



John Welwood, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist whose approach integrates Eastern contemplative psychologies with a focus on the body inspired by Eugene Gendlin's work. He trains psychotherapists and leads workshops throughout the world. John has published eight books. *Journey of the Heart* was the first book to lay out the path of conscious relationship. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* has been widely praised as a fresh and eminently practical integration of the wisdom of East and West. His most recent book, *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships: Healing the Wound of the Heart*, is the winner of the *Books for a Better Life* Award.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: Maybe one way to start would be to ask you how you work with clients.

John Welwood: Well basically, I work in a lot of different ways with clients, depending on my sense of what they're needing and where they're blocked and what they're like, because everybody's different, so everybody's going to respond to different things. But the overall method or approach I take is to help the person's experiential process to unfold in the direction it needs to go; somehow it's getting stuck. So we could say everybody has a lifestream of experiencing—I call it the lifestream, which is like a stream of experience that's happening all the time; feelings, thoughts, impulses and so forth—and the reason they come in to see me is that something's stuck. There's some blockage; there's something they're stuck or confused about or some kind of repetitive pattern they have no understanding or control about. So first of all, I often use the words "track" and "unpack." So I like to track the experiential stream, see what's going on, where it's stuck, where this person's life is stuck, exactly how it is, and that might take awhile. But that experiential stream wants to go in a certain direction, just like a river does, a stream or a river, it wants to go to the ocean. It doesn't really know though, you could say the river doesn't know that it wants to go there, until it gets there and then it probably realizes, "Ah! I'm where I have to go." It's the same with the body, the body unfolds in that kind of way you could say, and we're not just talking about the gross physical body. We're talking about the subtle body, the lived body, the energetic body, the felt body. To me there's three levels of body—the gross body, which is the outer body, the inner body, the felt, lived body, experiential body, the body as it's experienced—

S P: So it's these three bodies that you track?

J W: Yes. But I track mainly the experiential body. I actually talk about three kinds of body, and we have to keep going back here—the body we inhabit, which is the gross outer body, the body that we are, that's the stream of experiencing, we are that river that's moving, and then there's a third level which is more esoteric, and that's called the "no" body that we are.

S P: No body as in N-O?

J W: Yes. And that is somewhat equivalent to in the Eastern traditions what is called the Dharma-kaya, which is the body of truth. So you could call it the awareness body, the truth body. There's a lot of wisdom in the person that's beyond their personal understanding of themselves that's also moving or wanting to come to life or to come to fruition in some way. For most people that's kind of hidden, unless they're a spiritual practitioner of some kind and they're focusing on that.

S P: So you're also talking about the fact that this third body is something that you can tap into even if the client is not particularly subject...

J W: Yes, it's always there, it's right there in all of us, the awareness body—that we're all aware of what's going on, even though usually our awareness is lost in our experience, it's hidden within our experience. We're usually focused on what we think and what we feel—the contents of consciousness. So we're focused on the content, and we get kind of swept away by the content. And we're usually not aware that we're aware...in other words, if I'm feeling angry, I'm swept up in the anger—in the angry thoughts, I'm in the angry mood, I'm in the, sort of, what's going on with my body around that, I'm in the beliefs—I need to get revenge, or whatever it is. There is an awareness of all that going on at the same time. And that awareness is not swept up, it's not caught up, it's actually a place of space and openness that can actually recognize what's going on there. And it's actually neutral, it has no agenda toward that—it's not caught up in having to get revenge, or to do anything, really, or to even express the anger. Its task is to actually recognize what's going on.

S P: And that is that the other body is one that you can access and you can help the client shift from the gross body to that other...

J W: Yes, but I'm not doing that technically in any kind of way. It's not like I'm trying to get them to shift from one body to another body. I'm trying to help them develop awareness of what's going on, which is tapping into that third body. At the same time, it's not a disembodied awareness, it's not a dissociated awareness that's completely stepped back from the stream of experiencing. You could say awareness is very much holding our experiencing, but it's also distinct from it. Our experiencing, our thoughts and feelings and emotions, happen in awareness, so they're in that space. But the awareness itself is not completely limited to those thoughts and feelings. So it's like the sky and the clouds—the contents of experiencing are like the clouds, they're held in the sky. The sky is not actually obstructed by those clouds, even though it seems that way sometimes, but in fact that sky is nature, is completely vast, open, infinite. So I'm trying to help that person find some of that clear sky to reflect on and relate to what they're experiencing.

S P: So in other words, the person's experience is to be mostly aware of the clouds, and that relates to that sense of feeling stuck.

