Talk

Angela 2 — Week 5, Day 5, Session 2 — 43 minutes

Summary: Russell teaches sympathetic joy, happiness in another's happiness, and how bodily experience already joins us to something larger than a separate self. Students ask about opening to others' joy and sorrow without being overwhelmed. He speaks of life-giving anger and sangha, then guides a practice of permeable boundaries and simple contact.

Sympathetic joy

[Russell:] There's a wonderful teaching in Buddhism — many wonderful teachings, but one of them that I appreciate so much, which I think is a little bit rare, is what they call sympathetic joy.

And sympathetic joy is the feeling of happiness in another's happiness.

And I feel so wonderful for the people in Seattle. But it's true. It's true.

And I can also feel disappointment about my team losing, and know that there's lots of people who are taking it seriously, who feel some real loss, because some people really identify like that, and that's kind of sweet in a certain way.

But you know what I mean. That was a real discovery for me. I might have mentioned that before. It actually came as a very powerful insight about twenty years ago. A long time ago, Linda and I committed to a monogamous relationship. So that was maybe a few years into our relationship.

And there was a moment when I had this recognition that I would never be with another woman again. And something inside went —

And then I had a realization. I mean, that actually lived in me for a while as some sort of burden. Burden's not quite right, but just some sort of closed place. And I was still committed, but it really felt like I was giving something up for that commitment. That's a whole other thing. There's things that I learned in that.

But then I had this experience of seeing some women I found very attractive, and seeing them with certain men, and being so grateful to those men for doing the life I was not doing.

No, really. That's when I first found what sympathetic joy really is. They're living that. I'm not jealous of it, but the flip side of that is I can have joy, and let that part of me, embodied by them, experience that. And I don't have to have all the complications.

And then, around the same time, I was going through an airport — a rare experience — and saw this group of monks who were, judging by their robes, probably from Thailand. And I said, they're doing the monk thing for me. The part of me that could just dedicate myself to practice and nothing else.

And then I started seeing how these different beings are living the lives I'm not living. And that kind of freed up a certain part of myself that wanted it all. And it all tends to go very shallow when you're grasping at trying to cover all the bases.

And so the life I have, of course, includes loss. And there's something, as you've heard me talk about before, about embracing our loss — not shying away from it, but embracing it — that has sorrow in it, but it also has joy in it. And that joy part is not often experienced that way, and I encourage it.

[Participant 1:] Well, it's a story along those lines that might actually challenge all of us a little bit more than thinking other people are having gratitude for others living our life.

A friend of mine, quite a few years ago, had an affair with an old boyfriend. She wasn't young, but she must have been in her late forties, so it was kind of toward the end of the time of your life when you're likely to start having affairs.

And she had this passionate affair, really intense, and she was going to leave her husband, and this guy was going to leave his wife, and they were going to get married. They had been boyfriend and girlfriend in high school. And then he decided he couldn't do it. He couldn't leave his wife. And so her husband found out.

And his response was the most incredibly generous response I've ever heard. And he said to her, "I am so glad you've had this experience at this time in your life." He meant it, you know? I was like, whoa. And he just got it.

[Russell:] Yeah. Thank you. That's a wonderful story. It's an inspiring story. Just an ordinary guy who isn't some spiritual teacher.

[Participant 2:] So what strikes me about your description is, from the Buddhist teachings, the recognition that others' joy is our joy, and others' suffering is our suffering. When the separateness and the self-containment is relaxed and we become more permeable, it is like the joys and the suffering in Seattle and San Francisco. It is our suffering and our joy.

[Russell:] Yeah, yeah, and that's just — thank you. That's just somehow where I wanted to start our morning.

Already connected

[Russell:] I wonder if you experience something about what I said this morning, when we were standing in the meditation. When we are connected to our bodily experience — before thought, within thought, beyond thought — when we're connected to our bodily experience, it doesn't mean there isn't any thought, but thought is also within.

Connected to our bodily experience, we implicitly are already connected to something larger than ourselves. And how could you be? You're standing on something. I mean, you have to be in a real denial to think that you live separately from that.

