Talk

Angela 2 — Week 1, Day 7, Session 1 — 92 minutes

Summary: Russell offers suggestions for the time between gatherings: a daily sitting place, eyes-open practice, and care of posture. He treats pain that comes and goes as inner life, then teaches ground, sound, and breath, pausing, and listening inward. Listening partnerships, Focusing, and his path to Gene Gendlin and Anne Weiser Cornell close the morning.

The time between

[Russell:] We're going to begin. There are two things I would like to be coming to — actually three things this morning. We're going to look at some suggestions about the time in between.

I'm going to be modeling a basic way of self-listening. That's kind of the next step of what we've been doing, around what's happening in here about our ending right now, and what's coming next. Since we all have an ending and a next, we'll all explore that in this way of listening, this way of self-listening. I'll guide you through that. And we'll do some movement together. There's a movement lesson I want to get to before. So I'm not exactly sure of the complete order. It will reveal itself.

I'd like to start with suggestions about the times in between. My view is that I'm here as a guide, and you get to organize how you're going to follow it. Some people will take these as — well, I really want to, Russell thinks this is a really good thing to do, this feels pretty good, I'm going to go with it. You might have some things that go, well, that's not quite right for me, and I will defer to you. You're in charge of your learning, and I will make some suggestions.

I have a strong suggestion: creating a daily sitting practice. You create a place where you sit, if possible, in your home structure, the same place you go to. Ideally, at least that specific area is not used for other things. If it needs to be, fine. But ideally it's a place that begins to develop a kind of etheric substance, we could say, or some sort of — you see it and it draws you.

You have a cushion there, or a chair there. For some of us this doesn't work, and that's not a problem, not a fundamental problem. But if you have the possibility, create a space. Have something beautiful there that draws you. I often like to have a flower there. I have a candle I like to light, although I recommend not putting the candle right in front of your gaze. It doesn't become a candle-gazing practice. That's a different kind of practice. Have the candle off to the side. I personally use incense. That's something I like.

You might have a stone, if that. Something that's not too evocative of an emotional state. I wouldn't have a picture of your child sitting right in front of you. That will bring too much of a particular aspect of yourself to the meditation. Off to the side is fine, but in front of you we want more of an open space.

[Participant:] I was wondering what the purpose of something in front of you is.

[Russell:] Oh, you don't have to. You don't have to.

[Participant:] No, no.

[Russell:] The idea is that there be something that, when you look at it, you get a feeling in your body. There was a group that once gave me a crystal from Switzerland. I'm not big on — Linda's our crystal person. I don't know a lot about all that stuff. I like it. It's interesting, but it's different from where I focus. Something in this crystal just gives me a feeling. I put that there.

[Participant:] I'm not looking at it.

[Russell:] No, no, no, no. It's just an environmental feature.

The other thing I recommend is that you sit more like our second sitting in the morning — that you sit facing a wall, if that's possible. Why is that? Again, not a demand. You may find that in the structure of your home it doesn't work. But what I have found — this is traditional in the Zen world — is you do what's called wall gazing.

Facing a wall creates a container around the practice. When we're facing outward — and it's different in a group, because we're facing toward each other, and that brings a kind of energy from the group, and that's helpful for the facing out. But part of why we face out at least once a day is — I don't know if you had this experience, but most people feel it — I feel more on my own when I'm facing out. I feel more in the group when I'm facing forward. And I want you to have both of those experiences. The benefit of group support, and the sense of, I'm with people, but I'm on my own.

Facing the wall contains your energy in a different way than facing out. These are subtle distinctions. It's not essential if you go, gee, I really want to face that. I do recommend, especially with eyes-open practice, that you're not gazing out a beautiful window. You need something to hold the energy.

Another time of the day, do another meditation looking out the window. Beautiful, right? Another time of day, do a meditation with your eyes closed. Another time of day, do a more reflective process, listening to your body and working with something like we talked about last night. But as a core kind of ground practice, I really want to encourage this style of just sitting.

Just sitting

[Russell:] Just sitting. Coming back to something like this very, very gentle and subtle question. What's the most subtle feeling of being alive right now?

And then I use my body to bring me to presence. Okay, I'm here, now. Within the feeling of this bodily sense, can I let that dissolve into just the bare feeling of being alive?

And then, because the mind gets busy, I'll use the breathing. Especially the exhale is so helpful for emptying into the most subtle feeling of being alive.

Being alive means being. What's the most subtle, direct — without thought, without feeling — but we use sensation to land us in the moment, and then it evaporates in a certain way.

Dogen, who's the teacher from this lineage, back in the sixteenth century, says, casting off body and mind. It's really a feeling of body and mind getting cast off. You don't actually cast it off. It dissolves, but it doesn't dissolve into unconsciousness. It dissolves into justness.

Even something like a body seems — it's a thought. We can't really speak about it, but we use the body as an entry point. It's very helpful, and even to focus on the breath. But even when you're focusing on the breath, there can be this very light feeling. Not only that the breath is light, but it's like the simultaneous — what is seeing all this?

And it's not an inquiry like, what is seeing all this? That would be for your reflective meditation. The most subtle — it's like the question just evokes an opening. Again, I have this image of a snowflake falling into a lake. It dissolves.

We're not trying to say, well, what is noticing all this, but — notice. Breath. Breath, notice. And then you get distracted by something, so you need something tangible to bring you back. Find your bottom. Find your breath. Be with the breath. Let breath and whatever is noticing breath dissolve until there's just — and then it gets distracted. Then it gets grounded.

Body helps to locate. The breath is more subtle than the body. Air is more subtle than earth. Then there's an observing of breath, and then the breath is more subtle, and whatever it is that's observing begins to dissolve. But it dissolves into light. It's not dissolving into unconsciousness, but it's right on an edge.

