Discussion

Angela 2 — Week 4, Day 4, Session 3 — 57 minutes

Summary: Russell invites reflection on presence and the historical self, using images of stepping out of the story and feeling the river. Participants share openings through the body, images, identity, and daily life. He responds on the gap before reaction, warmhearted attention, and where the I is placed.

Reflecting on presence

[Russell:] Let's take a moment. Feel into your bottom, feel into your sitting, and feel the influence of movements.

Reflecting to your experience — the meditation experiences from this morning, also from last night, together.

This morning, continuing with that image. It's two worlds. We're able to step out of the story at any moment — bubble opening. Or being carried by this river was the other image we used, and steering back to feel the flow of the river.

Just sensing into, as you're here right now, reflecting the discoveries, surprises.

Any questions?

I don't want to be working in so much theory right now, but really out of our experience. What are you discovering as you clarify what happens in a moment of presence, and how you're navigating the currents of the fresh presence and the historical self interacting?

As you can find language for that, it helps to clarify it in your journey, and it helps others.

And it's not only new territory for people outside of monasteries, but even for people in monasteries. Historically, the thousands of years that people have been investigating — to do it in a public way, where this is being shared and looked at, not just in the privacy with a teacher, but where we're actually finding what happens.

When this ordinary person has these moments of stepping out of that contracted self-identity, even if it's a tenth of a second, then it's a second, then it's a few seconds, then its fragrance is never away.

And we don't have models for living without that kind of identity as the basis of a self.

So I'm curious how the process is, if there's something that you're noticing, maybe last night, maybe this morning.

Yeah, please.

A doorway through the body

[Participant 1:] I just think this access point through the reptilian brain, for lack of a better word, and through the body — it's extraordinary. It's the doorway out, you see.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 1:] And I just — I don't know. That just changes the whole thing, doesn't it?

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 1:] And it felt very necessary. I mean, we were very grateful. The whole body just — last night I was sort of feeling this alignment going on. Well, anyway, it's really — thank you. Very nice doorway.

[Russell:] Yes. Yes.

You know, when you say that, I realize that although they didn't speak that language, that was the original intention of Hatha Yoga. It was to take care of that part of our brain so that one could go to the higher states.

Now, unfortunately, the asanas begin to take on, for many — it's not the fault of the asanas — a kind of physicalness that's confining. And now their bodies are getting stronger and better, and they feel good, and it becomes solidified, not as a pathway.

Same thing can happen with Feldenkrais work, because it's so great at making your body feel better. But that's why we keep coming back to, it's the awareness moving through you.

At one level we can say, to take care of, to soothe that reptilian brain. It needs it over and over and over again, because it has millions of years of practice being only concerned with what's going to eat it, and what it's going to eat, but mostly what's going to eat it. Right?

I mean, eight out of ten reptile babies are eaten by their parents or other adults. So you're not going to feel real secure. It's kind of built into the DNA of that part of our brain.

Thank goodness for mammals. Right? That whole — I mean, I don't want to get too — I love that stuff too much. I can talk all day about that evolutionary development, but not now. I want to stay in practice.

Images and the gap

[Participant 2:] So this might be the same thing or it might be different, but I just wonder if you can talk to the tendency of creating images. It's easy to let talk go, or chatter go, but there's this compulsion of creating images. There's an image of being unpleasant. There's an image when I'm stepping into or out of small self.

And sometimes I can be with it and still not feel that it's a box, and then other times I think, oh yeah, I'm just creating images. So speak to that.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 2:] There are visual images, and then if there isn't, then a color comes in.

[Russell:] Yeah. And these arise, so to speak, spontaneously. You're not intending.

[Participant 2:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Right, right. So the approach is just as if they were thoughts. Just the noticing. Noticing the place that gets bothered, or a place that thinks it's insightful maybe in a moment. Any conclusions about it — we always want to notice the phenomena and the reaction to the phenomena.

They get wedded together so often that we don't realize there's two steps there.