The air is right there moving through us. The idea that we are somehow contained within the boundaries of this body as a separate being — you have to be in radical denial of your experience to believe in your separation.

And that we are here together. This is a fact. We're not here alone. It's a concept that we are here separately.

If we look to our bodily experience, what I realize is, it's only when my thinking is my identity, only when I get lost in the created world of my inner symbolizing, my imagination, my history constructing itself again. It's only when that is predominant in my experience, when the sense of beingness and the sense of bodiness fall away and I'm lost in thought — that is the only time that I feel separate, alone. It's unworkable somehow. My problems get bigger. My inabilities seem huge.

Now, I'm not suggesting that that level of the self isn't an extremely important part of the self. It's just when it gets disconnected from the life stream, when we're no longer sensing our connection to something larger than our self-created world.

It's in that separation that those thoughts seem so real that it's almost impossible to question that sense of insecurity, or that sense of stupidity, or that sense of being unlovable, or whatever is the stumbling place in our inner story — or stumbling places.

As soon as I remember my authentic experiencing, as soon as I am back in the river of my experiencing, it's not necessarily pleasant, but there's a sense of connectedness to larger than the separate self. And that connectedness is so key to the work we're doing.

That we're in touch with our autonomy, that we each have different gifts to bring, but that autonomy is constantly being — it's like the windows are open, and it's constantly being refreshed, and living into, and living through, our interconnecting.

And when that's an experience that we have enough, and we get confidence in that, then when our historical stuck places arise, they're still painful, but it feels workable. It doesn't feel so dramatic. It doesn't feel impossible. It doesn't feel true in some existential sense. It feels, oh, okay, I'm getting stuck again. Okay.

And that's when pausing, dropping down, connecting to body, saying hello, being with what's there — and then it starts to soften the boundaries. We start getting more permeable again. It can still be uncomfortable, but there's some air moving through, some life force moving through, and from that place, asking for help is, in my experience, remarkably both effective and sustaining.

Opening the eyes

[Participant 3:] A place of difficulty for me in meditation is just opening my eyes.

[Russell:] Yeah.

[Participant 3:] As soon as I open them, there's a reflex that objectifies the outer, and then separates. I don't know how to work with that.

[Russell:] Okay. Would it feel as true to say there's a habit that does that, as a reflex?

[Participant 3:] Okay, so yeah, there's this habit. It's really deep. It's very fast. It's very, very fast.

[Russell:] Could we say — and this seems trivial, but I'm gonna argue it's important — that it's extremely, extremely fast, and it's not instantaneous.

I'd like you to feel into your experience when you meditate, because there, that gap — that gap is a moment of no subject, no object. There's a moment in which the oneness is there, and then — and all we need is a little bit of that.

It doesn't need to sustain itself, because we can have the sense of subject-object living in the field of non-separation.

Okay, so we just need little tastes of that, so that becomes authentic in our experience. It doesn't have to sustain itself. That's a different question.

Staying open

[Participant 4:] I remember when I read the article about implicit connectivity. Yeah, I remember that when I read it, there was a focus on going back to ground and being grounded. And she was describing working then from your inner self and your feelings. And that all made sense.

And then, as we started moving toward larger space and permeability, and the larger community that we're engaged with, where I run into a process is that when I open up to the larger community, the sadness and the sorrow — it's overwhelming.

So if I go back to be grounded, I find myself coming back in. You know, reading the newspaper over here, turning on the computer, and I find myself coming back in, as opposed to staying open, because I don't know what to do with all that. It just really overwhelms me sometimes.

So I've got this quandary. How do you stay grounded without going back in — being grounded, but still be open?

[Russell:] Right, right, right, right. Or could we say, how to be grounded and have that?

[Participant 4:] Right.

[Russell:] Well, yes.

Yeah, it's not easy what we're doing here.

[Participant 4:] Right. Right.

[Russell:] Okay, well that's great. That's beautiful, 'cause that's part of it. Maybe hints from your inner life.

