

Lynn Preston

## Everything Is a Problem for the Big Blue Sea on the Big Green Couch: A Focusing Oriented Approach

*Abstract:* Focusing is presented in this paper as a particular kind of attention to a particular dimension of experience. It involves a sensing into that which is just beneath the horizon line of focal awareness — the “more than” words or concepts. This open, receptive, expectant attention facilitates the emergence of small steps of opening, deepening and consolidation. A description of some focusing concepts such as *the felt sense*, the *zigzag* link between implicit and explicit dimensions of experience, the importance of the *pause* and *the felt shift* introduces this portrait of a focusing orientation. A transcript and discussion of a focusing oriented therapy session follows to give the reader a glimpse of what these concepts look like in action.

A focusing orientation stemming from Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit, is not in its broad meaning a method of therapy, but can be used to deepen and enliven any approach to therapeutic practice. I, for example, a relational psychoanalyst, find a focusing perspective and its derivative therapeutic movements a compass with which I can locate myself and find a sense of direction moment to moment in the clinical exchange. It is concerned not primarily with the content of therapy but with the micro movements of its processes.

By focusing, what I mean is the act of sensing into what is palpably felt but not yet worded or thought — the intricate quality of what is implicit and still nascent. It entails a shift of attention from linear narrative and what one has already packaged in formed ideas, to the unclear fuzzy edge of thinking/feeling. This shift of attention requires and also facilitates an attitude of expectant, receptive inquiry. “Focusing” can be loosely described as a dialogue between implicit and explicit dimensions of experience. It is a dialogue with one’s visceral level, each step of which carries the process forward, opening out to small steps of unexpectedness and change.

*A Brief Description of Some of the Elements of a Focusing Orientation*

*The Felt Sense*

Through my focusing orientation I am guided by my body sense of the implicit felt meaning that my client is speaking from. I want to welcome, invite, invoke and evoke the aura — the whole complex feeling sense — of this raw stuff of experience. I find ways to point to its presence even when my client is far from touching into it. I may do this by reflecting back my sense of it or slowing down the process. In this way, I hope to bring our attention to this unthought knowing level. My aim is to partner with my client in finding the unclear edge of experience, making room for it and sticking with it or returning to it until it opens — speaks — and we can bring its message over the horizon line of conscious awareness. Then it can be drawn out and formed into linear thinkable communicable language.

*The Zigzag Link Between Implicit and Explicit*

I look to the zigzag process of making the unsayable, sayable, and finding the implicit more than can be said in what is articulated. This dipping in and spelling out rhythm carries forward a new living process and builds therapeutic momentum.

*The Pause*

The pause in our speaking — the turning in and then speaking out from it, is pivotal in focusing. Like the stillness and receptive attention of gazing into a hazy field until shapes and form begin to appear, the focusing process brings clarity but it is a clarity that comes not from linear horizontal movements of mind, but from that which constitutes the self by leaning into what is murky and unclear — the edge of meaning making and meaning finding.

*Felt Sense Language*

Language has a special role in accessing the implicit level. The way Gendlin puts it is that “it” (the implicit experience) “talks back.” We can often recognize that something is speaking from this edge of experience through its fresh metaphoric, imagistic language. Only particular words — the words that *come* — have the power to open it and carry it forward — to speak to it and from it.

*The Felt Shift*

From the perspective of focusing, change occurs in small steps of development. Each time that one is able to connect with what is trying to be felt, to be known, to be said, there is a little sense of release, of movement, of interest and aliveness. Even when what emerges is “bad news,” its coming into the light of day brings opening and energy. After a series of such tiny steps, there may be a felt shift in which although perhaps nothing in the situation has changed, one’s relationship to all of it is new. There is a quality of visceral clicking in and coming home to oneself.

*A Brief Example*

Mary, a new student in the self psychology program that I co-direct wore an unusually hesitant, downcast expression as we began our session. “I am having second thoughts about the program,” she said. She explained that she was troubled by our emphasis on newer developments in self psychology when she had never studied the basics. “I don’t have a self psychology foundation. I don’t really know what a self is. I don’t understand how it becomes derailed or what it needs to develop. I read references to what Kohut said, but I don’t really know what they mean because I haven’t read Kohut.” I asked more about her experience, reassured her that the language would become more familiar, explained a bit about “new paradigm” thinking, offered her a recently published book about the basics of self psychology, and empathized with the limitations of a two year evening program.

