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The Teaching of Moshe Feldenkrais

By Layna Verin

Layna Verin took part in a workshop of Awareness Through Movement I gave in San Francisco. I was surprised and very pleased to read Layna's account of her experience. Surprised, because it is perhaps the fullest and best description of what goes on in my workshops. Pleased to find that so much can be experienced and learned in such a short time. Layna has written an exceptionally exact and full account of her experience. It is just beautiful... Moshe Feldenkrais

Wisdom is always the same. Its application varies, but its use is invariable - to free the human spirit.

Among the wiser men in this world is Moshe Feldenkrais, originator of a unique kind of body reeducation which, I believe, is destined to have exceedingly far-reaching application and influence.

Like other great innovators of our time, Feldenkrais bases his method on the importance of awareness in human functioning. What makes his work unique is that he has discovered something fundamental about learning and change that no one before him, in either the Eastern or Western world has scientifically understood, though they may have sensed it intuitively. Because of this understanding, he has devised a way of learning so rooted in common sense and so profoundly simple, that it is within the capacity of anyone from superb athletes to those crippled by deformations.

Awareness, to Feldenkrais, has a very special meaning. To him, we live in four possible states: asleep, awake, conscious, and aware. Consciousness is a higher aspect of being awake, but awareness has to be cultivated.

Awareness, is consciousness allied to knowledge. It includes being attentive to what goes on both inside yourself and in the external world. For the external world, the surrounding environment of space and society is as intrinsic a part of us as the nervous system and its body envelope.

Awareness cannot be taught verbally. It has to be experienced. And, in order that it may be experienced, a particular learning situation has to be created. This situation must both stimulate awareness and pose problems that only heightened awareness can solve.

In creating this kind of learning situation, Feldenkrais has also created a new kind of learning. A learning that is non-cerebral and non-coercive, in which there is no "correct" way of doing things, no competitive striving, no "perfect" or "imperfect." A learning that is as much play as it is work. A process, in fact, in which the mind/body play/works.

This learning, like that of the infant, is self-directed. It is the antithesis of the authoritarian rote learning to which we are accustomed. It circumvents the twin demons of anxiety and habit, replacing will power and compulsive effort with curiosity and pleasure.

The changes it produces are immediately and dramatically visible, affecting body, mind and feeling simultaneously and resulting in a new and heightened sense of self - a new self image.

Feldenkrais is a great teacher who insists that he teaches nothing. What he teaches is learning to learn. What he does is make it possible for you to experience your body and to replace habitual ineffective movements, which he calls "parasitic" movements, with free, unhampered movements that do what they're intended to do with the least expenditure of energy.

Nevertheless he says, "The movements are nothing. They are an idiotic thing. What I'm after is to restore each person to their human dignity."

What is astonishing is the simple and direct means he has devised to accomplish this.

Feldenkrais works through the motor system. He sees the motor system, not as related to mind, but as inseparable from it. Thus any change in the motor system will alter the patterns in the motor cortex of the brain, with results that diffuse throughout the nervous system.

"Without motor functions," he says, "the brain wouldn't think, or at least the continuity of mental functions is assured by corresponding motor functions."

Movement is the essence of life. It is also the embodiment of intention, the intention of the organism. Every thought and emotion finds its expression in movement, whether the movement consists of the gross muscular transformations of rage and fear or the infinitesimal change in the eye's pupil caused by a fleeting thought.

Movements are concrete and simple. They are easy to differentiate. And learning depends on the ability to distinguish and differentiate.

When we move, an image of the movement is transmitted to the brain. If our self-image is distorted, that distortion is incorporated in the message. Each time the movement is repeated, the distortion is repeated, its repercussions in the body becoming more and more destructive.

If a new message can be transmitted to the brain, a change takes place in the cortex, freeing it from the old patterns, and the brain will transmit new messages to the body. This reversibility in the nervous system is distinctively human and is what makes re-learning possible.

"That being so," Moshe would say if he were talking to a class (all his students call him Moshe-pronounced Mo-shay), "that being so, lie down on your backs on the floor."

His lessons usually begin with a simple movement, such as flexing and extending one foot, or placing the feet near the body so that the knees are bent and lowering the legs first to one side then the other.

Such movements may feel totally unfamiliar, though you may have done them when you were a baby. Babies haven't yet lost their native intelligence and intuitively exercise every muscle and every sense with no direction or compulsion from anyone, without even a guru.

