Can I make room with this? Can I be with this? Most often, I can. Sometimes it either feels like it’s too much or it feels like I’ll be flooded by something and then I might strategically shift my attention. But if I can, then that opens up the “I” part of this acronym, which is the investigation. There it becomes a question of inquiring is how intimately I can locate and feel those sensations on the inside.

For example, one time I was very aware of a deep sense of unease deep in my guts. What we’re trying to do in the practice is to see it clearly, so some of the avenues can be to really ask or just to inquire, does this have a shape? Does this have a color? Is there a

sense of its density?

I could begin to get this sense of a shape and of a size. For me in this particular time, it was just a fist, a kind of a tightly held fist. Then a question popped into my head, which was, “How old is this?” Like, how old is this tight clenched inside? I had a sense of it being [since I was] very, very young. Part of the practice was, again, just to see it and to recognize that, that this sort of tight fist had been there for as long as I could possibly remember.

That led to the question around being with or nurturing. One of the favorite questions I find in my own practice, is when I can really locate that felt sense inside and I can sense how old it is, maybe I can sense its point of view, is just to let it know I see it. I might even try to imagine what it’s like from its perspective. Then the question that I find very helpful is, how does this want me to be with it right now? Then to wait and to listen.

I’m oftentimes surprised, because what I imagine what it needs is to be bathed in soothing light or held up to the light of awareness, but oftentimes what it needs is just to be seen. I remember in this particular instance, I just had a sense that it was saying, “I just want you to see me.” As I did, giving it my full attention just to see it, it led to what’s called in the Focusing language the “felt shift.” That tightly held fist began to diffuse and it began to soften and it began to open, and it began to open into just a greater sense of ease and a greater sense of well-being that led to just tears of relief that were really quite extraordinary.

TS: OK, Jonathan. I still have several questions here.

JF: Great.

TS: About the process of body-centered inquiry, and I want to make sure that everybody is fully tracking when it comes to identifying the felt sense in their experience. It’s one thing to know what the felt sense is when, let’s say, you have to give a talk and you have butterflies in your stomach. Like, “Oh, I get it.” But in the course of our everyday life, there could be a lot of different things going on. Can you have several felt senses happening in your body at once? Do you choose one to inquire into? How are you sure you’ve identified the important felt sense of the moment?

JF: Yes. What a great question. And this is one of the best strategies as you’re practicing because, again, when you’re sensing what’s below the line, it’s vague and unformed and amorphous, and the reason it’s below the line is because you haven’t clearly seen it. So one of the best things to do is to when you feel that felt sense—let’s say you have a strong memory of being in a relationship that went wrong.

TS: Ouch.

JF: Then you check in. “OK, so how does my body hold that memory?” Let’s say you begin to feel something forming kind of in your throat like a clenching of the throat, and you begin to feel like a heaviness or an ache running down through the center of your heart. So you begin to recognize that. You begin to see it. You let it know you see it. Then you might inquire—again, there are many questions, but one of the most helpful questions is, is “There an emotional word that resonates with this feeling on the inside?” You might sense, “OK, well, this is disappointment.” Now what you do is you validate that, you verify that, so you’ll take that word, disappointment, and you’ll check back in with the feeling in the throat and the heart and say, “Does the word ‘disappointment,’ does that resonate

with this feeling? Is that the right word?" It might be, or it might be, "No, that's not it." Then you'll wait for 10, 30 seconds, and then maybe you'll realize, "This is grief."

Sometimes in that recognition, grief will resonate. It will be like, "That is the word." That has just moved you into a much more intimate recognition of what's there. Then of course the question is, "Well, then what does this need right now? How does this want me to be with it?" And to continue that investigation, so really verifying the felt sense, validating it by going back in and checking is a very, very important part of the process.

TS: How do you make sure, in finding the felt sense and putting an emotion to it and then verifying it, that you're not going up into the thinking process and being, "Oh, yes. I remember how terrible that relationship was, and that person betrayed me," and so suddenly you're now overlaying a memory onto something? It's not necessarily bubbling up from within your body.