Although we were both trying very hard, the session seemed to go around in circles and there was still that troubled, hesitant look on her face. I was beginning to feel as if I was wasting her session and providing her with an inadequate educational experience. I admired her tenacity in insisting that she needed to “really” know Kohut before anything else could make sense. With only a few minutes left to the session I finally suggested, “Let’s talk about the feelings of all of this for you.” She looked up with a sense of relief. “I am missing the foundation she said.” And as if the word “foundation” took on new meaning, she continued. “Yes, it is a foundation I am missing. As if there is no place for my roots to sink in. The program has an icy surface. I can’t find my way beneath it. I can’t get under its slippery skin.”

Now she was looking down as if reading something inside herself. “I need something solid but not concrete. It has to be porous, like dirt.” Now

she was talking with her hands and her face was full of lively movements. A new image was emerging. Then with a big smile she said, “I need to grow a new therapist self. Yes, that’s it. I am trying to grow a new self and I think that is what attracted me to Kohut.” She breathed a big sigh. “Isn’t that just what Kohut is talking about? Growing a new self? That’s why I want to ‘really’ know Kohut. This is really interesting, isn’t it?”

It is striking to me how markedly the quality of the discourse changes when the felt sense is being pursued and articulated. Although Mary’s content was still the need for more grounding in Kohut’s ideas, we went from circling the issue, drifting about the problem, to enjoying a rich path of exploration. There was a quality of aliveness as images opened up to the articulation of new personal meanings. We still had the same practical problem of no room in the program for a course specifically on Kohut, but the situation had changed. The issue had broadened to an exciting life challenge of “re-growing a self.” This expanded meaning was accompanied by a shift in mood that brought a new vitality into our session. Instead of only the frustration of something missing, it seemed like both of us were eager to see how Kohut might help in this venture of finding a new therapeutic self. My invitation to explore her feelings, welcomed her metaphoric imagistic language enlivening the link between her words and the felt sense level. This linking was an enactment of the growth of her new self.

As she was leaving, Mary said that she never would have thought of “talking that way” (directly from the palpable edge of her experience) if I hadn’t suggested it. It just wouldn’t have occurred to her.

*“Everything Is a Problem”: Session With Betty*

For the purposes of this demonstration I was participating in such a way as to facilitate the sensing in and speaking from processes. Focusing is inherently relational as well as individual. We don’t focus inside encapsulated selves, but inside of interactions. The particularity of *my* presence, who I am as a person, who I am to Betty, and how we are together at each moment, is part and parcel of what emerges. As a relational self psychologist and focusing oriented *relational* therapist, however, I would usually integrate more overt relating invitations and comments into our session.

*Transcript of the Session With Betty*

Lynn: (Betty is perched uncomfortably on the couch) So how does it feel now to be doing this [the taped demonstration session]?

Betty: Well . . . um . . . this (laughs) can I . . . really articulate anything on this tape, right? (looking down, speaking in a hardly audible tone.)

Lynn: Yes, with the tape's intimidating presence.

Betty: Okay, I guess I have just a sense of myself sitting here with you so, I guess sort of feeling stiff about sitting here.

Lynn: What is that like, that sense of sitting here with me, all stiff?

Betty: Well, I feel like there's half of an interview here. There's you — you appear to be — you're an interviewer, and you're sitting there nicely in your chair and I can see you and you have boundaries and you're in your role and you're ready to interview. And then over here I feel like there is not a matched person here at all. Right here, like the interviewee is not particularly here, it's . . .

Lynn: Oh, I seem like I'm all prepared in my role to be the interviewer and you feel unprepared — the one who's here now is not the interviewee. Who is here now?

Betty: Oh, sort of a rather amorphous, amorphous . . . you know, not particularly boundaried . . .

Lynn: Uh huh . . . so I'm boundaried and that half of this interview and the other half — you — this amorphous . . .

Betty: Talking to the big blue sea here. That's sort of what it feels like on the big green couch.

Lynn: You are the big blue sea — on the big green couch?

Betty: And I feel like I should try to — at least try — to be boundaried. To think, 'What would it be like to be a person — an interviewee, a person boundaried?' *I think I should at least think of that for a minute just to feel I haven't given up too easily.*<sup>1</sup>

Lynn: That's a good question. What is that giving up? On what? And you want to give a minute to trying on this boundaried person.

