

Years Of Possibilities

Volume 1

Meditations on Change, Awareness, and the
Feldenkrais Method

Adam Cole

Books By Adam Cole

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Introduction

In 2000 I became a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner. I completed four years of intensive training to learn how to use clients' self awareness to improve their functionality. By 2002 I decided working with the public was not enough.

I created an online magazine called Possibilities in which I explored a different topic of the Feldenkrais Method each month. The magazine proved popular and I maintained it for ten years, producing 120 issues. At some point I took down that particular website and the issues were no longer available.

The essays in those issues were more than just discussions. They served as a journal of discovery for me as I moved through my 30's. Now I am sharing the best of them.

This volume includes selected essays from Possibilities from the first four years. If you're interested in the Method, this is a good place to start. If all you want is some inspiring ideas to help you change and grow, you might find what you're looking for.

If you have questions, comments, or want to see more, please feel free to reach out at www.acole.net

Volume 1, Number 4 – May 2002

Quote from Moshe: "A violinist, an actor, a writer, or whoever, who is not aware of the importance of awareness of the way one directs oneself in acting or functioning in life will stop growing the moment he achieves what he considers to be the right way of doing." (from *The Elusive Obvious*, p. 96)

Did You Know You Were Missing Information?

Have you ever tried to solve a problem? (I'd like to see if anyone doesn't have their hand raised!) How about this: Have you ever worried because you couldn't solve a problem, fretting because it seems unsolvable, pacing the floor at night, not getting any sleep? Have you stressed yourself sick, not knowing how it will ever be resolved? And then, all of a sudden, something shifts, and information that you didn't have before comes to you? Then you go to solve the problem and it's easy.

I had a friend who had to take a trip to Birmingham from Georgia one afternoon. He was required by his employer to give a speech at a special convention for the Association of American Caterers at 7:00 PM . The speech would mean a big promotion for him if it went well, and it wasn't an option in any case.

My friend had a problem. The trip from Atlanta to Birmingham takes about two-and-a-half-hours, as long as one doesn't run into any traffic, and my friend only had two hours to make the trip. He looked after his baby son during the day, and his wife got home at 5:00 to take over for him. He was unable to find a babysitter or a neighbor to help him through the crunch on that particular day. It was a week before the trip, and he was sweating bullets. Even if everything went perfectly, he'd have to make a two-and-a-half hour car drive in only two hours,

and then rush up to the podium. Nothing could go wrong. His wife couldn't be late getting home, he couldn't run into any traffic along the long, well-traveled route, his car had to be in perfect shape. He worried so much that he began to lose his voice from the stress. He thought through the trip again and again and considered all his possibilities, but he just couldn't see any way to solve his problem.

Finally, a day before the event, he confided in an acquaintance. The acquaintance listened to his problem, then laughed. "You've got nothing to worry about," he said. "There's a time change from Atlanta to Birmingham! You'll be leaving at 4:00 their time. That gives you three hours!"

Problem solved. Suddenly what seemed impossible became easy because of a little information that my friend not only lacked, but didn't know that he lacked.

That's an important piece, his failure to know that he lacked an important piece of information. We should always assume that we're lacking information when we attempt to solve a problem because, in this imperfect world, none of us know everything about anything. But we forget that a lot, don't we? Most of us act as though what we knew were all we needed to know to base our opinions and make our decisions.

A lot of children in abusive homes often face problems such as "How do I deal with my parent's violent behavior?" Often lacking adult help with these dilemmas, the children often come up with their own solutions. The decisions they make may get them through the of trauma but may have equally harmful consequences that an adult in the same situation would recognize. Obviously, the child has only their own experience and information to draw on, and so running away, or closing off all vulnerability, for example, may be the only solutions they can come up with. As adults, we know that these options can put the child in equal or greater danger, and we would choose differently. What we would hope is that someone would provide such a child with information that

they didn't know they were lacking such as, "It's not your fault," "It's not supposed to be this way," and "There are people who you can call for help." When the child has this information, other solutions present themselves which may be a great deal easier and more effective in addressing the problem.

So what does all this have to do with Feldenkrais®? A lot, actually. Our lives are full of "unsolvable problems" that relate to the way we learned to move, problems that can often be solved when we get new information.

Many of us had a parent who told us to "stand up straight." Have you heard that before? I bet you can still hear it. You heard it as a child, and you tried to obey. You "stood up straight." The problem was, you didn't really know how to do that. You were happy with the way you were standing, and someone told you, "No, that's slouching." Well, there are lots of ways to change the way we stand to look straighter. You can tighten up your lower back muscles and keep them contracted all the time. You can stiffen your neck. You can clench your jaw, so that you don't ever have the urge to relax these muscles again. Then, according to someone, you're standing up straight.

But is it possible that both you and the observer didn't know some things about the way humans stand, and worse, you didn't know that you didn't know? What if I told you that standing is not a static state, but in fact a state that requires you to be in constant motion, albeit tiny motion? What if I reminded you that the spine must be curved in two places in order to provide the strength to hold the torso and head, and if it were straight it would most likely snap under the stress? What if I told you that forcing yourself to stand up straight using those constantly tensed back muscles would cause you all sorts of problems, not the least of which would be an inability to move that region of your body at all?

When you lie down on the floor and take an Awareness Through Movement® lesson, or experience a Functional Integration® lesson, you're getting information from the floor and from the hands. The

sensation of movement is interesting to your brain and provides information. The Feldenkrais lessons themselves also pose problems that you may or may not be able to solve, such as “How can I hold my foot in my hand and straighten my leg?”

If you run to the floor and try to solve that problem right now, consciously, vigorously, “no pain no gain,” going at it like a dog after a tossed bone, you’ll most likely fall short of the best solution. You’ll try all sorts of combinations of movements that you’ve always done and you will either do the movement painfully or find you can’t do it at all. Consequently, you’ll decide that doing this movement easily, without strain or pain, is impossible, at least for you. (The other possibility is that it’s easy for you, in which case I’d suggest asking yourself why you can’t play the piano as well as that six-year old prodigy over there.)

In order to solve the problem so that you can take your foot in your hand and easily straighten your leg, without strain, as simply as you might straighten your fingers or turn your head left and right, you need to discover what information you’re lacking about yourself. What parts of you are missing from your picture that you had forgotten you ever had? Do you feel all of your ribs moving when you bend to the side? Do you know how much they need to collapse on one side to make this movement easy? Did you even know they had to collapse?

The Awareness Through Movement lessons are designed to bring you along a path where you can start to really listen to yourself in a way that you so rarely have time for. When you start to listen, your awareness will be increased. The more awareness you have of yourself and your movements, the easier the unsolvable problems will become to solve. There are lots of ways to increase your awareness, but I think the Feldenkrais Method is the best way!

Listen.

Volume 1, Number 6 – July 2002

Quote From Moshe: “We may observe how natural practices have gradually given way to acquired methods, to ‘professional’ methods, and that society in general refuses to allow the individual the right to employ the natural method, forcing him instead to learn the accepted way before it will permit him to work.” *Awareness Through Movement*, p. 27

How Do You Do

When someone’s having a conversation with you, what’s the very first thing they ask you, maybe even before they ask your name?

“What do you do?”

They don’t mean, “What do you like to do,” or “What do you want to do,” or “How are you at doing what you do?” They want to form an opinion of you quickly to determine whether they will have anything in common with you. One of the ways we have devised to get a shorthand impression of someone is to identify them with their occupation.

“I’m a banker.”

“I’m a baker.”

“I’m a Feldenkrais Instructor.” (Lord help you.)

Is there anything wrong with this? What else are we supposed to ask? Why call attention to something that obviously serves as a very useful tool for communication between strangers?

No, I don't think there's anything really wrong with asking someone what they do. But the question does suggest something about the way in which we think of ourselves, as well as other people. Linking someone's occupation, what they do in a certain period of time, with who they are, their fixed identity, creates a connection between something fluid and something solid.

What is a baker? A baker is someone who has probably undergone some training in the culinary arts, or has at least apprenticed themselves to another baker. This person has a certain amount of skill in baking. How much skill? That's the question, isn't it?