And that space begins to — at first it might be a tenth of a second — it begins to —

Eyes open

[Participant:] Yes. I try to make the shift from meditating with my eyes closed.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] Yes, I can. Yes, thank you. I'm really happy you're bringing me.

[Russell:] Although most, when you get kind of in the groove of it, having your eyes kind of half open will be there most of the time. At first that can make you very — open your eyes wide. Look straight ahead. If looking down pulls you down, look straight ahead. Look at the wall. Have a blank wall, or something, that you're looking at. Look straight ahead. Bring attention down.

You might intentionally close your eyes for ten seconds, fifteen seconds, to feel the breath, to feel your bottom, because at first it can be hard to feel with your eyes open. Then open again. Let the attention drop down. When you have your eyes really wide open, you might need to use a little bit more time focused on your bottom and your breath, rather than that more subtle stuff I was talking about. Spend a little bit more time anchoring the sitting.

[Participant:] On a similar note, I was having the same struggle, but noticed that I was feeling very overstimulated when I was open. I felt I wasn't getting my meditation. So is that just, you know, gradually —

[Russell:] Right. Let's practice. Close your eyes sometimes. But this is a really good example of why we want to learn to meditate with our eyes open. We're going around so much of the time overstimulated. Things happen so fast. Especially those of us dealing with technology and electronics — there's so much going on, and so many sounds, and so many — to learn to find

presence with the visual field, even a little bit there, just having the visual cortex active, and yet still being able to be right here, is what will help us live with our meditation.

I totally understand, and agree, that there's a part of us that says, wait a second, I'm not getting my twenty minutes of peace. I'm not getting my — yeah, that will come. And again, close your eyes for brief moments. If you're not feeling so sleepy, just let the eyes be open a little. You don't have to see anything. Just let light in.

[Participant:] I trusted it now. I started to feel a change, but it was hard.

[Russell:] Yeah. For most people, it works. And it probably doesn't work for everybody, but most of the people who work with me start with, I don't want to. And most of them, after a while, say, I'm so glad I did. I've had some meditation teachers in my courses from other traditions, and they find that. It's not that the other is bad, or not good. It's great to do at other times. But as a core basic training for how to live in presence, the eyes open is really helpful.

[Participant:] I've been doing this practice for a while. The eyes, for me — in fact, today I found myself going, okay, well, I'm going to get a camera and I'm going to take a picture of my eyes. I really want to see what squinting is. There's this place where if it's squinting, it's like shaking. And then when I open a little bit more, it's just so much. I don't know if anybody else experiences that, but that shaking — it's really nice with candles, because they just —

[Russell:] Right. Yeah. So when I'm like this, they probably look like they're closed, and there's light. If I decided to look at it, I can tell there's a carpet. I probably wouldn't be able to describe it a lot — describe the basic color. There's this stuff down here. I can just about decipher what it is. But light is coming in. I certainly would see my hands when I move them across here. So this is my norm. Then sometimes I'll be like this.

[Participant:] You're not looking around a lot here.

[Russell:] And then there'll be some moments where it's really close. So there can be variability.

[Participant:] I've noticed a lot of statues of Buddha with the eyes slightly open.

[Russell:] Yeah. This is not made up.

[Participant:] Because I was thinking, too, that my training has always been closed-eyes meditation. All the Buddhas I've seen, their eyes are always slightly open.

[Russell:] Yeah. Again, there are numerous Buddhist forms of meditation that close the eyes also. So not all Buddhist meditation has the eyes open. Most Vipassana sitters — Theravada tradition, Vipassana is very, very popular in the US — they have their eyes closed. And it's beautiful meditation. It's great. And it's in certain ways easier to enter.

Posture and the mudra

[Participant:] I'm sorry. I had a question. I've really been struggling with this, and I know you've addressed it before, but the issue I have trouble with is it makes me feel really stiff. And I feel like after I sit there for a while, I'm doing like this, and it doesn't feel like the relaxed kind of pose you want. I feel like I'm working the gesture, though.

[Russell:] Yeah. One thing that would be helpful — one of the classic images that'll be used is as if there's a little weight on your elbow. So there's no sense of upholding. It's a downward. If anything, there's a lengthening through here, and the head comes out of the shoulders.

And then what one begins to notice is a habit of lifting. And this is personal history arising. Often, not always, an underground anxiety state that begins to emerge. And we can actually use that as a reference. Oh, the mechanism is doing its old thing.

Another one that some people have is this folding forward, which tends to be — I don't want to make these literal — tends to be more of a self-protective, more of a fear state. This is more startle state. This is more of a protection. But you can watch your shoulders start to drift in their pattern. And then we come back to a more neutral, if we notice that.

And this becomes a circle that actually, after a while, begins to feel like it's supporting you. And this place of collapse, in so many people, up here in the upper back, begins to feel like it is going up through the top of the skull. And one feels a subtle lengthening through the spine, and a dropping in the shoulders.

And then another thing people start to get is this — some people begin to pull inward with their elbows, and the ribs start — it's like someone having a clutch bag in New York City. And then we want to let — the traditional image there is, you've got an egg, and you don't want to squeeze it, you don't want to drop it. So there's some sense of vital ease.

And then the fingers — the thumbs can start pressing against each other when you're really into a thought, or start going way apart when you're kind of — and so the thumbs become — this is all skillful means for feedback.

That's why — I mean, I gave you a description of this subtle sense of being alive. The other side of that is we are referencing our embodiment over and over as feedback for the quality of presence that's here. So, oh, into my holding pattern. Oh, into that one. Oh.

As I'm sitting here, there's a very light kind of scanning through that helps to ground the practice.

A wonderful instruction that we can give to ourselves as we're sitting is, we want to take care of our mudra. We want to take care of our posture. Not to have good posture, but to take care of our posture. It's like taking care of Buddha, taking care of the awakened one inside.

Or this picture — I don't know if I gave this one to you. There's a nice image of the baby Buddha. Did I talk about baby Buddha?