Betty: Uh huh. (Pausing, she turns her attention inward.)

Lynn: Let's find the sense of the boundaried person, the interviewee.

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<sup>1</sup> Words spoken with emphasis are italicized.

Betty: Which would mean being myself. (voice stronger, looks up)

Lynn: *Being yourself!*

Betty: Yea.

Lynn: *You don't want to give up on that!*

Betty: *No, I've decided not to give up on that.* And as I think about being myself . . . as I say that and I feel it a little bit, I am kind of aware of some . . . pain or pain, discomfort, stress, strain. In my stomach. Yea.

Lynn: Being yourself comes with this pain, distress, stomach feeling.

Betty: Uh huh.

Lynn: That's right here now.

Betty: Yea . . . uh huh . . . yea, I guess. Try to be in my skin. Be myself. (She tells herself.)

Lynn: Be this self that's inside your skin, even with this pain, discomfort feeling.

Betty: Uh huh. (pause)

Lynn: I think what it feels like — as if what I talk about from any place that I would start to talk, it wouldn't take in the whole — be far from taking in the whole of what all I feel — what all bothers me. *There's so much bothering me.*

Lynn: Mmmm . . .

Betty: I almost kind of wanted — I was thinking of just this big spreading out mass of something, then at least I can say, oh, there's that and that and that and that and that . . . um . . . yea, I'm . . .

Lynn: The boundaried would be more starting from someplace and seeing where that is in you and it feels like it doesn't do justice to the that and that and that . . . the spreading out, almost infinitely spreading out.

Betty: Uh huh. (a relieved sigh)

Lynn: So much there.

Betty: So many problems. (looks down)

Lynn: So many problems. (joining)

Betty: (She looks up and speaks with a more lively tone.) And maybe that is a problem. The fact that I see so many problems. It's beginning to bother me. It's funny to say, it's beginning to bother me, but it's what's beginning to bother me that — I mean if I just — *this is the feeling*. I don't quite remember feeling quite this way, exactly, that . . .

Lynn: It's new?

Betty: Well, it's new that every damn thing is a problem. And the thing is that I really don't have problems. (laughs)

Lynn: (laughing) There's something quite ironic here!

Betty: There really is!

Lynn: Let me see if I have that whole thing — that whole ironic thing. There are so many, many problems in the big blue sea on the big green couch, and then what came was maybe that's a problem — that there are so many problems.

Betty: Yea. Everything in my life is a problem.

Lynn: Everything is a problem. And then there was this other little ironic piece, that you don't really have problems.

Betty: No.

Lynn: Everything in your life is a problem and there is a beginning recognition — a new feeling, like, maybe *that's a problem*.

Betty: *Yea!* (emphatically)

Lynn: That becomes the pinpointed, non-amorphous boundaried thing. *Maybe that's a problem*.

Betty: And then I feel like I'm coddling myself. There's some kind of a critic comes in now that says that, oh, um, I don't know what the critic says anymore . . . that . . . it's something I feel that I do — just sort of collapse — the collapse and say that everything is a problem. I can't really — everything is a problem. That's all. My saying . . . what am I saying? (She seems defuse and lost again.)

Lynn: When you say maybe it's a problem that everything is a problem, and then this critical voice appears that says, you're just collapsing.

Betty: You wanting someone to save you? To take over your life? Maybe that or just labeling everything a problem. Just living is a problem. And I'm just poor me. I'm just such a mess and everything is a problem.

Lynn: So first when you articulated that there was a feeling of a little lightness in the laughter and as if there was an appreciation of that insight into it. And then something critical comes and judges it. "You're just bidding for someone to take over and . . ."

Betty: Become a cripple. I don't want to become a cripple. My mother kind of treated me that way. And I was kind of a cripple.

Lynn: She treated you as a cripple.

Betty: No, she . . .

Lynn: Aah . . . (encouraging)

Betty: (whispering) *Yea*, yes she did, I think I . . . on some level I was a cripple around her. But I've touched on this before in therapy, a while back, that I was a cripple around her. And I may be longing for that now.

Lynn: Uh huh. You *may be* longing . . .

