Discussion

Angela 2 — Week 3, Day 6, Session 5 — 48 minutes

Summary: After a brief sensing of focused and diffuse attention, the group reports what they noticed in the body, in vision, and with one another. Russell speaks to fluidity between the two, the nervous system, and the modern pull toward focus, then the conversation turns to focusing, doubt, resolution, and a caring attention.

Sensing the difference

[Russell:] So, close your eyes for a moment, and even as you sit here, notice if you can sense a distinction between sitting here with a more focused attention — in all domains, a more focused attention — and a more diffuse attention, and feel the influence.

They each are valuable in different ways, and they each have different effects on ourselves. It's very helpful to sense.

Go deeper into your body and feel inside your body.

[Silence 30 seconds]

Let's bring our attention outward. So, what can you report from your experiments with the different kinds of attention? I'm interested in the full gamut, from what happens in your body to what perceiving is like — what's comfortable, uncomfortable, calm, anything about it.

Let's look together.

What the experiments showed

[Participant:] I'd like to start with just what we were just doing. What I noticed was that when I had a real focused internal, it was tense. It was as if my spine tightened and tightened.

And when I was not focusing, the music was much better organized.

[Russell:] Can you say more about that?

[Participant:] More in touch.

[Russell:] More in touch.

[Participant:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Right, I see. Yeah. Just keep coming.

[Participant:] Well, yeah.

[Russell:] Interesting, yes.

[Participant:] Actually enjoyed both of them.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] The focusing felt very powerful and intense.

[Russell:] Right.

[Participant:] It was like, I'm coming for you — kind of like you were intentional.

[Russell:] Very intentional.

[Participant:] Yeah. And there was a certain something that I really enjoyed.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] That was my intention.

[Russell:] Right.

[Participant:] And the diffuse felt very relaxed. Just sort of like on the beach. Carefree, and nothing could happen.

[Russell:] Okay, interesting.

[Participant:] Focusing — even my eyes.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant:] And by focusing my eyes and walking towards, I enjoyed how the object would get bigger. And you'd feel the vision, and backing away, it would recede, get smaller. And then more things would come.

Well, when I was focusing, it would still happen that I would see other things, but they weren't in focus. And then with diffused vision, there was a very nice sense of that kind of movement from the outside.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah.

[Participant:] And also when I was standing, and the group would come walking towards — and then when they backed away, I had one of those train car feelings, where you feel like you're moving. I felt like I was falling backwards, just at the beginning of when they would start walking.

[Russell:] Yeah. The sensation of almost falling backwards.

[Participant:] Yeah. And then outside, I actually really focus. So I want to see the elements of nature, clearly and close up. That's the way I am. I want to be able to see them. I don't want them to be diffused.

[Russell:] Right.

[Participant:] It's a flower, it's a plant, it's a whatever. And so I find being diffused not really comfortable.

[Russell:] Right. Yeah, interesting.

[Participant:] I noticed when I was watching you all come toward us, and it felt so similar in my diaphragm and in my neck to when I was focused. I got it across from you.

And I noticed the first time that you were focused and coming forward, kind of had your eyes on one thing, and I felt like, oh, there was something intense you were thinking about.

And then the next time you came forward focused, you were sort of looking around, but focused attention, and again I felt my diaphragm a little. My impression was — and then I included who else I could see in the line — like, they're very busy. Let me not disturb you, because there's a lot going on.

It felt so much more like availability. Just, you know, beach walking. The diffuse, and you could feel your body actually taking on a similar state.

[Russell:] Right. Yes.

[Participant:] Enjoyment in it too, because it really felt like I could get something done. But then, with the diffuse vision, I felt much more fluid in my body. Like I could feel my environment, like I was part of my environment.

[Russell:] Yeah. Yeah, great.

Okay, I want to make some comments about it, and then hear some more from you.

Why fluidity matters

[Russell:] This has been a major subject of study for me for the last 20 years, so I'm very interested in the overall influence on our bodies, on our interactions with the world and other people.

Each is helpful, so it's not a question of good or bad. But I would suggest it's really so very helpful to be able to shift fluidly, and to know when we are dominated by a particular style of perception.

The world we attend to, and how we attend to it, will determine our experience of living. The way we organize our attention — meaning how we attend and what we attend to — will create the experiences that we have, and what we pick up on and what we don't pick up on in the world.

And so it's a very important subject for human beings, because we're all interested in the quality of our living, the quality of our experience. So, fluidity.

Just like the other day, we were working more with the internal and external, and again this morning. Can my attention include the other, come back to the self, have both, sometimes more here, sometimes more there? Often we're looking for a sense of both being available.