Something comes, and especially with our habitual reactions, the reaction to it can be so fast, it feels like it's one event. But as things slow down a little bit inside, you get to experience there's a gap there, and we want that gap to grow, so that you can actually see.

Just like in the movement lesson — some of you I think started to get this — the thought of lifting an arm, the beginning innervation, where you can actually feel some internal phenomena going on and the arm hasn't moved yet, but you can actually sense the innervation. You can actually sense thought becoming manifest. And then watch that rise into the movement.

And we take time with that sometimes so that you can actually experience the subtlety and the profundity of how that space grows in there. That's the space in which awareness grows, between intention and action.

And it's the same with observing our reactivity. We want to grow that space so that we can see the historic tendency. And when that space can be filled with our curiosity and our compassion, we can begin to neutralize the history.

And this is key. This is really key.

Oh, there's so much about that. I don't want to say too much. So what I want to say with the image is to notice it, notice the reaction to it, and as soon as you can, come to a breath, come to something. And it may just keep coming for a while, but that will wear itself out with your presence and with your observing the reactions.

Learning who I am

[Participant 3:] Two things. One's kind of a question, and the other I'd just like to share — my experience. Sounds like an endorsement.

So, really, what happened. I had an experience this morning where it was very quiet in my meditation, the first part. It was very quiet, and I was thinking, well, maybe I could do some more directed focusing on what I'm doing. So I just did almost like a focusing thing, and I said, okay, you've always struggled a little bit with loneliness. So, is there anything there about that, in my meditation?

It was really interesting, because nothing came up, which really surprised me, because that's a historical characteristic. So I went through the rest of the meditation, and then I got my standard cup of coffee and went next door and just sat for a while. And it was really interesting. I was thinking about what I was doing, what I was going to do for the day, and there was this incredible awareness that I kind of knew who I was.

[Russell:] Go slow here. Go slow here, because this — no, really go slow here. Pause for a moment, because there's a place that wants to jump over that.

[Participant 3:] What?

[Russell:] No, not yet. Could you say that last sentence again? No, the one before that.

[Participant 3:] Yeah. I had an awareness that I really didn't know who I was. I mean, let me rephrase. I realized that I'm learning who I am. I mean, that feels right. Yeah — that's the saying, anyway. I'm learning more.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah.

[Participant 3:] Because one of the reasons I came to the program was that I absorbed the persona of what I did and who I was, and I lost who I was. And really, I think that the meditation has given me the freedom to release all the historical questions. It's taken a long time. And it's been real fast as far as I'm concerned.

So the exciting part is that I don't know exactly who I am, but I know that I'm not foreign anymore — what I was.

[Russell:] Right. Beautiful, beautiful. So that's really important. Yes, that's really important.

[Participant 3:] It allows me to see that some recent experiences over the last few months have shown that the person who I'm evolving into being, who I am, has been kind of showing up, kind of peeking out.

I shared a little bit about my experience with my older daughter, earlier. And the only way that we enjoyed our three days was just that I was really able to drop the history, and to not let the history creep back in. And I really do believe that meditation was very significant. I would meditate a little bit in the morning.

So I don't need to go any farther than to say that it's opening a whole new — it's kind of a window, a whole new series of opportunities. And I like both aspects of that. I like knowing that it's evolving, but I also like observing how it's been evolving, like I never noticed. And those were good experiences.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 3:] And so I need to have more of those.

[Russell:] Right. More of those good experiences.

[Participant 3:] Yeah.

[Russell:] And recognizing those experiences as you are, and giving yourself five to ten seconds of letting your body have a moment with your eldest daughter, where something felt really right — and letting that go all the way through. It might take twenty seconds. It doesn't take longer. It helps to reaffirm that state, so that can surprise you more and more often.

So when we get a reference in everyday life, we want to bathe in that further. And bring it into presence. And what happens naturally is, oh, thank you. It's like gratitude to being, that I could have this experience and notice it, and I can even have it again and notice it.

