Discussion

Angela 2 — Week 5, Day 2, Session 7 — 56 minutes

Summary: Russell invites an embodied listening round on what is alive in practice and what is at the edge. People share forgiveness, a rhythm of one's own, newly felt emotion, light alongside pain, and a move from self-preoccupation toward witnessing. He speaks of realization becoming actualization without turning into demand, then closes toward walking and sitting.

The invitation

[Russell:] So I'd like to — yeah, leave a space for someone.

[Participant:] Oh, yeah.

[Russell:] So I'd like to return to connecting with each other, and just a kind of reminder. It's actually a, for most of us, non-habitual way of speaking that I'm encouraging. It's not so much the way we might speak, or usually speak, with our friends, or with people, telling them what's going on.

We're really listening to this particular lens. Whichever — maybe it doesn't all connect for you — but looking inside and seeing, when I look at what's alive for me around my practice, around my studies. What's been exciting, thrilling, touching, moving. What's like that. And what is my edge? What's coming up?

And that might evolve from something strong and dramatic that's happening in your life. It might not. As you're speaking, it's hearing it freshly. It's not simply, well, this is the story I told at lunch, so I'm telling it now. As you touch it, does anything fresh come out of it? Does some new way of sensing yourself about that come?

It's listening speaking. I certainly don't always speak that way, but it's not uncommon. It requires some checking in. Again, it's the idea that our thinking, our feeling, and our body can live simultaneously, all becoming accessible in the same moment. So that what's coming through us has a feeling of something integrated.

One part might be stronger. There might be stronger feelings than the body sense, or stronger thoughts, memories, but that it's all coming forward. Or pausing and sensing — how did — is that the right word?

So it's not exactly doing a focusing session, but it's listening in a kind of similar way, and communicating from in there.

Again, it's not that we'll take usually so long. It might be just a few minutes. It could be longer. But I'd like to invite others to speak out. We may not get through everybody tonight, because I do want to have a walking and a sitting, and so we're really settling in our practice on this first

day. But this kind of round is actually very central to the kind of teaching that I'm hoping we're working with, where we're practicing an embodied kind of connecting.

The only way I know to get more fluid with it is to practice.

Would somebody like to — yes, please.

A rhythm of one's own

[Participant 1:] I feel a sort of nervous excitedness, and I don't know — there's a lot that's been — I just need to — I'm not even sure what I'm going to say.

And the first thing I want to say is, one of the things I'm really working with is forgiving myself. There's some way in which I — some part of me that holds — some way that I hold myself hostage around things that have happened. And it's hard for me to stay a little apart from it, not fully just be overwhelmed.

[Russell:] Yes. I just noticed that for a moment. Maybe just give a little more energy to feeling you're sitting, and your hands, so you get a good physical base to be with whatever wants expression.

[Participant 1:] I think that's all I want to say about that. I have a couple of other things I'd like to speak about.

I also am really working with being connected here, and being able to be connected out here. I think I've been working on this for a long time. I may have spoken about it before.

And I'm thinking of when I play the marimba in my group. Sometimes, to find my rhythm, which is very different from everybody else's rhythm, I really have to be really here. But I have to listen out there. And it seems like that's what it's like in life. It's hard for me to hear both, and find my own rhythm, which is very distinct from everybody else's.

[Russell:] Just pause there a second. There is something so delightful in hearing that expression from you. It's so clearly coming through you in your own way. It's a sweet energy to feel from you.

You know, I can remember so well, in our third week, when we were working with space. You had your first insight about yourself and around you. And you said, this is the first time that I can feel myself. And then last time, you told us about the marimba. And it's like I'm watching this unfolding over the weeks. And it's so touching to me, because I also feel it just when I interact with you. Just a different way of the giving and the taking and the receiving. So I've been very moved by that unfolding.

[Participant 1:] Yeah.

[Russell:] That's part of why I think I was so touched by what you were just saying. Go ahead.

