Movement lesson

Angela 2 — Week 1, Day 2, Session 3 — 60 minutes

Summary: Russell invites a relationship with the earth as a living being, imagined as a vast pet elephant that takes one's weight unconditionally. Standing with soft knees, then lying down, the group explores contact, pulsation, and yielding through the back, belly, chest, and sides, lifting, folding, and rolling. They return to standing and name what they feel.

Standing

[Russell:] Please come to standing.

And I recommend coming off your mat, so you get less cushion underneath you, so you get a clearer feeling towards the floor.

Would you — we can have, yeah, I think if it's not too — you'd like a window open, sounds like. Yeah, yeah, try it. Let's see, let's see. We'll work with it together.

If it gets too cold, somebody say something, you know. I need your help. So if you need more air, let it be known.

And as you're standing, let your knees soften a little bit.

Knees. This tendency to pull up and tighten our knees is a surprisingly important influencer on chronic back difficulties, and a general pulling away from the support that's underneath us.

So part of getting more grounded, part of getting a trusting relationship to the earth, is letting your knees soften a little bit. And just shift your weight. Shift — your knees bend.

Also, this habit of tightening in the knees, of not allowing a kind of bending in the knees, generally over time gets the ankles, or invites the ankles, to be much stiffer than is helpful. And there's a pulling away from the support that's underneath us.

It's one of the most important qualities for human beings to get, their support from the earth. That's where we're gonna start today.

So just shift your weight.

I wanna bring an image that some of you have heard from me before, and I like it in the room — the image of the earth, what we're standing on, as a living being.

This is the way the earth has lived for most cultures throughout the history of humanity. It's very recent. It's in the last couple of hundred years that the metaphor of a dead rock has dominated groups of people. Meaning, just, it's a rock that has — you know, there's gravity and there's a rock and we stand on it, and we can make it grow stuff — but actually —

And just keep shifting your weight as I'm talking.

Even literally, the biomass. What they're seeing now is the biomass of the earth, the part that's alive, is not just the topsoil. It's actually way, way, way, way down. That most of this earth is alive. And to think of this as a living being.

Yeah. They just discovered a new community of life even deeper underwater than last. It's remarkable. Yeah, yeah.

So this living — I mean, can we imagine this, again, as all indigenous cultures have forever, a living being? Not just that it grows stuff, but an actual being that's alive, that we have relationship with. Radically different.

And so I sometimes have this strange image. I say, imagine you had a pet elephant. It was a hundred times bigger than a normal elephant. So you were like a little flea on its back, but it loved having you on its back.

I'm bumping down a little bit.

Imagine that you're on the back of your pet elephant. And it loves you on its back, and you love being on its back, right?

And let yourself walk as if this is a living being that you actually care about. Not metaphorically, not as art, not as an ecologist, not as an environment, but as a human being that has a relationship to another being that actually unconditionally takes your weight. Always.

You can be in a bad mood, it doesn't matter. It will take your weight. You can be your worst self, and the earth will take your weight. Amazing. That's called unconditional. Unconditional support.

And imagine if we could live with the sense that we are unconditionally supported. And this is what the earth is offering us, literally, as well as metaphor. Literally. Support under.

So let your knees soften, let your ankles soften, and stand for a moment. There'll be just a little bounce. Comfortable, comfortable, just a little bounce. Your jaw be at ease.

There'll be just a kind of — we've got a mat set up for you. Didn't we set up a mat? Someone set up a mattress there? That's yours, Sarah, this one behind you. Thank you very much. It's called Sarah's mat.

Okay, so just a little bounce. You may not know this, but you're on an elephant right now. You're on your pet elephant, who's a hundred times bigger than a real elephant, and loves you, and loves to feel your weight. And you love to be on its back.

On your back

[Russell:] Okay, come lie on your back, and let's grow a true relationship, which I am so hoping you will have for the rest of your life. A relationship of support that is unconditional.

Wait, you know, I don't think I brought any, but I can get you some.

