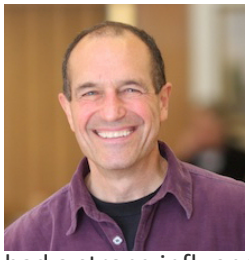
Russell Delman: Beginner's Mind

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Russell Delman's dedication to the study of awareness and human potential began in 1969 as a college undergraduate. The main influences on his teaching are over 40 years of Zen meditation, his close relationship and training with Moshe Feldenkrais (he has helped to train over 2500 Feldenkrais teachers worldwide), a deep study of somatic psychology including Focusing, and his rich family life. Over the last seven years, his friendship with Gene Gendlin has illuminated his understanding of life and had a strong influence on his teaching.

Serge Prengel is the editor of Proactive Mindfulness project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: We're coming to this idea of beginner's mind.

Russell: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm so pleased that you resonate with that because it's been such a guiding light for me. It actually began, my whole work in Zen was just that phrase actually. Somehow over the 45 years now, it keeps enriching itself. You know? If we're going to be true to that, then boy, freshness is really called for and the more you do it, the more freshness is called for. It's so easy to ... Just to warm up the old dish, right? It's so easy to do that.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. That freshness. Earlier, you know, you said something that could be a paradox. You called beginner's mind a guiding light, and it's really wonderful to think that the not-knowing could be the guiding light.

Russell: Isn't it true? Oh, yeah. Let's go slow there because I hadn't really seen that when I said it, and it's so true that you're pointing that now.

Yeah. That possibility ... It's so in where, for me, Focusing and Zen really meet, actually and my work, The Embodied Life. It's all around this same, you could say, elusive. We could say "always there", guiding light called freshness. Call it, in the great Zen phrase, the first principle is not knowing or just that lovely phrase that I got. Shunryu Suzuki, that so many of us did with his Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, that he was the one to really bring that. It was a popular, not a popular, it was a well-known phrase in the history of Zen but he really brought it to the United States.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: Yeah, yeah.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: Just even as I say that, I feel such indebtedness, indebtedness living right next to gratitude because they're similar but different. Indebtedness and gratitude to ... Yeah, let's go further, to the guiding light of beginner's mind without denigrating the value of our knowing also.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: That beginner's mind includes what we've learned over these years, which is something.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so that sense... As you're doing this, that sense of, "Okay, I don't have to choose one or the other." You know, this non-duality is not about negating that the opposites exist, but that they can be contained.

Russell: Oh, so important, so important. I really, really rail against the superficial understanding of non-duality when it does not include duality. Suzuki Roshi's way of saying that was, "Not one, not two", which is so good. It's not saying all is one.

Serge: Right.

Russell: It's saying, "Well, duality is important." It's not saying, "Well, it's all one and duality." That would be the easy way to go. "Oh, let's include oneness and duality." Okay, we got our bases covered. We feel confident, but go one more step and it's not one, not two and your mind goes ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. We need that, right?

Serge: Right, right.

Russell: We need that moment that we're ...

Serge: Right, right. Very nice, because as you do that, you have that gesture and you have that body of being jolted-

Russell: Yeah.

Serge: Out of complacency.

Russell: There we go.

Serge: You know?

Russell: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right there.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: Right there. Yeah. Yeah, let's take that in.

This is calling to mind. I had a call this morning with my Embodied Life community. We have international calls once a month, and the subject that was brought is sometimes called the essential pause or what I think Mary Gendlin maybe called the revolutionary pause-

Serge: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Russell: Something like that. It was so nice when I met her language that it was the same thing we're talking about. Right now I'm connecting the centrality of pause to beginner's mind and how to have that and how pausing, we don't want to make it into ... Now this is tough to say. We don't want to make it into an imposition on the flow of the moment, because flow often carries something from the larger space through us. It's not needing a pause until it needs a pause. Right? If we have the idea, "Oh, I should pause every minute" or something, you know, it becomes a practice in that kind of studied sense.

Serge: Right, right, right. As you're talking about this, you know, and I'm also in a way following not just your words but you have this hand movement.