J W: Yes, claustrophobia comes in there, you can say they're lost in their experiencing, they're lost in thought and emotion. Their capacity to reflect and to know and to be clear and to be open, to really know what's going on, to really know what's happening, that's all lost in the absorption in thought and feeling.

S P: ...so absorbed in the clouds and the feelings and in the emotion that actually they are unable to see the larger picture.

J W: Right, to even feel themselves--the larger picture would be themselves—to feel themselves, in the larger sense. Because their sense of self is so determined and conditioned by that experiential stream. I'm not saying this is meditation where we just sort of sit there and watch our experiencing in a very detached way, it's not quite like that, but there is an element of being able to step back and have that open sky quality so we can actually see what's going on. At the same time, we're actually also working in the stream of experiencing, so we're trying to connect very much to the feelings that are happening.

S P: But with a sense maybe that the big sky provides a larger container for the experience.

J W: Right, well that's in my own background so I don't bring that in in any didactic sort of way. What I would actually do is try to help that stream move in the direction it wants to go. It's getting sort of blocked, which is creating stress and pressure inside the person, because they're lost in the whole process and they don't know where they want to go and they don't know how to overcome an obstacle in their life. So everything's getting a little coagulated and stirred up and stressed out. So we try to help the stream move, track the stream and see where it wants to go. So we start to see what the feelings are. When we pay attention to those feelings it's an unfolding process. Those feelings start to unfold so we bring attention to the self sense or the self implicit, which is there but hasn't yet been articulated. And it's directly felt, it's very palpably felt, but it's not clear to that person exactly what it is or where it's going. We bring attention directly to that, and start to unpack it, unfold it. So basically there's two things going on—tracking the feelings, tracking and unpacking.

S P: So I want to just stop for a moment, when you talk about the tracking, as I'm listening to you, you also depict a very vivid picture of some kind of a landscape where there is a flow. So that the client may never really—you're not doing a didactic description of this, but it's pretty much your roadmap as you have a session.

J W: I don't have a roadmap, really. I don't know where it's going, either. And I don't have a particular agenda for where it should go. But that's not always true. There are times when I am actually trying to see if I can agenda some kind of knowing or understanding in a person. But the essence of the healing, the essence of what I do is to just help the person bring awareness to what's going on, acknowledge it in their body, and through the process of bringing awareness to that with no agenda toward it and feeling it directly and bringing an attitude of inquiry. I think I started earlier saying there are three elements of the therapeutic relationship, and then in the process there are two main things, one of which is inquiry, which is bringing awareness to bear on the experiencing so that we can actually look and ask questions into the experiential stream. So that's the inquiry, it's the process of reflection. There's another process of presence, which is the capacity to be present with feeling and experiencing that's going on.

S P: And the relationship obviously helps the other two processes.

J W: Yes, the three of those kind of work together. So we're tracking, and things are unfolding, you pay attention to your body sense, that it feels kind of tight, and then you inquire into that, so what's going on here, let me feel into that tightness, what is this, what's going on in here? You know, what's it like to make contact with that? And once they make contact, maybe there's some relief or maybe it's more intense. Maybe it shifts a little bit, something else comes up—and it's not so much tension, it's once I pay attention to the tension, maybe something else appears. Maybe there's a sense of sorrow, or a sense of frustration or anger or whatever.

S P: So just to describe it, you're paying attention to what the person is feeling here and now in the body, that sensation—not quite sensation, but the felt sense. And as you stay with the felt sense, it starts unpacking and going in different directions.

J W: And that's what we mean by the body knows where it wants to go, it doesn't know cognitively, the body, now we're talking about the feeling body, the experiential stream, like a river, knows where it wants to go. It implicitly knows it wants to go to the ocean, although the river wouldn't know in advance until it gets there, and then it would say "Ahh, this is where I'm meant to be." It's the end of the unfolding process, you go "Ah, yes, this is what I'm needing to know or to be or to understand." But along the way, they keep running into obstacles that sort of block it or dam it up a little bit. Those obstacles are like psychological structures, conditioned patterns, defenses, strategies, blockages of the feelings itself, fear of the feelings. Basically a lot of our feelings are undigested material from the past, we haven't been able to fully digest them. So there's a kind of fear of them, a fear that they're too much, I can't handle them, never been able to deal with them. And that fear itself prevents the stream from moving forward. So in order to digest that material, help it flow and unfold, we have to unpack what the obstacle is here. So if the stream goes along and you hit the obstacle, it's sort of like doing some vertical work of digging in and seeing what's stuck here, what's going on here. And the questions are always asked into the experiential stream, into the felt sense, into how it feels, and not to be answered with the cognitive.