JF: Yes. It's a challenging process, but oftentimes I think what people find with some training is they realize, "Oh, I'm completely in a story right now." Then the invitation, again, is to come back to that felt sense. But again oftentimes, when people practice meditation, when they practice an active inquiry process like this, into what's between them and feeling free—as you start to un-peel the onion, there could be very painful memories in there and there can be trauma in there, sort of that coalesced sense of a fear and helplessness. That's when we come back to that model of RAIN.

It's one thing to recognize fear and helplessness, but then it's so critical to inquire, "Can I be with it?" Sometimes the answer is no. They'll be a sense, "This is too much. I feel like I'll be flooded." The strategic thing to do then is to, again, let it know you see it. Here's this wild animal at the edge of the woods. Let it know you see it. Another time when the conditions are different—maybe when you've got more energy or you've got some support or maybe you can be facilitated, your intention is to be with it. But there it might be very helpful to strategically shift your attention.

TS: I'd love to ask you a question that I found in my own process, and I imagine other people may have as well in attempting body-centered inquiry. That you can recognize what's going on and allow it, and then in the inquiry process, in order to not get too conceptual and leave the real feeling—there isn't a sense necessarily of resolution and knowing what's really at the roots of this, staying with the felt experience, being with it, nurturing it—but at the end of it if you said to me, "What did you discover?" I might say, "I was with it and it changed, and I don't really know what the core roots were. I didn't get that far."

JF: Yes. A key element, I find—well, there are two key elements in the inquiry process. The first one is to abandon all expectations. I find that to be very, very helpful, to kind of renounce the fruit of the actions. But the other one is to substitute the intention to figure it out with the intention to become more familiar with it.

There's a beautiful line that's attributed to the Buddha, where the Buddha said, "Familiarity leads to wisdom." I find for myself, when I can release myself from wanting to figure it out or nuke it so it'll never come back again, if I have an intention to become more familiar with it, something kind of softens inside. Something opens up inside a little bit and quite often that will lead to some form of a deeper recognition, a deeper sense of possibility, and sometimes even to insight.

TS: OK, now I want to circle back on something that you said, Jonathan, that caught my

attention. You said that the Focusing people were anarchists in a certain kind of way, and that they encouraged people to create their own models. I thought, “Wow, that’s unusual.” That’s not like fitting into a particular tradition or a lineage or here’s the four of this and the nine of that. So tell me more about this idea of creating your own approach to going into your body and why that was important to the Focusing people, teachers.

JF: That’s my understanding, and I just could be completely deluded on that one, but that’s certainly what I heard when I was studying and I do believe. What I’ve seen is through the tradition of Focusing, that there are different models, there are different approaches that people have out there. Some are very prescriptive in the process; it’s a little more linear. Others are much more wide open and more intuitive. The model that I have found so helpful is to really see this through this lens of Buddhist psychology.

But ultimately—and what I love about this is that this is a process of discovery for each one of us. Each one of us has our own particular internal constellation of causes and conditions, and while I find they’re helpful riverbanks—and again I find the model of Recognition, Allowing, Investigating and then meeting what you find with that intention to bring a sense of Nurturing and loving presence, that model, I find, is really helpful for me—but then inside of it we all have different approaches. I like to describe this process of body-centered inquiry as very organic. Another translation is very sloppy. There’s kind of a natural sort of unwinding when we really begin to listen to the felt sense.

TS: I want to apply body-centered inquiry to something that I think we’re all familiar with, which is physical pain, and to see if you could give us an example and walk us through how we might engage in a body-centered inquiry process when we’re in pain. Maybe something has gone off in our back or our neck, something like that.