We don't really care how much skill someone has as a baker, provided they feel confident telling us they can bake at a professional level. Whether they are a good baker or a bad baker is irrelevant to us unless we have to decide to taste their wares, a conversation for a later meeting. We want to fix their identity in our heads as "baker," a solid thing which either is or is not.

This person is a baker. That person is not.

Just like computers, we deal with "yes" and "no." Someone is something, or they're not. We should recognize the significance of this idea. Having gotten in the habit of thinking of other people in this way, do we think of ourselves in this way?

I am a baker. I am not a baker. Okay, we can live with that, right? Either we are a baker or we aren't, right?

I'm not so certain we do ourselves any good by thinking of ourselves as "something" or "not-something." If we did, we would never really understand how to get from not being able to bake, to being able to bake a little, to being able to bake a lot. That wonderful spectrum of competence, and the ability to move along it, would be irrelevant in a scenario in which we "are" or we "aren't" something.

Very often, we apply this type of thinking to something that's beyond us. "I am not a piano player. Yes, I took lessons, but I was so bad that it became clear to me that I'm just not a piano player." "I'm not a tennis player. I love the game, but I don't have the ability to play it like I want to." We even apply the "yes/no" idea to more basic definitions of ourselves. "I'm not coordinated." "I'm not good with people." "I'm fat."

When our self-image becomes fixed, we lose the ability to grow and change that image, no matter how desperately we want to do so. If the fat person sees themselves as fat, they will only cease to think so when they become "skinny," and as there is no real way for them to conceive of a middle ground, they are likely to remain "fat," no matter what their weight.

Really, if you think about it, fixing our sense of identity is just a habit. When our identity is "fixed," we can use our mind to think about other things that we believe are far more important. Most often, these important things are simply wood that feed the fire of the fixed identity. We can think about how to amend our far-person wardrobe so as to look skinnier. We can contemplate our latest diet. All of these things with which we fill our mind go to the service of reinforcing the idea that we are one thing unless we're another.

Moshe Feldenkrais believed that there was no limit to human improvement. Imagine yourself on a long road, continuous to both horizons. You're neither at the beginning of that road, nor at the end of it, and you're free to move along that path forever in the direction of improvement. So you're not "uncoordinated," you're a person with a certain amount of coordination. If it's less than you want, you can rest assured that you can improve it.

How much? Enough to satisfy yourself that you are "coordinated?" If you ask yourself that question, you're already thinking "yes-no" again. In the service of changing one's self-image, it doesn't matter how much one has to improve, only that one is in the process of doing so. If you are increasing your coordination, even by tiny steps, you are living a

better life than by resigning yourself to the notion that you are “uncoordinated.”

What can you focus on instead of your identity? How about focusing on what you want to be able to do? Instead of thinking of yourself as “uncoordinated,” think that you would like to be able to balance better on a balance beam, or juggle, or simply walk without falling. These abilities can be improved continually, and you enable yourself to better accomplish them by focusing on your improvement, no matter how small.

The Feldenkrais Method is designed to teach you how to listen to yourself, how to gauge your own improvement while you are improving. A Feldenkrais teacher wants you to throw the fixed idea of yourself away and begin to imagine yourself in a much more useful way, as a person that can change, that does change every day, and that takes notice of that change, the better to direct it.

Can you see yourself having more compassion for yourself? Can you imagine being able to move towards any image of yourself that you might have, with the understanding that you will always be able to better it? Can you imagine yourself answering the person who asks you what you do by saying,

“I bake.”

Volume 1, No. 10 – November 2002

Quote From Moshe: "The organism...needs constancy, order, invariance, homeostasis if it is to exist...[The] nervous system introduces order into the random, constantly changing stimuli, impinging or arriving through the senses to the system...the most unexpected means to achieve this Herculean feat is movement. " The Elusive Obvious, pp. 17-8

The Angel is in the Details

While at the zoo, looking at the flamingos, my eyes fell upon a patch of grass near the railing. It wasn't a functional patch of grass; didn't serve to feed the birds, hardly had any aesthetic appeal to it, was really only there as empty space. I didn't so much as notice the empty patch as realize I was looking at it.

The patch was part of the picture, the whole scene there at the zoo that morning. The main element was the flock of flamingos, yes, the smell of algae, the pink blush of the birds, their honking sound. But there was that island of grass, too. It didn't serve any purpose, but you couldn't have taken it out of the picture, either. Something had to go in that spot.

I became aware that I was looking at the grass intently. When I glanced back at the flamingos, I found to my surprise that they looked more substantial than they had before. I had fitted the patch of grass into the scene, and realized that it was no less essential than the flamingos were. When I saw those birds in the context of their entire space, I enjoyed looking at them. I noticed how their color balanced with that of the green grass. The distance at which they danced was in contrast with the relative nearness of the patch at my feet. The dry grass touched the small pool that surrounded the little island upon which the flamingos danced. The flamingos became real and exciting creatures

instead of mere images of birds because I was real and they were connected to me through space and time across that patch.

This illumination had some fringe benefits. I could breathe; I could relax; I stopped thinking about the future for a few seconds. I got outside my head and realized where I was and what I was doing and felt pretty darn good. I was astounded that I could feel a physical and emotional improvement by becoming more aware of the scene around me.

All of this from becoming aware of an “insubstantial” patch of grass.

We’re observers of ourselves, even while we exist and carry on as ourselves. The quality of our observation can be a measure of our success in our attempts to live as unimpeded human beings engaged in the fulfilling of our daily tasks. How well aware are you of what you’re doing? You might think you’re very aware. “I’m reading this newsletter. I’m eating a sandwich. I’m sitting in front of a computer.”

That’s enough, right? We don’t need more information than that. If we know we’re eating, reading, sitting, we have enough to go on, don’t we? Anything else is unimportant, just a detail that won’t add anything useful to the picture.

In a Feldenkrais lesson, you’re encouraged to pay attention to things you might think are superfluous. Perhaps you never even considered wondering when you get up from the floor which way you roll. If you never wondered about that, you certainly wouldn’t bother with the question of what you’re doing with your eyes when you roll. And who cares about your jaw and your tongue? We’re rolling, right? Not eating a sandwich.

Those little details seem superfluous because we haven’t noticed what they have to do with who we are. We’re often too tired, too rushed, to even consider them, and many people, this Feldenkrais practitioner included, experience some impatience when they lie on the floor quietly for more than a minute or two.

In that time, you think you know what you're doing. "I'm lying."
Pause. "Okay, I get it, I'm lying on the floor." Pause. "Lying on the floor in a room. A cold floor." Pause. "Got it. Is this going to do me any good?"

What parts of your body do you notice when you're lying on the floor?

"Lower back."

Where does the floor seem to rise up to meet you?

"Hmmm...okay, just above my lower back, and way up in my shoulder blades."

Is it the same on one side as another?

"Well...hmm...I guess it's more on one side than another."

Which side?

"Left. Left near the shoulder...right near the hip."

You may discover why a part of your back on your left side protrudes when you roll, why the muscles seem to always be contracted there, and how those muscles are working or lying flaccid. You keep finding more and more details, the longer you listen to yourself. But what makes the Feldenkrais lesson special is that you're going to discover how these details fit together and how to use them to improve your function. In doing so you will be able to become more present to your own experience of living.

When, after one lesson or a hundred, you discover how you bring your back muscles into play when you roll, you may find you can make some active decisions about how to better use those muscles, decisions that may make rolling much easier than it was before. When you are able to

roll smoothly, elegantly, and easily you will find that you have been using this movement in dozens of ways, from turning to look over your shoulder in the car, to scratching your back, to dancing or playing golf, and now you can make it easier than it was. Maybe you haven't played golf or danced in a long time, and now you can once more.

Those little details only seem little because they're not understood for what they are, parts of you and how you function in the world. Like the patch of grass, the direction that you roll is a piece of a larger picture of you that must be integrated. If you try to ignore these details, nevertheless they will remain in your world, burdening you like a numb weight, affecting everything you do and leaving you with a sense of powerlessness as they make particular activities more difficult.

