Talk

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

Summary: Russell traces the three turnings of the wheel, from the Four Noble Truths through Nagarjuna's teaching that nothing exists independently, to the Mahayana integration in which selflessness is love. Sitting for others is a courageous turning toward life, a light offered to the whole, including generations still to come.

The first turning

Some of you probably already know this, but I think it's an interesting frame of reference. If we look at the current Buddha, Gautama Buddha, who, they say, is the seventh in the line of Buddhas.

So it's good to have that picture, that it's a continuity, and that there's a coming Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, who is spoken of in numerous traditions.

And the current Buddha, Gautama Buddha — when he had his realization, his complete enlightenment experience, he then gave his first teaching in a place called Deer Park in India. There he laid out the Four Noble Truths. He laid out his path, how to do this, how to do what he did. He gave a teaching.

And that was called the first turning of the wheel. First turning of the wheel.

You had a concerned look on your face. Oh, okay.

So the wheel gets turned, and there's a turning. And what's so beautiful in the picture, actually, in his moment of enlightenment — the story goes, this is as much mythology as anything, but I think it's helpful for us, because I think it lives in our field. He stood up and pointed to the earth. The earth and all beings of this earth are simultaneously enlightened with me.

In other words, he brought this capacity to be all of us. That's why when they say we are Buddha nature, in our core we have Buddha nature, it's the sense that this realization became available to everyone.

We just turned the wheel one time.

So then he goes to tell people, well, if you'd like, if you have any interest in being free from suffering, you might want to do these things. So he gave out his teaching, and kind of the causalities, and how things work.

So the wheel was turned, and they say many people who were quite prepared were enlightened in his presence, just hearing these words, or receiving the teachings.

The second turning

Now there's a second turning. Again, mythology of the second turning, that there were teachings that were held back, that he felt like the people weren't ready for these teachings. And so one story

is that they were hidden for 400 years — some say 400, some say 600 — which is a very interesting timeframe, because it makes it 100 years before Christ or 100 years after Christ. It's right in that time that these teachings were discovered in southern India.

And he was teaching in northern India. These teachings were given to a historical being, a man named Nagarjuna.

Again, the mythology is he was taken into the ocean, found by dragons — naga means dragon — and found these teachings. But they say they come from Buddha, and it's the second turning. And now it's really interesting, because the first turning was all these teachings. Now the second turning is: everything I said before is wrong.

Don't believe my teachings.

What he was saying now was, it's not that they're wrong, it's just that anything you say is wrong. Don't believe your mind. Because your thoughts are unreliable. Don't believe your feelings, because your feelings are unreliable. Don't believe your body, because your body's unreliable.

Not only unreliable — now this is the very interesting part to get — they don't exist independently.

And this is when Jean speaks of interaction first. It's a very similar understanding from a very different place.

It's that this is not a bell, except that we call it a bell. This is made of certain components. This is made of metals, and it was made through heat, and it was made — and actually those metals required somebody to take the metal out of the ground. And this was made of many, many actions, and it's temporarily used as something that makes noise that we call a bell.

Now, there's a really good chance in a few hundred years it's going to be something else. So it temporarily takes a form because of conditions. It doesn't exist outside of my hand right now, and outside of this room right now, and outside of the conditions that created it, and the conditions that it is becoming. It's only in our mind that it is a separate thing called the bell.

And he's saying, this is true of everything. And the part that he didn't think people were ready to hear is, it's true of you.

That you don't exist separate from the people that you're in connection with, the chair that's supporting you, the earth that's holding you up, the air that's going through you. That the idea that there's a you that gets carried around, independent of all this, is just foolish thinking. I mean, foolish in the sense that it's not seeing what's in front of you. We could not be having this conversation without the earth holding us, and without this air.

So to have the picture that you are separate from this air and this earth is obviously erroneous. It's part of the mythology we were raised in, of being this separate being.

Now, if we really examine things, it doesn't hold up. And then if we realize, well, I couldn't be here without my parents, and there's going to come a time when this body is not going to be here, and I couldn't be having this moment of speaking to you without this room and you listening, and you couldn't be here without everything else that's creating this moment.

We realize that it's a concept that we live in as separate beings, that the experience of living is one of interbeing. If we look to our experience and step out of the concept, interbeing is our reality, moment after moment.

So Buddha's second turning of the wheel was basically annihilation of the first, which said, you know, here's a path. Well, what I said doesn't exist. The path doesn't exist. You don't exist. But this is a big problem. Because if you don't have a very strong ethical development, then it goes, well, nothing matters. Anything I do is fine.

The third turning

So then he had the third turning of the wheel, which was integrating the two. Which was basically, yeah, it's really true that you can't say anything that's true, and it's really true that you don't exist, and the teachings don't exist, and it's really good to do them.

And now, the most important thing I want you to see, though, is when the wheel was turned. In the third turning of the wheel, what came was a new stage for humanity. And in Buddhism, it's called Mahayana. It's a new stage. And what is that new stage?

It says, well, since I don't exist without you, you are like my thumb or my right leg or my finger. I do not exist without you.

This is the ground for saying love is the highest — or the most accurate — relationship to life. It's saying that my separation is untenable. It's saying that selflessness is a teaching of love.

