

Part 2: Awareness Through Movement

We naturally have different abilities and requirements for movement in our lives. The way we move reflects our physical structure, culture, environment, education and personal history. Indeed, movement is an essential part of our individuality. It's our silent signature, revealing who we are – in every move we make. We may move with pain or comfortably, with effort or effortlessly, with agility or stiffly, with elegance or awkwardly. But one thing is certain: move we must.

This section includes lessons that explore a variety of simple movement patterns designed to facilitate awareness of, and change within, your present movement abilities. My intention is not to prescribe what is *correct* movement. Rather, I wish to help you awaken your ability to move freely. As you explore (or learn), you will discover satisfying new ways of functioning that will enrich your life.

All of the following movement lessons are based upon the principles and methods of Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), an Israeli pioneer in the application of movement in learning. Dr. Feldenkrais was a distinguished scientist in the fields of physics and engineering, as well as a recognized master in Judo. Using his knowledge of Eastern martial arts and his Western scientific understanding, he developed a unique form of movement-based learning, in a field now known as Somatic Education.

Feldenkrais's own body was his principal laboratory, while his own injuries were the catalyst in his search for well-being. He also studied the knowledge then available in medicine, psychology, martial arts, yoga and the movement arts. Over time, Feldenkrais developed a hands-on method, using movement to help others lead improved lives. In the 1950s, after years of research, selfinquiry, and working with others, he started to teach verbally directed movement classes in Tel Aviv. Feldenkrais eventually referred to these classes as *Awareness Through Movement* lessons to emphasize their learning and transformative nature.

The Feldenkrais method essentially uses movement to increase awareness and facilitate learning. The method helps free us from our compulsion to follow established patterns of action in the world. Those habituated patterns are reflected in our movement and behavior. Through this work you can learn to move more comfortably and in a more satisfying way, and to change behavioral patterns that are no longer needed. You can learn to improve everyday activities, such as walking, sitting, playing a sport, writing or working at a computer. You can also use this approach to enhance already refined abilities, such as dancing, singing or playing an instrument.

This is the unique beauty of the Feldenkrais method.

Learning and Habits

Learning occurs quite differently in this method than in traditional education, where rote (or repetitive, and mimicked) learning is the norm. In school, a student usually learns by

repeating a set of actions until he or she achieves the intended goal. Most instruction follows this approach, from learning to write, to playing a musical instrument, doing mathematics, or acquiring an athletic skill. From a neurological perspective, this strategy is tremendously useful. Repetition organizes the neural pathways in the brain so that activities are done smoothly and automatically. For example, in martial arts a student learns a counterblow intended to ward off an attacking thrust by continually repeating that particular movement pattern until it is automatic. This is called a habituated response.

Once automatic precision is achieved, the necessity for deliberation (which leads to doubt and hesitation) is eliminated. Without such precision a warrior is vulnerable - an unaffordable situation in combat. Another example is that of learning to write. A child learns by diligent repetition to reproduce a mental image of a letter on paper. As we know, writing involves the coordination of several different faculties, as well as the ability to move in a highly organized manner. Such a task requires years to master.

Much of what we have learned in life has been acquired by the body's intrinsic learning capacity. Just think of the enormously complex task of making sense out of the information that enters through your ears and eyes. No one teaches a child to see and hear, yet a healthy child learns from experience how to make order out of the noise and light that reaches the senses.

We also learn through selfexploration, by imitating others and by responding to our emotional and physical environment. For instance, rolling over, crawling and walking are mainly acquired by a child's exploration of what is physically possible - by trying this and that until the child can do something new. Children learn by trial and error what is satisfactory, rewarding and enjoyable for themselves or others, and what is not. Thus a child's exploration will lead to ways of moving that, when sufficiently repeated, become ingrained patterns within the nervous system. These firmly embedded habits are often carried for years, into adulthood and old age - unless, of course, something occurs to alter or replace them.

Habits are extremely important. Both acquired and innate patterns get us through daily life. Acquired patterns are those that we have adopted in the course of life, as I've described above. Innate patterns are reflexes that we are born with, such as the startle reflex, which is involuntarily triggered. In fact, the nervous system is only functional because of habituated impulse patterns that give order to the brain. It's a remarkable achievement, given that the brain has at least as many neurons as there are stars in the Milky Way.