Give more conscious moments to the appreciations of the joys and the beauties, and like just a few more seconds with that story about that person, and really let that in your body, so that you have some of that. So that's really in you, that you have the living experience of the beauty, of the grace that is alive also.

We need that. We need to cultivate that. We tend to skip over that a little bit. Some of us a lot. So that sounds like part of it.

The other is — there's a paradox for me. This is gonna come out all wrong, I think.

There's a way in which the suffering breaks open my heart, brings a sadness, brings an oh, oh, oh. And living around that — and this is the part that's hard to put into words.

Is the sense that — I don't know what to say. It's a bowing to the — I don't want to say that it's good what's happening, or that it's in any way not full of sorrow, but I get rid of my sense of wrongness about it.

Even really terrible events, because I realize I don't know all the things connected to that. And it's beyond my wisdom, actually, to understand whether this is karmic happenings from other lives. But what I come to is not some kind of resignation — well, it had to be — but some kind of recognition of my ignorance, and not siding only with the part of me that says that just shouldn't happen.

That part's there, but I want to place the reality of life as having a stronger weight than my opinions, preferences, evaluations, without casting aside the part of me that hates it, or that gets angry about it.

Because when I have all of that, the anger can become life-giving anger. I don't dwell in the constriction. But the anger becomes, how do I open to this situation? Is there action I want to take in this situation?

If there's not action, can I bring it into my prayer life, or into my meditation, to include this? Can I somehow take this energy? Because anger is just a name for a certain energy that's gotten vitalized, that could be a positive force.

And where it gets to be a constricted force is when what's in the anger is our judgments about everything. So to honor the place that's judging, right? So we're getting levels of complexity.

It's not that we're saying, okay, stop judging. No. Last night I had a Focusing with Bruno that was just great for me.

What I discovered was I was working with a challenging situation, the thing in the other training program that I still have some energy about. And what came was, there was a place inside that wanted to stop being so understanding, and wanted to just kind of rant and rave a little bit at the people who were doing it — and so letting that part come brought such laughter.

It's fun that, okay, I don't have to be so understanding. Of course I have this larger perspective. Of course that's there. I'm not getting rid of that. But within that could be this little guy who just wanted the whole thing to stop and wanted it to go away and just wanted to bitch about it a little bit.

And how wonderful that the inner listening could let that place be there. And then that energy — and then it became laughter. And now I wake up with a very different energy about the challenges that are there.

I don't know if that's the kind of example that can help with what you're working with.

[Participant 4:] Yeah. It's just about the reality of life, you know. I'm going to have to listen to it again.

[Russell:] Yes. Well, it's a lot.

[Participant 4:] Okay.

[Russell:] And that's it. And to listen to it down in here. Because what I'm trying to — my words are at one level, but as some of you know, most of my communication is body to body. And that'll come through there. To get this experience of that interbeing.

Beloved community

[Russell:] So I woke up this morning and I'm feeling this — I don't know what kind of joy was there — and feeling the sense of connectedness. And I had to send an email, so I checked my email, and then I realized something. I realized it yesterday, but forgot this morning.

It was Martin Luther King Day, and that we're celebrating. And then I just thought of that, and that brings a certain feeling in my body, so I let that come in. And then I got an email with a quote from him. That is just what we're working with.

He talked about his beloved community. He had a writing or a speech called Sangha by Another Name, and that's what beloved community is. Because he went to India in '58, he was so influenced by Gandhi, went to ashrams and studied nonviolence, so he knew some of the language. Sangha by Another Name is what he called beloved community.

And this is just a small quote from him.

"We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality. Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way the world is made."

Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. That's sangha — working for each other as we work for ourselves at the same time.

You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. And this is the way the world is made. This is the way it unfolds. The way we evolve.

So, yeah, this is good. Let me say this.

One of the challenges that came up for a couple of people in the other group — this is an interesting twist — was we had a conference call with the group about the reactions to this person. And so I got an email, and one was very concerned about how accepting everyone was, and concerned that there was a kind of groupthink around acceptance.