Non-habitual movements are added to the habitual ones...turning the head in opposition to the shoulders or the eyes in opposition to the head. They form combinations and variations of combinations, culminating in a reorganization of the whole body. At that point, what Moshe would call "a funny thing" happens, the "funny thing" he has been leading up to.

He asks the class to do one more movement. This last movement isn't simple at all. It's quite complicated. It demands flexibility, coordination, balance, a fine adjustment of intent and impulse, none of which you had to the necessary degree when the lesson began. Yet, to your delight, you do it. Effortlessly.

You may be arching your body in a way that is usually achieved only after weeks or even months of arduous hatha yoga stretches. Or, find yourself swinging your body around in a full circle on your pelvis, like a child. Or, with utmost ease, touching your knee to the opposite elbow. The details are unimportant. What is important is that in a ridiculously short time you have accomplished something that you were certain you couldn't do, and accomplished it with ease, enjoyment and zest.

"Stand up," he says. "Walk around. How do you feel? Do you walk differently? Look at the people around you. Look at their faces. Do they look different? Have their eyes changed? Their shoulders?"

Indeed they have. The eyes are brighter, more open. In some people, they appear to have slightly changed position. The shoulders are looser, the expressions more intelligent, more alive. And indeed you walk differently. Your feet feel more balanced. They get the same stimulus from the floor they did earlier, but they respond differently.

You have demonstrated to yourself the apparently changeless rule of change: when you can't change the stimulus, change the response. You feel exhilarated. Centered. Receptive. Even kind of loving, maybe. What has happened? How did he do it?

He did it in the most delicate, the most ingenious way. By enabling you to become more sensitive to differences. By devising a configuration of movements that cannot be performed without this refinement. By making you aware of the minute interval between the time your body mobilizes itself for a movement and you actually do that movement - the minute interval that allows you to exercise that capacity for differentiation and to change.

Periodically he stops and asks the students to scan their bodies. "Experience the changes of sensation in the side of the body that is being worked on," he says. "Feel the difference in the way the spine lies on the floor, the difference in the way the limbs are lying. Notice whether the backs of the knees touch the floor." Amazingly, one side of the body seems to shrink, the other side to expand and swell. It seems to grow warmer, more alive, more expressive.

He may ask for a large movement, then reduce it to a smaller and smaller one. He may ask for a slow movement, then quicken it so there is less willful control. Or, retard it even more so that the experience of sensation is stronger.

If the work begins on the right side, the movements may be repeated on the left side in exactly the same way. Or, he may ask the class to imagine doing the movement on the left side several times before actually doing it. You discover that when you imagine the movement, the body mobilizes the muscles for action. Then, when you do the movement, it not only feels as if you had already worked on it, but it is more fluid than on the right side because you have discarded your previous mistakes.

Sometimes he has the class imagine the movements on the unworked side and never do them at all. And, occasionally the work is done only on one side so you can experience how the learning diffuses through the nervous system into the muscles on the unworked side.

What is most extraordinary about all this is not the magnitude of the change or the ease and swiftness with which it is effected, but that it is a complete reversal of ordinary learning. It is discovery. Discovery not about things, but about processes and change. The whole self is involved - mind, body and feeling. The obvious difference in posture and movement is the outer sign of an inner change. There is a new attitude to both the inner and the outer environment, the beginning of a new facility in dealing with both.

"Learning that is not conducted through a new way of action is not learning," says Feldenkrais. "You only learn what you already know, what you have experienced. Learning is the crystallization of the experience." The experience isn't verbalized. Nevertheless, it isn't complete until it becomes verbalized so that the differences between the old and the new way are understood. It must also become so familiar that it is automatic, or even unconscious.

In ordinary learning, a habit confronted with a situation in which it is useless is resistant to change. Confronted with a similar situation, a movement or attitude that is learned with awareness can be modified or changed by virtue of that awareness.

Feldenkrais never presents a lesson twice in exactly the same way. There is always a new variation, a new realization to be shared. "He has the ability to see new things every single day," says one of the students he is training to carry on his work. "He uses no notes and every day he comes up with something new - not just a new movement, but a new perspective, a new way of looking at things... A most incredible teacher.