When you improve your function, you better the quality of your life because you recognize how your sense of well-being is connected to your perceptual sense and to the ease of fulfillment of your daily tasks. In order to get a clear picture of yourself you have to slow down, notice how you act in certain situations, and get some good guidance on what to do with the information. I'm going to give you as much of that guidance as I can. Once you have it, you'll find that becoming aware of the little things can create big benefits.

Watch yourselves.

Volume 2, No 3 – February 2003

Quote from Moshe: "Note the important role the eyes play in coordinating the musculature of the body...It is sufficient to recall climbing up or down stairs when the eyes did not see the floor at the end of the stairs to realize how great a part the eyes play in directing the muscles of the body." Awareness Through Movement, p. 148-9

Our Eyes Our Selves

I am a frequent cataloguer. I can't resist putting things into little categories, organizing them for quick and easy discovery, rearranging them. You'd think my office would be clean as a result, but that's another story.

I think it's very human to categorize. It's one aspect of our intellectual organization that we use to empower ourselves as a species. For better or worse, it's made complex finance possible, as well as high-level manufacturing, large-scale education, and any activity that requires us to work within a hierarchy. There's nothing inherently wrong with our tendency to categorize, but it can get in the way.

When we look at the body, at how we function, at our walking, our seeing, our eating, is it wise to imagine these activities as though they are completely discreet from one another? I can give you one example where it is most definitely not to your advantage to put an activity into a box.

What is the act of "seeing?" When you walk down the street, as you look around at the trees or the houses or the buildings or the cars or the drug-dealers, how are you looking? With your eyes? Did I hear someone say that? Okay, so, we look with our eyes. Anything else? No?

Let me ask you this: You're eating. You use your thumbs while you are eating, right? Most definitely. Otherwise the fork or the chopsticks would fall on the table. But if I asked you "how do you eat," would you reply, "with my thumbs?" I don't think so. Obviously, you use your thumbs to eat, but you also use your teeth, your jaw, your tongue, your eyes...

Whoa...your eyes? Well, you could eat with your eyes closed, but I bet you don't. I suspect you use your eyes to find the food and also to guide the fork or the chopsticks or your hand to your mouth. So you eat with your eyes.

If you eat with your eyes, do you see with your mouth? It sounds ludicrous, doesn't it? That's the problem with categorizing an activity: Anything outside the acceptable definition must be discarded.

But you do see with your mouth. Next time you're walking down the street, open your mouth as wide as you can, until you feel your jaw popping. Keep it open and look around. Is it harder or easier to see in this way? I'd be willing to bet that although your eyes are unaffected, you cannot swivel your head as easily, nor can you think about what you are seeing as clearly.

"Hold on," you're probably saying. "When I walk, my jaw is closed. If my jaw is closed, I'm not using it."

Have you ever stopped to notice the extent to which you tense your jaw during the day? How far apart do you keep your top teeth from your bottom ones? The jaw is never really at rest. When you are looking at something, craning your neck to follow it, refocusing your eyes to see far away, there is a corresponding movement, an adjustment, however small, in your jaw. Next time you're looking at something, keep your jaw in the back of your mind.

This is a game of words, really. If you change the definition of "use," you can claim that you "use" anything to "do" anything else. But what

I'm really getting at is that the act of seeing requires more than your eyes. The eyes in and of themselves will not see. There are a number of people who have fully functional eyes that, at some time or other, cannot tell what they are looking at.

You see with your mind. In order to really see, you must recognize and respond to the images that appear on your retinas. This response will occur in your entire body, because it isn't the individual, categorized parts of you that is connecting with the thing seen, but rather your whole self. The better we integrate the whole of ourselves in perceiving, the better our perception will be.

What does "better seeing" mean? Categorically we understand "better seeing" as being able to perceive objects in clearer focus. All other aspects of seeing are relegated to a lower category. Not until we lose our color-sense do we recognize that appreciating the different colors is a valuable and improvable aspect of sight. What about the ability to keep track of complicated movement? Some sports fans have mastered the art of following a football game by seeing the larger picture of the movement on the field instead of having to look at any one detail. They take these skills for granted, but not all of us have mastered them.

How about depth perception? It may seem as if all of us with two eyes have been granted this miraculous gift, but there are those who, while having the physiological ability to perceive depth, do not truly register it. Their lack of true understanding of depth will not only cause them difficulty in driving or catching, but will play itself out in their understanding of how they move their bodies.

Without the true experience of depth, a child will have a much greater difficulty gaining the lessons of sophisticated three-dimensional movement such as twisting, rolling and dancing. Instead, one thinks of movement along a flat surface. One can move left and right, up and down, with forward and back being merely a limited avenue for advancing or retreating. The lack of the mind's ability to see will play

itself out in the way a person moves, and eventually in their interactions with their fellow human beings.

Recognizing that we see with our whole bodies, we discover the following to be true: If you want to improve seeing, you must improve more than just the eyes. You must improve your mind's ability to perceive.

To judge how well we are perceiving we can examine ourselves as we look at things. How are we using ourselves when we see? To what extent does our body change as we alter what we are looking at? Do we "gaze" with our selves the same way we "scan", or the way we "examine"? Perhaps if we have more difficulty observing tiny details with our eyes, we may discover a difficulty in discerning tiny movements such as minute turnings of the head. Or maybe our difficulty in observing details stems from an inability to create a sturdy base beneath us whereby we can steady our vision enough to make them out. An overuse of the muscles of the neck, brought about by poor balancing upon the skeleton, can require us to constantly be moving our head around to avoid fatigue, wreaking havoc on our ability to pay attention to anything else.

It can be said that all activities rely to some extent on our whole self. There is nothing that we do that relies on a single part of us exclusively. Seeing is an activity that has been exclusively categorized as an activity of the eyes, but it, and so many other types of sensory input, rely on an integrated use of the whole self. Any way we can improve our use of ourselves will thereby improve our sensory input.

Try it and you'll see.

Volume 2, No. 10 – November, 2003

Quote from Moshe: "Doing does not mean knowing." Awareness Through Movement, p. 46

Three Feldenkrais Games

Many of you would like to try Feldenkrais. I know it. You just haven't had the time. Classes may be too far away, maybe your budget doesn't allow for it. Maybe you just don't think you know enough about it, even now, to give it a go.

Feldenkrais is so unusual that it can't be easily described in a newsletter, even one as splendid as Possibilities. Nevertheless, the benefits are so tremendous, and the improvement in many people is so great, that I want to give you a chance to experience, if not an actual Feldenkrais lesson, then the experience of learning through an altered state. This is the essence of Feldenkrais: changing your awareness of the world and of yourself by discovering a different perspective on a routine idea.

In this month's newsletter, I have developed three exercises you can do in the course of your daily routine that will give you a sense of how you might feel during a lesson. You may also experience some of the benefits of a Feldenkrais lesson from doing these exercises, because they work on the same principle of paying attention to yourself in situations where you usually just coast.

Exercise 1: Changing the compass

Take a walk. Do you stroll daily with your dogs? Take a weekend constitutional in the park with your sweetie? Maybe go shopping in the mall. Any of these scenarios are fine. But instead of giving your full attention to your dogs, your sweetie, or the bargain in the window, spare some for this challenge.

If you walk in a familiar area, you have a general idea of how it's oriented in the surrounding neighborhood. In a park, you know which direction the sun rises every morning. In a mall, you know the way to the parking lot. You take this orientation for granted, counting on your mental map without a second thought.

As you walk, imagine that all directions have been reversed. Pretend you're in a totally different park or mall, and you're walking through as a visitor, perhaps from another state. As you move along the path, see if you can get the sensation that you're walking in the opposite direction, as if all the details of the park or mall have remained the same, except that someone has picked the whole place up and spun it around a half-circle. North is now south.

Can you feel a difference in the way you walk when you conceive of the space in this way? Are you looking at the details differently? Do you react to the same scenery in a different way? Is it a pleasant sensation, or an unpleasant sensation, and how does it change your pattern of strolling?