Baby Buddha just means you in your original state. The image is that it's like living in here, living in this tanden, this dantian, in this place where the hands are. This is not a haphazard place. This is a precise place. In that, you can have this image that you don't want it tilted, you don't want it pulled in, because baby Buddha can come out like on a terrace and look around the world.

So you're giving a little platform for baby Buddha — meaning you — to kind of gaze out. And that's kind of sweet, to have this little Buddha coming out of your belly. You already had a Buddha come out of your belly. Now you've got the next Buddha, the original Buddha, your original Buddha.

[Participant:] Any significant bend in my elbow — so I had to figure out how I can feel this circular feeling. And I have long arms and a short torso. So I've been having to figure out where I can be where I'm not — if I'm like this, there is a tendency, and then the elbow, the weight, and then the weight that would come in. Ergonomically, having long arms is giving me an invitation to wander about.

[Russell:] Where you went to, just as you were doing that, and you let the arms kind of — that's closer, I think.

[Participant:] It's closer, but my elbows.

[Russell:] Yeah, no, that's pulled in. You were in an in-between place a moment ago.

[Participant:] There was some — this physics. Elbows in the air. I have long arms and a short torso, so I feel like it doesn't look — where this mudra is. I mean, my mudra could be out here.

[Russell:] Okay, so let me see. Let me observe. You can make it a little less of an oval. Your thumbs can come down a little bit.

[Participant:] Oh, it's comfortable.

[Russell:] It looked like it was not — yeah, that's fine.

[Participant:] Like a squash oval? I was trying to make it an oval. Did you want your fingers to touch the thumb?

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] If I let my shoulders down, I feel like my elbows have to go back.

[Russell:] Let your shoulders down and just let your elbows rest. What's that feel like, where you are sitting?

[Participant:] It still feels like upward pressure into my neck, but maybe I —

[Russell:] Okay, so you're sitting. Do you usually sit in —

[Participant:] Yeah, this chair probably isn't right, because I'm actually not —

[Russell:] Yeah. You need to be a little bit higher. Let's try that other one. Let's get a look at that.

[Participant:] Five days ago I was in the same — like, I can't do this, this isn't for me, I should hold it. And I'm really appreciating what you're saying about the mechanism doing its thing. For me, has it been about —

[Russell:] Yeah. So maybe if you're in a chair, you might need to lower your hands a little bit more. Classically, your thumbs are a little bit below your belly button. But as long as this area — let's say from an inch below your belly button to your pubic bone — as long as you are kind of open to that area, and approximately there, this can serve its function. One of its functions is to kind of create a magnifying glass into this region.

[Participant:] Now that's better.

[Russell:] Why is that better?

[Participant:] Because the chair is higher. This is the barstool I cut off. The standard barstools look like —

[Russell:] Yeah, that's better. Pelvis comes forward. That's much better for you.

Actually, the way I described that — and you're accurate in what you're saying — the way I described that was the sense of pulling your hands apart. And it's a subtle sense of as if the hands are going away from each other, and it creates a kind of widening, and the shoulders get some space, and the sternum lifts a little bit. But all these things are really surprisingly helpful for cultivating the presence.

But that's much better. So we'll have to have you on something higher.

And remember, for those who are on the floor, and you have challenges with your knees and things, rolling things up, putting them under your legs, is really a good strategy. Using pillows, using blankets to help support you, is a good strategy.

[Participant:] I called here first and then moved my —

Pain, lessons, and resourcing

[Participant:] I have a couple of questions, but one is, I oftentimes have this burning in the center of my back. So it sometimes is there and it sometimes is not, and I kind of get a sense that maybe I'm just not sitting exactly right. Like that exercise we were doing, moving the knees to the side — that really helped a lot. But then the next time I sat down, that was kind of gone.

So I find myself going like this a lot, trying to adjust where I am. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's burning like crazy and that's all I can think about, and then another thought will come and it goes away. And so I'm not understanding the pain.

And in that same kind of sense, this morning I sort of did that exercise to kind of remind myself how to sit. With the Feldenkrais, a portion of it. It seems like when we are doing the movement lessons, they're very slowly moving towards that bending. That was like the culmination of a couple of days. Well, if I sit down before I meditate and I go right into bending my knee to the center, without — I haven't done that subtle stuff that's beforehand. I guess the question is, am I supposed to be with the common practice, trying to find — and am I going to force myself into it?

[Russell:] Okay, so there are a few questions here. Let me go in reverse order.

First, it'll be great working with these whole lessons again. When I get back to making my recommendations, what we need in the between time — one of the things I'm going to say is, a lot of people in the programs are finding the materials really helpful to work with. If anybody has the idea, kind of been there, done that — any of the lessons we've done can be worked with many times, whether they're the talks.

The talks are not just information. You'll see if it's true, if you listen to them and really listen. And sometimes maybe you'll just put on a recording — some people listen to them in their cars and do that — but if sometimes you really listen, you'll find that the talks go into your body in a certain way. The information is helpful, but the information is actually kind of holding something together that is more central.

I recorded some of the meditations in the morning. Some people find them helpful to use in their practice.

And the lessons. What's interesting about the Feldenkrais lessons, as wonderful as they are to do in their entirety, to do a series like that — once your nervous system begins to get the lessons, you can bring about the effect with just a piece of it, and then bring about the effect with just the image of the movement. That's the direction of the work. It's still great to do the whole lesson. Even when you can access it with the image, you get other things. But that's the direction. That's why it's not primarily about your tissues and joints. It's really about your brain getting a motor pattern more clearly.

So it's great to do them again, and great to think them, and great to imagine them. And when you get a kind of posture that feels, wow, this is the way it feels great, I wish it could feel like this all the time — just like with the resource processes. This is a moment that's asking to be resourced. Do you get what I mean?