JF: Yes. There are a few things that I find fascinating about physical pain, and one of them, of course, is the relationship between the mind and the pain itself, and how when we think about the pain, of course it oftentimes becomes much more dramatic in our minds—and the practices to bring ourselves to the actual real time experience of, again, what’s happening on the inside. There are a number of strategies, but maybe I could share with you, I think one of the most helpful ways to working with physical pain?

TS: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JF: I get migraines since I was probably six years old and they can be quite crippling, and this has been one of the best approaches that I have found. Really what it comes down to is identifying that sensations in the body will show up in three different categories. There are the sensations that are pleasant, the sensations that are unpleasant, and then the sensations that are in-between, the neutral sensations. When you experience physical pain, when you just notice where it is, it’s helpful to ascribe that physical pain as, let’s say, zone one. OK, that that’s zone. What the mind tends to do is it fixates on zone one. Like when you’re getting a tooth filled in the dentist, the tongue keeps going back to that sensation, so there’s a fixation that occurs when we’re focused on zone one.

The practice I have found helpful is to identify the neutral and the pleasant sensations as zone two. So what you’ll do is you hold the intention to keep your intention in zone two and you let your awareness flow freely around zone two. It might be right elbow relaxed, left palm open, and when the mind goes back to fixate on zone one, you notice that, but then you guide it back to—again, let your awareness kind of flow freely, identifying the location and the quality of feeling in zone two.

What happens for me are a few things, and I've done this many, many times, but one of the most helpful things is I will have a realization that I can be with the pain. Not all at once, but I can actually tolerate it. The second thing is there's a tendency sometimes for zone one, the unpleasant sensations, to begin to kind of bleed into zone two. The boundaries will become a little bit more amorphous because I am holding the space.

I recognize, let's say with a migraine, that 94 percent of my body actually feels OK. The 6 percent is freaking out, but if I hold that balance of the unpleasant with the pleasant and neutral, something begins to shift—again, back to that something. When I have that sense of presence, then what I might do is I might actually bring my attention to zone one and just let my attention begin to move around, again freely. Oh, the left part of the occiput pulsing. The sense of the rim around my left eye socket, white pulsing. By bringing my attention there, sometimes I'll begin to feel that tightly bound sense of the physical pain will begin to experience that felt shift where it'll become more expansive or more amorphous. Sometimes not. Sometimes it doesn't seem to shift at all, but I have just been able to come into a deeper sense of relaxation and establish a way that I can actually be with that unpleasant sensation.

TS: That's very helpful, that example. It does bring up a further question for me, which is, you mentioned you've had migraines since you were a young boy, since six. Have you discovered, through being with and becoming familiar with the physical sense of the migraines and feeling this felt shift, what the emotional or psychological roots might be for you in the manifestation of migraines? And how—how did you come to that, if you did?

JF: Yes. I would love to report that through this process I am migraine-free, but I'm not. I think sometimes another helpful question when there's pain in the body is, "Is this biological or does it feel more emotional or psychological?" I've thrown everything I've had at my migraines, and I've come to have a very, very deep understanding through my own inquiry by bringing loving presence to the experience of a very deep sense of empathy and compassion for the helplessness that I felt as a kid, of not being understood, etc., etc., everything I've added to the experience. I have a much more compassionate response to my migraines when they occur and I also have a much more compassionate response to when anyone else is in pain because I know that for my myself, so I feel in many ways I've deconstructed my story around it and this simply seems to be part of my biological inheritance. Of course, the gift of it is that I have heartbreaking empathy for people who experience pain.

TS: I notice I feel really moved by this part of our conversation because I think a lot of times we approach something like body-centered inquiry because we're going to get rid of our pain and get to the bottom of it and discover that, "Oh, this happened to me and now I've forgiven it, and I'm free and I'm happy and it's over." Here you've obviously gone so deeply into the practice and have discovered your helplessness. That's so profound to me.