So as you come to the ground, just take a few moments to sense your back, as if you're lying on a living being. And feel how that shifts what you sense in yourself.

Really imagine that this is a being that's alive behind you, that has pulse, because the earth does have movement in it.

And for the part of your mind that says, oh, that's a nice fantasy or a nice imagination — it's no less scientific than dead rock, right? They're both descriptions of a kind of relationship.

And I encourage you — there are sometimes when it's good to think of your weight as gravity, physical laws, and sometimes it's good to feel your weight as you're being supported by a being. That takes your weight. They are both descriptions of a relationship.

I like having gravity as a description. It's not the only truth. It's a description of a relationship between two bodies. The smaller body being attracted to the larger body. That's what gravity is.

Similarly, we can have a description that says you, as a living being, are supported by this living being called the Earth.

Notice how your breathing feels through yourself.

Lightly let your head move a bit. Turn it a bit and feel. You know what it's like when you're playing with a child, or with a lover, or rolling on each other's bodies, or a child rolling on you, and that feeling of your body gives way and their body gives way. And just let your head be alive to the ground behind you.

And enjoy the breathing.

Yeah.

And then just feel the backs of your shoulders, and just gently kind of play with pressing one shoulder a little bit and the other. So it's kind of experimenting, playing, how you and the earth together help you to find yourself. Right? Here.

So just kind of move. Press one, press the other, press different parts of your back to the ground. But the feeling that this being helps you to feel yourself.

Can you press your whole lower back to the ground?

And again, it's like bringing your lower back to this being that loves you, cares for you, that supports you.

And feel your heels are on the ground. Different parts of your legs, so you're letting the ground enliven you, help you to feel yourself.

Your hands and arms sense the ground.

It's like each moment, just like lovers do, or we do with our kids, that our bodies kind of help us to feel ourselves more completely. We discover ourselves in contact with the other, and the earth is there for that.

And just take your time.

Onto your front

[Russell:] Finding a way to come onto your front, and let the front of your body discover your elephant, discover this being.

And just let yourself have this totally different feeling of your genitals towards the earth, of your lower belly towards the earth, of your chest, organs.

And just let yourself have some moments of breathing, and connecting to yourself through your connection and contact with this great being.

And you can invite any gentle movements that you'd like, to help press another part down so you can feel yourself more and more completely, just by shifting weight, and breathing, and pressing here, pressing there.

It's a kind of free form practice of uncovering yourself through contact with the earth.

Listen to how your body would like to move right now. What feels — where do you get a yes? Where does it feel, oh, that's really nice to move like that.

[Silence 31 seconds]

And as you exhale, have the feeling of letting go into the support. Just a kind of —

Good. And then just pause for a moment, just breathing and sensing.

Notice any kind of subtle pulsation in your contact with the earth.

So as you feel weight, then go even more subtle. So you feel — let's say you feel the weight of your pelvis, the front of your pelvis against the floor. And then as you listen to that in a more subtle way, there might be something like pulsation, vibration.

Just sense that quality of livingness, of life force.

And feel into your lower belly, where we hold the mudra, and notice that part. And maybe even there's a gentle movement where you can press that part a little bit, so you feel it more clearly into the earth. Or breathe towards there.

Pull in the belly and push out the belly down there.

And then again, sense the more subtle. What's the most subtle feeling of life within your lower belly?

And bring attention to your chest, and how your chest is resting.

Feel free to organize your arms so that it's helpful, and your head, so that you can find a way.

And listen to the contact of your chest. As you feel that sense of weight and contact, invite — what's even more subtle than that? Living in my cells, living in this part of myself, maybe something like a pulsation of living, of life.

Good. Okay, and please come onto your back once again.

[Silence 49 seconds]

Lifting the right foot

[Russell:] Bend your legs. Let your feet come to the floor.

As you sense the contact of your right foot in the ground, just feel the shape of your foot, anything that's alive in your right foot, any pulsations within the foot.

And very slowly begin to lift the right foot, but don't actually let it come off the ground. In other words, have the thought, I'm going to lift my right foot, and begin to do the preparatory actions, and get all the way to the point that the foot's about to lift, and then release all that's gone on.