[Participant 1:] I just performed right before I came. I started last year, a year ago almost exactly. And I was so nervous on the way. I was just driving there, and I was so nervous — more than usual nervous. I didn't know if I'd be able to play. And I felt that part of me that was so frightened. And then this other part showed up. And this is the part that goes away. Goes away completely. And this part was so afraid that that would happen.

And so something settled a little bit, and I got there, and we set up, and we had a chance to play, and I couldn't remember what I was doing. I couldn't remember. And there was this thing that

happened. I was in my solo, and I saw this plane. I hit all the wrong notes, and there was this plane that came down, and I remembered I didn't want to dissociate. I think that's the word. And it didn't happen. I was able to come back and be right here.

And then when we actually performed, I played it. I was so connected to myself, and everybody in the group, and the people out here. And it was really huge for me. It was like a choice. It was not just — it was like I made a choice. And I don't even know how. My body made a choice. But there was a mind there, and everything. There was something.

[Russell:] Wow. Oh, yes. Thank you so much. What a gift.

Emotions coming through

[Participant 2:] Well, I could go next.

[Russell:] Yes. That's all right.

[Participant 2:] So I better go tonight, or I'll spend the night crafting some story. Wake my wife up in the middle of the night. How does this sound?

So, just checking in from where we were in June. On one level, it's really been great. I think my meditation practice is getting easier, which is good. And I've had a heavy influx of calling Christ in, and yoga, to overcome some physical stuff, so I've had a lot of that. And I've really been trying to practice my compassionate listening, and all that.

On the other dimension, I've really noticed, just over the last few months, the periods of time that I've gotten really angry — and I'll speak to that in a second — or really anxious, or really joyful.

And I'll do the joyful one first, because it's the easiest one. We had a grandchild in June, and so it's great to practice compassionate listening with a baby. Once it gets to be positive, and everything sounds, and that kind of stuff. It's been a great opportunity to experience joy in a different way. It's very different.

And the underlying current is that, for me, it's taken a while in the program to really start feeling these emotions. And it's very confusing. It's like, so why am I so angry? I understand why I'm joyful.

The work that has to be done is that I kind of have to figure out what to do with them now that they're appearing. They're starting to come out.

I wouldn't say I was a control freak over my emotions, but my wife might say that. It's not something that would normally come naturally for me. And so it's just been fascinating, because we've had the pleasure of spending a lot of time with our kids and our grandchildren over the last few months, in different experiences — Thanksgiving.

And there's one other piece, and then I'll tie it together. Most of you know I spent most of my career working in a college, so I worked with young people who are coming through. And what's really come present for me recently is — and I see it in my kids, because the youngest are twenty-eight, thirty-one, in their thirties — I'm watching how the culture is treating them. Badly.

How employers are cutting their benefits, and how they're putting them in contracts, or changing their jobs. That's not the way our culture used to treat our young people. And so I read that, and I

look at that, and I'm watching how it's happening. And it's not just my kids. It's the young people in our church group. They're getting laid off and put out to work. They're in their late twenties and early thirties, and it's like they don't want to go home, but they're adrift. And it's just incredible.

And I realized how angry I was getting. Now I'm looking for a solution, but it's like, before, I don't know that I would have gotten as angry. I have to figure out what to do with that. Actualize that, or do something. But it's the same with the anxiety. I work with these young people, and I see them, whether it's my kids or others, and I absorb their anxiety. And I worry more about them than they worry about themselves, because I can kind of see the future more. I think I can. But I imply that there's a future.

So the bottom line is that, for me, it's a point in the program where — some of you may have been there sooner — but now, all of a sudden, it's not only watching these emotions come up, but watching where they come up, how they come up in my body. I can feel it in my chest, or I can feel it here, depending on the emotion. Or in the joy, there's a certain lightness.

And so the challenge for me, in the program here, is to continue to practice, and continue the skills we're learning, to tune into those newfound emotions so that I can deal with them, and not get trapped in going back into my head and saying, oh, there must be a thread that goes all the way back to my childhood. It must be because of this and that. Just to live with the emotion, and not overly process it.

So I feel good about where I am in the program. I'm not sure I like what's happening. I don't know where it's going, but it's a kind of new experience for me.