That you pause, and you invite your nervous system to recall everything it can. Not only the physical sense, but gee, I feel light, I feel free, I get a kind of light in my thinking even. I feel hopeful. Okay, what else is here?

[Participant:] Well, my bottom is more settled than usual. And funny, I'm a little bit more left — but don't say I should be equal. This is really —

[Russell:] Really get more precise information about how you are when you're in a moment of grace, when you're in a moment where combinations of forces have brought you to yourself. And to shine a light there, so that your system has more information for finding that again. This is neurology 101, actually, or neurology 303.

So that's about how to use the lessons.

In terms of working with the discomfort, and when it gets painful — the fact that it changes is very important to know. The great majority of physical pain that arises in meditation is confusion in your thinking. It's inner life revealing itself through your body.

Not every bit. Some of us have — we hurt our knee, and we've got a torn cartilage, and we need to support it. So I'm saying mild to moderate, but even fairly — especially things that come and go. Especially things that come, and then sometimes you're with them for a while, and they pass. Those kind of things are your bodily history expressing your life history. And it is such an exquisite, substantial way of working with our patterns of contraction.

Remember what I said yesterday. All of our incomplete identities — what I sometimes call false identities — but all of our constructed identities have a kind of contraction built into them. We're contracting away from our wholeness. Whenever we return to our home, our sense of wholeness, it doesn't always feel wonderful, but it feels true. And in that true, there's some kind of opening.

And so when we're sitting here and there's something feeling like it's tight, there's something invariably in that that is in my life. And I'm not saying, well, there's this problem and therefore it's this spot. That's too simplistic for how the organism works most of the time. It's more like, oh, how can I be with this burning in my back where I'm not fighting it?

And if it gets to where you are fighting, you change position. You do something. We're not doing a masochistic practice here. It's not helpful. I've done that. But to be with the ones you can be with is really helpful. And to see if it unwinds in your warm-hearted presence.

And then you come back to your breath, and you might even need to bring it as the center of your practice for a little bit. And you're just breathing with it and feeling. And here you might do an investigation. You might do something like — not so much where does it come from, what does it mean, not like that, but more like, what is this that I'm calling pain?

Is it hot? Is it cold? Is it pressure? Is it stabbing? Not that you're analyzing. You're with it, and you're not letting the concept pain keep you out of the experience. That word — I often don't like that word, because it asks us to leave it in that box. We don't open the lid and go in. And it's scary to go in at first. But when we get to where we can be with that, it's not only helpful for that. It's helpful for many future moments of bodily discomfort.

The fear that we tend to bring into the moments that we call painful begins to lessen, and therefore the sensations begin to change. So all the things we layer on the raw sensation, that turned it into suffering, begin to evaporate. Then we get down to brass tacks. We get down to what it is in its essence. And at that moment it starts becoming something like vibration and pulsation, and it can even dissolve.

So it becomes something to work with. Suffering turns into caring.

[Participant:] Yeah, suffering turns into caring. That's nice. Is there any point at which this is related to life?

[Russell:] Often, often, often. And then what's really great, as you learn these kinds of skills — sometimes it reveals itself. Sometimes later you do a more Focusing kind of practice, or a more reflective meditation, and now you really investigate it with all your skills. And you invite it to come forward, and associations might appear, and you feel what it's linked to. And then you see, well, is that just a random thought, or is that really something coming? And you sit with that.

Okay, I want to go on.

Sitting together

[Participant:] So about space. Is it a space that you create that's always there, or can you move a chair and then go to this space? Is it that free?

[Russell:] I would say optimal is to have a space, your meditation space. Next step — okay, you can't keep a chair there, but you can keep it so that you don't also go to your computer in that space. That has something like sanctity. But I don't mean to make it sound precious. It's got sacred, it's got sanctity, it's got something that we're keeping fresh.

So the sitting practice, I strongly encourage.

Footnote on that. I hope you start — those of you who are interested — use the ELMP board. Also pay attention to the everyone. So you have a couple of — what are they called? Are they accounts? Forums. There's an everyone, an everybody, and then there's your own. And so some messages will go just of you together, that'll feel right, and some —

In the everybody forum, there are people around the world who are starting to post when they're sitting together. There are certain European groups that once a week do a collective sitting, and now they're starting to let everybody know when they're sitting. You might find this surprising, that sitting at the same time as other people starts feeling like your sitting is being supported.

And so people in this group might like — you can just put on a post. You can just say, I'm going to be sitting at eight o'clock on Sunday, West Coast time, if anybody would like to join me, and I'd love to know that you're there, so send me back a message, or something like that. And then maybe five people are sitting together, and maybe you start having a regular time that you do that. I don't know. You'll see. You will form your own ways.

[Participant:] Don't we also have everybody's individual email, so we could send an email to one person?

[Russell:] The ZIST people are on the everybody list, right? ZIST is a German — one of the German groups. You're the only ones who can see Angela 2, but everybody can see everybody. So they have everybody and ZIST, and that one has everybody and Johanneshoff, and this one has everybody and Santa Sabina, and you have everybody and Angela 2. You don't get to see Angela 1.

So sitting, regular sitting, highly recommended.

Movement and the floor

[Russell:] The next thing I'm going to suggest is that you have the intention of, once a week perhaps, doing a whole movement lesson. A whole movement lesson. And you can use recordings, or there might be live classes. If you don't know if there's a live class near you, you can contact us at the office and we can help you with that.

[Participant:] What's a whole movement lesson?

[Russell:] A Feldenkrais movement lesson is usually forty-five minutes to an hour, and you go in and they do one of these lessons. There are thousands of these kinds of lessons.

[Participant:] Yeah, those are shortened so people actually do them.

[Russell:] That's skillful means. Always.

[Participant:] No one's told me about that.

[Russell:] As soon as he tells me, I'll let you know.

[Participant:] I appreciate that.