So think, I'm gonna lift my right foot. You prepare to lift it, and observe how many changes there are in connection to the earth. How much your body, your pelvis, your back, maybe even your shoulders, maybe even your left foot — how much is influenced by this process of preparing to lift your right foot. Your whole body is part of that.

Once you've felt that a few times, actually lift the right foot a little bit off the floor, a few inches maybe, and then when you come back to the floor, feel the settling of the whole body.

Do that a number of times, where you can really get intimate with the whole process of lifting and placing the foot.

Feel how the back changes, the pelvis. Notice if you hold your breath.

Good. And this time, when you lift your foot, please interlace your hands around your right knee.

And feel how different parts of your back begin to connect to the earth.

And just experiment with bringing the knee a bit more towards your chest and a bit away.

And of course, you're feeling the changes within your body, but in this particular experiment, we're also very interested in how the ground changes behind us. Where you feel the contact, where the weight is, how it shifts.

And scan in your attention so you notice if you're clenching your teeth, or if your eyes are fixated in some way.

Thanks. Yeah, and let the knee move a little bit left and right also, and feel the changes within your hip and pelvis, and then extending out into your relationship to the earth.

Good. And then lower your leg down, and pause. You can lengthen your legs if you like.

Just get a feeling for the two sides, any changes in the contact of your back on each side, a sense of the length of each leg.

[Silence 41 seconds]

Lifting the head

[Russell:] And then bend your legs once again.

Interlace your hands under your head.

Once again, we're interested in what happens within your body, but equally, or even more, the connection to the earth. How you meet the earth, and how the earth reveals you to yourself.

Slowly, let the elbows come toward each other and lift your head in small increments. You lift a little, you go back down, you lift a little more, and you're sensing how the folding of your chest is translated into contact with the ground, with your elephant.

And you gradually — extending that contact down in the direction of your pelvis.

Surrender the weight of your head to your hand.

As you're lifting, let your eyes orient between your legs. Even if they're closed, the feeling of looking down will help your head to lift.

Feeling that you can let your sternum, your breastbone, drop down and back. A sense of maybe exhaling as you lift, so there can be a softening in your chest.

And notice how the back begins to really come to the floor.

That's good. Okay, and as you come down this time, pause once again. Take your hands out and rest for a moment.

The left leg

[Russell:] Bend your legs, and just tune into your left leg standing here. Just this amazing capacity, that you can bring consciousness through that leg, and actually feel the shape of it, and feel the foot on the floor.

Feel what's alive in the foot.

Notice how you can go from the thought of lifting that foot, to the preparation to lift that foot, to the actual lifting. Feel those stages of action — of thought, preparatory movement, and actual engagement in the movement — and then let the foot lift out of that sequence.

And you can notice just how much action there is throughout your whole body to organize this simple movement. It's not at all a movement of the foot. It's a movement of the self, and the foot also moves.

Then interlace your hands non-habitually, meaning putting all the digits over one space. So it's the same kind of interlacing, it's just they're all moved over one. And then put your hands around the left knee.

Just again, begin to experiment with this, and doing it very freshly. Most of us have done this kind of movement many, many times. Can we be fresh?

Bringing the knee towards your chest. Breathing.

Feel how the hip bends, and how each moment there's a change on the ground.

And open out a little bit, so you have a little more movement in your hip, and sense through your pelvis, and you sense how each moment the ground is alive to your shifting.

That's letting the knee go left and right, as well as towards you and away, and letting the back lengthen, yield to that.

That's good. And then lower down once again.

Take a pause and feel how that's alive in you right now.

[Silence 33 seconds]

You might let your head turn a bit. Each moment is a different kind of contact.

Folding

[Russell:] Bend your legs. Interlace your hands behind your head. And this time, as you lift your right foot, also lift your head. Surrendering your head to your arms, and direct your elbows in the direction of your right knee, and listening to that pattern of pressure along the floor.

