

The *Feldenkrais Method*: An Introduction

by Alan Questel

The *Feldenkrais Method* is an approach for improving both physical and mental functioning through the exploration of body movement patterns and the use of attention.

It is based on the brain's innate capacity for learning and the potential for lifelong development and growth. Movement is used as the medium toward understanding our habits and identifying, learning and acquiring alternatives that promote ease and well-being.

The applications of the *Feldenkrais Method* range from reducing pain, improving neurologically-based difficulties and learning disabilities, and increasing mobility - to enhancing performance of professional athletes, dancers, musicians, and actors. People who come to do *Feldenkrais* are referred to as students, rather than patients, because learning underlines the basis of the Method.

Origins and Development of the *Feldenkrais Method*:

The *Feldenkrais Method* was developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, born in Russia in 1904. Feldenkrais emigrated to Israel at the age of thirteen and eventually went to Paris to study degrees in mechanical and electrical engineering, earning his D.Sc. in physics at the Sorbonne. He subsequently worked for a number of years in the French nuclear research program. Feldenkrais was a keen athlete (soccer and martial arts) and studied with Kano Jigaro (the originator of judo); in 1936 he became one of the first Europeans to earn a black belt in that discipline.

A chronic knee injury prompted him to apply his knowledge of physics, body mechanics, neurology, learning theory and psychology to the body and mind. His investigations resulted in the formulation of a unique synthesis of science, learning and aesthetics, known as the *Feldenkrais Method*.

The Process of Movement

A lesson could begin with a practitioner saying, "As you're sitting, what are you aware of about your sitting? Perhaps it's your back against the chair, or your feet on the floor, or your buttocks on the seat.."

A student's reply might be, "It is doing this.." Yet most often, it is "I have no idea what those parts are doing."

The answer indicates that we give little or no attention to certain parts of ourselves or we tend to notice the same parts habitually. The fact is our whole self is involved in everything we do, but we sense only certain parts of ourselves in our actions and it generally tends to be the same parts. Through a more even distribution of effort and force throughout our whole self, an overall enhancement of movement, action, and thought results.

The foundation of this kind of exploration is not the kind of learning based solely on information, rather it involves learning that can lead to a change in action, a change in thinking and feeling. The introduction of new movement variations awakens curiosity and teaches adaptation for continually altering circumstances. Rather than attempting to learn the

"right way" of doing something, or "correcting" or "fixing," students can explore choices, options, and different ways of using themselves. Thus, one can act more effectively and efficiently depending on the context and the intention in that moment.

The *Feldenkrais Method* utilizes attention in a learning environment that is safe, easy, and geared toward an appropriate degree of challenge. In this context, each person can discover and shift habitual patterns that interfere with their functioning. You become your own laboratory for developing understanding and awareness of your daily actions.

The Two Modalities of the *Feldenkrais Method*:

Awareness Through Movement (Group classes):

Participants are verbally led through a series of structured movement sequences that utilize attention, perception, and imagination. Designed to evoke a more synergistic use of oneself, the lessons establish new patterns of movement. As lessons progress, participants become more aware of their movement habits, affording new patterns of behavior.

There are more than a thousand different lessons, with movement ranging from developmentally based patterns to innovative configurations. The movements are usually done lying down or sitting, and in a manner that recognizes each participant's own pace and range of motion. Comfort, ease, and quality of movement are the main criteria used as one is developing more inner authority.

Functional Integration (Individual sessions):

This one-to-one, hands-on interaction is specifically designed to meet the needs of each individual. Practitioners guide students to a new and more varied use of themselves, using movement as the means to promote changes in patterns of thinking, sensing, feeling, and interacting. The quality of touch is non-invasive, and interactive in nature. Students are fully clothed, and lie or sit on a low table throughout the session.

Benefits of the *Feldenkrais Method*:

The *Feldenkrais Method* aims to improve physical and mental functioning. It is applicable to anyone wanting to enhance the quality of his or her everyday life and activities. People from many different walks of life do *Feldenkrais*. They report results of increased vitality, enhancement of self-image, better breathing and posture, greater flexibility and range of motion, and reduction of pain.

By bringing attention to the process of movement, students usually feel lighter and more graceful, and have greater ease and effectiveness in turning their intentions into actions.

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