[Russell:] Yes. Those will help. Another resource is the Guild, where they know where ATMs are in each city across the US. And I've heard there's a website, Feldy Forum, where you can go in and there are actually ATMs. But check that. You might have to be a practitioner for Feldy Forum. But you can go to — is it feldenkraisguild.com? Feldenkrais.com. And they can help you find classes in your area. Or if you like learning from audio materials, you can send me an email and I can recommend some. If you want more than the ones that — it's great for you to get other teachers, other inputs.

So to do a lesson like that is great. But I want to say, maybe most important to me is the practices that move through your daily life.

I want to really encourage that you begin to get on the floor as a learning environment. That even if it's ten minutes of checking in, of listening to your body — just kind of the question, how am I right now on the floor? Lying down. Different positions, just checking in.

This was my main way of learning through my Feldenkrais training, more than whole lessons — getting on the floor very consistently. And really listening, and gently moving, and sensing, and moving. Not haphazard, but sensing what would happen. Getting on the floor is a really good thing.

Ground, sound, breath

[Russell:] I'm then going to say, the practice that is kind of core Embodied Life practice, that people are doing throughout the world, is what I call ground, sound, breath.

Ground, sound, breath means it's about a thirty-second practice that, if you're willing to do something like five times a day, really begins — seems to be enough for most people to shift what I think of as the rhythm that their day is moving in.

And what it means is a pause. And it's a pause where you first find the ground. It might take five, ten seconds, where you just do what we've done many times. Feel your bottom. But the key here is, don't let that become a concept. Oh yeah, my bottom. Let me get to the next thing. Where you're really here. Feel your bottom means every time it's fresh.

And to begin to recognize when you've fooled yourself, when you just say the words to yourself. And then really going, very tangibly — right foot. And if your mind splits off, note, oh, I'm not really here in my right foot. And you come back to your right foot. No shame. Your mind may — especially if you do it in the course of the day, you may find it's amazing. I can be in my right foot for one second, and then all of a sudden I'm shopping, or something. But then go back to your foot, and ask yourself questions. What's touching the ground? Is there any temperature? Give yourself some way of using it as a magnet for consciousness.

This is literally the gift of the physical body. A tangible vehicle for presence. A tangible vehicle to find the present moment.

This is one of — I hear stories, again, this is not personal knowledge — that there are angels that envy humans for a certain learning that you can only do in a human. And the Tibetans have these ideas that if you knew how rare it was to be born as a human being in a human body, and the kinds of learning you could have, you would be in gratitude all the time, no matter how it felt, because of the opportunity to feel that you are here and alive.

And what I can attest to is this reliability. It gives an address for your consciousness. It gives an address to locate. And so you begin — that's why this first week there's such an emphasis on groundedness. This is our ground state, that we feel, I'm here, I'm not there. I'm here on this spot.

In challenging moments, you're in a difficult mind state. Also, find your body. You don't have to push that away, but don't just trip off. Let your tripping off have your bottom in it, and your feet in it, and a sense of weight and comfort in your hands. Ground.

Sound means we don't want to get trapped inside the physical body. The physical body is too small for the experiencing human being. The physical body is too small. Our experiencing is so

vast, our presencing is so big, that if we confine it to the boundary of the physical body, we'll feel like we're in a tight shoe.

So sound is meant to bring us into the space around us. As some of you have commented to me, you've felt that. You've been in, and I'll mention something about notice the sounds, and all of a sudden it's like you decompress, and you're bigger. And boy, that's a gift. But it's not sound in general. It's these particular sounds. And it's not picking the ones you like. It's not going for the birds and ignoring the trucks. It's whatever's there. Because it's not there for your enjoyment. It's there for your presencing.

Ground, sound, and then three breaths from beginning to end. And really stay with the exhale, into the space that lives before the new inhale. And if you can do that, there's a space at the end of the exhale, very brief, but that's an opening. That space is an opening into being. That becomes your best friend. That's a still point. It's a still point where your whole history can melt, at least for that moment. It's a still point where everything that's bothering you can dissolve, at least for that moment.

And three breaths from beginning to end, then you go about your day. Takes thirty seconds. Might take a minute if you're caught up. Might take two minutes. But most of the time it'll be thirty seconds, forty-five seconds. And you do that a number of times a day.

It's an interruption to the constructed identity that forms when you're in your — I'm doing this, I'm doing that, I'm feeling this, I'm feeling that. To that default place we tend to go to, of constructed identity. So we want a way of stepping off the train.

[Participant:] Please, would you recommend to make it seated, or standing up?

[Russell:] Any position. I do recommend with your eyes closed for that one. Probably not unless you're parked. Any position is fine for that. And it's great for those who take trains.

I can't tell you the number of people who, especially in Europe, will contact me and say, my train ride is so different. I've never been present on the train. I've always sat down, gone to the newspaper, and didn't leave that till I left. But it's amazing to hear just the random sounds. I feel so alive. And then I go to the newspaper. And then maybe I'll stop again after a few stories. My experience on the train is like I'm connected to other beings. I'm not just in my shell. And it sounds silly, but it's a huge life change.

Little — our nervous systems don't need a lot to make these shifts. They need consistency around some small things. So that I very much strongly encourage.

If you do not sit

[Russell:] Let me go back to something, since it's in my mind right now, and I forgot to mention it in our discussion about meditation.

If you have an intention toward a daily practice, and you're choosing not to sit a given day, my encouragement is, go to your sitting place and bow. No shame. No, I'm bad, I'm a bad meditator today. See if we can eliminate that whole story, and just do a hundred percent thing. Give yourself to that moment.

If you're connecting to the frustration, that will shape your inner life. If you feel resistant to it, don't struggle with it. You'll do it some more here. Maybe it will take for you. But that gesture is a beautiful one. Just to even do that can be very, very potent.

Yeah, got a little more to go, but you had a question?

[Participant:] Pause. This is pause. It can be anything.

[Russell:] Exactly. Thank you.

