On Health

by Moshe Feldenkrais

"A healthy person is one who can live fully his unavowed dreams."

A few years before World War Two, I was teaching judo to make a living while working at the Sorbonne with Joliot-Curie for my doctor's degree in Science. One of my pupils turned out to be a hunter of wild animals in Africa, and he invited me to his house where I was left alone for a few minutes. I was startled when a lion walked in and came over to lick me. It had been brought to Paris as a cub and had grown up into a real lion.

A few months later the lion was taken by the police to the Paris Zoo. The lion had gone into the street, and an old lady with a little pekingese dog and dim eyesight, mistaking him for a big dog, chased him through the streets with her umbrella. After refusing food and drink for about ten days, the lion died in its cage. I have shortened the story by omitting the details.

Now, there was a healthy animal that died, obviously due to an emotional trauma. But what is a healthy animal? If a healthy lion dies ten days after a sudden change in its life, what is health?

If a human being needs no medical services for years and has no complaints of pains or aches, is he or she healthy? If, on the other hand, this same person leads a dull, uninteresting life with marital difficulties that end up with suicide—is that a healthy person? And is a person who never brings his or her work to an end one way or another, and who keeps changing his employment only to avoid his duties time and time again—is he in good health?

Obviously, health is not easy to define. It is certainly not enough to say that not asking for medical or psychiatric help is proof of health.

What, then, is health?

Life is a process. This means that whatever goes on in us while we are alive is linked with time. Everybody knows that, even if nobody thinks or says so. A process cannot be stopped for any length of time, depending on the forces that are involved. And of course everybody knows that if the brain does not get oxygen for 10 or 15 seconds, the process stops altogether. If one succeeds in restarting it by chance, it is a new process and the person is never again what he was. If a person bleeds enough he bleeds to death, and a heart that stopped for that reason is not easy to set working again. In short, any process stopped, will not start again spontaneously. This is true of any irreversible chemical process or any reaction.

So, obviously, health means first of all that all the essential functions of a person must be able to continue without prolonged breaks. Consciousness, the central nervous system, the heart and so on have to go on uniformly. There is nothing here that we don't really know.

Very large systems that function are also processes depending on time. Any of the very large companies or any nation is a good example: Ford, ICI, Philips, or any such large system. All such systems will continue functioning no matter which particular factory, mine, or city ceases to exist. The measure of a large system is the size of the shock it can take without its processes stopping.

Now, the human nervous system has $3 \times 10^{10}$ parts at least. This is a system large enough for its balanced functions to obey the law of large systems. The health of such a system can be measured by the shock it can take without compromising the continuation of its process. In short, health is measured by the shock a person can take without his usual way of life being compromised.

The usual way of life thus becomes the criterion of health. Sleep, food, breathing, change of weather, cold, heat, work should all be capable of large variations—sudden shocks. The healthier the person, the more easily will he regain the conduct of his life after considerable sudden shocks by changes in all the necessities for life.

On reflection there is nothing here that is very difficult to accept. Except that we may be surprised to find where this leads us. Our nervous system is not born as it is when we are adults. In order to get a system to work as it does in us, the nervous system needs the outside world. There is light—of different intensities and colors. Objects are near or farther away, and so on. Our eyes therefore first have to learn to see, even a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional picture. In short, our system needs a special part of the world to learn a language.

But there are more fundamental issues. The system is wired through its sensory and kinesthetic organs to the external world. A nondifferentiated nervous system, while it grows, gets differentiated to cope finely with outside objects. What does this entail in a practical sense?
They have never been differentiated to be of any practical use in acting and reacting in the world around us. So that everyone has his unavowed dreams when grown up. Our culture, parents, and schooling make us dismiss these dreams as infantile attitudes not befitting a realistic adult. We gradually suppress them, are somehow ashamed to be very serious about them. But luckily not all of us. Some exceptionally fortunate ones succeed even to the point of making them come true—and some find their inspiration in other occupations just by avoiding taking their dreams seriously.

I am not sure that I have made the problem clear enough. Let me say, however, that a healthy person is the one who can live his unavowed dreams fully. There are healthy people among us, but not very many.

