Movement lesson

Angela 2 — Week 5, Day 3, Session 3 — 15 minutes

Summary: Russell guides a standing exploration of support — feet, soft knees, pelvis, and breath — so that vulnerability can rest on grounding, lengthening, and centering rather than on contractions in the jaw, eyes, and shoulders. He includes the ankles, then closes toward introductions and an ATM.

Support underneath

[Russell:] Okay, so the next step I'd like to work out here. Then we'll go in, we'll speak some more, and then we'll go into an ATM.

The ATM will be somewhat connected to what we're doing here.

It's actually perfect, following this theme of vulnerability. The security in the body is so much connected to our sense of the ground, our sense of center — that we're empowered from our pelvis, that the breath can drop down, that the empowerment of our lower body allows a softening in our heart and in our throat.

So that instead of carrying ourselves with all this contraction in our jaws, necks, eyes, and shoulders — when we don't have the support from down here, we carry ourselves from up here, and we protect ourselves with our contractions up here.

It's not safe to have a softening in here if you don't have something reliable underneath you.

Part of why we started with the legs and feet yesterday, and are continuing today, along with the breath, the four-phase breath, is cultivating enough support that it can be healthy to be vulnerable. Because vulnerability is not healthy if you don't get support from some other place. Better to be protected.

So I want to grow some of the key features in our support.

Ground, length, and center

So again, just shift your weight.

Yesterday, connecting to the feet and the softness of the knees. Moving from center.

Remember the embodied qualities that we've worked with from the beginning, that there's this groundedness. And connecting to the ground also connects to this light and lengthening.

And why is the lengthening so important? It's 'cause our contractions up here keep us from this kind of intimacy, this vulnerability, this connectedness.

But to have the length here, the freedom in our spine, we need some support underneath. So ground and length go together.

If you think of a person embodying dignity, courage — in an embodied way, we can picture this. My heroes, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, these people have this dignity in their spine, and yet a quality that they're here on the ground.

And so, shifting your weight, moving from center. We have grounding, lengthening, centering. Right?

In our first week, we emphasize the grounding and lengthening. The second week, we emphasize the centering and the breathing.

Again, that quality that when we feel stuck, our breathing tends to get stuck. And how helpful the four-phase breathing, and the freeing of the breath throughout the organism, can be, so that we can embody our grounded, centered presence.

And from there, it gets to be safe to open our hearts.

Right? So grounded, centered.

Breath through the pelvis

You sense the breath down towards your pelvis.

Maybe put a hand — put your hands. Let's start in front.

Some invitation of the breath coming down through you, but with the exhale, have that picture of the lengthening up, so you don't end up collapsing in your exhale.

The exhale is a time of letting go, but it's not a dropping, necessarily.

Have one hand in front and one in back — back of the other hand on your sacrum — and you're shifting weight, sensing breath down through here.

Letting your shoulders drop, and your neck and head have their length.

Change the hands whenever helpful.

Some give in your knees.

These are kind of key points. We have the ground in the feet, that we're not locking our knees, that we're connected to center. We have our length.

And then in the upper body, the key points are to notice the contraction in the shoulders, which always includes the neck contraction up here, the contractions in the jaw, and the fixedness in the eyes.

So shoulders, jaw, eyes are the keys in the upper part of ourselves.

We'll be clarifying all these things over these next days.

So let one foot come forward, and as you come forward again, the feeling is you're moving from center, and you're sensing down and up.

Don't lock the knee. Let there be some give in the knee, so there's a buoyancy there.

There's a sense of length, and yet groundedness. So you're not coming up off the earth, but you're also not collapsing down.

Jaw and eyes

Notice if the jaw has — is there some space between your teeth?

There's a slight space between the teeth.

If there's some weight in the jaw, we don't need to go around with our mouth hanging open, but it's an active contraction if your teeth are touching. That's called chewing.

And when you don't have something in your mouth, don't chew.

[Student:] I have a contraction in my mouth. Always there. I can consciously relax until it's back in an instant.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Student:] So I try to make contact through my eyes, to relax and make contact with the world.

[Russell:] Yes.

[Student:] Because the sense of the world's not sick.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Student:] Yeah. I don't know how to deal with — how to do — yeah.

[Russell:] Okay, so we'll do a lesson tomorrow morning that will speak to them, okay?

It's bringing back, in a new way, something we did in the second week, but I can answer it more directly bodily than I can verbally.

The left foot

Let the left foot come forward. And just pause for a moment.

Get clear — the ground. The knee. That you're in touch with your pelvis. Breath is invited down.

Let your arms hang for a moment and feel — is there space for your neck and head to rise, and your shoulders to rest?

As the jaw eases, and the eyes be soft, even if they're closed.

Come to the back foot, again having some bend in the knee.

Stand on both legs.

Freedom in the ankles

One thing that I'm skipping over in our lower body, just 'cause I don't want it to be too many things — but it's actually part of the focus of the ATM we're gonna do later this morning — is the importance of our ankles.

So we can think of the ankles as part of the foot, for this context.

It's surprising how important the freedom of the ankles is for the whole torso, especially the lower back and sacrum.

The rigidity in our ankles is like driving without shock absorbers. And there's a smashing that occurs in the lumbar and in the sacrum — of course also in the knees and hips.

So one of the things, right now standing: see if you can lift the insides of both heels and just be on the outside of your feet.

Inside of both feet lifted a little bit. The toes are down — you're not lifting the toes — and then go to the inside of both feet.

See if you can feel that shift. The knees come in, and go out. Feel the movement in your hips.

This movement in itself — Feldenkrais did a bunch of work around this. I think it's connected to his judo work with foot sweeps.

And this movement, particularly bringing the inside of the foot up and the outside down, was a major movement in judo. And he began connecting how important that is for opening the legs for meditation.

So we're gonna do a lesson a little later this morning that will help us with our feet and ankles, but also for the sitting practice, and should be helpful all the way through our lower body.

[Student:] Does it have to do with the spiraling, when we're lifting the inner and the outer? Through the spirals in the leg?

[Russell:] Sure, yeah. There's a coming up and out. It's like a lifting.

When we're collapsed in the insides — like when we have no arches, or we're collapsed very much to the inside — the knees get folded inward, the hip joints get brought together. There's generally a contraction in the lower part of the pelvis.

For many people, just bringing the weight out actually raises them about a quarter of an inch. They get taller.

So we will clarify that.

Length from both ends

Okay, so now, just another few moments of standing.

Feeling the ground — the texture, the temperature.

Sensing the length, the rising out of the ground, the top of the head towards the sky. There's a feeling of length in your spine.

If there's a tendency for you to get overly contracted in your lower back, then just imagine that your coccyx, your tailbone, has a tail, and it's a little heavier.

Not that you're folding your pelvis under, but that it's just as if you're weighted down in your spine, even as you're pulled up. So from both ends, there's a lengthening.

Feel some give in your knees. Breath downward.

So these are some key elements to what I think of as grounded, centered embodiment. That we're awake in our legs and feet, that we're moving from center, the breath can easily drop down, and we're able to be much freer in our upper body.

This is where we meet the world. This is where we hug, or keep it away. This is where we take in the visual, take in the auditory, take in food.

This is our meeting with the world, all up here. And to have this support underneath us is critical.

Okay, thank you.

Let's go ahead and sit in a small circle to start, complete our introductions, and then have an ATM lesson.