Unfortunately, the problem with habits is that they're not always beneficial and at times are even harmful. What was a useful and rewarding way of doing something in the past may no longer serve our needs today.

As an example, many years ago I injured the Achilles tendon of my right foot. This injury severely limited my ability to stand, to walk and bear weight on the right leg. I learned to transfer my weight onto my left leg, a useful strategy that kept me mobile and working. The tendon healed slowly and my new habit of walking became solidly ingrained. In fact, I unconsciously kept up this particular habit of walking for many years after the tendon healed. In time, my right side began to feel a continual tension, which

later developed into right hip pain and stiffness. Fortunately, through the Feldenkrais method, I found a way to alter this injurious pattern of moving.

First, I learned how to recognize my movement habits by becoming aware of what I was doing. This awareness was born out of learning to sense change within myself. At the same time, I found new ways of moving to replace those patterns that were harming me. Gradually, as my awareness increased with practice, I discovered new possibilities of movement. This has given me a level of flexibility, comfort and strength that I've not had for years. In this process of learning through movement, a newfound curiosity about life and my own place in it has arisen. All of this has led to my letting go of old behavioral patterns, including ways of thinking and feeling that no longer serve me. This experience reinforces my conviction that any notion of duality between mind and body is illusory. We act, feel, think and sense as one whole being.

From my experience, we can see that injury, physical and emotional trauma, repetitive strain and poor posture can limit our ability to move freely. We become increasingly constrained in our activities, more and more areas of unwanted tension develop, joints lose their smooth functioning and range, and our nervous system attends more and more to the habituated struggle of moving. We lose the ability to use our entire self in action. Movement itself becomes a burden instead of a joy.

This is where the Feldenkrais method can help us, refining our ability to move in the world in a way that's internally satisfying. We can learn to do what we want, not what we are compelled to do. We start learning how to use our whole self effortlessly and completely. And, most importantly, we work with our intrinsic ability to learn. Our nervous system is so adaptable that even when damaged by injury or disease, alternate neural pathways can be made available to do the same functions.

As you can see, an important part of this work is in becoming mindful and present. Such awareness enables you to notice what you are doing and how and when it changes. It is difficult to alter your actions unless you clearly sense change - and it's through the recognition of differences that change is noticed.

In the lessons below, you'll see that much attention is given to discerning differences in movement. With practice, you'll be able to feel what is beneficial and what is not. As you become more aware, more new options for movement become available to you. You'll learn to replace harmful movement habits with beneficial ones. I also hope, in working with these lessons, you'll find a heightened sense of well-being, connectedness and functional integration.

Please read the following preliminary instructions before beginning the lessons.

Preliminary Instructions

You'll recall that, in all our sessions, a quiet, warm, clean and somewhat open space is desirable. A room with a carpeted floor and/or a yoga or workout mat with a blanket over the top will increase your comfort while lying on the floor. You may also want to use a small, firm, flat pillow or a foldedup towel under your head and neck during the lying-down lessons. The pillow or towel's thickness should give sufficient support and comfort

to your neck and head without lifting them too far off the floor. This is very helpful if your head tends to hang backward when lying down (that is, the arch of your neck increases its angle so that the face tilts slightly upward).

In some of the lessons, a stool or chair is required. I'd suggest using one with a flat seat, and low enough so that your legs may bend at a right angle while your feet rest flat on the floor.

Generally, loose, warm, and comfortable clothing is best. Avoid wearing belts and anything restrictive or distracting to your ability to move freely. Watches, heavy jewelry, eyeglasses, hearing aids and prostheses are best left off, if it's feasible and safe to do so.

The following movement lessons can be performed during any part of the day. Just be sure to leave sufficient time for their completion and perhaps ten to fifteen minutes of free time, to rest afterward.

However, I would caution against doing a lesson directly after eating a large meal or following intense physical exertion, or if you are overtired already. This will only distract from staying both present and aware during your lesson. For many people, the end of the day before sleep is a good time to do the lessons. Sleeping after the lesson allows for thorough rest to occur. It also gives time for your nervous system to integrate the learning.

At the beginning of each lesson, I suggest an approximate length of time that you'll need to complete it. Of course, the length of time needed is dependent on how many repetitions you make with each new step, and on the length of rest periods, or interruptions that may occur. Remember to add a few minutes to rest and observe any changes in yourself after a lesson.