So you're folding with an exhale, sensing how the knee and the elbows go toward each other. The knee and the elbow.

There's no intention that they should touch. It's just a folding comfortably together.

And when your knee and elbows are toward each other, notice if you could go a little bit right and left, if you could rock just a little right and left, letting your back come to the floor in this position. The sides.

That's good. Nice. Lower your head, lower your legs. Keep your hands behind your head for a moment, but lower your foot to the floor.

Sense which parts of your back are really present for you in relation to the ground.

And then lift your left foot off the floor and experiment with bringing the elbows and the knee toward each other.

You're listening to how your back comes to the ground, shifting. Let the knee open a little more, a little less, and begin to add a little left and right movement to that, so that more of your back rolls on the floor.

Or inviting movement between the ribs and the vertebrae. There's a balancing aspect as you go from side to side.

And you're learning to pay attention to the ground as well as to your back. That you're not only inside, but you're with this relationship.

Okay, and then lower down, pause, let your arms come out.

[Silence 44 seconds]

Gently press your right shoulder blade back against the floor. Release.

Press your left shoulder blade back against the floor. Release that.

Press both shoulder blades back against the floor. Release that.

Press the lower back against the floor, and release that.

Press the lower back against the floor, and release that.

And both legs.

Bring your right arm on the floor in an upward direction, a headward direction, just resting the arm near your head somewhere, some comfortable place. If it's not comfortable up there, go a little more to the side. But find a comfortable way for that arm to be. Somewhat long, so the elbow's not too bent. If your shoulder doesn't like it in an upward thing, go a little more to the side. Feel a comfortable place.

And lift your right foot off the floor and bring your left hand around your right knee.

And very gently begin to bring it around the knee from the inside — yeah, like that. And not underneath, but below the front of the kneecap.

And gently let the leg open out towards the right as you very slowly begin to roll over those ribs towards your right side.

Feel as your back gets friendly with the floor. A sense of surrendering to the earth supporting you.

Get some help from your left leg. It can come over. If you're conscious of your left foot, that will help you with some balancing.

But feel how you can let that left shoulder be pulled by the right leg, and surrender in your chest and in your torso.

There's a feeling of yielding to the ground. A sense of surrender to the support of the earth.

And then, letting the lifting of that right leg begin to bring you back to your back. So there's a sense of rolling back from your pelvis, and rolling over. You can even begin the rolling back with just a pelvic movement. That'll help lift the right knee.

Just get softer and lighter, rolling in this position.

Let those ribs really yield to the floor. It's the safest and most effective way of reorganizing those vertebrae, softening those ribs. Those ribs are attached to different vertebrae, and it's a very safe way of releasing the unnecessary contractions across the torso.

Exhaling, yielding, enjoying your elephant.

Your head might end up rolling on your arm or over your arm. That's fine. It doesn't have to, but it can.

And then come back and pause. Let go of your leg, rest here, and just feel how your breathing and the ground interconnect.

[Silence 46 seconds]

And just as in the meditation, we're interested in where the mind goes during the pauses, without trying to control it or fight it, just noticing.

If you get involved with a story or some other situation, you go, oh, that's interesting, that's there. You just shine a light on it for a moment, and you come back to just being here on the floor.

The other side

[Russell:] Bend your legs.

And bring your left arm upward on the floor. Bring your right hand around your left knee. So the right leg is bent and standing.

And just imagine for a moment. Just imagine the knee opening leftward, and the ribs softening, and the shoulder yielding, and you're connecting to the ground through your whole left side. That your left side could soften to the elephant, as if the skin of the elephant and you were meeting.

You could feel through your ribs into the earth, that you're actually alive in the whole left thigh.

And then slowly begin to let the left knee open, and moment to moment, saying hello to how you're alive in your left thigh in relation to the earth.

You come awake to yourself through that.

Calm.

[Silence 41 seconds]

And really let this be a harmonious feeling of your whole self. Rolling, letting the head roll, letting the neck yield. A feeling of really letting the ground soften the hardnesses that have grown in the chest, in the torso.