When you've had enough, convince yourself that you're back in your familiar park or mall. Do you feel as if you remain altered? If you have reverted to your original state as well, do you have a better sense of what that is?

Exercise 2: Meal in a mirror

Go to a full-service restaurant, preferably by yourself or with a friend you can trust. When you are seated, tell the waiter you'd like to start with desert (it takes a lot of courage to do this). Order the entire meal in reverse and eat it that way, main course second, appetizer third, salad fourth. Go on! It won't hurt your digestive system to do it once.

As you dine, rearrange your silverware and glasses so that they are on the opposite side from where they usually are: forks on the right,

spoon and knife on the left. If you are right handed and you usually cut with your right hand, and feed yourself with your right hand, use your left. Reach for your glass with your non-dominant hand. Lefties, of course, are going to try being right-handed for an hour or so.

You will have to be very patient as you eat in this way. It may be clumsy, so you'll have to go slowly. Don't be embarrassed. Many people who have suffered a stroke have to do this every day, and you're nowhere near as hampered. Instead of throwing the whole experiment away in fear and disgust, stick with it. It's only one meal.

What happens to your experience of eating when you change the speed at which you dine, when you have to think about all the movements you usually make automatically, when you can't even trust the sensation you're going to experience next? Pay specific attention to how you are sitting, whether it makes you feel completely different as you leave the restaurant, and whether you notice anything about the way you walk or see that has changed. You may be surprised to find that your initial discomfort goes away after a couple of hours, but that the things you discovered stay with you and may improve your ability to do ordinary tasks.

At the meal following your strange meal, eat normally. How does it feel to eat, now? Are you noticing the way the food tastes? Is it so much easier to cut your potato that it feels like someone else's arm and hand holding the knife? Most importantly, are the benefits to this kind of awareness worth the slight discomfort you might initially feel, or is it better to be in a numb routine where you eat mindlessly, never really tasting the food or appreciating the moments of leisure you have?

Exercise 3: Think about it

Lie on the floor in a comfortable place, preferably on firm carpet or a workout mat. Take a second to notice how you lie upon the floor, where you press into it and where your body rises up.

Imagine a simple movement, that of rotating your feet so that your big toes come closer to one another, then away from each other again, back and forth like slow windshield wipers. Don't actually make this movement at all. Only think about it. You will never make this movement during this entire exercise. If you find yourself actually moving, stop and return to thinking only.

Imagine as clearly as you can the sensation of the heels rolling on the floor, the toes sailing in a gentle arc through the air. Are your toes coming along for the ride, or are they pulling the feet behind them? Is your big toe the center of the universe, or does the toe on which you focus depend on the direction your foot is going?

Make the image of this simple movement clearer and clearer, so that you have the impression that you can notice all of these little things. You may fall asleep as you concentrate on this. That's fine. When you notice and wake up, imagine again. You may drop in and out several times, but always return to improving that image of your big toes moving towards one another and away.

When you have passed out about three times, or when you have sufficiently created a clear image of this movement, open your eyes. Slowly come to standing. How does it feel to stand upon your feet now? Different? Walk around. What's that like?

Why should you feel so different after only thinking about a simple movement, without even making it?

These three exercises demonstrate the kind of approach you will experience in a Feldenkrais lesson. You will be instructed to move with an attitude of curiosity and attentiveness. The exercises above are very general and may only make you feel different without teaching you anything. Feldenkrais lessons, on the other hand, are designed to bring your attention to specific aspects of your functioning so that when you get up at the end, what you have learned is useful to you. Your ribcage

may actually move when you walk, and you will understand why. Your head may rotate more easily on its axis, and you will be able to turn and swallow without effort.

But in order for you to experience these changes, you have to go in with the understanding that what you know is not sufficient, or you would have used it to improve already. How you find out what you need to know is a question of the degree of unfamiliarity you're willing to tolerate. Hopefully your Feldenkrais teacher will make it easy for you to explore! In the meantime, try these little exercises and see if you can stand to see the world just a little differently for just a little while.

Volume 2, No. 11 – December, 2003

Quote from Moshe: "In those movements when awareness succeeds in being at one with feeling, senses, movement, and thought...man can make discoveries, invent, create, innovate, and 'know.' He grasps that his small world and the great world around are but one and that in this unity he is no longer alone." Awareness Through Movement, p. 54

Can Feldenkrais give you the Buddha Nature?

One aspect of many alternative therapies, whether they are rooted in science or metaphysics or Chinese medicine, is that they possess a spiritual component which Western medicine has long since thrown away. The Feldenkrais Method has no such obvious spiritual components. Moshe Feldenkrais was a skeptical and rigorous scientist long before he was "miraculously" healing people, and he endeavored to explain the success of his work in scientific terms even while it was being adopted by people who were far less rigorous and skeptical.

Nevertheless, Moshe understood the connection between the spiritual and the physical, and, admitting such a connection existed and was a practical and usable tool in the betterment of the self, he was able to develop his Method to procure the kinds of "miracles" that many of his colleagues in medicine and therapy were unable to reproduce or explain.

Moshe said "We all pray to different gods, yet we all have our prayers answered. Therefore, there must be something in the way we pray that gives us what we need." What could it be? If Feldenkrais was interested, it must have involved something regarding human movement. As in all other spheres of life, movement is one of the few elements in human behavior that transcends culture, race, sex, and era. While the kinds of movements we make vary depending on the demands of the environment in which we live and grow, that we need to move in order to survive is an unassailable fact. Moshe's method uses our ability to learn

in the process of moving as the way to improve ourselves in all aspects of our lives.

So in religious acts, the fact that we move in certain patterns, and the way we move, is a subject of interest to Feldenkrais. Coming at it from the other direction, examining the way we move in all spheres of life and determining which of those patterns provide us with a sense of satisfaction, particularly a deep, spiritual contentment, may bring us closer to an understanding of the purpose of religion in our lives.

The most important feature of religion is the bow. Even in those religions in which movement is restricted to the forward bending of the head, when the congregation as a group bows they are entering into another state. It is significant that this state is initiated by a specific movement. The preacher does not say "We will now enter into a prayer state which will last ten seconds." The act of averting the eyes from the forward and upward focus of the pulpit with a definitive bend of the head produces a different feeling in the body than even a simple closing of the eyes. It is a movement closer to the curling of the fetus, the little ball we curl into when we wish to snuggle under the protection of our covers or our mothers' arms.

In other religions, the movements are more pronounced. Judaism, Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy have ritualized movements in their long services such as the Eucharist or the kissing of the Torah as it passes. These movements have long been studied for their symbolic significance, but the fact that these movements have evolved and been maintained for thousands of years speaks to their effectiveness and the idea that by substituting different movements, one would lose the effect.

The Moslem custom of the deep bow and the placing of the forehead on the floor, done many times in a day, present an example of the full use of the body in prayer as an essential component in the connection with God. Going even further, we can look at the Dervishes who whirl and twirl in intricate, stylized dances for the purpose of keeping a connection with God. These movements are inseparable from the state

of religious adherence and point to the fact that some cultures have long been aware of the connection between God and the body in motion.

We cannot ignore the element of movement in religious acts, but if we differentiate the movement from the ceremony, can we still claim that we are approaching a spiritual state? Is the movement without the intent sufficient or even valuable? If we are attempting to replicate a deep bow in a Feldenkrais lesson, what will we accomplish without the religious impulse behind it?

Movement without intent is simply habit, and Feldenkrais had an aversion to moving simply out of habit. But, after all, in an Awareness Through Movement lesson there is intent. The intent is to inspire awareness so that one is more intimately connected to the world around oneself, able to interact with ease and grace in the world and accomplish one's dreams. These goals are not unlike the prayers we offer to our various gods. If the movement in prayer can bring us closer to such a way of being, then we may find a similar result using these movements outside of our prayer-centers.

