Talk

Angela 2 — Week 1, Day 2, Session 2 — 71 minutes

Summary: Russell gathers the group closer and invites a direct sensing of the living moment. He speaks of spirit and soul, the limits of method, and the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, then takes questions on the mudra, open eyes, and welcoming, and describes himself as a guide.

Come closer

[Russell:] Oh, good morning once again.

So we work in a lot of different shapes. This big oval is our usual meditation, and sometimes we'll talk together like this. Other times we're using the whole room for movements. And then sometimes I like to say, come into my neighborhood. That means kind of move into this area. You can bring your chair — a chair's usually in the back, people sitting on the floor. So come closer, because we need a little bit more connecting space.

Come in, shift, move, make yourself comfortable. Yeah, a little bit closer.

Every time I say that, some people in the room will go, "Back to Mr. Rogers." You know, it's something — come into my neighborhood. I feel like I should get a cardigan sweater, you know? That's a television show from American youth, I guess. Mr. Rogers influenced a lot of people.

The living moment

[Russell:] So take a moment, maybe just close your eyes, and feel how life is stirring in your experience.

Where we always return to is how we can know directly how living is occurring. We want to grow more our facility of opening directly.

Keep your eyes closed if that's comfortable, and I'll say a few more words.

Some of us are dominant thinkers, so when we go to find out how we are, we begin to think about things, and that's good to notice.

Some of us are dominant feelers. Emotional life is very strong. We go to sense what's alive in us. What comes to the fore is our feeling life.

Some of us are dominant kinesthetic types, sensory types, and what comes to the fore when we go, well, how am I? are the sensations in the body.

And all these are good. All these are wonderful aspects of human being.

Our direction is that all of these, and more, become easily accessible, so that more and more often this elusive quality called how my whole self is right now begins to emerge — a sense of the all of me in this moment, which includes everything that's living.

So we often will be pausing and just kind of dropping in. And dropping in doesn't mean to exclude thoughts, exclude feelings, sensations, or to focus on one more than the other. It means to open to the livingness of the moment.

And of course, at times we will focus on certain aspects of that wholeness, because that helps it to grow, to differentiate it. To take something like our sensations and go deeply into them — then more becomes available for our wholeness. To go more into our feeling life and differentiate that, to go more into our thinking life and differentiate that, but always from this embodied perspective, that we are returning to wholeness with each investigation.

Another few moments of just kind of seeing what would like to be acknowledged, or sensed, or felt.

And then maybe let your eyes open once again.

Simple, but not easy

[Russell:] So I want to speak to a few things. What I just spoke about is probably the most important thing I need to say today, but I want to speak about a few more things.

Everything that's significant and important in this teaching will occur 627 times, approximately. In other words, don't be grasping something — oh God, I really want that. Write it down if you like, that's great, but if it's really germane to our learning, it will return, and it will return again and again, because what we're working with is not actually complex.

It's very challenging to live from the qualities of experiencing we're working with. It's challenging to do that, but it's not difficult to understand, and I like that. So we can say it's simple, but not easy.

We need to keep returning, and as we keep returning, you'll have insights. You'll go, wow, I really see it. And that will be great, and sometimes that will even stay with you, and then another level of insight will occur, and then another level. And it's remarkable how deep we can go with any particular realization that we have.

So we'll sometimes gather like this. I sometimes have some things I want to say, and I often will say, is there something you'd like to look at? There'll be an open invitation. It can be a question. It can be something you want to share that's going on in your experience, because we learn from each other. This is not just a one-way happening. Our group mind will begin to educate all of us.

And I really trust that. I trust that so much more than I trust methods.

Methods

[Russell:] Okay, so I want to say something about my relationship to methods, because a lot of you know from my history, I've spent a lot of time in the Zen Buddhist world. The main reason for me leaving a teacher that I was with for 30 years is that he wanted me to teach in robes as a Zen Buddhist teacher. And it was clear to me that that was not my destiny, and not what the people attracted to me were wanting, and it was actually too narrow for what I wanted to bring.

The same thing happened in my journey in the Feldenkrais world. I love the Feldenkrais work, as I love Zen meditation. I love the Feldenkrais work, and I was very connected to Moshe. I still feel very connected to Moshe. We had a deep personal relationship. I was teaching in that world, and I still do a little bit, for more than 35 years.