And so the gratitude turns into the blessing, and the blessing turns into the gratitude, and we actually grow the capacity for that beingness to pop out more easily, because it's getting reaffirmed in your brain. I mean, the old language — in your soul.

Sitting for myself

[Participant 4:] Yes. Easy. I'm having this experience. I think it's been coming for a while, but it really occurred to me that I'm learning to sit. I mean, I'm not talking about meditation. Sit. Sit. And stand, and walk. And it's not for anybody else but me.

And yet at the same time, it's for everybody else. But it's different.

Somehow, in shifting my attention, when I walked this morning — I think maybe it's the first time. And then it was connected to me, and me was really big. It was like everywhere, and yet still here.

[Russell:] Those whose bodies are resonating with this felt sense, let that go through. This is community at its best, where we actually live into each other's experiencing, right here, and in a bigger space.

Keeping company with what's here

[Participant 5:] I'm ready.

And what I'm saying — this is even critiqued, what I say. There's this story that is pretty recent, and there's always a story that's pretty recent, that ruminates. And I'm working at noticing it, accepting it, adoring it, welcoming. But it's so powerful that the change of that form is so slight, and frustrating.

[Russell:] Let me just see if I've got it so far. So there's a strong story, and there's always a recent story, and there's a critique in it. And there's a sense of noticing it for moments, but that feels very small or slow compared to the potency, or persistence and bigness, of the story. Something in that.

And there's a frustration in that. And it looks like maybe some sadness or something also.

Can you sense that place inside that has all that? Can you have a little bit of space from it, where you can sense it and let it know you're with it?

Oh — and you know that you can't. So somehow there's a knowing of that right now.

[Participant 5:] Yeah. Frustrating.

[Russell:] Okay, so that place is really frustrated. So something sees that it's frustrated. Oh, there's something there that sees the frustration, and sees the — what, maybe tired of it, or —

[Participant 5:] Exhausted.

[Russell:] And you see that also. So there's a little gap that's able to see right now, right?

[Participant 5:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Okay, good. So we want as much space as needed for the frustrated place, for the exhausted place, and for you to be able to sense that that's here. To even feel it in your body.

Does the frustrated place have a difference in there from the exhausted place? Can you feel them?

[Participant 5:] It feels like they're sort of married. Like they're married, so they're two coming together. Like that kind of married.

[Russell:] And so maybe they feel like they're holding hands. Stay, if it feels okay, stay with that a little bit. So go and feel — well, they're two, but they're linked, and they even feel like they're holding hands. The place that's exhausted and the place that's frustrated.

And you pointed to your belly. Does it feel like it's in there where they're holding hands?

[Participant 5:] Yeah.

[Russell:] So just let them know you're with them. And really just keep them company.

[Participant 5:] Right.

[Russell:] What was that that just happened?

[Participant 5:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Yeah, just give it a little more time. You're really with that right now. These places really need you.

[Participant 5:] They don't feel so big.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 5:] They're little.

[Russell:] Oh, they feel little now. See, in the world of being, size, space and time transforms instantly. In the world of the mind, it takes time, but in the world of being, it's like, oh, they're really small.

So I would suggest, if it would feel right, over the day, give them some care. And really take some time. They might have some different things they want you to hear. They might sometimes not hold hands, and want to be heard in their self, and then they come together again. So treat them really like these beings that you're carrying, that you're going to care for.

[Participant 5:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Thank you.

Yeah. When I was in Switzerland, and had this image — maybe I gave this to you before, although I think it's happened since I saw you. So I was guiding a Swiss person through. They were dealing with — they felt so solid, the way we can feel so condensed and compressed when we're contracted into an identity, or into a thought state, or into a feeling, or into a worry, or into a something.

And so we started kind of being able to be with it. You just reminded me of that. And the longer we were with it, from different points of view, then it started, of course, as it always does, get lighter, get more space. And then this image formed, that the group really got. We're creating Swiss cheese.

Our identity gets solidified, and it's not that we have to get rid of it. So some air can get into it. It's not solid. It's just a kind of — so for that group, that was the perfect image.