For the unreligious, this means one can reach a sense of satisfaction and spirituality through the Feldenkrais lessons, solely as a result of the effect that movements done with awareness has on the self. For the religious, one may wish to differentiate between the purely spiritual motives in prayer and the more selfish physical desires in ATM class, but to isolate the two completely is to miss the point of Feldenkrais' work, that we are complete humans at every moment in our lives and that no action can be stripped of one of its elements, physical, emotional, or spiritual without robbing it of some of its effectiveness.

Those who are religious may be able to use what they learn about themselves as moving bodies in their ATM's and FI's to reach a more profound state of calm and tranquility in prayer, to make a more satisfying movement when bringing their forehead to the floor, or to be aware of the difference between staring at the preacher and contemplating God with bent head. Feldenkrais' work serves to offer us

benefit no matter where we are by stressing the importance of awareness in our daily life, specifically in those times when we are most troubled and most at peace.

Volume 3, No. 2 – March, 2004

Quote from Moshe: "...if a man wishes to improve his self-image, he must first of all learn to value himself as an individual, even if his faults as a member of society appear to him to outweigh his qualities...Those who succeed in looking at themselves with a sufficient, encompassing humanity to achieve stable self-respect may reach heights that the normally healthy will never achieve. But those who consider themselves inferior because of their disabilities, and overcome them by sheer will power, tend to grow into hard and embittered adults..." Awareness Through Movement, p. 19

Being Good Enough to Get Better

I want to share a personal experience with you, something I just went through which changed me. As I examine the experience, both privately and with you, I see more and more how my understanding of the Feldenkrais Method prepared me for the moment and enabled me to make sense of it.

When I'm not writing about Feldenkrais, I'm playing or teaching the piano. I've been a pianist since I was five or six years old. As I approach my thirty-fifth birthday, I'm looking at thirty years of piano playing. In that time, I managed to do nearly everything a pianist can do: teach, write, perform, accompany, play in a jam session. There was only one thing I had never done on the piano: audition.

At the age of 18, when most high-school seniors who are serious about music are auditioning for Julliard, Eastman, Curtis and other noteworthy schools, I was applying to be an English major at Oberlin College. I probably could have auditioned for Oberlin's conservatory, but no one was encouraging me to do so, and deep down I had serious doubts about my ability to play the piano at an acceptable level.

I spent five years at Oberlin hanging on the fringes of the music-school, playing the piano in the practice rooms, but never daring to share my playing with anyone else. As time went on and I spent more and more time around the truly gifted pianists who study at Oberlin, both my desire and my fear of piano-playing increased.

I meant to conquer that fear by coming back to Atlanta and making it as a professional pianist without a degree in music. Somehow, by luck and persistence, I entered the niche of ballet accompanying and within a few years I was playing twenty hours a week for the Atlanta Ballet Centre for Dance Education. As a musician I had done pretty well, and I was pleased with myself.

Once I got married and began having children, it was a different story. Suddenly the money I could earn and the hours I had to keep as a pianist were no longer working for me. Hoping to earn a decent living in the corporate world, I tried my hand in television advertising and medical administration, but it became apparent to me and my wife that I'd go crazy if I didn't stay involved with music. Unfortunately, my options in that field were continually being curtailed by my lack of a bachelor's in music. So we decided that I would return to school to get the music degree I had skipped a dozen years ago.

There was just one problem: To get into school, I would have to...audition. Ah, yes. Forgot about that. After all this time, I'd still never had to audition on the piano. I would be required to memorize about twenty minutes of difficult piano music and perform it for faculty members who knew how it should sound.

Although the prospect terrified me, I made the commitment to myself and to my family to go through with the audition and to do it well. I spent nine months working on the music I would play, learning it, getting it up to speed, memorizing it and polishing it. About a week before the audition, the music was ready, but I wasn't.

I was terrified. For reasons I could hardly understand, this audition was some kind of passage that I had always avoided and which now I was going to have to traverse. It held some kind of an inner test, more significant than the outer test of performing. I was deathly afraid I would be unable to represent the music in front of people as well as I could play it by myself. Already in that last week, I was seeing my abilities start to deteriorate. I was making mistakes that I had never made before, forgetting parts of pieces that I had long ago committed to memory, and losing the confidence that I could complete my task.

It took a few pep-talks from a few worthy friends to help me through the last few days so that I could approach the music faculty of Georgia State University and play my audition. My desire was to play my music perfectly for them, so that I would never have to wonder about my abilities again. My fear was that I would self-destruct in front of them, make a big mistake, lose my place, and be unable to continue. Neither happened. I played my audition, made a number of small mistakes along the way, but managed to get through the music fairly well.

Something changed in me that morning, something very deep and powerful, and it wasn't what I expected. I had hoped to go in and prove to myself once and for all that I was great. Instead, I found that there was this thing called "good enough." Even though I had lots of places where I needed improvement, my performance was still acceptable to the task at hand.

This was a revelation to me because I have always lived my life as though I needed to be perfect in order to be worthy of anyone's notice, that if I wasn't perfect, I had darn well better be getting there. Life always seemed like a slippery rock that I was always trying to scramble to the top of. If I ever stopped to rest I'd slide to the bottom. Instead I found that I could count myself as a worthy human being as I was now.

This is a central idea in Feldenkrais: improvement is always possible, but only with an awareness of who you are in the present. Such awareness is so difficult because we are often sad or angry in the moment and do not want to experience these feelings. Perhaps we avoid really looking at our weight, our clumsiness, our potential to hurt others, and instead try to jump straight to fixing these things, becoming a skinny person, a super athlete, a saint. Having defined ourselves as inadequate, we are doomed to keep that identity because, until we achieve our unattainable goal of perfection, we will always see our current state as one of failure. The sensation of inadequacy permeates our lives. It drives us forward even while it keeps us back. We seem to progress, but we never get anywhere. No matter how much we achieve, we remain fat, clumsy, mean.

Feldenkrais is an antidote to this way of thinking. As we do a Feldenkrais lesson, we move slowly and gently, stopping in our movement long before we reach the point of failure. We get so interested in what we are doing, and so curious about how we do it, that we no longer care about the goal. Suddenly, whatever we are able to do is good enough, even while one can see how it would be possible to do it better. We arise from the floor with a profound feeling of serenity, hopeful for the future, but satisfied with the present.

We can reach this state because the lessons themselves are abstract. Movements done for their own sake are beautiful, and as we make the movements we see beauty in ourselves. Sometimes we cry when we see how beautiful we are because we never dared believe we could be worthwhile and still be so flawed. This is a powerful moment, and it happens again and again in the lessons.

As we learn to accept ourselves as moving, learning beings, we take this experience into our lives and our relationships, and suddenly we are living a different life, a life in which there is time enough for all things, in which we are good enough but not perfect, and in which we can allow other people to be wherever they are on their path as well. Surely this is a better world.

Volume 3, No. 6 – July 2004

Quote from Moshe: "...eye movements coordinate the body movements...Testing these connections of eye and neck muscles separately increases control of body movements and makes them easier. The movement of the eyes in an opposite direction of the head – and movement of the head in an opposite direction to that of the body – add a dimension of movement of which many are not aware. These exercises broaden the spectrum of activity..." Awareness Through Movement, p. 145

Look At Different Things, Look At Things Differently

There are two kinds of pairings in the world. Let's look at the words "duck" and "bird." These words can be paired together, but are they equivalent? You might think so at first glance. But it only takes a moment's thought to realize that while a duck is a bird, a bird is not a duck. This is the first kind of pairing, in which two things belong together but are not equivalent.

There is another kind of pairing, in which two things are so interrelated that they are, in fact, inseparable. The interesting thing is that often the connection between these two things is subtle and hard to see. "Tail" and "head" can be paired together even though they represent seemingly unrelated parts of an animal's anatomy because they are two sides of a coin. And, in fact, one cannot exist without the other. You cannot pick up only the tail side of a coin.

This seems trivial, but really it's only a model for a more complex idea: That is, certain pairs of things imply not only a connection but a relationship. Relationships can be much more complicated than simple

pairings, just as marriages can be much more difficult than dates, because there is such a richness in the intertwining of things that two seemingly opposite concepts can prove to be part of a greater whole.