[Russell:] Right, right. I'm happy to hear it. Thank you.

[Participant 2:] Thanks for hearing that.

Light with the dark

[Participant 3:] I don't actually know what I'm going to say. I erased it before I was going to rehearse some of it.

I think the edge for me right now started last June, when we were together, and I was working with Russell. I forget whether it was a process or a focusing session. And I was going inside, and a lot of really painful things were coming up. It was not a happy experience in there.

And at one point Russell said, is there any light in there? And so I looked, and I said, oh, yes, there's lots of light. And it was kind of the beginning of me realizing that it's possible to feel that light, even in the midst of a lot of pain, a lot of sorrow.

Sometimes, if I go inside, it's not always pleasant. Memories are coming up that are difficult to deal with, and stories about those memories that are difficult to deal with. And so it was this new concept of being able to listen to an inner experience that I would like to just push away, get distracted from somehow — be able to listen to that, and at the same time — it's hard to say the word — it's this edge of allowing. And it sort of comes to me in the form of, is that possible to do?

Is it possible to be with the hurt places, and the sad places, and the angry places, and the anxious places? Is it possible to push those aside, or distract myself from them? But even if I feel caught in them, is it possible to also experience the light, to also bring something in?

It's hard to find the words. Something more light, more joyful. Do I even have permission to do that? Am I obligated to honor this part of me that hurts, this part of me that feels it's somehow gone through experiences that have made it not possible for me to have that kind of lightness of being, as it were?

And so that was the edge. Is it possible? Is it okay to do that? Do I have permission to do that? Is that dishonoring all this other stuff?

And so I've been working with that. At first I thought, I can have the lightness, I can be in there, and I can have the darkness. But can I be in the darkness, and know, and have the light too?

I feel like this child that someone opened the door and said, okay, it's a candy store, go do it, you can have whatever you want.

And since I've been working with that, I'm so much less stuck to the other places. Already, stuck is the wrong word. I'm not so angry with them anymore. Not, oh, again, come on, get over it. You don't need to — that was a long time ago. I'm not so, oh, there you go again, in the middle of it. I'm not so much like that. It's more like, oh, there's that.

And it's possible for me not to say — I mean, I used to think, oh, there's that, now what can I do? Let me get busy with this, so I don't have to feel that. And so I'm not so busy anymore. I mean, I am busy, but not so frantically busy, trying to keep away the devils, as it were. To do everything right, to do everything so everyone thinks — and I don't do it for the people to say it, but people would say all sorts of things that were not really true in my reality, because they see me. They see the result of my pushing down all this other stuff, and being the good girl, whatever that looks like.

And so, with this kind of permission not to jump in to fill the gap, where I see the gaps, as it were. And just sometimes, just to take — a friend and I were talking about it. The last time I was there, we really had this wonderful experience with horses. And so when I have a wonderful experience like that, I'm like, oh, that's what I'm going to go do. I'm going to do that with them. And just to be able to step back and say, it was a wonderful experience, and just kind of be with it. Is that where you're going to go?

And that's just so new for me, and it's so nice, and it's so freeing, just to be in that place — that kind of empty cup place, where it's not all filled up, and you're not anxious about it.

Yeah. It's not so frantic in there.

[Participant:] Amen.

[Russell:] Yeah. Keep going with that, the light and the dark, living together. Go right there.

[Participant 3:] Thank you.

The listening edge

[Russell:] Yes.

[Participant 4:] When you ask, what is your age?

[Russell:] Not your age. Not your age.

[Participant 4:] What is your age?

Fifty-two.

I was wondering, in fact. I don't live the practice as if I were near an edge. So there's a lot of excitement about the work, the fact that I have the practice on a regular basis, and I'm committed in it, and I do it without any effort. The sitting practice, and the movement practice. But the listening practice is not as much. And so it may be the edge, in a way.

But it has a strong impact on the way I am in this world, how I feel in this world, and how I'm more open to ideas, or practices, that I would have found strange some two years ago.