JF: It definitely has been for me and it actually brought up something, which I had the good fortune to talk to Dr. Gendlin about this, is that I notice that many people use body-centered inquiry as a tool for psychological healing, which it's phenomenal for that. There's a tendency that, "I've got an issue. I sort of clarify the issue. I relax. I open my awareness to the felt sense. I notice where I feel it. I give it a name. I give it some space. I ask it what it needs. It begins to shift. I feel what the unmet need is. I bring empathy to that. I feel a little bit better. Then I'm on to the next issue."

But what I noticed in my own practice with this, just as every time I would work with my migraines and my physical pain, and I realized this is not going to be psychologically

resolved—this just seems to be an experience of raw, unfiltered pain. The only way I could be with it was some kind of shift in identity, that I needed to open to something larger than my capacity to fix it in order to be with it. Part of what happened is it just opens me to the suffering of others. One of the venues for me when I'm caught in a migraine and I open to it as fully and intimately as I can, is to remind myself that other people feel this too, and there's a profound shift that happens.

What I've noticed for myself, that when I do this process for myself or when I lead other people through it, is what I find most interesting is when there is that felt shift—when that deep ache in your heart begins to move and shift and change, and grief begins to turn into gratitude and you begin to turn your attention to explore—what does gratitude feel like on the inside? How big could this feeling of gratitude get? That it becomes a doorway into the nondual. It becomes a doorway into the pure open presence. To me that's really the fruit of the practice, is moving from this tightly bound self that's working on an issue to this capacity to hold it in awareness itself.

TS: Jonathan, I'm curious if you'd be willing to lead our listeners in a short practice of some kind of that might give them a sense of right now identifying the felt sense in their experience and investigating, becoming familiar and potentially learning something from the process. Do you think we could do that?

JF: That would be great. In fact, why don't we do a little process around making a decision?

TS: Sure.

JF: Because this one, it could be really tangible and helpful, I think.

TS: Perfect.

JF: Would it be helpful for me to preface this with a little story?

TS: Sure.

JF: Yes. I think the example might be helpful to get a sense of how this process works because it can be quite reliable. A number of years ago, I was invited to a conference on the psychology of happiness with Martin Seligman and it was at a local university. I was invited to be a presenter and there would be kind of a faculty lunch and so forth. I immediately said yes because I'm just kind of a greedy person. I realized as time went by that I wasn't feeling great about it. I was being asked for the copy and the headshot and all that sort of thing, and I kept resisting. I thought, "What's going on?" Finally the deadline was coming, and I thought, "You know, I have option. I could always just say I'm not going to do it," because I felt so unsettled inside.

Then I remembered this process. How this process works is when you have a decision to make, you break it down to kind of binaural. You know, two options, maybe three. I chose, OK, one option is I can just make up an excuse and beg out of the conference not too late. The other option is I can say, "Yes, I'll do it." What you do then, once you have that clear sense of what option you're going to choose, you choose one of those and then you tell your body, "This is what I'm going to do," and then you pay attention to the felt sense, to how your body holds that. I thought, "OK, I'm going to do it. I'm going to tell my body I'm going to do it."

Immediately I began to feel this clench inside. I'd feel a tightening in my belly. I could feel myself beginning to hunch forward a little bit. I recognized it. I brought attention to it. It had a feeling of kind of like being the younger brother, not ready for primetime, feeling small. There was sort of a shyness to it. It was a pretty yucky feeling, but I continued to try to bring some compassion to it. Then one of the pivotal questions is, "Well, what does this need?" I asked, "What does this sort of tight crunched down, small, shy feeling inside need?" The word "help" popped to mind right away. I thought, "Help, what does that mean?" Then I realized I hadn't taught in an academic setting in a really long time, and really what I needed was some help to find out who was there and what kind of copy I would write.

Then I asked myself, "Well, if I had that kind of help, would I still want to do this conference?" Immediately my body just was a big yes. It felt up. It felt excited. It really helped me to understand that when we're conflicted around a decision, something inside wants to do option A, but something inside doesn't, and oftentimes there's an unmet need in there. When you can get to that unmet need, it can be sometimes very, very helpful. Perhaps I could lead just a short little practice on this?