Pausing

[Russell:] Let's say the ground, sound, breath is a particular way of pausing that I encourage you to add. But I would love you to come up with your own pausing. That pausing becomes a theme. I know it's at first intentional, now spontaneous, except when it's not, and then it's intentional.

In my meetings with Linda, there are so many more moments where it's — I'm ready to just react, because we're quick. We often have regular kind of quick conversations, sure. But more often, especially if it's something of significance, it's a, let me take a minute. Let me take a few seconds. And then sometimes it's what I was going to say, but sometimes something fresh comes.

[Participant:] And by walking. Walking your dog.

[Russell:] Yeah. Sweet.

[Participant:] I was just once told the best time to pause is when you're the most busy. If you're feeling totally overwhelmed and have twenty things on your plate.

[Russell:] Yeah. And you pause. It gives you a path through all the chores.

[Participant:] It's very sound. The only thing I do is a big deep sigh. That just happens for me all the time. And I'll sometimes think, wow, this probably sounds like I'm exhausted, or —

[Russell:] I encourage that.

[Participant:] You said something at Breitenbush that really helped me, because I did a lot of the pausing, as you recommended. It was in particular when you're going to be in dialogue with someone, to make sure you've arrived before you start the conversation. And I found that to be so helpful, because a lot of times my body was here, but I wasn't. I hadn't arrived. So it's like someone coming late to the movie. My consciousness sort of rushes in, and then before I can stop myself, I've felt the same old way. It feels a little bit like slopping over the edges. You're late. You're late for the party. You said that to me, and that was so helpful. And you always do it.

[Russell:] Well, thank you. Thank you for bringing it, because these are for all of us. If you're honest with yourself, you'll start noticing more and more how often it is that you're not there. You're not fully there. And you might be speaking. The mechanism works, but —

When it becomes legitimate to recognize, and then to be able to say something — oh, whoa, I need a moment — it's a gift.

Hello in there

[Russell:] Okay, I want to say one more thing. The listening practices. What is moving in the direction of Focusing. You could call it focused listening, or deep listening, or embodied listening. I like embodied inquiry.

It's pausing, and first we drop into the physical body, and then we do that turn toward, hello in there. Hello, sweetheart. Hello in there. Hello, dear one. Or just, hello in there. How is it?

Like you're checking in with this deeper level, this neurologically deeper level, and just saying, there's always some one, two, or three feeling states that are happening. And you're just kind of checking in and saying, how is it? And not necessarily even doing something about it, but just acknowledging. Oh, I'm basically doing okay, but there's something kind of sad in there. Didn't know that before, and I don't really have time to be with it right now. I just want you to know, I know that there's a sad place in there. And then you might go on with your day.

Oh, there's something — I don't have a name for it, but there's something going on in there, even when you're basically fine. There's something that we learn to bring attention to. The guests. And say, oh, I know you're there.

Sometimes you might have the time to sit down and have a listening. Have a real listening to it. And remember, the essence of this way of paying attention to ourselves is, this is invited to speak, and your ordinary consciousness is invited to listen. You are being present for what you don't know yet. What you don't know — some of it you'll know, but you're really inviting your inner life.

And I use interchangeably here your inner life, or your inner body, your feeling body and your inner life. You're inviting it to speak to you and tell you some of the things that you don't know yet.

And we're going to do some of that together in a few minutes.

[Participant:] So speaking to the person who speaks to the being. This morning and yesterday morning, if boredom would come in, saying, hello, boredom. And then boredom would say, really? And say hello to me. I think I'm feeling — I don't have a trust — but the voice saying hello, boredom, is really the being, the presence in that person. Or am I tricking myself into saying, I'm so freaking bored, I need to talk to myself?

[Russell:] Right. Let's pause there, because that's a really great question. Great observation.

So one senses a boredom, and there's a hello, boredom. Now, rightfully, for most of us, our inner life doesn't trust us. Doesn't trust the conscious mind. Why? Because it's spent years of being manipulated. Being told what it should be. Being told, go for the good stuff, don't go with it. It's been manipulated. It's been violently manipulated. So, rightfully, it is cautious when we bring our first hellos.

We turn toward it with the hello. Now, it could be that you're really in presence, and it's a genuine hello. It could also be it's your controller trying to manipulate the bored place.

Your work as presence is to notice. To listen to the quality of the voice. And if it is the manipulative place, to turn towards that with warm-heartedness. Oh, you really want to change that boredom place. Oh, tell me what's so hard about it. I'm with you. And see if you can get any bodily sense.

Again, sometimes it's a bodily sense in a place. Sometimes it's not in a place. It's just an energy. It's got a kind of quality. Those are good bodily senses. It doesn't have to be, I feel it here and here. It can be, there's something in there that's just kind of like — and then there's something else that's like this. The body often speaks like that, and you might even find gestures for it.

And be able to say, okay, oh, there's that bored place, and there's that place that hates it. Okay, I'm with you both. Now you have two kids that need your attention. And you're paying attention to — right, familiar? Now you're seeing, who has the more needs at this moment? And make sure you let the other one know you'll be back.

And so we learn to navigate. But the key here is, we learn what presencing feels like, which means we learn how we fool ourselves. No, I'm really listening. I'm just going to make it all better.

Presencing doesn't have an agenda. Presencing doesn't have a need to fix things. Presencing does not value this over that. I mean, there's a basic warm-heartedness, but it's like light. It's like the sun shines on weeds and flowers equally. It doesn't go, okay, that's the good stuff in my life, that's the bad. It shines. And that's what your presencing is bringing to your inner life.

[Participant:] Unique and wonderful. I find that sometimes if I'm saying hello to grief or sorrow, then the part that's saying hello is also feeling grief and sorrow. It's like a mother picking up a child who has been run over by a car. The mother's grief. It's not like presence saying — yeah, there's just another layer of grief.