And what became clear to me when I started doing the Embodied Life trainings was that that also was too narrow for what was growing inside. It is not a condemnation of the Feldenkrais method. I think other people can take it and be fully in it, and not feel that. It is not about that. It's about me and my process.

So I began to see that for me, any of the methodologies that I had learned — the important ones were very helpful for a certain kind of unfolding, but at a certain point I would begin to feel a little trapped in the methodology. And what was living inside really had a leading edge that I wanted to be devoted to.

And I've realized, in myself and in the people who work with me, that I absolutely trust that. I absolutely trust that we have this intimate connection to our — fill in the blank — our true self, our awakened self, our original nature, who we are, our beingness. You can call it whatever. Different traditions speak of it in different ways, but that is closer to us than our skin.

Closer than our skin.

We cannot be separate from who we are. And that essence is absolutely and always connected to the source of life. We are never, ever, ever, ever, ever away from the source of living.

And there's intelligence in this life force, and it has direction.

Of course, we can all have the experience of feeling separate from that. But that's connected to our confusions, our conditioned ways of thinking and feeling, and carrying ourselves.

Two levels

[Russell:] So in this work, we work on two levels always, and sometimes one is more emphasized, sometimes the other.

One level is to get a deeper, more reliable, more confident connectedness to that which is unconditioned — the essence of who we are, this awakened being that is already complete.

We can't improve upon that. You can't improve upon that aspect of self. It doesn't fit in the world of improvement. It doesn't fit in the world of, well, I'm going to get a better self. I'm going to make my true nature a little bit more better. It doesn't work, right? It's an irrelevant criterion for that aspect, for that level of human experiencing.

So it's essential, and possible, and miraculous, and a blessing, that there are practices we can do that invite that experience, so that it becomes more and more reliable, more and more known. You can breathe easier in that, right? So there's that sense of the unconditioned. In classical terms, that would be called spirit work. Spirit work.

But simultaneously, we are working with our confusions. Our confusions include the mental patterns that we have developed, that we've practiced, that we've inherited, that we've been around since childhood — the kind of inner demands that have grown from outer demands. Those kinds of patterns, which are also connected to feeling patterns, which are also connected to embodied patterns, the ways we breathe, the ways we carry ourselves.

When I talk about our thinking patterns and our feeling patterns and our embodied patterns, our movement patterns, I'm taking this whole being and dividing it up. But it's not like these are separate things. They are all intertwined.

So we can say there is our conditioned self that, for everyone in this room, is often very challenging. Very challenging. Each of us has different versions of the challenges, and sometimes that level of the self is also joyful and satisfying and all like that. It's not always challenging. But when we are in the realm of our conditioned self, it's never going to be perfect.

And a lot of us are spending our life trying to perfect that, and it's an unfortunate decision.

So isn't that interesting? That which is perfect cannot be perfected further, and that which is imperfect can never be perfected.

Have a nice life.

Liberating confusion

[Russell:] But what we can do, and what is also a great blessing, is that there are reliable ways of working with our confusions that help to liberate our confusions. Help to liberate the energy that's in our confusion.

And when I say confusions, I can be talking about that habit of tightening the neck.

That was a good moment. Scratching your neck — or your neck brought me to mind.

It can be tightening in the neck. That confusion can be that same argument you're always getting into with your loved ones. That confusion can be that thought pattern of, I'm never gonna be this, or I'm always gonna be that. What's wrong with me? Am I essentially a damaged product? All those things that we run, and we're a little bit ashamed of. Those are part of our conditioned stuff.

It can also be conditioning of, I'm a wonderful person, and look how loving I am, and how smart. It can go in that direction too, but that's also based in the same kind of fear of what happens if this ends. Is it good enough, right? That's always living in there. It's always like this virus, living there when we are identifying self with that temporary thought or temporary feeling state, even when they're good.

Have you ever noticed that as good as an ice cream cone is, there's some part of us that knows it's ending? It's like every lick includes its opposite.

So this working with our conditioning — our habits of thought, our habits of feeling, our habits of movement, how we carry ourselves — it's so very important, because we create so, so, so much unnecessary suffering. Unnecessary, when we realize how we're doing it. It's probably necessary until we do. But suffering that's not implicit.

Some things are implicit. You're gonna die. If you're lucky, your body's gonna get old. If you're lucky. As your body gets old, you're not going to be able to do certain things that you could do before, no matter how much Feldenkrais or exercise, or how much you eat right, and everything. Certain things are going to change. I can guarantee it.