So everybody hears this from Buddhists, you know — selfless, no self — and it sounds so nihilistic, it sounds so dark, it's emptiness, all this stuff. And I think a lot of Buddhists get that confused. They don't realize that the teachings of selflessness, the teachings of interbeing, are fundamentally, we can say in the modern Western world, identical to the essential teaching of Christ.

That love is your essence, and that you are here to manifest, to take care of all of us by taking care of the situation that you're in.

Your job is to take care of the person that you think you are. Take care of that body, take care of that mind, take care of those feelings, take care of the people you interact with, take care of the situations that you're in. And if you're called to larger situations or smaller situations, those are your situations.

And the calling is the same, whether you're here to save the world in some grand sense, or take care of that hurt place in your heart. It's the exact same strategy, we could say — or that's not the word I want to use — the exact same approach, which is, how do I love this moment into its own rightness, into its own right place?

How do I take care of it so that it moves to its own livingness, so that it is in harmony with the all that's around it?

Because unless — see, so Mahayana and this selfless teaching led to what's called the bodhisattva vow. Bodhi — awakening, or awakened — sattva, being.

And what that means is a bodhisattva is taking this vow, which basically says, since we're all one and we're all in this together, I can't feel completely free and blissful and enlightened until everyone else is free, because they're me too.

So the first turning of the wheel said, get enlightened yourself, which was a necessary step. But now it's another invitation, which is, you can't get enlightened yourself.

That if you think you can get enlightened yourself, you're going to suffer, because you've cut off from the all. You've cut off from the interconnectivity, which is what we are. It's not what we're aspiring to. We're aspiring to realize it and live like that, but that's what we are already.

Sitting for others

So when I invite sitting for others, it's not some sort of abstract, sweet idea. Oh, you know, I mean, it's that too. But it's recognizing that so many of us — first, we find sitting difficult because we think it's about our own mind, mostly, and our minds are confused and it's hard to be with, and we think it should be quieter than it is, and stuff like that.

Second, we think we're doing it just for ourselves, so it doesn't matter if I don't do it.

But when we see that, in the first place, yes, it's good to work with the mental chatter, but that's not the essence of what's happening. What's happening is sitting still with an intention to turn towards life. That courageous intention is already standing up for life.

And that courageous intention is manifesting Buddha in the world, even when your mind is busy.

And we're doing that as a gift to others at the same time. So we're sitting there — to take care of the moment to the best of our ability when we're awake, to have the courage to return when we don't want to be here. To take care of the place that doesn't want to be here with kindness, and sometimes that means just dribbling around in thoughts and knowing you're doing that.

But mostly it means, okay, I'm going to do my best to orient to presence. Not just so that my mind gets calmer, which hopefully it will, and does, and not just because my life gets better when I sit. And almost everybody who sits regularly will report that their life gets better. Even if you feel your sitting doesn't, your life will.

And as we realize what we're doing, you'll find your sitting gets better too, because for most of us, if we know that — your willingness to come awake in one moment, you can think of it like a light bulb went on in vast darkness.

It's like a light. If we think of your body as dark and a cell gets lit up, that's what I think happens when we do our movements. There are these little lights that go on, and we start becoming conscious beings.

And I believe that's happening in the cosmos, in this whole field, that there are these lights in the darkness.

And I don't know if we need, you know, 10 kazillion to the kazillion kazillion power for this to happen, or I don't know the amount, but I know the direction. The direction is more moments of light.

And so we contribute what we can. Because our children's children's children's children's children — well, let me say it this way. As every Waldorf teacher will tell you, in the last 20 years there's been a diminishment in the children's capacity to experience life. They're losing the connection to the livingness.

There's a darkening in the human being, and there are forces that are darkening us.

And it takes a true commitment to be willing to sit in our own dark places and bring some little flickers of light. And I'm saying that that's good for ourselves, but maybe more importantly, it's not for our — it's for this all, which includes the future generations that will have a much harder time.

In the story I tell, and you don't have to agree with it, but we'll have a much harder time if we don't turn on some of these lights now.

So when you feel like it's too much for you, you probably have more energy in you if you feel that it's giving something to some beings you care about, who can't do it yet.

And I don't say that just to try to give you some cheap inspiration, but that's really the way I see this.

This field — I mean, I've never been one for the metaphor of light fighting darkness and good against evil and that kind of thing, but there is something in that that feels accurate.

And it calls upon beings who've received the blessings that we have, and the authentic teachings that we have, to move in that direction.

And the fringe benefit is that you feel better and better, but that's a kind of side benefit.

So the direction is love, and love is taking care of your moment. And when it's sitting on the cushion, it's taking care of the pain in the knee with your warm-heartedness. It's a willingness to sit through it sometimes, because that's also growing courage in the field.

Now, if you're torturing yourself, we don't want that in the field, but we want the courage to sit through difficult moments.

Imagine every time you manifest a quality like that, it becomes easier for others to find it.

So it's worth feeling. What's the difference between self-torture and the courage to sit with a difficult sensation? We want to distinguish that. We don't want self-torture, and we want the courage to sit through difficult moments. And —

No. That's not a joke at all. Not at all.

Let's close the doors.

[Silence 48 seconds]

[Silence 20 minutes]

[Silence 5 minutes]