Talk

Angela 2 — Week 3, Day 4, Session 6 — 12 minutes

Summary: Russell speaks of consciousness as life's capacity to know itself, and of sitting as a bow to whatever is alive. He offers Zhaozhou's answer — meditation is not meditation; it's alive — and sets a practice in groups of three, taking turns to speak only what is alive, without rehearsal.

Life knowing itself

So one of the invitations that I often give you is to listen to how life is occurring, how it's alive in there.

And this sense that life can feel life, that our consciousness is the capacity for life to know itself directly.

As I've spoken of before, we can think of this as billions and billions of years of moving in the direction of creating your capacity to be a vehicle for life to feel what it's like to be alive.

And that's a remarkable capacity.

That there's a difference between consciousness and awareness. Dogs can feel. Can dogs know that they know that they feel?

And when you see red and have a response, you not only have a response, but there's a knowing of the one having a response. It's alive. It's alive.

And that life knows life is so precious and rare.

The backward step

And so when we're sitting, life is everything — its breath, its weight, its sound. It's light, it's that place that doesn't want to sit anymore, it's that harmonious feeling, it's that place that hates it.

It appears in many ways, but when we take a backward step and turn the light around, we can bow to life.

And our maturation is really about placing life ahead of our opinion, our preference, our desire for it to be this way or that way. Not that we ignore that, because part of life is noticing the preference also.

But we keep taking the backward step and turning the light around to be with the living moment.

It's alive

And I'd like to do another practice in pods of three, different threesome, and if there's one overlap, that's okay, but not the same exact group.

And I'd like to give you a koan. Koans, as many of you know, are these stories from China and Japan. It's a teaching form. It's not a dominant teaching form that I use, but it's sometimes nice to have a word, or an image, or a story to work with.

And this is a famous dialogue, and we're only gonna focus on two words in the dialogue. That's actually the end of a writing that I just completed, but I haven't sent out yet.

And it's a Chinese story, and it was a famous Zen master, Zhaozhou.

And a student asked the Zen master, what is meditation? What is zazen? See, traditionally, what is zazen? Which means, what is just sitting? What is meditation? What is it?

And Zhaozhou responds, Zazen is non-Zazen. Meditation is not meditation. Just sitting is not just sitting.

The student goes, well, how can zazen be not zazen? How can meditation be not meditation? Get off it, old man. What are you talking about? Don't give me this Zen stuff.

And in a very famous response, Zhaozhou says, it's alive. It's alive. It's alive.

What are you doing on that cushion? It's alive. What are you doing sitting there all tired? It's alive.

How do you know it's alive? Well, either you know it's alive or you don't. And you can be absolutely tired, and there's something alive in the tired. How do you know the alive tired?

Alive doesn't mean you're feeling great. It means it's alive in the way that it is alive. Exactly. Not approximately, not your ideas of alive. Not how you want it to be alive. But this is our life.

And we either know it as it is, or we're living in a fantasy.

And it doesn't mean liking it, but it means somehow siding with life. It means being on life's side.

And it's alive. It's such a potent answer to how do I deal with this situation?

Who are these people that go through concentration camps and somehow come out resilient? You know, how does somebody lose their legs, or have this catastrophe or that, and somehow finds their way back to life?

You know, this was Feldenkrais's great question, this was Frankl's great question, this is Chowdhury's question. How do we come back to life? Over and over and over and over.

And it's heroic to be somehow alive in our boredom, alive in our tiredness, alive in our wonder, alive in our joy. Just, it's alive.

You know, the way Jean says so wonderfully — for me it was such a good comment, I probably have said it here — if somebody says, I feel nothing, his comment was, well, what kind of nothing?

What is this particular nothing like? Because every nothing is its own nothing. Some nothings are dark and black, and some are just kind of — and some are — and some are, I don't know. What is it?

Huh. It feels like it's just coming. Like it doesn't know what it is yet. It's that kind of knowledge.

Well, every alive is its own alive.

The practice

So the way this practice is gonna go, we're gonna sit with each other, sensing being alive. You can focus on your breath. You can go from your breath to any signs of life.

Your commitment to yourself and to your partners is to keep coming back to life.

And then, at a certain point, I'll ring a bell, and a person is going to be a person who can speak in the meditation. You don't have to. You'll have some minutes. Speak or not — you're not going to speak the whole time. Might say one thing or a few things, but you are giving what's alive for you.

Maybe it's one word, maybe it's a couple of sentences, maybe it's nothing, but you're there. In the Zen world it's called — well, we don't have to go into what the Zen world calls it. We can just say, it's your time, if you want to, to share something about your investigation of being alive.

Okay? So no demand to say anything. It's an opportunity to say something. But again, it's not anything theoretical. It's something alive. You're in the it's alive.

So we're working with these two words — or is it three words? Is "it's" two words or one? I guess "it's" is two words. Okay — "it's" is one word. So "it's alive" is the center. We're investigating.

Most of the time you'll be silent. So I'll ring the bell, and in your group of three, somebody's gonna be red, somebody's gonna be blue, and somebody's gonna be yellow, and you'll wait till I announce the color. It's not necessarily that order.

And when your color is announced, you're free to speak, you're free not to speak, but if you speak, you're speaking something about what's alive.

And if you're listening, you're letting their aliveness come to you.

I very much encourage you not to rehearse what you're gonna say. Let it come out of the moment.

Then I'll ring the bell a second time, and then everything is silent again. And then I'll ring the bell again, and I'll give another color. That person can speak for a while, then I'll ring the bell again, it'll be silent for a while. And then I'll ring a bell a third time.

Okay?

So red, blue, or yellow, get in a group of three. I'm in a group of three, and enjoy your life.