This is useful when we talk about “vision.” We understand seeing generally as a one-way process in which you look at something and then you know what it is. This represents the first kind of pairing: “I see the cat and I have a thought about it. I do not have a thought about a cat and then see it.”

This is a limited way to understand vision, and it robs us of an opportunity to use our ability to see as a means of bettering our lives. I’m not just referring to our ability to enjoy the view on a Hawaiian postcard. I’m suggesting we make use of the idea that every one of us sees the world differently, not only metaphorically but quite literally. When I begin to notice that seeing is a function as unique as speaking, I open myself up to recognize how I as an individual see, and even more interestingly, how I could improve my ability to see, and how such improvements would affect my life.

We can always start with the extreme examples. If you have no vision whatsoever, you will experience the world in a radically different way than if you had normal sight. It goes without saying that a person who loses all of their vision will be profoundly changed by the experience. If we narrow the differences between the extremes so that we are talking about a person who can see all around them versus someone who can see only what is directly in front of them, we might guess that there is also a difference between the way these two people experience the world, and that transformation from one into the other would have significant impact on the way they live their life.

Feldenkrais comes into the picture when we mention that a person may not always be aware of the limits of their sight. It often happens that people have gaps in their vision, places in their visual field where they do not really see at all. If these spots are discovered through typical eye exams, they are usually dismissed as long as they do not prevent a

person from seeing what they want to see. More often, though, the limitations on a person's vision are subtle and go undiscovered because they are not physically apparent, but rely more on the habitual use of the self.

We might think that a person whose vision is limited to, say, the world directly in front of them, a person who must expend a great deal more energy to look at the world than a person whose eyes let in a wider swath of information, would be affected emotionally and intellectually by this condition. Such a person's thinking might reflect their manner of seeing. They might not be able to solve personal problems unless the solutions are apparent. They might be excellent at seeing details of issues but fail to understand the big picture. This could affect their relationships, their work life, and if one brings diet and stress into the picture, their health. It might be worthwhile to consider that, if we could improve this person's intellectual capacity to solve problems, widen their emotional range, teach them to recognize more options, that they might manifest these changes in a far-reaching place like their vision. To sum, what if you changed a person and they could see more as a result?

It's a tall order, though, changing a person that way. How is such an emotional revolution to be accomplished? What kind of schooling will widen their intellectual prowess rather than merely extending it in the direction it's already going? Furthermore, would we have to broaden all aspects of a person before it was reflected in their vision to the extent that they noticed they could see more?

Here's where the pairing comes in: If you can change a person's vision by changing the rest of them, maybe you can change the rest of them just by changing their vision. Feldenkrais created his Method based on the idea that the process of self-discovery begins in our earliest attempts to learn to move. He taught people that by exploring their learning process through the medium of movement, they could affect every aspect of their lives, intellectual, emotional, physical,

developmental, and so forth. Exploring what you can see and attempting to improve that capacity can have a profound effect on the rest of you.

Let me put it simply. You're walking along in the park. Notice what you look at. Are you the kind of person who examines the leaves on the trees? What is the distance where your eyes usually focus? A few feet ahead of you? Ten feet? A hundred? Do you look mostly at the ground, the sky, the horizon, or do you switch around? In short, what are your habits?

These habits, your propensity to see a few trees at a time instead of the pattern of the foliage, or vice versa, is a reflection of your inner mental process. You cannot separate the way you see the world from the way you think about it. The two are paired like the head and the tail of a coin. This is excellent news, because if you can examine your visual habits and begin to explore new ways to look, you might experience changes in your entire self. In a sense, you can wag the dog with the tail.

Some visual difficulties, as I said, are too subtle for casual observance. There are Feldenkrais lessons designed to help you explore the use of your eyes in a more systematic way. Of course, you should always notice how the world looks after any Feldenkrais lesson, because as you work with other aspects of your movement, your eyes will change as well.

Because our eyes are so important to us, we tend not to think of them as being connected to ourselves in such a basic way. The eyes are somehow to be protected from the rest of us so they can do their all-important job. But this is to miss the bigger picture; our seeing, like our walking, like our eating and sleeping, is an aspect of our greater self and should be integrated into that self-image, not simply used as a tool. The benefits of this kind of thinking quickly become apparent when you start to see the results!

Volume 3, No. 12 – January 2005

Quote from Moshe: "If I raise an iron bar I shall not feel the difference if a fly either lights on it or leaves it. If, on the other hand, I am holding a feather, I shall feel a distinct difference if the fly were to settle on it. The same applies to all the senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, heat, and cold...More delicate and improved control of movement is possible only through the increase of sensitivity, through a greater ability to sense differences." *Awareness Through Movement*, p. 59

If the Shoe Fits, Awareness

I love many things about being a Feldenkrais practitioner. I love the gratification I get when I ease someone's discomfort. I love the excitement I feel when I'm doing an ATM and I learn something new. I love knowing the fascinating people who also do this work, people with whom I can interact and converse in a very special way.

There's only one thing I hate about the Feldenkrais Method. When I try to explain to someone what exactly the Method is, I eventually run into "the blank stare." If the person has a casual curiosity about the Method, they'll likely blank out at the first sentence of my explanation. When they're really interested, they'll usually pay attention until they hear something unfamiliar.

Sooner or later I have to use the word "awareness." That's when the game is up. No matter who I'm talking to, I almost always run up against "the blank stare" at that point. If the person is a doctor, they may assume Feldenkrais is some touchy-feely psychosomatic nonsense involving unsubstantiated claims and vague results. If the person is a New-Age healer, they may assume that "awareness" refers to some universal awakening to the totality of the human spirit, and that they know all about this and can achieve the same results with crystals.

Most often, though, the person is neither of these things, and simply blank out because they just don't get it.

Few people really understand what Moshe Feldenkrais was talking about when he used the word "awareness." In this issue, I want to set the record straight and be very clear about awareness, what it is, and how it so powerfully serves us in our goal to diminish pain and discomfort, or increase our facility. As usual, I will start with an unrelated example!

What if you wanted to draw a picture of a tree, but you couldn't draw? I don't mean a lollipop-type tree; I'm talking about a real, life-like drawing of a tree growing in your backyard. How would you approach this challenge? You could just dive in and do your best, going into the yard with a pen and a piece of paper, but the experience would most likely be unsatisfactory. You'd be lost; you wouldn't know what to look at; you'd get frustrated and stop. End result: No drawing of a tree.

You could take a photograph of the tree and then trace it onto a piece of paper. The result would be something that looked a lot like a tree, so it would appear to be satisfactory. But it wasn't, really. You didn't want a drawing of a tree, you wanted to be able to draw a tree. By tracing it, you'd have undercut the process and you'd be no closer to your goal.

Now let's imagine you're a very patient person. I mean, like, old-man-on-the-mountaintop patient. Instead of drawing the tree, let's say you go out into the yard, get a chair, put it under the tree and look for awhile. A long while. Let's say you do this every day for a year. Maybe sometimes you touch the tree. Other times, you might climb into it. The point is, you study that tree regularly so that after a year you really know its ins and outs.

No, you know what? You get so excited that you do this for ten years. Wow. Imagine how well you know that tree now! You could probably envision all its curves and branches with your eyes closed. You probably don't even have to be around the tree to be able to see it, and describe

it. In fact, if I asked you what it looked like you could tell me in detail. You might even be able to show me by sketching out your description as you talked. "It goes up like this...then the trunk splits here...and this trunk twists just so..."

Wait a minute. You're drawing the tree.

Yawn...there you go again, Adam. So obvious. Of course if you know exactly what the tree looks like in your head, you can draw it! What's the point?

Let's say you walk in great pain, and you want to walk pain-free. The doctors have no idea what's wrong with you. Your chiropractor cracks you every week and it's been helping less and less. What are you going to do?

Well, you could just start walking and hope for the best but...no, you know what will happen then. Pain, pain, pain...