Anything else from you? Yes, please.

The creative act of attention

[Participant 6:] I just want to share something about my meditation last night. I think there's a question in it, but I don't know what the question is. The whole experience of playing with the attention, the way we were doing, felt really — at one point I got to this place that felt really, really potent, in a way that I've never experienced before.

And it was like I had some kind of revelation in that, of the capacity that we have with our minds to control our attention and use our attention wisely. And then I sat with that, and it was a really powerful experience. And then the mind comes in and says, "Well, this will be all well and good in a monastery."

[Russell:] Right, sure. Right.

[Participant 6:] And I think it's back to that sort of question — and maybe what was shared earlier speaks to this also. It's like, how do we play with this moment to moment, and see the interactions, and make this normal.

[Russell:] Yes. Yes.

[Participant 6:] Skilled enough that we do it.

[Russell:] Yes. Yes.

[Participant 6:] There's a question in there, I guess.

[Russell:] Well, yeah. The question — you grow enough of a baseline. Enough of a bank account that you're then called to it. And then your practices take a priority.

You realize, when you really get it — attention is magic. The world we attend to is the world we experience. I agree. Our intention is godlike. What we attend to is remarkable.

When we really get that — without downplaying our circumstance, we all have different circumstances, different demands, different externals, absolutely — but when we realize the most creative act we do is how we use our attention to create our experience of our world.

And when we're willing to stand up for our creative potential, without blame when it's difficult, and without guilt when I'm making a difficult world, and without too much praise when I'm doing it well — all of that — but really willing to say, oh my God, I've been empowered. Whether it's by God or by evolution, I've been empowered to be. And not only empowered genetically, but empowered in my life circumstances to actually meet teachings that can teach me how to do that.

Now it's up to me. Whether I take it up. Whether that becomes so central, because I see — this is not fooling around. This is not stress reduction. This is not feeling better. This is taking responsibility for your life, for the quality of living. That's a big deal.

And there's a part of us that wants to go, no, wait a second, I didn't sign up for that. I just want to feel a little bit better. I still want to blame my mother. I still want to say, if only my spouse was different, you know? Right? But we have to let go of all of that. And there's a part of us that doesn't want to, right?

So we got to get to a certain threshold, a certain baseline, where we go, okay, I'm not cooked, but I see the path. And I see that there's nothing more important in my life. There's nothing more

important for the people I love in my life. It's not a question of taking time away from them. It's a question of bringing a more liberated being into relationship with them, a more awakened being.

And as we know, every time that there is this awakeness, there's more spaciousness. It's not sometimes more spacious and sometimes more contracted. It's not. It's spacious, it's light-filled, it's warmer. It doesn't always feel happy in that colloquial sense of happy, but it feels authentic, and it has a sense of — if it's a challenging moment, that you know it's passing, and you can embrace it.

But I think that's the courage, really. You know?

[Participant 7:] I wish this was like Montessori school. I wish this was its own separate curriculum. You know.

[Russell:] Well, it is.

[Participant 7:] I know.

[Russell:] Welcome to the program. You wish it — you couldn't get it, though. You've got to go through certain things. Everything in its own time. This is the perfect timing.

[Participant 7:] Yeah. No, I get that, too. But there's also that piece.

[Russell:] Yeah, I know. What I'm saying is, until you're going to create a school, don't worry about it. Let's stay right with — I'm with you. I get the impulse.

Okay. Coming back to that. Our weeks together build a certain — everyone in this room is at a different baseline than you were the last time we met, and way different than the time before. So the baseline is changing, right? And of course, it feels slower than we want, and that's part of it.

The mind pictures us in our best state, and having that all the time in some way, and we get upset when we regress or something like that. But part of the growing of our compassion is that whatever state arises can be met with that warmheartedness, so that the big things become small pretty quickly when they're met like that.

And we really need to let go of some of the old psychology stories about what it takes for transformation to occur, and all like that. They will limit our possibilities.

Also, some of the old spiritual stories do the same thing. So that's why we've got to kind of carve a new language, a new understanding of our potentiality.