So there's some implicit suffering. Everyone you love — well, first of all, they're going to have some physical challenges. They're going to have some pain in their body. It's likely, in their relationships, they're going to be suffering at certain points. Everyone that you care about, every pet that you love, every child, every parent, is either going to die before you or after you. And this is the fact. These are the facts. And we don't want this hidden under the rug, because these facts inspire our willingness to learn how to live this life — how not to take it for granted, and how not to let the

confusions that we took on before we were old enough to say anything about it, those very old confusions, dominate us.

How is it possible for an adult human being not to be dominated by this unconsciousness from the past? Some of it's genetic, some of it's generational, some of it's personal to the stories in your life.

So when I say that we're gonna work with that and help to liberate that, I don't mean make it perfect. I don't know what that would even look like. But I do know what it's like not to be bound by those habits. I do know what it's like to get caught up in a moment of unhelpful thinking, and know how to liberate that moment. To be caught up in a moment of challenging interaction with somebody I care about, and there's a sense of being stuck in something from the past, and how to liberate.

So I call that — or the historical name for that is — working with your soul. It's your soul life and your spirit life. Your spirit life, in the sense of the unconditioned. We're not gonna make that any better. We're just gonna get more and more and more contact, accessibility, confidence, that I'm never away from that. Or if I feel separate from that, that it's not far away.

That gives great confidence for doing the soul work. Because if you think the only stuff you have are these patterns — man, that's a nasty place to live.

A fresh approach

[Russell:] Okay, so we'll be working with all of this. This will be in the air. We work with our physical patterns. We sometimes work with our thinking patterns, our feeling patterns. But what I'm very grateful for is, there are ways of working with this that are —

What do I want to say?

Yeah, so what I notice as I'm speaking right now — concern grows — so I like to stop. I like to get it hot off the press, you see. If I'm gonna get it hot off the press, I gotta stop. Because if I keep the press going, I can only tell you what I already know. So I gotta see what's forming.

And what is that? Oh, there it is. Okay.

So when I speak about these patterns, it's very easy to put them into a box called psychology, and to put them into the box of what you know about working on yourself in psychological ways, because that's what they sound like.

And I'm wondering if we can actually approach this in a fresh and different way, that will be a cousin of those ways, that will respect the life-givingness of some of those ways, but will approach it differently enough that it's worthy of a different distinction. It's worthy of saying, well, there's a way of working with my history that is not just digging into errors that my parents made, or conditioning. It's not ignoring that, but it's not that. It's actually often connecting to what is already healthy and clear in us.

What is already — oh, let's say, what would be an example? Let's say physically someone has a habit of making themselves really tight and guarded. Well, I am quite sure that that person has moments in their life when they've experienced feeling free and light. Moments.

Well, what happens if we create pathways to that freeness and to that lightness? What happens to the habit pattern of the tightness?

So we can grow this life-giving quality, and we can explore in new and fresh ways what activates the old patterns. You get what I mean?

I guess you don't need to understand more. I'm saying maybe more than I need to say right now, but what I'm trying to get across is, I'm encouraging you not to lump what I just said into the world of what you know about process psychology or something. It will be related to, but different than, likely.

The three jewels

[Russell:] Okay, let's see, what else did I want to come to? Oh yeah. I wanted to give you an image that I get from the Buddhist world, and I love this image. I'd like it in the air here.

The Buddha spoke — the current Buddha, Gautama Buddha, the one from 2,500 years ago. He's the seventh in the line of Buddhas. There's a new one coming, they say, Maitreya. Only like less than a thousand years away, so it's pretty soon.

I don't know about that stuff that I read about. I like to differentiate. You'll hear when I know something, because I have confidence in direct experience, and when it's something I've read about.

So I don't know about Maitreya Buddha.

This image of the Buddha was of the three jewels, and it's really very precious to me to have the three jewels in the air here.

The first jewel, according to Buddha, is Buddha. And what does that mean? Bud means awakened. So a Buddha is an awakened being.

And when we say Buddha, we're talking about you in your awakened self. We're not talking about that historical being. We're talking about you, when you are manifesting what that being got to manifest. When you are awakening, when you are awakened, when you have moments of awakening, you are Buddha.

And what I was talking about before, in terms of original self, true self — another name for that is Buddha.