[Russell:] Yeah. But not unable to be with it, is my experience. It has a different quality. A different flavor. It can have some of that quality. The main difference for me, and the important difference, is it's not saturated with it. It's not lost in it. It's able to stand next to it also.

[Participant:] With its own grief.

[Russell:] I don't want to define it too precisely. What I want is that if it has its own grief — if it has lost the capacity to bear witness, then it is no longer presence.

[Participant:] Then it is grief. Well, I guess then you have to go to another layer, to be with that which is grief.

[Russell:] Exactly. And that's key, that move you just said. Key move.

The self-liberation — the liberation of this stuck state, or the challenge state — the liberation of it comes when it has company. When it's not alone.

And it's there. It's part — that is the gift of our consciousness. Like I said, that has one foot in the eternal, that is formless and has no states, and one foot in the relative world of what's happening right now. So it can sense into your grief, but it's not bound by it. It doesn't identify itself as grief. It can feel the flavor of it, but not be trapped in it.

It's like you're lost in this well of grief, and there's this hand that can serve it. But if witnessing gets submerged in the grief, it's not going to help you. So it can have the flavor of it and get its arm wet, so to speak.

As we practice — that's why the meditation is so key. The meditation practice, the way we're doing it, really the way we're doing it, will bring access to that presence more and more and more,

spontaneously, even when you're in difficult states. That it's not far away. That's one of the gifts of having the meditation alongside this way of going in.

Listening for each other

[Russell:] Yeah, go ahead.

[Participant:] I think it's relevant. In the materials you asked us to read, there was a part that says when we begin this conversation, sometimes it is easier to have it with a partner, for some of the nuances that you were talking about. I was wondering. But I'm thinking — and we had a little interaction. I didn't even know it happened, but I came back and he acknowledged it. He said, I wasn't a good listener. And I'm like, really?

Then he went through what happened, and inside it was interesting how — oh yeah, that was just so — not that he did it all the time, but it was so familiar that instead of feeling, I just went into hiding. Like, oh, okay, that's not okay to say that. I just sort of noticed a sort of hiding. And so just having him say, I didn't listen to you — immediately, whoa, I just kind of got, instead of tough, I got tender. We didn't even have a conversation. Just someone saying, I didn't listen to you.

So anyway, I don't know if I could have been as tender with myself. I think that is what I'm hearing. I want to be able to do that. But I can.

[Russell:] Beautiful. That's so exquisite. That brings me to the last thing I want to say about all this, about practices. We can begin to become listeners for each other.

Now, we haven't developed some of the specific skills that you will be developing much more, but you have the picture of the ground state of presencing. Of being there. Of having the intention, as the listener, to be in your body, to be really receiving, to put to the side your own needs to make things better, your own agendas. You are practicing presencing.

You might even have a list of the qualities of presencing in front of you when you're having a presencing conversation, or this kind of listening. Other conversations can happen in another way. I'm not saying all your conversations need to be like this. But to have this kind of — well, I want to be in presence with what's happening in my inner life. Would you be willing to be backup presence for me?

How do I be backup presence? By listening to me. You holding presence for me, and I am holding presence for what's alive in my inner life. You got my back, so to speak. You get what I mean?

And I will encourage you forming some listening partnerships. You can do this on the phone even. It's surprising that it works. Eventually this will become more like — throughout the world, people do Focusing on the phone. But this is the essence that I want us to be getting. This quality of being with. This quality of listening. This quality of wholehearted presence.

Now, what's also going to help over these next months is, there's an Embodied Life graduate who is also a Focusing teacher, and she's going to offer a five-week class in listening, on the phone, to help reinforce these skills. It'll be very inexpensive, because I pay for half of it. I subsidize it. But you'll have to pay something. I want to keep it inexpensive, and if the cost is keeping you from doing it, you let the office know and we'll cover your expense. But we basically share the expense to cover her.

It's not a demand. It's a suggestion that it can support the kind of listening that we're growing, because she knows where I'm coming from in all of this, and she comes from the same place. So she will be a support for that.

Another thing, for those who want to kind of jump further in the direction of the Focusing work. Focusing is generally taught in — what do they call those? Stages? Well, they're levels. So there are mainly four levels. The basic, often taught in a weekend live course, or on a phone, like a five-week series, goes through one level. Usually two-hour classes, and they break it. People don't always accept each other's levels. Like Anne doesn't accept anybody else's level.

Without getting into the whole Focusing community — if you go with a particular person, you need to follow their levels, but the levels don't really — gosh, we're going to keep going on. I've got so much to say.

[Russell:] Boy, you're really striking.

[Participant:] This is the third item. Could you put the exercise tapes on the board so we don't have to email you individually? And can you put the name of this teacher on the board? The exercises — earlier on you talked about doing exercises, and we should email you for those.

[Russell:] Oh, if you wanted CDs, you mean?

[Participant:] So that could go on the board.

[Russell:] Sure.

[Participant:] Then you mentioned there's this teacher that might be out there.

[Russell:] No, she's going to contact you, once we get the details worked out. Her first name is Sharry — S-H-A-R-R-Y — and Peague, P-E-A-G-U-E.

[Participant:] And the third one. You talked about this five-week series, or this weekend series. If there's information on that, can you put it on the board?

[Russell:] That's different. That's a dream class.

But the closest of the traditional Focusing teachers — and there are various schools of Focusing. And I'm not part of any of the schools, and I'm very, very connected to Gene.

[Participant:] You don't think so? I think that there are individuals who have their own styles, but technically there are identified schools that are identified as such. Anne is her own closed circle, but nobody else has one that I know of.

[Russell:] I can think of a couple, but let's talk about that later. There are different styles of Focusing. The one that I would recommend studying, that's closest to my style, is Anne Weiser Cornell. And that is called Inner Relationship Focusing.

But really, my main thing is, my Focusing partner is Gene, and that's how I focus. But I don't know how to get you to train with me.