And I thought that was really good to bring forth, out of the group mind. We do have a value of forgiveness and acceptance, but she was concerned that there was a kind of groupthink. Do we have this? And she's new to the program, and she wants to make sure, what kind of community is she entering? And do I have to think like everybody else? Is this part of what I'm getting into? And so we've been having this dialogue back and forth.

And she's a therapist who works a lot with autonomy, a lot with very, very hurt people — she's kind of specialized in trauma work.

And this integration that we've been working with since day one: the inseparability of working with our autonomous personal development and our permeability. And the permeability — our interconnectedness, interbeing — is not about erasing the individual. Now that's the old nirvanic picture. But we're looking at a different picture.

How do we be really different autonomous beings, with different preferences, different behaviors, different abilities, different gifts? And that autonomy is living in harmony with, and permeable to, the other beings and the larger forces. To have both of those together — interbeing that doesn't eliminate the individual.

Practice

[Russell:] Let's close your eyes for a moment and kind of drop the energy down.

You know, that picture of grounded and centered has boundary to it, has an integrity of the organism. Integrity implies integer. Integer is one. That you are separate also, that you are independent, yet you're not. You have a body. It's boundaried, and we need these boundaries for our evolution.

Feel, I'm here, sensing the grounded, centered integrity. And as one has a kind of confidence in that, one can let the boundaries open and soften, and the body actually softens, but it still has a good base.

So it doesn't protect itself through contractions in the chest and neck and jaw and eyes, but it relies on its base for support.

We contract when we feel under threat, and need to. Safety comes first.

When we're safe enough, the invitation is the opening, the interbeing, that keeps recycling back to the autonomous self and the interbeing — autonomous self, interbeing. They're like an inhale and an exhale.

And in the pause between, there's just this living together. It's not autonomous. It's not separate. It is interdependent. It's all together. And you're still there.

Just some four-phase breathing at your own rate.

Inviting the boundaries to be permeable, if that feels safe. Space around you to come alive, just by opening your attention from your body outward, or from outward towards your body.

Hold lightly the thinker.

Can awareness be here without you knowing who you are?

Just gaps in the self story.

[Silence 32 seconds]

There might come a vibration in your body. We can even let go of the picture of your body, and just sense. Something senses vibration or pulsation.

And maybe even "something senses" is not needed. Maybe just pulsation. Or breath, breathing.

[Silence 33 seconds]

Softly let the sense of I am here come, because we need that also. I'm here on this spot, and sense — a subtle sense of this presencing that's alive and noticing things.

And the presencing notices the breath and sounds, and also the light turns towards the thoughts and feelings. They appear within the presencing.

[Silence 33 seconds]

Let your eyes be open.

Maybe there can be a sense that perceiving occurs, but it doesn't occur from a particular place. It doesn't occur from your head. It occurs.

[Silence 35 seconds]

Let your eyes be open. Let yourself have contact with someone. You can find someone to be in contact with.

And just — we're experimenting with how, when we see another, there's maybe — maybe it's comfortable, maybe something arises. And think, is it possible to have this welcoming presence that doesn't need to be anything, doesn't even need to feel like it's perceiving well, or anything?

There's just an openness. And then find another.

And if you find that you start getting uncomfortable in any way, just take care of that place. Intentionally move your attention, but then just see if you can rest with another. And you not be anything, and just rest.

One more. One more person to be with.

And just sharing a field of openness, without anything special.

Close your eyes. Sit and live in what's alive in yourself.

[Silence 35 seconds]

After

[Participant 5:] I closed my eyes, and a Beatles song appeared. It just came. I just closed my eyes, and I was literally hearing, I am here, and you are here, and we are here, and we are all together.

I don't know the last time I ever heard that song.

[Russell:] Okay, so thank you. Thank you, thank you.

What I'd like to do, since my schedule is all kaflooey, is I'd like to go outside, do some movement together, and go right into a movement lesson. And then we'll unfold into our next practices from that.

Okay, so if you need the bathroom, use it fairly quickly. I don't want to pause significantly.