It's similar in this next dimension, or matrix, in the world of attention, which is focused and diffuse. And this is true visually, auditorily, emotionally, in terms of your meditation practice. We don't want to stay at one level of focus.

And a lot of us in our sitting practice have one level that we go to, and we stay there. It's kind of like having variability. If you're a runner, sometimes going fast or sometimes slow is helpful for your training. So variability in the focus and diffuseness of your attention is very important for how we perceive.

To be able to walk in nature and see the brightness of the flowers, and then see the landscape, the soft edges, and then be able to shift back, and to have some rhythmical fluid movement. Not that we'll all be the same, because some of us will prefer this more, prefer that more.

But what I notice with the majority of people is we tend to get locked into a narrow frame that we come out of in certain situations, but we have a dominant and relatively small range that we're in 80 percent of the time.

It's not that we never get real focused if we're a diffuser, or that we never get diffuse if we're a focuser, but we spend 70 to 80 percent in a rather limited range. And I'm suggesting this is a really helpful thing to attend to.

For example, it is in the very modern world that focused attention has become dominant for many people. It's a really new phenomenon.

Looking back — let's say, if we use the example of beings, young hunters or tribal beings on a plain — diffuse vision. Your motion receptors, your visual movement receptors, are much more acute in diffuse vision. So if you narrow your field, you don't see the potential enemies and prey. Then you need to focus.

But your general state is, you're living here, and then go. Then we are living here, and then occasionally, after a martini, go.

Really, that's half the cause of our substance abuse, is in needing to find a way to — and it's very important we see how recent this is, that so much of our living is taking place at this distance, and that we stay focused.

And this is really not only since the Industrial Revolution. It's really in the last 150 years. And radically so in the last 30, 40 years, and radically more so in the last 10 years. It's more and more and more focus, focus, focus, focus.

I don't know if you could sense this, and I'm not telling you. This is for your experiment. For the majority of people, there is a contraction in the spine with the focused vision. Some of you commented on that. Some of you could sense this.

It's not that you have to. You can learn to differentiate, and that's something I encourage you to experiment with. When you're really trying to hear, let your eyes soften. There are differentiations we can make, but in general, our focused vision stimulates the sympathetic nervous system. You get more adrenal activity.

The whole organism is organized as it would have been in earlier times to shoot an arrow, to deal with a danger, to respond to something that needs our immediate attention, and then you go back into this more open quality of attention.

We've got that reversed, which is why there's so much sympathetic nervous system dominance in modern humanity, and why there are so many chronic kinds of diseases. Because the parasympathetic side of our nervous system is where healing takes place, and that is in these more diffuse states.

Remember the first, second, third lesson I gave you? I said, remind me to tell you something — right? I got back there, right?

In the lessons where I'm emphasizing more exhale, surprisingly, a little bit of an exaggerated exhale stimulates the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, which comes both from your abdomen and from

your heart — it has branches in both places — is critical for stimulating the parasympathetic part of your nervous system.

Long exhales, that gap after the exhale, will see more vagus stimulation. Self-touch, particularly around the heart, stimulates the vagus nerve also. We get more parasympathetic response. More oxytocin actually comes released in the guts when they're pressed.

So we have self-touch, gentle stretches, lengthening yourself, reaching out in space, sliding across. Not a vigorous stretch, but that gentle stretching is activating for the parasympathetic side of your nervous system.

So these are all balancers for our sympathetic over-dominance, for all that adrenaline pumping through us, and all that tightness, or narrowness, that we often feel.

The combination of working with growing more spaciousness in the body and around the body is connected to enhancing the parasympathetic parts of our nervous system, is connected to getting comfortable with diffuse. Not as a place we stay, but we're comfortable moving into that. We can actually learn to be more intentional, even when we're softer in our walk.

And then sometimes we get really sharp. That's great too. Energy in that, right? There's intentionality, there's strength. But to learn — could I walk through a city and not have to pound the pavement, and not have to gear up and watch each, but actually learn to open the width of attention and find out that, oh, I can actually be safe, and then come to my focus as needed, wanted, helpful.

And then remind the deep levels of my nervous system that I'm not under attack, and I'm not attacking, and it's really okay to touch the ground with some softness, and I can even move quickly. Even though people tend to be slower when they're diffuse — I don't know if you noticed, until I asked you to experiment with speed. Diffuse tends to be slower, focus tends to be faster.

These are things we can begin to play with, if you're going to, hopefully, take up the work of experimenting with these capacities of our nervous system, these capacities of our embodiment.