We are extraordinary beings living in ordinary circumstances.

And yes, what I want to say is, this dual world — it's one world. Like I like to say, not one, not two. Of our historical self, which becomes the platform that we can express ourselves through when we're not controlled by it.

So each of us, because of our suffering, because of our particular histories, will be able to manifest this heightened state of consciousness in unique ways.

So it's not a question of getting rid of that stuff. It's a question of not being identified, not being solidified. That's why I'm always so curious: where do you return to, when you're sitting by yourself, and the voices are there?

We are neither the thoughts, nor are we the thinker. But that's where we're going to locate ourselves. But as long as there's some Swiss cheese, as long as there's some noticing, then that's okay.

What will tend to happen is we will solidify in some sort of old identity. If we feel good, it'll feel good, right? So we want to watch for those defaults. They will happen, those solidifications.

There's something else I want to get to about that. We just kind of feel into what I'm speaking about. I'm not saying that any of it is bad or wrong. It just becomes an identity that's too small for who you are.

And something in you knows that, recognizes it. And as you pop the bubble more and more often, and you feel the spaciousness and light is there, then you can learn — and this is back to that point — to navigate in everyday life as a mother, as a wife, as a healer, as a person in the store.

You need to be able to navigate and talk and interact and be regular, with access to the transcendent in that. And it's not like you go around feeling transcendent or something, but it's close enough to you that the fragrance is there. That sense of presencing is coming through your interaction.

And you don't look weird or anything, but people kind of feel good around you, most of the time.

Light coming through

[Participant 8:] I think I understand what you mean. There's the word presencing. So often in the past, presencing to me meant the historical self being present. Present is so different.

[Russell:] It is so different. That's a beautiful gesture. That was like light coming through, right? And to have a sense of that.

[Participant 8:] Yeah. From into the historical.

[Russell:] Yeah, and through.

[Participant 8:] Right, in and through. The hole in the cheese.

[Russell:] The hole in the cheese. That's what allowed that.

[Participant 8:] Oh, yeah.

[Russell:] Beautiful. And it's a really important step, and this took me a long time to get. It's not generated from inside. It comes through here.

But we need new language. The old spiritual language can work for some people, but it's not quite as accurate in my experience. Something does come through that is light-filled, and —

It's spacious and light.

[Participant 9:] Somehow, from something, came this gift of, I would say, permission. And it's sort of like a version of what I would call the old historical authority voices. That gets so lodged in there. If I could ever think about what my small self couldn't say — I'm responsible for my own — it wasn't very effective until this gift. The only way I can describe it was a gift that came. It did come from my small being. And they spoke again, and that's what I feel like had happened. It was something happening that said, you have the authority.

[Russell:] Yes. That's exactly what was said — I'm just standing for myself. That it's not for the others. Remember? That's that. I'm authentically here, not being good. Not living up to — I'm authentically here.

And you're right, my word for that is grace.

Yes. Yes. Nice, thank you.

Yes, really, as these moments come for each of us, affirm it in a bodily sense, in a feeling sense, in your imagery, at all those levels. As it's affirmed in as many references as possible — physical, feeling reference, images, symbols, pictures — then it gets more known to your inner world, to your life, so it becomes more accessible, right?

Because it's under duress, under our stressful moments, under our challenging moments, that our old stories reaffirm themselves. And that's the question: how do I live this in the challenges of my everyday living?

Well, it gets more challenging. That's why we need to grow our resource, our immune system, our bank account, so that we have something to draw on. And it literally — the nervous system knows how to find it easier, or it knows how to return to it when it's been lost.

We don't have to get so scared. Oh my God, I lost it again. I'm the same old jerk I used to be. I'm reacting this way, and I don't like my voice, and I wished I'd never said that, and how did that come out of me? I guess I never learned anything.

But you don't have to linger there too long, hopefully. And the remembering occurs. The re-remembering. Recollecting. To recollect the self.

We're able to turn the light around.