Russell: Movement, yes.

Serge: You're talking about the flow of things and, you know, the kind of practice would be a pause here, pause there. It's interrupting the flow in an artificial way. In contrast, what I'm hearing you say is, in a way, "Be so in tune with the flow that you hear the moment when the flow calls for a pause."

Russell: Yeah, nice. Nicely put, nicely put. We can toss that because sometimes pausing is just like bathing in the sun, you know?

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: It's like taking that moment to let it all drop down, drop in. Yeah.

It's really around this that, I think, was the ... In some unknown way, in some surprising way, because I'm just connecting it now, this is part of the territory out of which I connected with Gene originally. I didn't come to Gene through Focusing, you know? I came to Gene because we were both good friends with Zalman Schacter, Rabbi Zalman Schacter. Zalman kept saying, "Russell, call Gene Gendlin. You're hearing the same muse. You're hearing the same muse." I go, "Zalman, I don't just call people. I'm a little shy that way." "No, no." Every year he would say this, for maybe five years. Then finally, I was in an airport in New Jersey, Newark Airport, and I go, "I'm just gonna call him."

The meeting was really like ... I want to go slow there. So touching because I got to see how his way of listening and connecting was both very familiar and satisfied a deep longing at the same time.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: That's how we began, he and I having lots of conversations. Then I learned some Focusing.

Serge: I love that description you have of feeling very moved at something that is both very familiar and you had a deep longing for. In a way, the phrase that goes with it is "coming home".

Russell: Lovely, lovely. Yes, yes. Very lovely. Yeah.

That coming home, just to stay with that because that's also ... I want to let it unfold how that winds back to beginner's mind because it's so central to this Embodied Life work that I do, of how the sitting practice, Zen-based sitting, the deep listening that includes Focusing, and movement work developed by Moshe Feldenkrais. Those are kind of the three legs of my work, that they all have this element of discovering something new and coming home at the same time.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Russell: Now isn't that interesting? I never really saw that, and there's something in that that's connected to beginner's mind, that sense of the newness but also the coming home.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. That freshness. It's not new in the sense of advertising new, all new, different, and so on.

Russell: Right, right.

Serge: It's new with freshness. It's always been there but just, in a way, it's like you catch your eye seeing it in a different way and suddenly, wow. Yeah.

Russell: Yes, yes. Beautiful. Beautiful, yes.

I'm not a philosopher. I'm not well-read or like that, but when I look at meaningfulness and the search for meaning of human beings in all walks of life, there is something in the authenticity of our own experiencing, validating and valuing the authenticity of our own experiencing that, that is what helps us to feel intimate with our lives. That comes from freshness. That comes from ... Beginner's mind is a great light towards that. "Can I have this experience, alive as it is?"

Serge: Maybe, I want to go ... Whenever we use words like "authentic", some people can feel intimidated in the sense of, you know, "Will I ever be able to have an authentic experience? What is it? I wouldn't know one. I've never had one." You know? You can go into your head a lot.

Russell: You know what I say then, Serge? I say to somebody, "Can you feel your bottom on the seat that you're sitting on?"

Serge: Right.

Russell: The other one goes, "Well, yeah." I go, "Can you sense your right hand is touching something?" "Well, yeah." "Your left hand, is it there somewhere?" "Yeah." I go, "You're really experiencing all that?" "Yeah!"

You know, people ... Our heads make everything so unattainable and so complex.

Serge: Right.

Russell: It's like fish trying to know water in a way. It's, like, so here, but the mind kind of jumps over it thinking that it's something more than that.

Serge: Right, right. You have this gesture the mind jumps over, and in contrast, you know, like The Embodied Life is coming back down.

Russell: Right. Beautiful, that's right. The jumping over or the coming back down, coming home, flesh [inaudible 00:16:14]. What is alive in this experiencing? What is wanting to be acknowledged, met in this experiencing?

Serge: In a way, that the moment of feeling like, "I don't know if I'm authentic", like, "Okay, so maybe at this moment you're up there."

Russell: Yeah.

Serge: "You need to go back to ground."