Different spiritual traditions might talk about it as Christ consciousness. I'm not attached to the Buddhist name, right? I'm talking about a quality in the human being. An awakened quality.

So in the three jewels, you have this aspect called Buddha. And we bow to that. When we do this gesture that you see me do a lot, I'm not trying to get you into some religious program. What I'm doing is an embodiment.

Every gesture, every movement of a human being is an embodiment of a quality. All actors know this. We're all directors. You're not gonna have King Lear walk on stage like this. You're not gonna have a humble beggar walking around like — we embody what we are. We're always expressing what's alive in us. We just learn not to pay so much attention to it.

So every gesture we make evokes a quality within, and this is actually neurologically really interesting. If you think about some of the recent research in facial expression — we smile when we're happy, and true smiling begins to make you happy. Isn't that a funny one?

The facial expression evokes the kinds of neurotransmitters and the kinds of hormonal release that, as you smile — as long as it's not just a plastic, fake kind of thing that you're frozen into — as you smile, your body is getting the message, I guess I'm happy.

How cool is that, right?

So our gestures are not just what we're doing with our body. Again, we are whole beings. And it gets really fascinating when we begin to investigate what that means for our living in everyday life — that we are whole beings, and we can approach it from here, and we can approach it from here, and really influence ourselves.

So this gesture, this bowing gesture. Well, just look at it literally. We're bringing our hands together. Most of our action in the world is done with our hands, most of our doing. So we're saying, I'm not involved in my doing right now. Well, if you're not involved with your doing, you're closer to your being.

So it's a moment of, I'm not manipulating the world, I'm just here. And here we have right and left, which is the world of duality. Man, woman, black, white, right, left, happy, sad, all that. That's very important, and we're saying, this is a moment of oneness.

So, I'm connecting to my being in a moment of oneness. And this movement — as you'll find, anytime you lower your head in a conscious kind of way, there's a humbling of your historical identity.

It's the difference of that.

And so we're taking a moment to say, that which is most connected to my true self, to this being. And there's even a kind of vertical aspect here. When you first bring your hands together, that which is highest and deepest bows to that in you. I see that in you. I know that in you. Let's remember that together.

That's all living completely in the gesture. Let's finish our meditation.

Wow. When that starts living in you — not that you have to think about all that, but that it starts permeating your body.

The same with that big prostration, when you have these opportunities, deeper than your thinking mind, to actually shape your inner body in these directions.

Very, very precious to me.

So Buddha — awakened self — is the first jewel.

The second jewel in the historical teachings is Dharma. Dharma has many translations. The teachings of the Buddha is one — teachings of awakening. Teachings of the Buddha means teachings of awakening. So it means that there's a path to connect to this Buddha, right? It would be awfully sadistic to say, well, there's this true self that's awakened. Unfortunately, there's no way you can know that. So there's a path, right? Dharma implies a teaching.

It can also be translated as the law, and by law, what's meant is the way things are. Like in the physical world, gravity. There's a law. It's not somebody's opinion. Stuff falls. And so Dharma, in that sense, is, this is the way things work. You don't have to believe in it. It's the way things work.

So there's a teaching. There's a way of finding this Buddha nature.

And what I want to emphasize is the third jewel, because this is the most challenging, least understood, and, for our practice coming together as a group, may be most important.

Sangha

[Russell:] The third jewel is called Sangha, and Sangha means community — a community of people working together. As a community, it's not necessarily people who are even close to each other personally. Sometimes people are close to each other personally, but that's not the point of sangha. Sangha is people working together in a direction.

And what I want to say about that has been a tremendous learning for me in these mentorship programs. This is one of the big transformations in my understanding of life and learning, as I've observed how the group mind works.

I've been teaching groups for more than 30 years. Lots of groups. So I have group experience, and I've respected groups, but I've come to see it at another level in these last years.

Each person in this room is going to bring a different something. You will affect somebody, and you won't even know you're affecting them. They won't even know it at the time. And yet something that you asked about, that somehow got worked with in this way, two days later, or next year, evokes something in them that's a complete surprise. That's the way group mind mobilizes. Sometimes it's direct. Oh, when somebody says this, you have an insight. Sometimes it's like that. But often it's a kind of energy that's building.

So I encourage you, as part of this community, as part of this sangha, not to hold back because you have some historical thought — what I have to say is not so important, or they're smarter than my thing — or if you're feeling something wants to come forward. I encourage you to bring it. It'll be my job to help the group energy to move. Sometimes you might have something wonderful to say, but I feel like we've been talking too long and we need to move on to something else. That's my job.