TS: Yes. Wonderful. Thank you.

JF: Wonderful. Great. You might—if you like, you can close your eyes. You might want to slow down your breath a little bit. Just notice where you feel the breath on the inside. You might reflect on some decision you've got up ahead of you. It might be something as practical as what are you going to have for lunch or what are you going to have for dinner, or you might want to broaden that out to some decision you've got that feels a little bit unsettled. Over the next few breaths, you might clarify what that issue is all about. What wants your attention? If you have a sense of that, you might reflect now, what are your options? If you could break down two or possibly three options, you might do that now.

In a few moments now, I'll be asking you to reflect on one of those options you might like to investigate, and then I'll be asking you a series of questions that might help you to sense what it's like on the inside. So you might select one of these possibilities. Just sense which one feels like it would like a little bit of investigation. It doesn't really matter. Then when you're ready, just tell your body, "This is the one I'm going to do." As you think about following this option, what felt sense begins to form on the inside? It might be strong and unmistakable. It might be flicker or blip. It might be vague, unformed. What is that something inside? Where do you feel it? Does it have a shape or a size or a color? Is there a sense of its density? If it could hold water, how much water could it hold? You might just check in and sense, does it feel OK to stay with this inquiry? Does it feel safe? If so, you might continue this investigation.

When you imagine going down this option, what does it feel like on the inside? Whatever this felt sense may be, you might ask what it needs or how it wants you to be with it, and just to listen. Noticing anything that may have shifted inside, anything that may have moved or changed, and regarding this decision ahead of you, you might take a few moments to reflect on the following question; regarding this decision, what advice do you have to give yourself? If you were to do that, not perfectly or not all the time, but if you were to follow that, what would that feel like inside? What would that be like? You might, if you like, kind of cycle back and spend a little more time with it, or you might explore another option, but quite often I find that just choosing one of these options will oftentimes lead to a felt sense of what might be most wholesome. Then you can deepen the breath and kind of let this practice fall away.

TS: Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you for that. I found it very personally helpful.

JF: Oh, good.

TS: Very clarifying.

JF: Again, when we can tune in to the gut feel, that kinesthetic intuition, there's a tremendous amount of wisdom in there.

TS: I noticed it didn't necessarily solve my problem, but it told me you could get more information in this direction, in that direction, and that will then help you be able to come to a decision.

JF: Wow. Fantastic. Fantastic.

TS: Now Jonathan, I notice we haven't talked very much about you and your evolution as a teacher. I wonder if you can share with our listeners a little bit about your personal story, if you will, and how that brought you to be teaching now, body-centered inquiry really as the focus of your work?

JF: I think from a very, very early age I had a very profound awakening experience as a child that really shifted my attention in life.

TS: Can you tell us about that?

JF: Briefly, when I was a kid, I grew up on a farm, a beautiful farm in the Pennsylvania Dutch country, and maybe six or seven or eight, I just had an experience of leaning up against this big pine tree behind the house. The best way I can describe it is I felt myself kind of merging with the tree. In my seven-year-old language, the best description I had for the experience was that the stars in the sky felt like cells in my body. Then I ran inside to tell my mother and I told her, and she looked at me and said, "Wash your hands. It's time for dinner," which was a little bit of searing experience for me, actually quite a searing experience.

I had this very deep internal experience of something I couldn't articulate, and that set me off. I was also raised a Quaker, which is a wonderful tradition to grow up in, and fortunately I discovered meditation when I was 15, and yoga. I just knew instantly that this would be something I'd be doing for the rest of my life. And so I continued with my meditation practice through high school and through college, and found a community where we meditated together. Then stumbled into an ashram when I was 25, into the Kripalu Yoga ashram, and stayed for about 24 years.

TS: Oh my.