Betty: I may be longing . . . (spoken more slowly and deliberately)

Lynn: Longing to have that mother take over everything. And almost willing to pay the price of feeling like a cripple. To have the mother take over. Can you see if that *is* a longing right now? You said *maybe* that's a longing.

Betty: I think it is a longing. I think it's a longing. It's more than a longing!

Lynn: See if longing is the right word. There's something there about that. I'm checking to see if longing is the right word for it. (I want her to focus again to find the direct present experience.)

Betty: You know, before I get to longing, I think I just get to this *fact*, this fact that just pops up right now. That I did feel . . . I was kind of raised like a cripple. This came from a dream when I was really little about being on crutches in the other room and my mother being in the other room . . .

Lynn: In the dream when you were little you were on crutches in the other room from your mother.

Betty: And maybe I analyzed that dream with someone or thought about it myself because there was something where I convinced myself at some point that that was in my childhood. That was very much in my childhood. So now it's just . . . I'm thinking of it and I . . . a few things . . . I know I feel overwhelmed somehow, but like I don't want to function. It kind of feels like I don't want to function.

Lynn: You don't want to?

Betty: To function. Yea. And maybe I feel like I've got ten million problems (laughs) and I have been trying to handle things myself without turning as much to . . . I used to have one girlfriend that I turned to all the time for years. Charlotte. And starting about four years ago, that relationship became very . . . I started to have very hostile feelings toward her. Very, disparaging. *I wanted to get her out of my system*. I hated . . . I was so critical. This is the closest person in my life and her hair is all messy like that (she motions) and she looks like *that* and she's got that puzzled look on her face and . . . so there



was a change that went on for a few years. And she's different than she used to be . . . she got into some interests she didn't have before, and I just . . . that bond . . . that kind of bond, where we merged . . . it got changed. I don't have it now. And . . .

Lynn: It got exploded . . .

Betty: It got exploded or it got pulled away at . . .

Lynn: Pulled away at . . .

Betty: I kind of pulled away at it in different ways. Tore away at it.

Lynn: You tore it . . . tore away . . .

Betty: Tore away at it. And so there's . . . I do discuss myself with people. I discuss myself with Charlotte, my other couple of friends, but there isn't that one person that I feel . . . and I stopped going to therapy about four years ago. Probably for the first time in my life.

Lynn: It changed. Let me see if I understand what happened with Charlotte. That relationship was kind of like with your mother where you depended on her for everything — is that right?

Betty: I depended on Charlotte for everything. *In a particular way*, I would bring everything back to Charlotte. I would talk to her about everything all the time.

Lynn: She was the central switchboard.

Betty: Yea.

Lynn: And then . . .

Betty: But not so much with my mother. It wasn't quite the same. Because my mother I fought with all the time, too. But, so it's a little different with Charlotte. But she was like a central switchboard. She knew more about . . . *was more me than me in a way*.

Lynn: She knew more of you than you! And then you became very critical of her. Like how could you be so close to someone with messy hair? You felt disdainful of her . . .

Betty: She turned out to be more . . . she wore tons of buttons, like politically and I'm someone . . . I would think, "What's wrong with her?" if I walked around in buttons. I cared more about my clothes and how my face looked. More narcissistically inclined and she was just a disappearing of herself. The anti-narcissist.

Lynn: She was the anti-narcissist — disappearing herself. And is that what made you so angry at her? Making a tearing at that bond, an intense . . .

Betty: Yea, that may have been a really major part — something really majorly disgusting or something to me . . .

Lynn: Majorly disgusting and she became different from you — the anti-narcissist. Here you were counting on her to know more about you than you — and then she becomes an anti-narcissist. (lightly, smiling)

Betty: (laughing) Right. Yea . . . an un-narcissist.

Lynn: Un-narcissist! The nerve! So you're relying on her for your sense of self and she becomes an "un."

Betty: An "un" of something that I'm so full of . . . Not that I love it about myself, but nonetheless, I don't love it about someone doing the opposite.

Lynn: So there was a big change (slowing down, taking a deep breath) . . . there was first the fact — and I was struck by your use of the word *fact* that pops up — that you were the cripple in relation to your mother as a child.

Betty: Uh huh.

Lynn: And then Charlotte, that you relied on to know more about you than you, and then you ripped at that tie and you also stopped therapy *and here you are without that central person to define you* . . .