[Participant 9:] Yes. And a lot of that recently, and it's just the depth that I know you can sense, and you really feel that groundedness. And I'm starting to think of it, as a result of how it's feeling for me, differently than growing resources.

[Russell:] Yeah. Yeah, it's right there.

Not clinging

[Participant 10:] So relevant. A focusing session with a friend, who sends his best wishes.

[Russell:] Oh, right. From Switzerland?

[Participant 10:] Yeah, right.

And it was partly this thing of going through immigration, and it being a second time round, and realizing, oh, well, okay, so this is what's going to happen each time. Just not clinging to the resistance of it. And then having nothing planned, and the historical part of me thinks I should be organized. And the other part of me feels so — how wonderful. How absolutely wonderful.

And there's something in a conversation I had the other day, too, that somehow you enabled me to validate this part of me that is really developing. Okay, so that's changed. Okay, oh well, it's interesting. See what's there now. And this is increasing so rapidly, and feeling so right. I mean, just feeling, oh my God, I've become more who I am by now.

And allowing that to last, having been very aware of these elements of myself as a child being really difficult for other people — and which is really difficult for immigration. They don't understand how someone can live like this. It's difficult for them, you know?

And I tried to kind of remodel who I was, to fit, to make everyone happier, and then realizing that didn't work at all. It had been a gradual process, but now I feel like I'm moving into another place, and I'm just ditching all that. It's quite okay. It's just, find out what was there in the first place, and what's there now, and let it unfold.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 10:] Oh, it's a relief. The freedom. I just sort of think, I'm suddenly feeling confident. Oh, okay. Well, let's just see what happens.

[Russell:] Yeah. Beautiful.

[Participant 10:] It's taken for me to be 62.

[Russell:] Only 62? Congratulations.

You know, in the world of being, there is no time. And so it's only in the world of mind that we say it happened fast, or it happened slow. What are we judging against?

That's where it helps to have the Indian or Tibetan point of view. They would go, oh — only six lifetimes. Very fast.

You must be a speed demon.

That is a lot of historical stuff. A lot of mystery. Okay, well, thank you. This is wonderful.

Placing the I

[Russell:] I so encourage you, in the ordinary times — you're eating, you're walking — just to notice as much as we can, completely free from that whole good, bad thing. We can put that aside and just get real curious who's manifesting. And it's never like, oh, that shouldn't be here. It's when that can be here with the light on. That's all.

And to know that most of the time, just like in meditation, what you wake up to is your unconsciousness. So don't be surprised that you're lost in a story, because that's what you wake up to. When you're just awake, you're not waking up to anything. It's just what's there.

But in that moment where you've kind of gotten lost in some certain state that's gotten solid, and then it goes ding — like, oh, what am I doing? Oh, what's this?

And it's so very helpful when you can say, well, I'm not those thoughts. I'm not even that thinker. That thinker's a place in here. If I want to locate an I, it's the space and the light in which all that is. The light being the capacity for notice.

That spaciousness includes the thinker, includes the thought. But the way that we find ourselves — some of us always in a certain feeling state, some of us tend toward certain voices that we compress into — and when we wake up to ourselves, we're in that voice. And it's so easy for that voice to adopt the name I.

We've got to watch that. Where we place the I is one of the critical moments in the navigation of attention.

So this is important. Where we place the I is absolutely critical in the navigation, the responsibility for your attention. Because the place that wants to take the I is one step removed from who you are. It's a historical voice that has dominance inside. That's kind of like the presidential spokesman or something. It's the one right next to the I. And it talks for it, and it likes to act like it is it. But it's right next to.

And so, just by stepping back and saying, oh, hi there. Are you in harmony with me? Getting a sense of that from a larger space.

So we want to notice the default places we tend to fall back to. Not that they're bad. We're going to fall back to places. But they can become more and more light-filled, more and more permeable, more Swiss cheese.

Good. That's great.

Now we're going to do some movement. Let's take ten. Let's start at eleven with some movement, and then I think we'll have time for another process I'd like to do before lunch as well.