But what I was hoping you could get an experience of is that focused with your eyes is not just about your eyes. It's about a whole relationship for living, that will be expressed throughout your whole body and mind and will influence your relationships.

And to play with that, to see where you kind of fall. To be diffuse most of the time, people tend to be a little bit undertone, kind of a little bit spacey. They don't get much done. We need some of this tonicity that comes with focus.

But again, for most of us, we're way out of balance. Culturally, we're certainly way — and America even more so than Europe, although we're teaching, gotta be out of balance like us.

It's everything. You can see what I'm talking about in terms of the nervous system, culturally, reflected in things like, is it normal to have two weeks off, or four weeks off, or six weeks off? The same kinds of things weave into a culture that are living in our embodiment. We can look at it at all these different levels.

So experimenting with this is really helpful. And there's one other thing I want to say, and open it to you again.

In our sitting, I emphasize an open attention. There are many forms of meditation that emphasize a more focused attention. By the way, focusing is completely misnamed. It's actually more like defocusing. I mean, you stay with something, but you stay with it, not in a real — right?

But in the meditation, especially if you feel spacey a lot of the time, kind of lost a lot of the time, it can be quite helpful, as I have suggested generally to you and to a few of you privately, to spend more time with some focus. A few minutes of counting breath, or really bringing attention to some precise places, maybe looking at a point. I don't recommend staying there.

In the style that I'm working with, we cover more ground as the attention opens, but is not too far away. It doesn't get just spacey because it's open. So we narrow and open, spending more time in the open, until hopefully the attention leads you. It takes over. You're not directing it, but the object of the attention and the attender are all seen together, are all working together effortlessly.

But the way we get there, there needs to be some movement of your attention.

Okay, let's let all that live here for a minute. That's a big mouthful. I know I'm kind of hitting you a lot in our last afternoon, but we needed this out there for the spatial relations to feel complete.

Touch and relationship

[Participant:] Yeah. Back to my first Feldenkrais segment in the training program, where we did touching with open vision and attention. I think we did it with feet, and how dramatically different a person we worked with responded to the open attention. They didn't know which one we were using, and yet the relaxation response was just so dramatic.

[Russell:] Yeah. It's so amazing. It happens with touch. It happens with human interaction. I'll tell you a great story.

So, this is Thanksgiving. My brother and his whole family come out from New Jersey, and we haven't seen them in a long time. I see them when I go east. They never were here. And Linda and my brother are not so easy together.

My brother is very intense. He doesn't realize how loud his voice can be. I love him, but he's very intense. And Linda can be quite sensitive, and very feeling in her environment. There was sometimes a mismatch there. They actually like each other, but they can't figure out how to be with each other.

Cause my wife — so, how you doing, Linda? And for her it feels like, oh, you know, it's almost like you can see her moving.

And it was so fascinating, because the second day — there's a place, some of you know of it, in Freestone, called Osmosis. It's a very wonderful place where you lie in these cedar chips. Instead of a hot tub, you're lying in compost, basically. This is a Japanese system, and it is very powerful. It's expensive, so I only go there a couple of times a year, but you lay in these cedar chips and it gets really hot.

And so he's interested in that, and his wife, his French wife, likes these things. She's into yoga a little bit. So we sent them over there, and they loved it, and he came back. And all of a sudden, he and Linda have a conversation. And it was like, wow.

We went to sleep that night, and she said, you know, I really like your brother. And it was like, well, he needed to tone it. It's not only toning it down, but the actual way of looking, his way of feeling like he was in contact with you. It's Jersey.

What's true is that it's very effective in his work life. In a certain way it's effective. He gets a lot done. He's very like this. But it was beautiful, because he actually, with the help of his wife and a tiny bit with me, I think, got to maybe for the first time recognize the difference in his intensity, which was really about his kind of 99 percent of the time being at the same level of focus.

Do you get what I — this is important for our living. This is not theoretical. This is really our living, darling.

So I encourage you to play, experiment, notice, and we'll be doing more of that also.

Taking it into life

[Participant:] For some of the experiences that you exposed us to, would you encourage someone, if they wanted to become more fluid, to use some of these —

[Russell:] Absolutely. These are wonderful. You know, in some ways, we're together for six weeks over three years, and we could spend the rest of our life doing this, what we're doing, right? We're not touching just the surface of things. We're going into things.

So my deep hope is that you're working with yourself, and taking the things you resonate with, and experimenting. And some of that has to do with a practice of sitting, or doing the kind of listening that goes on, and the focusing interactions. And some of it is playing, experimenting with the kinds of — wow, okay, I'm going to the store. Could I just play a game with my back space? Could I play a game of paying attention to them and me?