What if you started paying attention to the way your ankles, knees and hips interact? What about your ribs? The balance of your head? What if you got off your feet every day and lay on your back where you're fairly comfortable, and you bent your legs at the knee and started moving them around, paying attention to how they work, where they move more easily and where it's more complicated. Maybe you'd begin to discover efficient ways to move them around. Let's say you did this for a year, so that you got to know the insides and outs of your lower joints really well, getting so familiar with them that, as you walk, you could actually imagine them working together

This understanding isn't clinical. It's not anatomical understanding the way a doctor would describe it. Rather, it's understood experientially. Just as when you talk you don't think about all the components of your speaking, the same is true with walking. Rather than imagine every little detail of every bone pushing every other bone, you have a larger picture that is far too complicated to describe in detail but makes sense

as a whole. The improved understanding has generated a more complete picture of yourself, not a string of concepts, and you embody this picture as you walk and can pay more attention to what you're doing.

This is awareness: an increasing of self-understanding which leads to practical improvements. It's time spent getting to know something intimately, which results in a greater sense of self.

That's what always creates the blank stare among my listeners: the idea of a "greater sense of self." But it isn't that complicated. A "better sense of self" means you know yourself better. If you know yourself better, you use yourself better. You improve in anything you undertake.

That's not so hard, is it? Now next time you consider doing Feldenkrais, remember, you'll be lying on the floor or on a table, gently exploring. And as you do, your awareness will be increasing. Now can you see how that will benefit you?

Volume 4, No. 1 – February 2005

Quote from Moshe: "...when your attention and awareness are improved, in a few moments, your judgment will be better, as your sensitivity will increase with the reduction of your efforts. The situation proposed is realizable by either sex, fat or emaciated, old or young, athletes as well as the not-too-severely crippled." *The Elusive Obvious*, p. 105

The Mixed Blessing of Flexibility

In our last issue we talked about the need for increased flexibility, not merely for the sake of being able to do cool things with your body, but for the process involved in getting to that point. Those of us who consider ourselves "not very flexible" or even "hopelessly stiff" often look with awe upon those people who can flop around, as if they possess the secret to the universe and we'd love to be in their shoes for a while.

But extreme flexibility is not always what it's cracked up to be. There are certain people whose bodies are as loose as rag-dolls who, nonetheless, have just as many problems as their stiff cousins. How is that possible? Even if you're flexible, you may not know the answer.

When I was in my training, I continually lamented my stiffness. It prevented me from reaching the important part of many a Feldenkrais lesson and, in some cases, from even doing the beginning. I thought of myself as one stiff mass of putty and I hoped that the Method would enable me to touch my toes at least. Then one day our trainer mentioned to everyone that I had incredible flexibility in my ankles.

I was astounded. This seemed like some kind of enormous complement that I didn't think I deserved. Flexible? Me?

He didn't elaborate, and I didn't think to ask him about it. I just filed the information in the back of my mind and moved on.

One day many years later as I was contemplating the memory of that statement it occurred to me that I had never twisted my ankle despite a number of awkward falls and missteps. Usually when I should have twisted my ankle I just rolled off it, stumbled a little, and was fine. When I realized the unlikely strangeness of this fact I began to see that maybe my trainer had been correct and had observed something in me that I'd always taken for granted.

But once I admitted I had over-flexible ankles I started to wonder how they'd gotten that way when all of the rest of my body is stiff. Could it be that there was a connection between my super-flexible ankles and my mercilessly stiff hip-joints?

I remembered doing hands-on work with another trainer who was so loose I hardly knew what to do with her. At that time I thought the goal of the Method was to increase everyone's flexibility. She was already there; what could I do for her?

When I told her my dilemma, she informed me that super-flexible people often lack bodily organization, that they can put themselves anywhere but don't really have a sense of where their parts wind up or how they connect. If you think about the perfect tennis serve, it relies on a smooth arc in the arm, with the engaged musculature contracting and expanding perfectly. If someone is very stiff in their upper body they won't be able to make the arc as elegant as it needs to be. The movement will be jerky. But what about the super-flexible person who can make the arc without any trouble? Well, they're likely not to be able to feel the perfect arc. They'll flail their arm out without really knowing where it's supposed to go. Such a serve lacks power and accuracy. Flexibility provides opportunity, but not enough constraints.

My flexible ankles were the counterpoint to my inflexible hips. In a better-organized bottom-half, I'd be able to make adjustments between

the ankles, knees and hips as I walked, ran, and sat. Every joint would have an equal reaction in another joint. Instead the ankles were taking all the strain and keeping the hips still, like a secretary who doesn't allow any calls to reach the boss. I had no idea where my ankles were supposed to go in any given situation, how much or how little they were supposed to bend at any time, and so forth.

The result of my flexible ankles? Stiff sitting, awkward walking, a frozen skeleton, even up into my ribcage and my neck. When I was a boy my head used to bob as I walked, making me the target of jeers. If I'd been able to feel the transference of my weight from my feet through my ankles, knees, hips, and ribs, I would have walked much more elegantly. It would have felt better and looked better.

True, I never sprained my ankle. But I never felt safe on skis, I couldn't consistently play soccer well, and my lower back ached whenever I played the piano.

My work in the Method has increased my flexibility and I am very happy about it. But the real value of the work has been to increase my awareness of myself, to show me which parts of myself are flexible as well as inflexible, and to give me the internal sensation to organize all my parts into an efficient, elegant, powerful whole.

What's your state? Are you flexible, stiff, or a little of both? Could it be that the answer to your problems has always been finding a way to bring your intelligence into the equation so that the parts of you which are flexible and the parts which are stiff both have an opportunity to change? Feldenkrais, anyone?

Volume 4, No. 4 – May 2005

Quote from Moshe: "A violinist, an actor, a writer, or whoever, who is not aware of the importance of awareness of the way one directs oneself in acting or functioning in life will stop growing the moment he achieves what he considers to be the right way of doing." (The Elusive Obvious, p. 96)

Questioning Your Assumptions

When two people get married, they usually get along great for the first...year? Month? Week? It depends. Whatever...they usually get along at first. Why shouldn't they? They're married now; they've been looking forward to being together; love solves all problems.

Anyone that's been married (or is still married) knows that I'm being facetious. Love only solves all problems if the people in love come up with the solutions. What happens after the first year, or the first month, or the first week, is the first fight.

Two people have very different ideas about something but, until now, they've always been able to ignore or work around their disagreements. At this point, however, they can no longer use the same strategies because things have changed in their lives. A conflict arises and when it becomes clear that neither side is going to give way, the result is pain of some kind; sadness, anger, fear, even physical harm.

Couples that make it know that the only way to resolve the fight and preserve the relationship is for each person to give ground. Not just any ground; sacred ground. Each person in the conflict has to examine a fundamental belief, usually an assumption, and decide whether it can be compromised. For some people this question is incredibly difficult,

and its true resolution may not come for twenty years or more. Such questions include whether one can give on religious questions, whether one can do without certain types of foods, whether one has to be in control, and so forth.

What often happens is that one person in the argument surrenders something first, most likely believing that they will be hurt or damaged by doing so. If the relationship is to survive, the other person will recognize the surrender and will surrender something in return. When each person finds they have not been destroyed by their compromise, the relationship grows.

Each person in the argument usually believes they have surrendered first and that what they have given up is more precious, but it doesn't really matter. What is important is that the fundamental need, the sacred idea, the unquestionable truth is examined. Even if the valuable thing is not done without, the act of questioning it may make dialogue and growth possible within a relationship.

We have relationships with ourselves as well, and strangely enough, even though there is only one of us, we often experience the same dynamic when we are in self-conflict. Something in our lives changes and we find ourselves in unfamiliar pain, physical or emotional. Whatever strategies we may have used to avoid or ignore the pain are no longer working. Now our choice is either to bear the pain, find an even better avoidance strategy, or make a change in our lives that will ease the pain.

The last option looks like the best one, but it's the hardest. Making a change in our lives usually requires examining a fundamental assumption about what we need in order to live. It may be something as simple as giving up chocolate (simple, but not easy), or it may be something as complex as undergoing radical chemotherapy. Examining our sacred ground when in conflict with ourselves is no easier than when we are in conflict with a partner.