While the class is learning, he pleads, groans, cajoles, reminisces, lives every moment of comprehension or incomprehension. He never minces words, says exactly what he means, with jokes, laughter, exasperation and wisdom. His vulgarity is hilarious. Even his irascibility is tinged with humor. "As I've said a thousand times," he says for the thousandth time, "when people are in a mood where they're ready to smile, their minds are working. You tell everybody to be serious, they're unable to think anything for themselves.

"Stop everybody!" he said suddenly in the midst of a workshop, just as we had begun a movement of bringing the head toward the left knee. "Watch her!" He pointed to a woman off near the corner in the front row. (Of a hundred or more people in the hall, she was perhaps the farthest from bringing knee and head together.) "You see the tiny movement she is making? She has self-esteem. She doesn't try. She does what she can. She doesn't have to prove anything to herself. And she will be one of the first to touch her head. You'll see."

He turned to the woman. "Here and now I say that you will touch better than all the others because you have respect for yourself."

The class resumed. "Aha! Did I tell you she would get there first?" Everyone sat up. The woman was doing with ease what others, who were able to "almost" do it from the beginning and who were working with effort, were still unable to do.

"Well," he asked, "did she grow stronger in this time or did she use her brain better? I say anybody can do it provided you correct your self-esteem. Only you can say if you are good. Nobody else. And you can learn now in an hour what otherwise people can't learn in years."

"You don't have to break your neck to show me how clever you are," he continued. "I know you're clever. More than you believe you are. Don't strain. It's a sign of internal impotence. And impotence is not a thing to be cultivated." Adding, "By the way, that's the way to cure real impotence - to learn to do it, not by 'curing' it."

There are many "first time in my life" experiences in the Feldenkrais classes. A young woman lying next to me in one of the first sessions I attended told me, "All my adult life I've felt awkward and ungainly. This is the first time I've ever done a movement and felt graceful."

A woman violinist who, for seven years, had been vainly trying to achieve a vibrato effect and who, in desperation, was about to relinquish her hopes of becoming a concert violinist, came home after the third lesson and played vibrato without knowing how or why. The old, ineffectual impulse - the "parasitic" one - had been inhibited and superseded by a new, organic one.

As for me, I experienced my skeleton for the first time in one of the classes. I became aware of my bones. I felt myself as a structure of bones and joints - a skellington," as a child described by Sylvia Ashton Warner wrote. Feldenkrais teaches that to become aware of what is happening in the muscles is basic, but it isn't enough. There must be an awareness of the skeleton itself, of its orientation and movement in space.

What I have been describing is only one aspect of the Feldenkrais work, the group aspect, known as Awareness Through Movement. The other aspect, which is an outgrowth of this original work, consists of manipulation, and is called Functional Integration.

In this work with individuals Feldenkrais treats the nervous system primarily through the skeletal structure. He gives physical support to the body members to offset the influence of gravity, thus returning the body to an early childhood state, and gently manipulates them, using the same configurations as in the Awareness Through Movement group sessions.

People come to him for treatment of deformations, injuries, congenital illnesses, and a multitude of physical problems with an emotional source. His reputation in restoring physical function, or as a student put it: "re-able-ization", is worldwide. "There is no limit," he says, "to possible improvement in functioning, and no limit to human potential."

I discontinued sessions with a chiropractor when I began the classes with Feldenkrais. I have a bad back-bone spurs, damaged discs, a severe curvature, a rotation in the upper spine. One manipulative session with Moshe accomplished what years of osteopathy and chiropractic had failed to achieve. The session lasted less than fifty minutes. I was stunned. "Can this be all?" I wanted to say.

I asked Moshe if the results would last, not believing that they could. He said that they would if I could manage to retain the sensation I was experiencing. I did, for more than three months, and would have done so longer had I not interrupted the awareness exercises.

To startle my chiropractor, I visited him again and asked him to examine my back. He did and gasped. "It can't be." he exclaimed, "Your back is entirely different."

Feldenkrais never speaks of his work as therapy. He never uses terms like "emotional disease" or "character disorders." He speaks only of faulty learning. Malfunctioning bodies are not diseases. The distressed psyche, unable to cope with the stress of continuous coercion and repression, is not diseased. They are simply poorly taught.