For instance, I feel more connected with people. And currently, the fact that we are not separate is something that gets more tangible for me. I meet people, and after a few minutes we realize that we are connected by something.

The guy in the plane, coming — I slept all the flight. And when we went out of the plane, we spoke, and there was a connection about the work, and the things that we did in 1996. And there was a really strong connection, and it was really moving, for him and for me, to see that we have such a common point.

And it happens all the time, currently, and it's something new to me. Meeting people, and a strong relationship that appears like that. So that's what is quite new for me, during this experience.

[Russell:] Thank you.

Right-sizing

[Participant 5:] The accent is sweet. And I think the enjoyment I'm getting out of listening to everybody has something to do with what is important for me right now, in terms of our group, my relationship to you all, to myself.

Growing with you, staying with you — hanging in there together — and finding out that I lay any more trips on myself than anybody lays on me. It's like, here's a contained group of people, with a beginning and a middle and an end. There are way more trips I put on myself than you all put on me. And it's a blessing to feel that way, and to feel that the more I get to know you, it's just some sort of correcting function that's going on. Not to be right, but it's sort of like right-sizing. Right-sizing to Russell, and to my fellow pilgrims, and to the rest of the world.

And it is definitely coming out of the practices in between the trips.

And the relief, the release, has to do with the fact that everybody gets more interesting. And less worry about myself.

Wait a second. To turn a kind of self-preoccupation into self-awareness, and integrate that into communication, is really something I aspire to.

I think there are ways to learn it, but then the atmosphere here sets a tone which makes it more and more comfortable to be less and less pretentious.

In a way, ironically, it's sort of like, I don't care what you think. I think it's interesting. What do you think? Me, or something else. And it's a lightening of a burden, something so heavy.

I also feel, this time — it flips over, keeps flipping back and forth, from a sense of distance and an eyewitnessing. In other words, even my community serves symbolically, in the sense that I don't

have to totally immerse myself the way I felt I wanted to before, and was lucky, and have been able to. But I felt a little freedom to make that choice. And even though it felt a little bit like a failure, a little bit of status or something, I felt some ambivalence, and I still feel a little of it.

[Russell:] I want to make sure I'm getting that.

[Participant 5:] Yes.

[Russell:] Something about stepping back a little bit.

[Participant 5:] Right.

[Russell:] What I'm hearing — I'm not sure I'm hearing it right. Well, first I want to backtrack. I was very moved by the self-preoccupation to self-awareness to integrated expression, this development that you're working with.

And one of the pieces that then came after that, that I'm working with now, is the amount of distance, and a feeling of one place inside that wanted to be very in it, but now is a little bit back. And something feels right about the back, but navigating how far back — and is it distancing, or is it witnessing, or something around that.

[Participant 5:] That's right on target. What I'm saying, in certain ways, is I feel like there's a right-sizing that's happening. There's also a right-sizing still going on.

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

[Participant 5:] Right. And so when I say I don't care, it's a facetious way of saying it.

[Russell:] I know that.

[Participant 5:] I feel like I can hear some very moving — it's restless today, but of course I don't have to cry about them. So there's a kind of attempt to stay with real feelings without being swept away in the rip current of them.

On the one hand, backing off. And there's the double meaning of detachment, where you can be detached but present, so that you can maybe be effective in helping people, or at least not hurting them. And there's also detachment as a wall, and that's for safety and cowardice. So I'm constantly just sort of evaluating.

In my interactions in here — because you're friends, I can do this openly, in a way. It's a wonderful opportunity, and I'm grateful for it. And I'm glad. Sometimes I get very heady, and I get hungry for novelty. And what I'm trying to say is that I just have a feeling of trust in this process, in this group, in this period in my life. And it spills over, in the best sense, into the rest of my life, in terms of moderating some extreme emotionalism. Being able to relate to more and more people.

[Russell:] Okay. Thank you very much. Yes, please.

Realization and actualization

[Participant 6:] I think we are twin souls.

[Participant 5:] Oh.