But I want you to feel like we have all come here for you. That you somehow managed to get us all. You got Bruno to come from France. Ruth, from Australia — wherever you were lately, I don't know where you were lately. You got us all to come here for your unfolding. And I'm not joking about that.

Now, the corollary to that is, you are here for everybody in this room. The picture I have of that is, we are each a universe. You are the central sun of a universe, and we are here as your stars and planets around you. And each of us is the central sun of a universe, and I am a planet in Tom's universe. I'm out here, and he is the central sun.

And if we can have both of those alive, our work will be very wonderful together.

If you have a hard time being the central sun, get over it.

If you have a hard time being a planet in someone else's universe, get over it.

I'll do my best to help you feel good about both of those positions.

Yeah, so there's Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. There's you as an awakened being. There are actually practices we can do that can help us get more and more spontaneous and easier contact with that awakeness. Some of that work is the spirit work of just resting in your true nature, learning how to do that. Some of it is more the soul work of actually cultivating states, cultivating qualities, working on stuff.

And this sangha, this group mind that we have here, is such a precious jewel. There's work we can do together that we each could not do on our own. It would take 30 lifetimes to do it on our own. And you don't know who in this room is going to be a central teacher for you.

See this? This is Donna. Donna's not here with us because she has pneumonia, but Andy, did you ask her, or how did that work?

[Participant:] Beautiful.

[Russell:] So Donna is with us.

[Participant:] And it's precious. Tell her we're very grateful.

[Russell:] Okay. It's precious.

[Participant:] Her hands made that.

[Russell:] Oh yeah. Yeah, beautiful.

[Participant:] No, thank you.

[Russell:] Yeah. Okay.

Names

[Russell:] Shortly I want to shift into some movement practice. I want to ground us in our bodies before we get into some other kinds of practice. But we're going to be gradually learning each other's names, in a variety of forms, because it's important that we know each other's names. It's important to me. People feel safer when their name is known, is my experience.

So I just want to start saying a few names, and then there'll be other ways that we're going to meet each other. I'm just thinking about the people who traveled so far. I think Bruno wins the prize. This is Bruno, came in from France, right?

And Ruth, I know you're from Australia, but you haven't been living there lately, right? You did come from there. And when did you fly in? Oh, wow. Yeah. Welcome, welcome, Ruth. Have you gotten some sleep? Are you caught up at all?

Yeah, that's a challenge. In my years of travel, there were twelve years in a row I went to Australia. I stopped in '02, I think, or 2000, something like that. And I am really free, almost completely, from jet lag, except that trip from Australia in. Maybe I'll have it mastered the next time. I don't know, but that was my most challenging.

And let's see, who else? Well, Karen's from Canada, right, from Regina. This is Karen — this Karen. There are two Karens. That's right, you got two Karens in a row.

[Participant:] No, I've lived all over Canada.

[Russell:] And then, so we have Karen, Ruth, Bruno, who came from other countries. It's good, when you hear the names, to just repeat them to yourselves, to get a kind of picture.

And then I just wanted to think of the three people who came in from the East Coast. Yeah, I want to bring them in. So there's Barbara over here, from New York City. Barbara.

And Chutro — how do you say your last name?

[Participant:] Chutro.

[Russell:] So we've got three Barbaras. And I noticed it said Barbie. So you were differentiating.

[Participant:] And I'm a Barbie, but I had one friend at work who used to call me Barbie. That was kind of fun.

[Russell:] Right, right. Thank you.

Let's see, Sarah, you came in from Virginia?

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Here's Sarah. But you're originally from Boston, right?

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Oh, yeah. Nice. Well, welcome.

And Lisa, Durham, North Carolina. Welcome.

Great. So I just thought, bring in a few names periodically, and then I'm also gonna ask you to say something. I don't want to make it a struggle. Say the names to yourself, get a picture, and then you have the pictures in your room, so if you forget someone's name, you can look at that. Very quickly you'll —

Okay, let's do — yes, please, Wendy.

[Participant:] Seems a little blurry. I don't know. I feel like it should be told. As it relates to what you were saying, your teachings on the Dharma and the Sangha.

[Russell:] Yes, please.

[Participant:] Bob and I have a friend who's 95 years old, and she has been an active meditator for years. Her practice has changed as she's aged, and she can't sustain the length of time.