Could this become part of everyday living, experimenting with being embodied in diverse ways? That's when that bug gets you. That's what I'm hoping.

Because, you know, Feldenkrais was a great teacher for me. I was quite young when I started with him, and his whole thing was, he knew he couldn't give us what he had. He got what he had by working on himself. And his intention was to give us enough that we could learn how to learn, and then be self-directed learners.

And I carry that spirit with me, of hoping to give that kind of attitude and atmosphere, that, oh, this would be interesting to work with. This is not homework I'm doing because a teacher says so. This is something I want to do.

[Participant:] Yeah. Just thinking about these glasses, and how I move through life with these glasses.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant:] And especially in my work, I take them off intentionally when I want to learn what it has to be. And there's a whole attitude with that, and then when I put them on, I can see.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah.

[Participant:] So it's interesting, because consciously and unconsciously, they're kind of a pointer.

[Russell:] Yes. And really interesting to experiment. Can I have the glasses on and diffuse my attention?

[Participant:] I'm sure you can.

[Russell:] I'm sure you can.

[Participant:] Yes, I know, I know.

[Russell:] Okay, so, yes.

[Participant:] I was touched the other day when you were demonstrating a movement, and it really hit me when you said, I'm really just starting to work with this again. And when you said that, it made me think about what you're saying, that this is part of our life, what we do. And I thought, even for you — I was like, this is cool.

[Russell:] Well, I used to say as a Feldenkrais trainer that if the Feldenkrais work works, then I should be learning more than anybody in the room. Because if it's learning how to learn, and I'm supposedly guiding people in learning how to learn, then I gotta be a good learner.

So I know from this week of work the acceleration of my inner work, how I'll redesign our fifth week, and how the work I'm going to do with the graduates in two weeks in Munich is going to be influenced. And this will change by my interactions with you, and what I discuss, and then when I'm at home, feeling, what's the difference between having my thumb in here and my thumb out of here? What happens inside?

And I do what Steiner — Rudolf Steiner — calls spiritual research. Spiritual science is what he called it. It's not just my opinion. It's that you put in consistent practice, you do study over time without a belief system controlling where it's going to go, and have variables that you're working with, and see the effects.

That's what resonated for me so much about Gautama Buddha's teaching, his final teaching, about be a lamp unto yourself. Don't believe what I say. But do these practices and see what happens. Be empirical. Work with it. That's so empowering for humanity.

Working with focusing

[Russell:] Okay, well, I want to move on, switching subjects to the focusing work, because we're going to shortly be sitting with something we'd like to learn about that's alive in us. Being with something that we want to learn about that's alive — could be anything. And we're going to sit with other people who are wanting to pay attention to what's alive in them.

And I'm wondering if there were particular — we're not going to talk too long, about 10, 12, 15 minutes. If there are particular questions, stuck places, didn't know what to do, or something that was particularly helpful, that you either got, gave to yourself, or someone gave to you, that helped your process to work. So that we're moving that learning through the group mind.

[Participant:] You know, the focusing I did this time was very different than I've so far done, and I've done a lot. And what I experienced was — like before, it was clear. I felt right in what I was doing. This was so new and different that there was what I called the doubter.

[Russell:] Okay, yes.

[Participant:] And I acknowledged the doubter.

[Russell:] Excellent, yeah.

[Participant:] But then later, at the end of the session, I thought, oh, I still have this feeling of doubt. So my question is, how to work with the doubt? Or maybe a little bit more?

[Russell:] Yeah. Well, certainly what you said already, that we recognize, acknowledge, and sense its presence. And also, if it's got a pretty present energy, that we don't just say, I know you're there, but we can actually turn toward it, and invite it to show us what it's concerned about.

Because what I'll say is just a little seed that may work in your focusing. Doubting energy and worry, and doubting energy and critical voices. Doubting voices and critical voices are invariably worried, but they rarely say they're worried.

And if we feel that doubting place and gently sense — oh yeah, you're really there, you're kind of pushing, pushing, pushing, are you? Oh, is there something you're concerned about that might happen here, or that might not happen?

Yeah, you're going to fool yourself, or they're going to take you there. Oh, tell me more. And really let it come. Invite it to be right at the table.

And usually, in my experience, there's a shift in those voices. Can you imagine that?

[Participant:] Yeah. And I guess there's another question that goes with that. What if the doubter was so loud, it was like, what if I'm just making this all up, and it's not really what I need to be?