[Participant 6:] I never saw it before quite like that, but as you were talking, I just realized that I think my cutting edge, my edge, is very similar. And I had never seen it really until you were

speaking. Not exactly like that. But last June, I asked Russell where I should focus, in terms of my unfolding. And you said, maybe work on being more external.

So I feel like that's really been — I was on such a high coming out of here in June. It was just such a great week, and a great summer, and I kind of built my internal place into getting ready to teach two classes of this work. And so I've taught, in September and October.

And then it was almost like this wave of relating to the world in a different way, and just being more outside of myself, and relating to more and more people, in this new way. An amazing way.

And then it all just kind of crashed, when a lot of things started happening in my immediate family. My in-laws moved to town, and my father-in-law has Alzheimer's. My own father came back into my life after my stepmother divorced him. So there were all these things that just happened, and I just couldn't hold my presence with everything in the same way. So I just went inside.

And what was interesting is, as I went inside, I also stopped meditating. Actually, I went so far inside that I just quit. It's really amazing how intense that reaction was, to just that overwhelm. And it's a very familiar pattern, now that I think about it. It's just something I've done many times in my life. Too much comes at me at a certain point, and then I'm just like, okay, this is more human energy than I can handle.

So I really pulled away from everything for a couple of months, and took two weeks off over Christmas, where I was able to slow my life down a bit, and look at what had happened, and how I lost my ground, really.

And so there's something around that whole trajectory that I'm just seeing, as I'm talking tonight, about internal, external, self, other. Where do I find enough embodied resource, even when things get really intense, with people close to me who have a lot of needs. Huge needs.

And when someone spoke earlier about being a compulsive caretaker, I thought, well, maybe I'm a compulsive caretaker. Maybe I'm trying too hard, meeting everybody's needs, and then when I can't, I just forget it. I'm not doing any of it anymore. I still do it, but I do it in a more disembodied way, and I'm not being present with the people I'm interacting with anymore.

So anyway, that wasn't at all what I thought I was — that wasn't my constructed story. That was fresh off the press.

[Russell:] Something about the connecting in and out, and sensing the amount, and calibrating.

[Participant 6:] My listening. Because I can listen to myself very well. I'm really good at listening to myself, and I can listen to one person at a time in my practice. I'm really good at that. But when I get layers and layers — my extended family, my whole community, actually, is full of people in crisis, and they all tend to end up at our house. I'm usually cooking for people five or six nights out of every week. And people after — you're coming over, when —

[Russell:] Yeah. So you're manifesting, in your life, the opportunity to learn what you're talking about. Right? It's appearing in your life, and this is your task right now. How to integrate that inner listening and the outer listening, at many layers, when it gets more chaotic. And the habit is to withdraw so far in that it feels like it's not serving you anymore. That old way you used to take care of yourself now doesn't feel accurate, but you don't know the new way yet.

[Participant 6:] Yeah.

Do you get that overwhelming feeling?

[Russell:] No, I don't.

[Participant 6:] No, it's great to hear everybody's sharing. So, in a different way. I feel like people in this room have skills. And I feel like, in my community — and my husband has really learned a lot. I've shared these practices with him, so he has a lot of these skills, and it's almost like people are coming for these skills.

[Russell:] Yeah, but that's why you're teaching. Your classes, immediately, were very — so this is the way. This is called manifestation.

[Participant 6:] Yeah.

[Russell:] I didn't tell you to manifest it that way. But I think we can say life is occurring, and exactly what you were working with, in a conscious way, then doubled down on you. It doubled down. It said, you want to learn how to take your inner world into the outer world — which is the movement, by the way, from realization to actualization. We need to see that step.

Realization, for most of us, is not enough, and we have to keep growing our realization. But realization by itself doesn't serve the world, except very indirectly. How are we going to actualize our realization? How is it going to radiate? And then, how can it radiate in ways that are congruent with what's living in here, and doesn't feel like a burden, and doesn't feel like I have to give up my inner life in order to do this? It doesn't start feeling like a demand.

As soon as you get a demand, you're going to start feeling contracted. And as soon as you start feeling contracted, you're not radiating anymore. And it's going to turn into either something like illness, or something like begrudging what you're doing. It turns on itself that way.