Russell: Isn't that a great gift, that we have this ground here? Right? The Tibetans, and also Rudolf Steiner, would say the angels envy us for certain things you can learn in the human body that you can't learn in other ways. I think that's a good example. Imagine you're floating in the universe and you're trying to find yourself, you know? It's so nice to have something substantial.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Russell: As a doorway back to presence, as a doorway back home.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: You know? It's like ... Yes. It's such a gift.

Serge: Yeah, the doorway back home.

Russell: Yeah, yeah. I say that and I think-

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: It really touches that place. Again, there's gratitude, and this deep, un-payable debt to these great, great teachers and teachings, for many of us, I think, that we're blessed by. For me personally, it was the Zen teachings, Moshe Feldenkrais, at a very young age that gave me practices to go deep. Much later Gene was part of that, you know, kind of hearing something similar but he was, he is so much more developed in certain traditions, certain ways of thinking, certain uses of language, that have just been such a gift for the expansion and deepening of my experience.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. As you're saying that, again, there's something that if we listen to it simply from an intellectual point of view, there's an apparent paradox because we're talking about traditions and you're talking about practices in contrast to beginner's mind and freshness.

Russell: Great, yes. Yes, yes. Nice, let's stay there a little bit now.

It's like the paradox. You don't have to rehearse to be yourself, and if you don't practice you're likely to miss it. Again, Suzuki said it this way. "You're perfect as you are, and there's always room for improvement."

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: That edge of paradox that we need to kind of-

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: Not get too comfortable. Perfect, you're perfect. You're perfect. You know? What about ...

It truly is a question of ... I have some people who will come to my retreats who have, in my opinion, misinterpreted some of the Advaita Vedanta, some of the teachings of oneness, non-duality, and begin with, "Well, why do you sit and meditate? Why do you teach meditation as a form where it's all one already? You don't need to do anything." It's absolutely true. You don't need to do anything. You know? Absolutely true. Boy, I have not met a person in this life who hasn't ... How do I want to say there? Without some practice or means or way of gathering the forces and the gifts that are living in us and helping to, not create them, but help them to function at their best, to help them to deepen, to help them to become whole within us ...

You know, the picture I get right now, Serge, is ... It's hard to imagine a really developed musician not practicing.

Serge: Right.

Russell: It's hard to imagine even the most abstract artist not putting in time to develop their strokes, or athlete. On the one hand we can say, "Well, yeah, it's different. Being an authentic, deep human being is natural. That's who we are." Well, yes, and this process of learning how to have the mental structures, the capacity for thought, the capacity for feeling, the capacity for awareness of thought and feeling and sensation, of all that together, to be able to function with all of that in an integrated way, in my experience, takes practice. It takes practice. We begin maybe as infants and we have this oneness, but then our job is to get some of that infant-ness back but not to become infants again.

Serge: Right.

Russell: Right? Infants are not great at compassion. Infants are not great at taking care of others. Infants are missing a lot of what we would call a developed human being, and yet they do have certain qualities that when we get hijacked by our thinking processes and our historic self-identities, we get really disconnected from that wholeness. We go, "I just want to be like an infant again, where I could be at one with the world and feel in harmony." Well, we want that part of infant-dom.

Serge: Yeah.

Russell: Also to be someone who can think, who can plan, who can remember, who can create. That incredibly demanding and mysterious human task of becoming this particular human being connected to the, call it inter-being or all or greater body, and to function both as an autonomous human being bringing our particular gift into fruition and having that in service to this wholeness that we share, that we are. [crosstalk 00:25:43]

Serge: Again, yeah, that friction, that paradox of, you know, that being an individual, having that sense of having one's own past, one's own history, one's own set of talents and gifts, at the same time as not having the illusion of being so separate and alone.

Russell: Right, right, right.

Serge: When we go into rigid words, we're actually into the realm of trying to reduce the world to ideas.