[Russell:] Right.

[Participant:] But the thing is, her only son had a massive heart attack, right before Christmas. It's still uncertain whether he will survive. And so we all felt that this might be really such a tragedy for her — how might she manage this deep loss, because she's lost so much in terms of her own physical capacity. And anyway, in an email — she pokes on the email, she has this constriction with her hands, and she only has like two fingers, at 95. And I said, oh my goodness, how are you doing? And she said, I take refuge in the Buddha, and the Dharma, and the Sangha.

I just wanted to say, she's one of my biggest teachers. Maybe her story can be a guidance, I think, for everybody.

[Russell:] Oh, thank you. Thank you. That's a beautiful story. I appreciate it.

So when Wendy referred to Bob — Bob and Wendy are here.

I encourage couples. Also a couple right here — we have Carl and Aaron, who, you noticed yesterday, are also here with Mesa. How old now? Two. A twenty-month-old son. And Liz, caregiver, nanny, friend for Mesa. And this is a great experiment. I've never had parents with their child at the program. I'm excited about it. He won't be at the silent table.

Okay, so this is Carl and Aaron, from Salt Lake City.

And yeah, taking refuge in the three jewels.

Is there anything you'd like to ask about, or comment on, before we go into our next practice? Anything from the practices this morning?

Yeah, Lori.

Okay. So first, did you try to get something to support your hands? Let me see. Yeah, you're getting some support there. And both hands will start getting numb?

[Participant:] Just that one.

[Russell:] And is there a history with that arm?

[Participant:] A little history.

[Russell:] Okay.

What I'd like to suggest is — well, first let me speak generally about the mudra, and then I'll come back to your question. Is that okay?

The mudra

[Russell:] You can do wonderful meditation without holding this mudra, okay? It's a strong suggestion, because a lot of us have found that, especially in the embodied work, where one of the places of focus is deep in this place, deep in the center here, there's something about this. It becomes almost like a magnifying glass for consciousness.

When you were a kid, did you ever put a magnifying glass above a leaf and let the sun shine through? It's like an intensifier. And something like that can actually happen here.

Also, once you get over the challenging aspects of it, it, for many of us, begins to feel like an actual support for the spine. This circle, especially across this upper part of the back that often becomes a kind of dense area — this circle evokes a support through there.

So I encourage you to work with it, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. I'm not addicted to it. You don't have to, right? But how can we work with it?

Well, if you're already getting good support, I would suggest trying also a little rolled-up blanket or something, so your hands are a little bit higher. This down here might be straining you a little bit. A little bit higher.

If that continues, try it with the right hand in the left. There are hundreds of different mudras that each have different effects on the movement of energy through the body. And as Karen was saying yesterday, I think you're used to having the right and the left. A Tibetan teacher, maybe?

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] So in the Tibetan world, both are used — cosmic mudra, and this other mudra, which some teachers speak about as the feminine aspect. For certain practices, we'll have people do this, and especially women use this, but not always, okay?

I want to encourage you to kind of start with this universal mudra. I'll talk to you later about right and left, and tell you stories about that. The most important thing is, can it be helpful? So you need to get a little experience with it. Get more support. If it doesn't work, even with more support, try turning it around. If it still doesn't work, see if interlacing the hands helps.

What I don't want is a sense of being pulled down by the weight of your arms. I don't want this kind of falling forward. When the chest begins to take on that position, or get pulled in that direction, it's not helpful for our clarity.

So let me know how it goes.

[Participant:] What about putting our hands on our knees?

[Russell:] Hands on our knees?

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Again, I encourage you to experiment with bringing the focus in here. And this is a beautiful position, as are these historical yogi positions. They're all good.

[Participant:] I've always found, as much as I've tried, that when I do the cosmic mudra, I tend to do exactly what you're saying. It pulls me down, and I'm constantly noticing that. It keeps my chest more open when I —

[Russell:] Right, right. Okay, so still I encourage you to experiment, okay?

And with this, to actually help you — this is a nice hint — have the feeling that you're pulling your hands apart. Don't let them go apart, but when you have the feeling, you'll feel your shoulder blades widen, right?

And the thumbs are very gently touching. Not pressing. Very gently touching. And the hands are not turned in towards yourself. The thumbs are away. Very light. It's almost like an electrical current that goes through the thumbs.