Betty: And that's been about four years. (pause) I feel like I'm dissolving into little pieces of problems. I don't . . . I mean, I think it's a . . . I don't know that I really . . . I don't know that I feel like I'm dissolving, but something . . . yea, it's just that everything feels like a problem. It's all I can say and . . .

Lynn: The first thing that comes is that you're dissolving into these little pieces of problems without this central person. And then you're not sure whether it's really dissolving, but it comes back to — maybe it's related to this feeling of everything is a problem.

Betty: Uh huh. And then you start to wonder, why is everything a problem? *What is that? That feels like the crux of the thing!*

Lynn: The crux of the thing is this . . .

Betty: Or *a* crux . . .

Lynn: Not *the* crux but *a* crux of it is this . . . this place that you are now, everything is a problem and it feels related to all of that that came before. (pause)

Betty: And part of this, too, is that I'm . . . I've been trying not to deal with the fact that I organize myself around a man caring for me and I've

come to see that as a . . . I almost call it my borderline . . . my borderline issue, because I spent most of my life just dissolving over . . . feeling I was losing a man.

Lynn: Mmm . . . that's a whole other aspect of this. There's this other aspect that comes into it now. You have been organized around a man caring for you and dissolving when you felt like you were losing the man.

Betty: Yea.

Lynn: It sounds like that isn't the same way now?

Betty: Well, it . . . it's a . . . I've been . . . I don't even know what to say about that . . . I don't know what to say . . . there hasn't been that much of a man around, but when there was I certainly did dissolve, but I've taken it as a problem . . . I've taken it just as, you know . . . I almost sort of call myself borderline now because I just say something like that . . . there's something that is, you know . . . *the last thing I want to do ever again is to get into that situation now — and I'm horrified that I spent most of my life in that.* People knew it . . . I was either deeply depressed and chasing after somebody or up in the air — high, excited — because there was somebody, however, none of it really became a relationship that worked.

Lynn: *The last thing that you want now is to become so focused on the man to take care of you.*

Betty: Yea, I don't want to have that, you know, that thing . . . that giving up months . . . that miserable and almost dissociated . . . in pain.

Lynn: Yes, you don't want that again. That seems very clear now. It seems like you're saying that you see right now that this feeling of everything is a problem, the feeling of amorphousness is not OK with you and that there's a new era — a new stage, a new place. Can you check inside to see if that's right?

Betty: Uh huh.

Lynn: And that it is new to say it's a problem that everything is a problem. What is this thing about everything being a problem anyway? (pause)

Betty: I think it slid into that recently. *This is rather recent.* (She sits up and looks directly at me.)

Lynn: Ah, yes, this hasn't been the whole four years.

Betty: No. This is pretty recent. This is like a few weeks that I've been so like this . . . acutely . . . I've been aware of it in certain ways. I'm not very

joyful about things and I'm anxious and I certainly know that thing. But lately I've been really feeling it, this . . . everything is a problem,

Lynn: Let's just see for a minute what that is that you slipped into in the last couple of weeks. It has much more of a shape now. It's a something that *you slipped into*.

Betty: Yea. Uh huh. It is. *It is a something that I've slipped into*. It's well, it's a something that I've slipped into.

Lynn: It's a *something* you've slipped into. It has contours. It has edges. It has distinctness.

Betty: *Oh yes, that's right*.

Lynn: And what would be the name of that? Is the name of it "everything is a problem?" Let's just see what the name of that whole thing is that you've slipped into.

Betty: It feels like I'm going under. Sort of subterranean. Like I'm going subterranean.

Lynn: So the name of this is "subterranean?" Is this the amorphous feeling? Or maybe it isn't right now amorphous anymore?

Betty: Yea, maybe there's a feeling there. (lingers as if to touch the feeling) Is it, like, death? (Long pause, she turns her attention inward to see.) You know, like letting go?

Lynn: There's a big question here about . . . what is this state that you've slipped into? And also there's this question of how did this "slipping into" happen? What is it — something about death? Letting go? Subterranean? It doesn't have all the words yet, this state. But you can sense it as "a something."

Betty: Yea. (pause) I don't know. Maybe it's connected to that I am a little involved with a man now.

Lynn: So that could be part of the "slipping into."