In our culture, the life-process, starting with a widening of the differentiation of the nervous system to a finer and more complete variety of experiences of the outside world, with an increased ability to change it for our growing intentional activity, slows and narrows its scope with sexual maturity. After that the system narrows its links with the external world as a whole and specializes in a particular aspect of the external phenomena. We become expert in a narrowing peak of activities and experience. We become a poet, a boxer, a scientist, a politician, a painter, a musician, an economist, a surgeon, a dancer—the choice is irremovable. Our learning is then not concerned directly with continuing the essential differentiation of the nervous system through a widening commerce with the outside world. There comes a point where our education as it developed does not help us, but very often limits and directs us into channels which are not conducive to health. We become so unhealthy that we have to retire before we are biologically old—we are simply unhealthy. Some bits of us—those involved in the peak formation of our activity—are worn out. The life process is narrowed. Activity is restricted more and more to the specialty in which we excel. Only those parts of the nervous system essential to continuing the process of biological existence function, after a fashion.

Even in our culture a number of us succeed in retaining their healthy life process to an old age—an age, that is, where the unhealthy are already dotty and sick. Some of our best and healthiest men—who, by the way, may be hunchbacks or have other deformities—are the sort of people of whom we think as artists. Most artists, be they cobblers or sculptors, composers or virtuosos, poets or scientists, like good wine are best when they are old. The outstanding difference between such healthy people and the others is that they have found by intuition, genius, or had the luck to learn from a healthy teacher, that learning is the gift of life. A special kind of learning: that of knowing oneself. They learn to know "how" they are acting and thus are able to do "what" they want—the intense living of their unavowed, and sometimes declared, dreams.
The Teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais:
Seeing Movement as the Embodiment of Intention
Layna Verin

The teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais are not a routinized set of exercises, but rather a process as alive and animated as the teacher himself. The basic idea is to reeducate the movements of the body in order to eliminate habitual responses in the brain—responses that hamper our movement, and therefore our total energy and creativity.

According to Feldenkrais, the key to a natural expression of movement, "as the embodiment of the organism's intention," is to affect the cortex of the brain via the motor system. In his own words, "what I'm after isn't flexible bodies, but flexible brains."

In this beautiful article which Moshe Feldenkrais calls "perhaps the fullest and best description of what goes on in my workshops," Ms. Verin captures the joy of Feldenkrais, the man and his teachings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless, he says, "The movements are nothing. They're an idiotic thing. What I'm after isn't
flexible bodies, but flexible brains. What I’m after is to restore each person to their human dignity.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You may be arching your body in a way that is usually achieved only after weeks or even months of arduous hatha yoga stretches. Or find yourself swinging your body around in a full circle on your pelvis, like a child. Or, with utmost ease, touching your knee to the opposite elbow. The details are unimportant. What is important is that in a ridiculously short time you have accomplished something that you were certain you couldn’t do, and accomplished it with ease, enjoyment, and zest.
“Stand up,” he says, “Walk around. How do you feel? Do you walk differently? Look at the people around you. Look at their faces. Do they look different? Have their eyes changed? Their shoulders?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If a new message can be transmitted to the brain, a change takes place in the cortex, freeing it from the old patterns.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I discontinued sessions with a chiropractor when I began the classes with Feldenkrais. I have a bad back—bone spurs, damaged disks, a severe curvature, a rotation in the upper spine. One manipulative session with Moshe accomplished what years of osteopathy and chiropractic had failed to achieve. The session lasted less than 15 minutes. I was stunned. "Can this be all?" I wanted to say.
I asked Moshe if the results would last, not believing that they could. He said that they would if I could manage to retain the sensation I was experiencing. I did, for more than three months, and would have done so longer had I not interrupted the awareness exercises.

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

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

A person who realizes that his education has been faulty does not regard himself in the same way, nor is he regarded in the same way, as a person who is "sick," regardless of what euphemistic jargon disguises the "sickness." If we feel awkward, dull, somehow shameful, we will behave in an awkward, dull and shamed manner. Feeling free and uninhibited, we will behave spontaneously.

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

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

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

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


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