You can try to go cold turkey with the thing you want to eliminate, but your chances of relapse are high. You can get counseling, therapy, support from friends, but these things drag in a lot of excess baggage which can be hard to separate from the actual issue at hand. Moshe Feldenkrais figured out, though, that we can examine ourselves in a way that is more neutral, a way which limits conflicts so that they are perceivable and manageable: Our movement.

Often we embody our fundamental assumptions; they can be seen in the way we move, the way we carry ourselves, the way we physically interact with others. People with a fundamental belief that they deserve abuse often keep either a submissive posture or one that invites attack; they may keep their back bent, their head tucked, may hyperextend their knees or keep their throat bared.

Because of this correlation between identity and physicality, it is no easy task to examine one's movement. Often people will set out to change an aspect of their physicality only to fail as they approach the change. The most obvious example of this is the person who cannot lose weight. When they begin to lose, they abandon their diets "temporarily" as a reward or a break, and in the end never return to their regimen. The result is that they stay in an unhappy place, but a familiar one.

Movement may not be a foolproof way of examining ourselves, but it is far more neutral than psychology. Recognizing that you are unwilling to move a certain way on the floor, even when that movement is quite possible for you, gives you an opportunity to make a change without having to think too much about it. When you move in a new way, you may get up from the floor feeling very different emotionally without knowing why. When your head and shoulder-blades rest in a different position without your having to make any discernible effort, you may feel very liberated.

It helps greatly to have a practitioner giving the instructions and, even better, making observations. One of the toughest things about examining your fundamental physical assumptions is recognizing them.

If a practitioner suggests you do something that you never even would have thought to do, you may wind up feeling quite different.

My favorite story is about when Feldenkrais was training several hundred people in Amherst. He turned to a man and instructed him to bring his shoulder up to his ear. "I can't," replied the man, claiming the movement to be far too painful. Feldenkrais worked with him for a little while and slowly brought the man's head down until it touched his shoulder. Then he lifted both head and shoulder up so that the man was in the proper position. The man realized where he was and said to Moshe, "You don't understand. I can't do this."

He experienced a radical change so quickly that he was unable to question the assumption of whether the position was possible for him. He may have attached identities to that simple failure of movement, of his ability to do certain kinds of work, to pursue his youthful hobbies, even to make love. Once he was forced to see that he "could" do it, he had to reexamine the question and ask himself why he couldn't do it before. What was stopping him?

When we come to a juncture in our self-examination where we see a way of moving, of standing, of sitting, that we always believed was "not allowed," or "not possible," we have a chance to rethink that assumption. The result can be more powerful than you might suspect. Everything we do with our bodies is connected in a fundamental way to our emotional and mental states and changing our posture, our movement, is a way of changing our relationship with ourselves, and even, perhaps, with others.

Volume 4, Number 7 – August 2005

Quote From Moshe: "On examining even the most generous list of instincts, no other one but fear is found which inhibits motion. Now, the problem of 'can' and 'cannot' is fundamentally a question of doing..." (The Elusive Obvious, p. 63)

A Choice Encounter

One of the great lessons I, in my infinite wisdom as a parent, have tried to impart to my children is that they always have a choice. (Even when they really don't have a choice, like when I tell them to do something and, dogone it, they better do it, I present it to them as a choice.) I say, "You have a choice. You can do what I say, or you can do what you want and then this will happen." That's the key: take a situation in which they are fighting with you because they don't like how much power you have, and give the power back to them. "Kid, it's your choice."

What I like about this exercise is that I can turn it on myself. When I'm faced with a situation where I feel like a victim, either of circumstances or of an emotional state, I remind myself that I'm choosing my response. This is especially bitter medicine to swallow when I'm angry. At first, anger is a chemical response, out of our control. Things do make us angry and often we can't control the inbred, hardwired reaction. But after a very short time the initial stimulus fades. Yet we find we are still angry; we nurse a grudge, turn the situation over and over in our heads. In fact, we are choosing to remain angry, all the while telling ourselves the way we feel is their fault.

We don't want to admit we have the power because owning the power will require us to do the work to change ourselves. We want someone else to do the work, preferably the person who we are angry at. Of

course, other people rarely go the distance to fix our problems for us unless we are extremely aggressive or extremely manipulative. For those of us that are neither, we are stuck with our feelings until we choose to do what it takes to feel otherwise.

As difficult as it is to make the long-term shift, recognizing our power to choose in situations where we had previously considered ourselves trapped is an extremely empowering thing to do. When we see that we are choosing a reaction of violence rather than simply riding the non-stop rail towards it, we can envision new outcomes, change relationships that we thought were unchangeable, and create a life for ourselves that we had always assumed belonged only to other people.

What is true for the mind is also true for the body. So many of us find ourselves with certain physical problems that we assume are hardened and inescapable. But after a short time working with the Feldenkrais Method, we discover ourselves escaping these states, if only temporarily. When experiencing sudden relief after years of chronic back pain, we long to live permanently in that place. It often takes years to make that temporary shift a permanent change, but it can be done, and it comes from recognizing where our choices are.

In our bodies, as our minds, we have the ability to self-examine. The Feldenkrais Method creates this environment of self-examination through movement. By approaching physical challenges such as rolling from the back to the side and then returning, or rising off the floor gracefully, we are forced to confront those places where we get stuck, where we either push through or avoid our difficulty. If we are patient, if we are curious, if our Feldenkrais teachers are doing their jobs, we can change our attitude towards, and thus our approach to, those difficult spots. If we go slowly enough and keep our minds clear we can find the choices that were not apparent to us before.

An amazing thing happens when your physical choices increase. Your mental and emotional choices also multiply. This is especially important for children and for the very old. A child has limited experience and

cannot always envision the end of a sequence of choices. By experiencing certain consequences in their movement, they may be able to imagine the existence of such chains of thought in other areas. "If I combine this series of concepts, the following occurs." This shift happens naturally when we are babies but as we get older we begin replacing this process with a more intellectual one which may not be as efficient.

As we age we begin to have a sense that our options are vanishing, that we have far fewer choices than we did before. Family, career path, and illness can corral us so that we see only a straight road ahead, often lined with razor wire to keep us upon it. This reduction in our sense of choice takes a toll upon our body as we physically conform to the situations we imagine to be our prison.

Even when our constraints begin to lift, we continue to believe that things once fluent are fixed in stone. Our identity narrows and, correspondingly, our physical ability deteriorates. We wear grooves in ourselves from acting and reacting in the same way over decades. These grooves go all the way down to the bone and we experience aches and pains, debilitating conditions and depression.

The elderly benefit from Feldenkrais in several ways. Obviously it opens up more choices for them in their physical life. The lessons allow them to fully explore the range of possibilities in their bodies that they have long since forgotten or denied themselves. But discovering that what was once a physical constraint is really a choice makes its way to other realms of the imagination as well, so that someone who finds themselves able to move in more directions will also begin to see more facets of themselves. Perhaps they can choose to be more loving, or more patient, or more assertive than they ever were able to be before.

This is the gift of the Method to all ages: To provide us a view of choices whether we choose to make them or not. We have only to become aware of the forked path and we can go wherever our choices lead us, if we so choose.

About the Author

A jazz musician who writes books, Adam Cole is the author of many works of speculative fiction including *Motherless Child* and *The Girl With the Bow*. He has been featured in *Reader's Digest*, *Psychology Today* and NBC.com and serves as a regular contributor to periodicals such as *UpWorthy*, *Transzion* and *Fupping*. He chronicles his journey through stage fright, self-improvement and the learning process in his popular blog series.

His journey has taken him through roles as a jazz musician, a music educator, and a choral director in public and private education. As co-director of the Grant Park Academy of the Arts, he advocates for the importance of the arts in education. He continues to take his many experiences in these fields and rework them into the worlds his dedicated readers have come to love.

Adam completed his certification in The Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education in 2000. He incorporates the work into his writing and music instruction, constantly seeking new ways to reach people about this phenomenal work. He has published and presented in the United States and Israel, and serves on the editorial board of *The Feldenkrais Journal*.

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