The classical image is that you're holding rice paper. You don't want to dent the paper, but you don't want it to fall. Just not quite touching, not quite apart, almost like an electrical current that's going to connect the left side of your brain to the right side of your brain, through your whole body. We actually get this kind of harmony of current through the whole body, an integration of left and right.

So there's a kind of physiology to the mudra that, again, is helpful, but not essential.

Eyes, gravity, and levity

[Russell:] Also, this instruction of having the eyes open. I know for most people it's harder to have the eyes open.

I would say I'm more strongly inclined to encourage you to keep your eyes open than I am to hold the mudra.

The eyes open is another level of significance, in that for the Embodied Life work, we are learning to bring this quality of presence into our everyday life. And the visual cortex is so strong and so dominant — even for people who are not predominantly visual, it has a strong influence on our experience. If we're learning to go deep with our eyes closed, the jump to having our eyes open is too big for the transference of the learning into everyday life. It's just a bigger gap.

You can do beautiful meditation with the eyes closed. I'm not condemning that. Once in a while, or sometimes, you can also do that, sure. But as a base practice, I very much encourage you. The eyes can be a little bit open, not dropping the head, just gazing downward.

If for ten seconds here or ten seconds there you want to close the eyes and really get a deeper sense — you can't find your breath with the eyes open — find it, then let them open.

You don't have to see anything. It's just that there's light there. There's activity in the visual cortex because there's light. It's a very helpful embodiment of what we're doing.

[Participant:] You didn't say that. In the sitting this morning, it was just while I was relocating my attention.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] Very loose in the hips, and very grounded on my bottom, and then I realized my tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah.

[Participant:] I recognized that in the silence I was thinking through, mouthing. I was trying to — as if words are not going to come out of this mouth. I was very aware of that. I loosened my tongue, and that allowed the universal mudra to really feel like the circumference of my mouth.

[Russell:] Oh, nice. Yeah, that's beautiful.

[Participant:] My chest opened up, shoulders dropped. Very aware of how I very surreptitiously found that my mouth and my tongue were where I was going to hold the tension.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah.

[Participant:] Just releasing my tongue and softening globalized the experience of being soft.

[Russell:] Nice, nice. Thank you. That's very helpful.

Yeah. It's basically the same. Just gazing downward, but not dropping your head, so you're more or less gazing across the back, or the material of the cloth in front of you, or the colors. Your eyes can shift a little bit, not locked in, and you can occasionally even close them, even when you're standing.

It's interesting. In the walking meditation, except for the mudra, this up here is basically the same as if you were sitting.

This exquisite quality — actually, in terms of Embodied Life work, we will be defining kind of five central embodied qualities. I'll talk about that later. I don't want to go into a talk about that now. But the two that are dominant this week, and these two tend to go together, are the quality of groundedness — connection to the earth underneath us, whether sitting, walking, or lying, an intimate relationship to the ground — and the corollary, which is the lengthening, or lightness, upward.

So we could say the central themes of the week are gravity and levity. How can we be grounded without getting unduly heavy or serious? Those are the near enemies of groundedness.

Every positive quality has a near enemy.

Near enemies of groundedness are heaviness and seriousness. The near enemies of lightness, or lengthening, are a sense of frivolousness, of not being really committed to the moment or to your practice, a sense of flightiness.

So we want a balance of our up and down. The walking is a great opportunity to feel the precious earth supporting us and inviting us up.

Okay. Yes, please, Wendy.

Don't put your glasses on. It's not about seeing. It's just about light, and letting your eyes blink as much as they need to. If your eyes can't figure out what to do, you can look straight ahead for a little bit. And even, for moments, just kind of move your eyes around, and come back and look down. It doesn't have to be held in one position. And it's likely to influence your seeing.

[Participant:] Sort of a mundane question. The day we couldn't get the keypad to work — has anybody had success with that?

[Participant:] I did, this morning. The door that works for the 254 is the door nearer the elevator. Otherwise, not.

[Russell:] The side door near the dining hall. 254.

Welcoming

[Participant:] You used the word welcoming.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] And what I am struggling with is really differentiating welcoming, because when I think of welcoming, I think of, hey, welcome, come on in. But then a lot of the things that are arising are things you're like, no, I don't want that. So I'm just wondering if there's other language for welcoming. There seem to be many kinds of welcoming, and I seem to be stuck in, hey, come on in.