A beautiful way of inviting yielding in the vertebrae, by softening the ribs. It's like working with the levers that are on the vertebrae.

Good. And then as you come to your back this time, pause here once again.

[Silence 47 seconds]

Slightly roll your head a bit, right and left. Feel the change of contact.

Each moment of shifting in your head can be sensed down the back, maybe. It's not just your head. Your arms know your head is turning. Something different down each arm as the head turns.

Rolling

[Russell:] One last movement. Bend both legs, with the right hand around the right knee on the outside, and the left hand around the left knee. Let the legs be open, comfortably open.

Just kind of lightly play with the legs. Just kind of let them move a little bit randomly, the way little kids — you know, infants, their legs just kind of dangle in the air. See if you can, with the help of your hands, find those dangly infant legs.

And then begin to find a way just to let yourself roll, really from your pelvis, from your legs turning, so that you're not using great effort, certainly not in your head and shoulders. It's a feeling of being carried by your lower body, and rolling, and softening your chest to the ground as you roll to one side.

And if you get all the way to the side, just let the upper leg lift, to begin to carry you to the other side.

Let your head roll.

Breathing, softening, feeling where you would like a little bit more softening in your back, and see if you can use your attention and your breathing.

And you're just listening, to invite a kind of yielding in your torso, lightening in your torso.

Lightening means we have this connection with the earth force. The support of the earth allows something in your body to get lighter, softer, less held.

[Silence 33 seconds]

Right, and come a little faster, if that feels comfortable. Just kind of a little more playful, a little bit less controlled, aware of your neighbors, that you don't collide.

That's it. Light, but quicker, more playful, freer.

Get a little momentum. Let your head roll. Let your back really go. That's it. That's nice.

Beautiful.

Okay, and leave that. Just get a last sense for now of yourself, and your elephant.

Feel how you are inside, and how you are in relation to your support, the surface.

And then roll to your side and come on up. Come on up to standing, and feel what the earth is like underneath you, your connection to the sky.

Coming up

[Russell:] Coming up from these lessons, it's wonderful to just receive it. You know, at first it takes a little bit to get used to being vertical. Your system needs to find its way, without going back to the old state, but to kind of reorganize in the vertical.

And then you listen to what is interesting, what feels different.

And it's good to sense throughout yourself, and then you begin to move in any ways that you like, and explore your world in any ways you like, so that you can kind of connect what happened on the floor with what it's like to be standing.

Yeah, you can jump on your elephant if you want. Just walk or turn.

And I'll often say at the end of lessons, sometimes I'll say, if there's anything that's coming to you that you have words for, put that out into the room. And it's good for other people to go, well, do I have something similar? Without any sense that I should, but just, it gives you a reference. So you might have the opposite, or you might find that someone's experience helps you to sense something that you didn't have language for.

[Participant:] Fluid.

[Russell:] Fluid, fluid, nice word.

It's also important that we grow our vocabulary for sensation, so it's good when you hear a word that resonates, to add it to your vocabulary. So, fluid.

[Participant:] Spirals.

[Russell:] Spirals. Yeah.

[Participant:] Gliding.

[Russell:] Gliding. Okay, let's go a little bit slow so we can each take in these, and see which ones resonate and which don't. So we have gliding, spirals, fluid.

[Participant:] Undulating.

[Russell:] Undulating.

[Participant:] Buoyant.

[Russell:] Say something about the buoyancy. Is that in connection to the ground, or in your body? How do you feel that?

[Participant:] Yeah, vertical, how you come off the ground.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] Heaven to earth.

[Russell:] Heaven to earth, yeah, an up-down buoyancy, yeah.

[Participant:] Connected.

[Russell:] Connected.

[Participant:] Sensual feet.

[Russell:] Sensual feet. Yes.

[Participant:] Heavy happy.

[Russell:] Heavy happy. Nice, nice, heavy happy.

[Participant:] Hungry.

[Russell:] Hungry. And you know, that's a really good time to feel hungry, because we are gonna go to lunch.

Thank you.