And so the skills we're growing are to be able to sense in our bodies when this impulse toward sharing with the world starts becoming a demanding energy. As soon as it becomes demanding, it starts constricting. And those are signs that you're not coming from your essence, that you're not in your radiance. You've left contact with your being. It doesn't mean something bad is happening. It means, oh, there's a different kind of listening needed here. There's some need that's alive in me, that if I can get in touch with it — even if I can't get that need met — if I can get in touch with the energy of it, something can let go.

And in my experience, we can move back from it feeling like a demand to it feeling like a self-expression.

[Participant 6:] So most of the time, you don't experience so much needing to put boundaries around yourself. You're saying that, in attending to the need, then maybe the need doesn't actually —

[Russell:] Right, right. Now, I do feel a need to listen to — I don't function in my highest state, or in my most helpful ways, if I go for long periods without getting enough time to myself. My wife knows it. I've learned that I don't need long — what I need is a certain kind of feeling. It's the way my system works. If I can get — sometimes it's just some minutes, sometimes it's some hours —

but kind of let the field vibrate again at a certain level. If I don't get that, it gets chaotic in here. And then my actions are not harmonious, my thoughts are not harmonious, my feelings.

Now, externally, it doesn't look so disruptive. Most people would say, oh, it still feels fine. But I can tell when it starts. Oh, I've got a lot on my plate, and what I really need to do right now is go for a run. I've got a lot on my plate. What I really need to do is just play my shakuhachi.

And the more I have demanded of me, the more I need to be in touch with those energies. Otherwise, if I start answering all the emails I get from students with a feeling of obligation, then it's not how I want to be in the world. There's a contraction that occurs. A feeling of — imagine, I'm being given the gift of people wanting to connect, in the ways that I've been wanting to grow in my life, and now I'm feeling burdened by it. So if anything like that starts, I stop. I don't answer emails from that place, because it feels so terrible inside.

And then I need to ask, what kind of space? Is it a quiet space? Is it a playful space? Is it getting into the sports section and just reading that? Is it watching a 49er game? What's needed, to give it what it needs? Is it time with her? Have I not had enough connection time?

And that's where, when I listen to that level of need, either I get it satisfied in the world, or I can get in touch with it on a being level. Now this, again, will get clearer over some days. When I say get in touch with it at a being level — if I'm needing connection with her at my mind-body level, and she's not available for it, I can still tune into the place that knows connection. And in the longing for it, have it. Because it's already in there.

But it takes conscious choice, and some time, and some pausing, and getting out of the idea that she has to supply me with it. So there's no sense of blame in there. And by the way, when I go to her already fulfilled, then, hey, she wants to give — because I'm not going with so much need.

There's still the longing for something, but it's just coming from a different energy inside. And I know what it feels like when I come from the one or the other.

But let's go back to what's important here. You're getting what I'm saying. So it's really listening. Even in the midst of it. And that's the next step. You really took what we worked with and put it out in the world, and really were interacting in bigger ways, and are continuing to. Even organizing the workshop is a way of interacting that's bigger.

But now it's like the universe is doubling down and saying, okay, now you've got all these people to take care of, and he's got dementia, and your father's coming back into your life. Okay. But hey, we're growing these lives, and we're not in charge of what is then given to us to take care of. We get some say, maybe, in how we're going to respond to it. Maybe. But we don't get to say what's coming along.

Thank you so much.

[Participant:] When you talked about the move to actualization, what's the first one?

[Russell:] Realization.

[Participant:] Will you be presenting that later on?

[Russell:] Yeah, it's usually something I dwell more on in our last week. But yeah.

[Participant:] Yeah.

Closing

[Russell:] Okay. I see yawns. We're going to wait till tomorrow to finish our sharing. It feels long enough right now.

What I'd like to do is a walking meditation. Set up for meditation. Dim the lights a little bit, light the candles. I'd like to do a walking first, and then a sitting. And do we need to open some windows, do you think? Some fresh air in here, maybe?

Okay.