S P: So as the stream progresses, you hit obstacles, and you explore them, but with running away from the cognitive and helping people explore deeper in the felt sense.

J W: Right. To keep unpacking it.

S P: So I like the image of unpacking, of the sense that maybe there's something very compact and material.

J W: Yes, the words that are useful here are implicit and explicit. Implicit literally means "folded in." Our experience is very complex as human beings, we have all kinds of things going on at the same moment and we have all this history of things in our past, so most of it is functioning implicitly, it's not explicit, but when we bring awareness to bear on the implicit we start to unpack, or we could even say exfoliate, different elements of the self implicit. And you can only do that one by one, so at first you feel tension, and you pay attention to that tension, and it feels a little heavy. But it's already a little different, it was tense, now we're bringing attention to it and we actually realize it's a little more heaviness. Then you feel the heaviness, what's going on here, what it's like to connect with that heaviness.

S P: So what you're describing is that process of unpacking the implicit is actually not something that's done through words, through analyzing situations...

J W: The words are a vehicle for it.

S P: A vehicle, but for putting words on connecting with the felt sense and being very focused and very aware of what's happening at a body level.

J W: Sort of like letting the felt sense express itself, that's really ideally what we want. Sort of like the way if you were doing improvisational dance, it's different than having a choreographed dance. So improvisational dance, how does that happen? How do you know where you're going to move? You don't know until the body actually does it. But it comes from an impulse, it comes from a sense. If it's really concurrent, if it's really creative, if it's going to be in the flow, it's going to come as a kind of direct expression of where the life energy is at that moment. That dance is going to be a beautiful expression of it. So the movement is the explication, making explicit what was implicit before. The body had a sense, and now you're invited to dance, if you give it a big room and say, "You can dance in this room," the body starts to unwind, and it's the same way with the experiential process.

S P: So that's definitely a dance in the sense of an improvisational dance but also maybe a dance between you and the client.

J W: Yes, absolutely.

S P: The encouraging, the helping, the noticing.

J W: Yes. So you're kind of flowing along with that person. So as a therapist I'm flowing along with that river, with that client's stream, and their stream of experiencing is also affecting my stream of experiencing, inevitably. So I also track them, but I track them by tracking me. I track them by tracking my own felt sense of their felt sense. When we're working in this kind of way I'm not in my mind thinking about what's going on and what it means and where it should go, but I'm more in my body just sensing what's being said and the shading, from the tones and the coloration, and then suggesting things back to that person that help them focus on a certain element of it, and then we're constantly checking back, if we use words we check back those words to make sure they're congruent with the felt sense. So that the stream is actually moving where it really, really wants to go.

S P: And again, every step of the way, the control of whether it's going in the right direction is at the felt sense level, the body.

J W: That's right. That's the ultimate harbinger. It sounds very corny to say that the body "knows," or body wisdom, but this is what it really means. You could say the process of digestion—another term would be digestion, we talked about explication or exfoliation or unpacking—these are all just terms for a kind of blooming, buzzing confusion of experience that's implicit, or it's like a hologram. When you bring it to a holographic design, that takes a certain form. If you looked at it in nature it's all very fuzzy and blurry. It's like that in our experience—it's all very fuzzy and blurry until we bring awareness to it and start to weed out the different elements one by one.

S P: So on the one hand it's fuzzy and blurry but on the other, it's compacted.

J W: It's compacted. That's why it's fuzzy and blurry, all these elements are compacted into one and they have to be kind of brought out piece by piece.

S P: And absorbed at a body level.

J W: And absorbed and assimilated, the process of bringing them out. So the inquiries we were asking, there's also the process of presence, what I call unconditional presence, where we need to

help the person actually be with what they're arising. Because often what they're arising is threatening or it brings up old wounds, or old issues, or old devotions, belief systems, whatever it is. There's a process of helping that person be present with what arises. It's like the stream is moving and then it hits a certain point and then you do some unpacking and then it arises, and then again, before the stream can continue to move, I need to make sure that this person is really present with their experiencing, that they're really okay with what's going on, if they have any attitude toward it, like this isn't okay, this shouldn't be happening, I don't like this, I'm afraid of it, anything like that, the stream is not going to be able to move.

S P: And this will also happen at the body level, the felt sense.