Russell: Right, right. Yes, yes. Yeah, which brings us towards that part of us that wants to control what's going to happen. As much as we long for the freshness of the living moment, there's almost as strong in us the desire not to be surprised by anything or to feel that I'm in control of this body, this mind, this relationship, this "What's going to happen next?" Right? There's a certain ... In some ways, that's the attempt of these thought boxes, right, to put the world into boxes that we can then move around but not get too shocked by and feel a sense of order and feel, "Okay, I've got that." Then if we're paying attention or we've had the gift of some kind of seeing, we begin to experience the unsatisfactory-ness of living in those boxes. That

suffering is a gift. That's because there are people who don't get to that suffering til their death day.

Serge: Right.

Russell: The gift of seeing, "Oh, I've been living in this illusion, really convinced by my self-talk, my inner dialog, my constant perpetuation of past, present, future, that I've never really stepped out into intimate experiencing."

Serge: Yeah, yeah. A minute ago, you were talking about the boxes and you had these gestures of putting the world in boxes, which not only contain things, will simplify them and contain them. But, you had this gesture of moving them so you can manipulate them, so you can literally control them by having them in a little, tight, little box but also being able to move them.

Russell: Right.

Serge: There's a fascinating aspect to it, that you can really go and be, wow, entranced in this and then forget about, you know, "That's not the real world. That's not all of reality."

Russell: Right, right, right, right. It's so rich. It's so rich because as we are discussing things and doing our best right now to use the concepts and the words in service to experiencing, it's not to get rid of thinking. It's not to get rid of [lying 00:29:28]. In Zen, there's this very nice phrase that we live in a topsy-turvy universe. Topsy-turvy, the way I verbalize that, is there's our being-ness and once we're four, five, six years old, most of us begin to develop this thought structure, this language. Then by the time we're a little bit older, maybe nine, 10, we get this self-concept and concept of the world, and the historic, conditioned mind is sitting on top of this being. The being never goes away. From a Zen point of view, that's an upside-down or topsy-turvy universe. The practice is to let the historic self, the thinking times, be of service to the being who is living here.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. To have that thinking mind, that abstract mind, be of service to the being.

Russell: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's pause there a second because that's so important. We're not getting rid of that. That's part of how our uniqueness expresses itself but is functioning in service to what, in service to what?

Serge: As I'm watching you, you're also speaking with your hands. As the hands move, I'm not seeing just a topsy-turvy movement but I'm also seeing the dance. Maybe there is a part that might be subjugated and say, "Wait a minute. No, let's reverse things. Let's try this. You might come back here, but then let's not forget." I'm having that sense of a dance.

Russell: Beautiful. I love that picture. I love that picture because it really does help convey the kind of movement that's involved in fresh living. We want all of it. We're not, "Okay, now being is on top and thinking is below, and I live like that [inaudible 00:32:13]." It remains a dance. It remains a weaving and a moving and a falling down and getting up. The humility of, every day, falling down many times, getting lost and remembering and coming home, coming back. Beautiful language from Gene of taking care of those inner places, taking care of those inner places. Not getting rid of, not having them perfected, taking care of the inner places because even those places that have been so challenging for us somehow, and I know you know this, somehow become central to the gifts that we're bringing. It's like the transformation of the wounds or the way, the way the lonely, sad place becomes compassion, caring.

Serge: Yeah, yeah. You know, what I'm hearing there and which might be a place where we stop for today, I'm not sure.

Russell: Yeah.

Serge: I want to just check with you what feels right, but I'm hearing that strong sense of going into movement, into flow, quoting Gene, "into process".

Russell: Yeah.

Serge: That sense of… When we started talking about beginner's mind, it's not one thing, but it's actually being in that flow where you have the possibility of experiencing beginner's mind, so being in that process.

Russell: Beautiful. Yes, yes, yes. Yeah, that feels just right and it feels like this is a really, really satisfying introduction to us conversing and to The Embodied Life work that I'm hoping, maybe in another recording, we can kind of define some of the territory and see how it relates to this freshness of experiencing-

Serge: Beautiful.

Russell: Beginner's mind.

Serge: Beautiful.

Russell: Yeah. Lovely. Lovely, lovely. Thank you so much, Serge.

Serge: Thank you.

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