Betty: It might be. Oh yes, it might be. *That would be interesting to know!* (She brightens and sits up.)

Lynn: Yes. It is important to know that. (The allotted time is up.) — Is this an okay place to stop?

Betty: Okay, yes . . . so much came out of this. I am surprised (in a lively tone).

### *Discussion*

Betty has been in a focusing group and knows the surprises that can come from speaking from her felt sense. Very little was, therefore, needed from me to keep the process moving, except for my encouraging, engaged presence; my reflecting back the implicit edge of what she was saying; and an occasional focusing invitation. This minimal facilitation, however, was pivotal to the process. I stayed close to her moment-to-moment experience — adding very little of my own thoughts and feelings. I was following her in her incremental “sensing into” process.

As Betty started our session, she felt herself as amorphous, “unboundaried” as she put it. This self experience opened up through the focusing process in small steps of development. First she needed to allow the felt sense of the “unboundaried” feeling to fully form as she found her way into the texture and coloration, images and metaphors of this sense. Entering this difficult self state enabled her to *decide* not to give up on herself. This came with a particular “pain, discomfort, strain, stress” feeling. Betty’s explorations culminated in the handle for her difficulty — “everything is a problem.” (As a self psychologist, I am sensitive to issues of a lack of self cohesion — the sense of fragmentation, the need for a “self delineating” self object experience. Although these concepts enriched my felt understanding, I did not reference them in any conscious way during the session.)

Betty’s next step was the recognition that *this* (everything is a problem) was itself the problem. Betty then had to grapple with her critical voice that accused her of collapsing into longing for someone to save her. I invited her to *check inside* to see if she actually could experience such a longing. She found the feeling that “it is more than a longing.” After exploring the sense of being treated like a cripple by her mother and her merged and torn relationship with her friend, Charlotte, she asked herself if, without a central defining person, she was dissolving into “little pieces of problems.” She came back to the main theme, “a crux,” that everything is a problem.

The next step was the emergence of her recognition that she doesn’t want to deal with her tendency to organize herself around a man caring for her — her determination for this not to be anymore. Then after her next pause she realized that this state was something she “slid into” recently. She now had a very different relationship to the sense of amorphousness than

the one she started with. It was no longer *who she is*, but *something she slid into*. I underscored here that this issue now had a shape and contours.

At the end of the session she explored more of the felt sense of this “slipping into.” She wondered if it could be connected to her being “a little involved with a new man now.” She left interested rather than overwhelmed.

#### *Points I Would Like to Make From the Process*

Although Betty clearly had a problem that she was working with — the problem of infinite problems — we were not pursuing solutions, but instead dialoguing with *the problem itself* or with the implicit meanings that emerged from it. This kind of exploration requires and facilitates an open expectant receptivity. This is sometimes referred to as a “focusing attitude.”

The reflecting process is a kind of *clarifying*, but not an effort to put what is being worked with into known packaged concepts. It is the clarity of finding the *exact, precise, resonant* words as hooks to bring the implicit over the horizon line of focal awareness.

Like Mary, Betty’s change process had to do with a change in her relationship to the issue and to her self. It entailed a self evolution — a development not only of understanding and accepting the self but also of a more alive and open channel between implicit and explicit self experience. The articulation of the implicit edge of Betty’s experience helped to *carry forward* her process. The pauses in our conversation often brought a deeper level of discovery.

There were many opportunities for inquiry, interpretation and relational invitations. (For example, I might have *asked into* her feeling of me as boundaried and her as amorphous. I might have asked more about her “tearing away” at her bond with Charlotte. And, of course, her ending revelation that these feelings may be related to her experience of being “a little involved with a man now.”) I believe my following, rather than leading her offered her a new relational experience in which she, through her own self inquiry, could find and define herself.

#### *Conclusion*

Like gestalt therapy, focusing is process oriented and, like mindfulness and meditation, it involves a shift in consciousness. I am eager to hear from our discussants more about how these neighboring approaches are aligned

with and differ from focusing. For me, what distinguishes a focusing orientation is its emphasis on *a particular kind of attention* (receptive, expectant, bodily) to *a particular dimension of experience* (the visceral edge of meaning making). With this approach we find that every bit of human experience has a forward movement inherent in it (see Gendlin 1996, p. 15). The forward movement can be directly accessed through this kind of attention.

#### *References*

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