People who realize that their education has been faulty do not regard themselves in the same way, nor are they regarded in the same way, as those who are "sick", regardless of what euphemistic jargon disguises the "sickness". If we feel awkward, dull, somehow shameful, we will behave in an awkward, dull and shamed manner. Feeling free and uninhibited, we will behave spontaneously.

A physical distortion exists in the brain as literally as in the vertebrae. The corrective lies in releasing an inhibition in the brain cortex so that the old pattern of response is broken and can be replaced with a useful response. Once that is done, the change in behavior is already begun.

We live in a civilization that demands finer and finer adjustments in order to function in a human way. Yet, from our birth, that civilization represses in us the qualities we most need to develop. Feldenkrais seeks to undo the emotional and physical havoc caused by this suppression of our most vital impulses. He says that he has barely scratched the surface of the study of the human nervous system and the ways of bettering its function. He has taken only one aspect and worked on it, but the possibilities are immense.

"People are not a bunch of properties," he says. "They are a process. All life is process. Improve the quality of the process and the rest will take care of itself."

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Please see next page for more info re: Victoria, multiple office locations, and her offerings

If something we are faced with challenges our ability to move with ease, then the Feldenkrais Method of either "Awareness Through Movement" classes and/or "Functional Integration" private lessons can help. We find that daily movements become easy, pleasurable and then elegant with the Feldenkrais Method. Our brains always choose ease when given the experience of ease. The Feldenkrais Method is the language of ease. As we experience ease and begin to become familiar with it, we learn how to recreate this ease for ourselves. In this way we can increase our vitality and become less dependent upon others for our wellness. We learn to become our own inner authorities. We can use individual sessions in the Feldenkrais Method of Functional Integration to fine tune and deepen our understanding of ease. The group retreats and classes are a valuable aspect of the Feldenkrais Method. Both aspects of the Feldenkrais Method offer a gentle, profound and pleasant method of learning to improve the process of life itself.

Victoria Ahrensdorf began to study the Feldenkrais Method in 1978, and had an opportunity to study directly with Moshe Feldenkrais in 1978 and 1979 prior to her official four year training program with Moshe. She participated in the last the Feldenkrais Professional Training Program taught by Moshe that ran from 1980-1983. (Moshe had been trained as a physicist and engineer, held a black belt in judo, was fluent in 11 languages, and began developing the Feldenkrais Method in 1945. Moshe passed away in 1984 in Tel Aviv, Israel.)

Teaching "Awareness Through Movement" - "Relaxercise" classes since 1981 and watching how "students" (of all ages) can learn so quickly to gain flexibility and ease, continues to inspire and delight Victoria. In 1994, Victoria became the first woman in New England to be designated as an Assistant Trainer for four year Feldenkrais Professional Training Programs and has taught around the country to physical and occupational therapists, doctors, and other professionals, as well as many others, people of all ages and from all walks of life. People who are inspired by the effectiveness and global nature of Moshe's thinking and work understand they can develop themselves in the four year training program as well as prepare to serve others.

After interpreting American Sign Language/English between Deaf and hearing people for many years, Victoria retired from interpreting in 1986. She now offers Feldenkrais individual lessons to the Deaf community, as well as to the hearing community. In private practice with the Feldenkrais Method since 1983 and full time since 1986, Victoria has worked with countless people who continue to prove the remarkable neuro-plasticity of the brain... the ability to improve amidst a wide variety of challenges, including Parkinson's, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, strokes and many other forms of brain injury (in addition to chronic and acute pain). The Feldenkrais Method offers an environment for learning and allowing people of all ages, from infant to seniors, to learn how to become their own inner authority and manage their challenges in a more productive and satisfying way for daily life.

Victoria Ahrensdorf is currently in private practice in Northampton, Ma., and, in the "hilltowns" in the Williamsburg/Conway area. Victoria teaches private lessons, retreats and classes. Individuals are invited to call to discuss their specific needs and situation for a personalized program.

Health care facilities, businesses, corporations may bring Victoria in to teach seminars to help prevent injuries, increase over all well-being, productivity and creativity while reducing stress and pain.

Also, available: individuals are invited to call for an appointment for ergonomic consultations in their car and/or office for increased comfort and productivity with Feldenkrais movement and treatment included as per individual needs.

For updates on day long and weekend retreats and classes change, ...location, cost, & dates and any other questions about classes, call Victoria at: 413/563.7553 or 413.268.3220.