JF: Having a practice at the core was so, so powerful for me, but also I think because it sensitized my own suffering, it sensitized me to the suffering of others, and through all the different modalities that I've explored over the years, through different yoga technologies and meditation technologies, what has been so helpful for me as kind of a head-based person has been this potency of exploring this world on the inside. Now living outside of Washington, DC, and working with very, very bright, motivated, utterly stressed-out people, it has been such a privilege to share these practices with those who are really looking for freedom in the midst of busy, very, very engaged lives.

TS: I wanted to end on a note that draws on something you talk about in the Body-Centered Inquiry audio training series. You talk about how at a certain point, when someone becomes really familiar with the practice, that they have this experience of stepping into something that you call an “evolutionary process”—almost like the innate intelligence of the body takes over in a certain way in someone’s life. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, this evolutionary process that doing this kind of work can unleash in our experience?

JF: Yes. There are two things about that. One was sitting in retreat with Sogyal Rinpoche and engaging into all those technologies, and I had some very, very powerful experiences. I asked him in a little private meeting I had with him, “If I continue to practice these techniques, what can I expect?” I was so startled by his response. He looked at me and he smiled and he said, “Confidence.” He said, “You will develop confidence that you can be with anything.” I’ve really come to recognize that more and more in my life—a sense that no matter what arises, I can be with this. That may come with age, but I do think it comes with practice.

But I’ve also found that really living in cooperation with the body does help us more and more move from the realm of the cognitive, with this judging, comparing mind, more and more into a sense of flow. I like to think this is a very intuitive process and the linear rational mind is very, very good at comparing and judging and figuring things out, but the moments when I’m really in flow, when I feel kind of hooked up or deep intimacy or connection to the mystery, there are three things that are not happening; I’m not judging, I’m not comparing, and I’m not trying to figure things out. I think what happens, what I’m sensing in my own life and with others is that the more we can open that internal sensitivity to what’s here, not only do we heal what’s between us and feeling free, but perhaps we live more and more out of that flow space where our intuition becomes more alive. It affects our decision-making. It affects all of our choices.

TS: I am going to sneak in one final, final question here, which is, you said a couple of times this question, “What’s between us and being free?” almost as if this is a kind of ultimate inquiry or something that we can do with ourselves to really look at what’s between us and being free. Why is that question so important to you, Jonathan?

JF: I learned part of that protocol as part of the Focusing protocol, but I find it to be tremendously helpful because when I can sit—and how I tend to practice it is really through the repetitive inquiry to ask myself that question repeatedly, “What’s between me and feeling free?” Well, the first response might be, “You know, I’m a little dehydrated. I didn’t drink enough water today.” Part of the practice in this approach is you say hello to it, you set it to the side. Then you ask again, “What’s between me and feeling free?” “Oh, you know, there’s this anxiety that I’ve got around this phone call I got to make next week.” Say hello to that. You place that to the side. When I do that practice and when I lead other people in that practice, quite often there will be a point where either I or someone else will say, “You know, other than these 15 things, I’m feeling pretty free.” [Tami laughs.]

What it does is it gives you a sense of the landscape where you can really sense, “Here’s what’s between me and feeling free,” but it also cultivates the sense of who I am as the awareness of all of this, and that I find to be quite extraordinary. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning and I have those moments of clarity and then the software program starts booting up, and before I get my feet on the floor, I’m already amped up into some anxiety. I might just lie there for a little while and just say, “OK, so what’s between me and feeling free right now?” I might name four or five things, and sometimes just the

naming of them, the recognizing of them will cultivate a little bit more, a little bit more relaxation.

TS: I've been speaking with Jonathan Foust. He's created with Sounds True an audio training series on Body-Centered Inquiry: Meditation Training to Awaken Your Inner Guidance, Vitality, and Loving Heart. It's packed with guided meditations, practices, and some pretty good wisdom stories and some funny stories of Jonathan as well. It's really quite an amazing training program that you've created.

JF: Thank you so much.

TS: Thank you so much for being a guest on Insights at the Edge, and thank you, everyone, for listening. SoundsTrue.com: many voices, one journey.