[Russell:] Yeah. So you need to be with that questioning voice. And if it's staying around, you could do what I just said, stay with that, and that might be your session. Might be being with that place. That's fine, and it may lead you to something you have no idea of, and it's actually important for your unfolding process that that got the attention.

We don't know what needs attention in there, so we let what's energized guide us. I think that's really helpful at this stage.

[Participant:] Yeah. I think that's a good way to look at it. Like, just knowing that it's in process.

[Russell:] It's in process. Right.

Definitely. No pressure is what we called it yesterday. There's no pressure for a solution. But I'd like to make a distinction, a beautiful linguistic distinction that's nice to have in the air.

My experience is that almost always, if I'm really with a focusing attitude, I will get some resolution. But not necessarily solution.

Resolution means it's carried a little bit differently, the way it feels in here. Maybe it opened a little bit, maybe it got a little lighter. But almost always, when I spend that kind of time with something, there's a breath. It's not solved, but it feels somehow at least a little bit, and sometimes a lot a bit, but at least a little bit.

So I listen for resolution in that sense, that it's in a process of resolving.

[Participant:] I think that answers my question, which was, if you didn't have a time constraint.

[Russell:] Yeah. Yes. So — I don't know. What I do get a sense of is that it's kind of similar to Feldenkrais. I use that example because you know a little bit there.

There's only so much the nervous system can take, and then it goes kind of flat. It stops bringing helpful new, and starts circling or pulling back. And it's somewhere in the territory of 30 minutes. It may be 40, sometimes maybe more, but in general, something 20 to 40 minutes, somewhere in there.

But what I also notice is that unless it's something that's really one of my bigger issues, or a person's bigger issues, knowing that there's a time limit coming, the organism organizes around.

This was a fascinating discovery, leading Feldenkrais trainings. I at the same time had some trainings that lasted two months every day, and one week off in the middle, I made. Another training meant one month twice a year. Another training meant a couple of weeks, but mostly three-day weekends.

And what I found was, in the two-month training, people began to burn out around the fifth, sixth week, and then they'd get a second wind. In the one-month training, they started to burn out around the third week, and then they'd get a little wind. In the weekend training, by the second — wow, this is getting tiring.

It was like the organism organizing themselves for the length of the run. And it's like that in a focusing. It's amazingly so. If you've ever had the experience of doing anything over a long period of time, we tend to prepare ourselves for the period, and the organism adjusts, within limits.

Okay, so what I'd like to recommend is that you have a different partner, and that you spend some time with something you'd like to know more about. That you're not trying to fix your life. You're really generous towards your inner life. What might like some attention?

[Participant:] Just clarify something that you said yesterday, excuse me. You had mentioned it should be two to one, in terms of life-giving experiences. And I'm just trying to clarify. Does that mean, in your focusing, if there's more that you want to know about, are you saying you'd recommend that we spend a little bit more time with that?

[Russell:] Yes. Okay, so, there's much more I'd want to say about that quote, but let me just say this. Where that came from — the moment that came out of was the fact that many people approach focusing as problem solving, as finding a problem to work on. And I wanted to say that it's beautiful to grow the life-giving states. So you see what feels right for you.

[Participant:] This is the first time I've heard that, so that was very interesting.

[Russell:] Well, and that's part of your attraction to the resource growing, is that you know that's important for your inner life, to water those seeds. And as was pointed out, we can spend time with something that's difficult and have it become very life-giving. It's not like one or the other.

[Participant:] Just to speak to that. I know for myself, when I started focusing, I could really get lost in problems, and then not be able to pull myself out. And so, kind of just spending the time with the problem, having a little more emphasis on the support for the problem, rather than —

[Russell:] Yeah. I think that's good. I think that's really good.

I gotta say one last thing. This light that we're working with, this unconditional warmth, in terms of our listening process — that is what's listening to us.

We talk about it a little differently in the meditation, but it's a very similar energy. When I'm with something inside, I'm touching into the place that's completely not identified with my history, but is just bringing caring, warming, warm-hearted interest to what's in there.

And what I'll say is the key for me, especially at this point for us, but maybe always, is if you lose contact with that, let that be the center of your session. Finding how can I reconnect to that place, that larger self that has this caring towards whatever is going. That's where we want more than anything.

[Participant:] And how to find it if it's lost?

[Russell:] I say, oh — you feel like you lost that. Tell me. So I immediately, by investigating it, I become the space again. In other words, the feeling that I lost it is just something living inside this being. So as soon as I can stand next to the feeling that I lost it, I'm back in my being.

Find a partner.

Enough words.