[Participant:] So can I just suggest that everybody buy the little book?

[Russell:] The book is great. That's on the reading list.

[Participant:] The book is so short and wonderful.

[Russell:] We'll put this on the board. Resources through the Focusing world, their websites and such. There's a lot that's out there that's free and available, and I will encourage you to begin taking that up.

A naturalistic way in

[Russell:] I've gone so back and forth in my inner life, and in constructing courses, and thinking about what to ask of you. I so get concerned about people putting methods ahead of the living process. I love certain methods for skillful means, but I'm navigating this. I will, over the time, be giving you certain things that are really helpful. But we're always grounded in this vowing to — the life force has movement.

Let me tell you a little bit about how I got into the Focusing part of things. I was teaching my work in the world, Embodied Life work, back in the nineties. A part of the work grew out of — I'd had a background in Gestalt therapy, very present-oriented work, a way of working with your inner life that was congruent with the meditation work that was so central in my life.

So I began, out of my meditation work, out of my Feldenkrais work, to get insights into what might be helpful for people's development, and I began to create practices that would do that. Workshops, retreats, guiding people through different kinds of awareness practice. The work with, when we're in threes, paying attention to your bodily sense. That's not a Focusing practice. That's an Embodied Life kind of — there are numerous things. But some of what I was doing was connected to what was Focusing, and I didn't know Focusing.

And then I was teaching in Munich, back — I think it was like in '95 — and a couple of Focusing teachers came and said, oh, you must have studied with Gene. We can tell by your words. I said, well, I've heard of Gene, but I've never read his stuff. I don't know it. And that's interesting.

And about six months later it happened again, where somebody said to me, oh, you know Gene Gendlin? I don't. This is your — so then I leave it alone. And about three years later, a good friend of mine, who's a rabbi named Zalman Schachter, a very well-known rabbi in the States — we're talking on the phone, and he goes, you know, you should give Gene Gendlin a call. You're hearing the same news. And he and Gene have been good friends, and they talk. He goes, yeah, I call him. He focuses me. I focus him. We just talk to each other.

So I finished teaching. You can phone from anywhere in the world, but for some reason I waited till I was at a New York airport, because I knew he lived in New York.

[Participant:] How does that put someone closer?

[Russell:] I'm reflecting on why I'm calling him from a New York airport rather than waiting till I get home. It's like I'm nearby.

So I call him, and we have an immediate connection. The next time I went to New York, I went over to his house, and I connected with him and with his wife. And since then, usually twice a year I go and stay at their house. She has some physical difficulties. I work with her a little bit, and he and I spend usually two days just going back and forth. And then we have phone sessions with each other.

Now, along the way, this is another interesting link. I had heard about Anne Weiser Cornell, and I said, oh, I should, I'd like to learn something about that. And I was getting ready to go to Sweden

to teach, and a book arrives that I didn't order, from Anne Weiser Cornell. It wasn't her first book. It was her second book. Somebody — they didn't tell me they were going to do it — had been at a seminar of mine and said, I loved your work so much, I wanted to give you a present. I think you'd really like this.

And I really connected with Anne's language. So I called her up when I got back, and we connected. And so then we started talking, and I said, I love Gene, I don't know your work really, but I guess I do something similar, because Gene and I focus. So then I did her training for four weekends, or five, an extra one, and learned a lot through her.

But my entry into Focusing was what I call naturalistic. Because although I've learned a lot — I'm not minimizing how much I learned from each of them, and continue to learn — what attracted me to it was that it was so natural. So I want to keep that in there, even as I help you grow your skills.

I'm going to ask you to get exposed to Anne's style and to Gene's style, and I'm going to give you a couple of other styles, so you can grow your own style of getting more and more skillful at what? At how to be with your inner world in a way that allows it to open.

None of these — his style is not true, her style is not true. Is it effective for your inner life to come forward? Does it help blossoming? Does it help forward movement? So we're kind of backdooring into the forms. Get what I mean?

It's a difficult learning style for a lot of people. I'm asking you to do something difficult. People find it easier to have the form. But what I see is, if you get the form first, you start wedding yourself to the form. And then you start losing something in your inner life, because it's living over here. So I'm doing my best not to fall into that, but to also encourage the skills.

[Participant:] Do you know the Changes meetings?

[Russell:] They're meetings, a little bit. They're groups that get together. His idea — of course, everything should be free. He wanted Focusing to be free. And he created, or encouraged the creation of, little groups where people got together to focus. So in most areas where there is a Focusing community — at least in New York, and I am assuming elsewhere — there are Changes groups, which are places informal. It might be someone's house, but people just get together, and without any charge, they focus with one another. There's no requirement. There's no fee. So if you're in an area where there is a Focusing community, you might check out if there are any Changes groups available. I think that's great.

At this point, you're not ready to be Focusing partners, though, I would say. There's an expectation.

I need to bring this to a close. You've got a burning question. Okay, go ahead.

[Participant:] I'm asked to lead a meditation at a woman's retreat in a couple of months. And I'm wondering if you could just talk about how — is there something that you would caution me about when I'm talking about this to other people? I'm not done learning, but at the same time there's so much opportunity to talk about it and to use it in my life.

[Russell:] Let's talk about that together. And anybody who wants to join in, you can come over. But I'll be getting to how to present meditation — just not this week. Can we pause there? Are you okay with that? You had something that wanted to —

[Participant:] Well, based on your strong, medium, and mild encouragement at a retreat — Anne Weiser Cornell offers a free weekly Focusing tips email. Do you take any of it? Just to familiarize yourself with her mind. Reading. Really a wonderful resource.

[Russell:] Yeah. You can get her newsletter. That's focusingresources.com. There's a promotion attached to every one, but you take what you want.

We're going to pause, partially because I really have to pee.

Some kind of something that feels — there's something. It's like pressure. Feels like pressure.

It's like a pressure that goes — let's see.