J W: The body level, yes. For me the unconditional presence practice has some elements to it, I won't go through all of it right now, but by acknowledging the feeling and making direct contact with it as it is, and then allowing it to have some space, giving it space. And then that person can start to relate to that feeling. Usually they're having a hard time relating to a feeling because it's like maybe some kind of bogeyman: they're never going to be able to handle this, it has some kind of connotation or association that's dangerous. So we try to give it a lot of space to be there, and then they can start to feel their awareness happening, because it is awareness that allows the space for the feeling to actually be there.

S P: And part of that space is your presence.

J W: In a way I'm embodying the space by my presence, yes. Representing space.

S P: Acceptance, space.

J W: Allowing, acceptance, holding, openness, no agenda. No agenda is really important because the minute an attitude comes in toward it, like it's an anger that should be expressed, or it shouldn't be expressed, or any attitude like that, that interferes with the process, so it's sort of fine tuning of not introducing some agenda of what the person should or shouldn't be doing at any given moment.

S P: And that sense you mentioned of the therapist embodying those qualities or expectations of presence, of acceptance, of space.

J W: And that's where meditative training comes in, for a therapist. It's a very useful training. I would consider meditation my best training as a therapist; to develop a capacity for openness, spaciousness, equanimity, non-agenda toward your own experience. And when you can do that with yourself, you can do it more readily with clients. And if you can't do it with yourself, it's really hard to do it with clients, because in that case, if I have trouble with my own anger, then the client's anger is going to bring up my sense of discomfort with my anger. And then I'm going to try to banish their anger in some kind of way, and that's kind of imposing my stuff on them, so that's the opposite. So we need to actually be open to the whole range of our own experiencing as a therapist. The meditative training is pretty good for that.

S P: And that's where actually it goes hand in hand to have a meditative approach in training, at the same time a very body-oriented approach. Meditative does not mean in any way something that is "spiritual" and unconnected to the real body.

J W: It's actually quite embodied, an embodied sort of meditation. I sometimes call it an embodying presence.

S P: So would you say that is the spiritual component of your approach to therapy, that sense of embodying presence?

J W: Yes, and my emphasis on awareness. And for me, I don't talk spirituality with my clients at all, really, unless they're completely honest and they want to talk about it. I just hold it that way, I hold it with that third body just as part of my understanding implicitly, that ultimately all the neuroses or all the blockages are all parts of an intelligent activity that wants to unfold out of the person's personality structure, that wants to unfold and flower. We don't know exactly what the flowers are going to look like but it knows that it needs to go in a certain direction. So I'm kind of holding that therefore, there's an intelligence operating at every obstacle along the way and that there's an intelligence there that is actually going in and through meeting those obstacles and that it's ultimately going towards wanting to realize its true nature which is, in very simple terms, openness and compassion and love, wisdom. Wisdom being the capacity to know the reality being what it is, reality at every moment. So that capacity to develop into our life and our self, that capacity is really what everyone wants, because that's our true human nature. So that it ultimately where we're going and it will take a different shape for each person but kind of always holding that as part of the process.

S P: And as you're holding it and embodying it, in a way there's no need for the client to be explicitly aware of it for it to be present in the room.

J W: Not at all, no. I very rarely talk about meditation.

S P: The client has the experience of simply talking about very real problems and maybe processing them in this way that's a little bit non-natural, the felt sense, but essentially just processing these very normal things for them.

J W: Right. So they're very much connected to their bodies, their sensations, their feelings, and another important point is to make a distinction between that—that experiential stream, feelings, sensation, flow—distinguishing that from their mental stories and constructs about it. That's another thing that keeps blocking the stream: the story. The story that the person has about who they are or what they're doing, or what it means, or what their life's about. And by story I don't mean a narrative, but I mean a mental construction, a mental fabrication about what that means. When the experiential stream starts to get taken over by a story, it shuts down, basically, it stops. It doesn't flow anymore. Because it's like the story puts it in a box—this is what it means, I know what this is, this is what it is, okay. And it shuts down the process.

S P: And with the experiential process and paying attention to the felt sense of the body, you're bringing it back to life.

J W: Right. And the thing is, what's beautiful about human experiencing, is you can always inquire into it freshly. Even with things you think you know all about, you know, a person says, "Oh, I'm just bored with that." Well, what is this boredom? What's going on with this boredom? It's always fresh, and this particular boredom is going to be different than any other boredom, because it's happening right now, it has its own texture, because it has a different place on the stream. Maybe

upstream is boredom type A, and now a few miles downstream it's boredom type B, and it has a unique quality.

S P: And when you capture the unique quality of the freshness of the moment, you don't have an agenda, because you're there.

J W: Right. So it is very much a flow and a dance for two people together.

 *This conversation was transcribed by Margaret Moore.*

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