[Russell:] Great. That's a great question, and it's really pretty central to our work. So I don't want to answer it. But I do want to give a direction.

The direction is, investigate from your history. And your history includes your own experience. It includes every movie you've seen. It includes everything. What are some different kinds of welcoming?

So begin to explore not only different kinds of welcoming, but how they feel in your body.

Second thing is, in your pocket there's a poem called The Guest House. And this is an open invitation to everybody. We work sometimes with poems here, and I actually encourage — and I'll talk more about this later — to begin to learn poems by heart, poems that attract you. And I invite everybody here to work with The Guest House during this week. If you don't like it, you don't have to, but it's an encouragement not just to read it, but actually to learn it.

Learn it. A good way to learn poems is just write it out, have it in your pocket. When you go for a walk, go over a line. Even if you think, I can't remember anything — doesn't matter, just keep returning to it. You go to the bathroom, you take it out. It sure beats what's usually going on in your mind. You know what I mean?

This is called, why eat junk food when you can eat great food, right? So that's the heart of learning poems by heart. Look at what food you're eating, and let's eat a good diet.

So I will be recommending that you find poems that attract you, that you love. But for this week, I have one that I would encourage us all to work with, because it's on this theme of welcoming, which is one of the central themes we'll also be working with this week.

So begin that investigation, and if something starts coming, bring it up. Some learning about that. And of course, when I'm speaking to any individual here, if it resonates for you, that becomes something you can take up.

A guide

[Russell:] Yeah, so that brings me to the last thing I want to say. That's nice to get back to.

I've spent years looking at this metaphor called teacher-student, and it's a relationship that I'm sometimes comfortable with — or a metaphor that I'm sometimes comfortable with. It's a relationship I'm often comfortable with. It's a metaphor that I'm sometimes comfortable with. What I mean by that is, often teacher implies a kind of authority. Student implies a kind of powerlessness. And I very much don't want that part of the metaphor to be living here.

So I like to think of myself as a guide. You are responsible for your learning, and I am responsible for guiding you in that.

And I will have a different relationship to everybody in this room. Some of you will like a lot of guidance. Some of you will just occasionally want something, very rarely. I'm open to us growing a relationship together that serves your needs. I don't have a particular need for you to be a particular way with me. There are certain boundaries, of course, but I don't have a particular way that I want you to be, actually.

My role is to deepen my connection to the truth that's living here, and encourage that there. And I use everything from my history, and from my dedicated practice, to bring that for you.

So I'm happy to — I don't shrink from taking on the mantle of the position. I'm very happy to be authoritative. I'm very happy to be in the role that I'm being asked to be in. I don't shrink from that one bit.

And when I look in each of your eyes, I see an absolute universe of wonder. And I would not presume to know what you need, except that I'm willing to interact with you in a way that hopefully is helpful.

So I will make suggestions. Even in the practices in the room, you are always free not to do something. That's why, like when I was saying, most people in the Embodied Life work have grown to love the prostrations. I usually have a few people, particularly in Europe, the recovering Catholics, who have to struggle for a little while with, this looks religious — this isn't a cult, is it? You have to go through some stuff. I say, don't do it. And it's amazing how many of them it's their favorite thing to do now.

So it changes.

I will invite you. I will encourage you. But I want you to know that you are always empowered to say no. That's essential.

This has been a very powerful gift that I have received through numerous sources, mostly through the meditation practice — that it is essential, at this time in the evolution of consciousness, that people work in freedom.

The old relationship of guru to devotee is rarely the accurate relationship right now. It's not gone. It can be, and there are ways of being in that relationship that can be healthy, but a lot of that is not what's needed right now. What's needed is, how can we grow the autonomy of each individual while we're simultaneously growing the interconnectedness of our community life?

And that's an exciting edge to be on. It asks for a different type of relationship between someone sitting in this seat and people sitting in that seat. And we don't know what that is yet. We're growing that. It's unfolding.

Sometimes it asks for stuff that looks like old relationships. Sometimes it looks — we don't know. What I'm saying to you is that I will encourage you to be responsible for asking for what you want. I'll be encouraging you to be responsible for your learning, and I will be responsible for meeting you, to the best of my ability, and bringing you what I think is most needed at a given moment.

Okay?

Let's take a little pause. You know where the bathrooms are? There's tea over there. Let's say fifteen minutes. Let's start at 11 o'clock. We're going to start a movement lesson.

Thank you.