For optimal results, I recommend that you do a lesson each day or every second day in the sequence offered here. The lessons are arranged to move you through a progression of abilities. Generally, the more lessons you do, the more cumulative their effect will be. You can also repeat the entire series at a later point. However, if you wish, you can do the lessons in the order of your choosing and derive benefit from them.

No matter in which order you choose to do the lessons, the key is to explore as many as possible. The more variety of movements you learn, the better your abilities will be. In addition, the lessons that you find challenging are often those that lead to surprising improvements. Go back as often as you like to these.

If your ability and stamina are compromised by illness or injury, I would suggest that you break the lessons into smaller parts. Consider spending only five or ten minutes at a time working with a lesson, perhaps twice a day, even though it might take you a few days to work through one lesson.

When following the lesson instructions, read one step and then do the movement before reading the next step. Each step is to be repeated, but the number of repetitions is up to you. Usually six to ten repetitions of each movement will be fine. The goal of repeating the movement is simply to explore and discover how you move: not to stretch, strengthen or achieve a pose. This exploration and discovery leads to a refinement of the movement, making it easier and more elegant.

Each lesson involves a specifically designed movement pattern. Usually, lessons

are broken down into small sequences of actions in the beginning. Then they are reconfigured into more complex movements. The effects of the movements may appear instantaneously while working with a lesson, or later on, as you resume your normal activities. The lessons are organized to have a cumulative effect. You'll be given some indications about improvements that you might notice in your abilities as you work through the lessons.

I would encourage you to reflect on each lesson in the hours and days that follow its completion. By taking a few minutes to remember various moves from a lesson, you will help integrate them within yourself. There's no need to memorize the lessons. Simply recalling movements that are spontaneously remembered from the lessons will facilitate your learning process. Recalling the final composite movements from the end of a lesson is also very rewarding.

Before you begin, please read and study the following principles. In fact, reread these principles before your subsequent lessons until they are thoroughly familiar.

If you become enthused about the Feldenkrais method and wish to learn more about it or want to find new lessons, consult the Resource Guide. There are literally dozens of books and tapes and hundreds of lessons available to the public. Enjoy your exploration.

1. Go slowly. Do each movement slowly - there's no need to rush. Just like the old saying goes, "haste makes waste." Going slowly helps maximize your ability to stay present and aware. Taking your time to sense and to move will help you reduce muscular effort. It also lets your nervous system assimilate new and unfamiliar movements.

2. Reduce your effort. Do much less than what's possible. Never go to your limit or even close to it. Simply make your movements within the range of what's easy and comfortable. After a few small movements, you may find that you're able to increase the size of the movement without increasing your effort. In learning, the *more* you exert, the *less* you'll be able to notice differences. Only by reducing unnecessary effort can you begin to appreciate the quality with which you move. The fewer demands made on your system, the more you can attend to the details of the movements.

3. Rest frequently. At the end of each movement pattern, you'll be asked to rest. At these moments, take a minute to rest deeply, while letting go of all tension and effort. You may be asked to rest in various positions, or you can choose to rest in a comfortable position of your own choice. In addition, if at any point you feel strain or fatigue, stop and rest for a while before you carry on with the lesson. Rest is an important function; it helps facilitate the assimilation of new learning. As well, rest keeps you refreshed and alert.

4. Use your imagination. Whenever you find a movement particularly difficult or even impossible to do without discomfort, just imagine doing the movement. This might happen if you've had a stroke and one side doesn't move well, or if you have a frozen shoulder that won't move much. This also applies if you tire easily. For best results, take

time to imagine the details of the movement, clearly and precisely. While imagining, you can also recall all the sensations from the side that can do the movement. Your imagery will immediately influence your body's ability and ease of motion. The mind and body begin to form a unified whole, and we can use one to influence the other. In fact, you may notice that your body responds to your imagery with very minute movements.

5. Be comfortable. Always insist on being as comfortable as you can. Take time to rest, keep warm, move, or adjust your positioning if necessary. You can even stop a lesson should you wish to, or if you have had enough. You can always complete the lesson later. Comfort makes learning that much easier.

6. Notice differences. Staying aware and present with ourselves can be challenging. By noticing differences we engage our curiosity and our ability to remain present with our experience. Noticing change will reinforce choice within your ability to move. Once you can differentiate one movement from another, new movement options become available, and the necessity to move in a habitual way is reduced.