

Awareness Through Movement – Part 1

Lessons in awareness according to M. Feldenkrais

Self-image

The image we have of ourselves largely determines our behavior, our feelings, and our thoughts, yet it is in fact formed more or less coincidentally during our childhood. During that period our habits develop, and they differ greatly depending on the place and circumstances in which we grow up. The power of habit is strong. Moshe Feldenkrais, however, designed lessons aimed at learning how to change habits. His premise is that by repeating a movement several times with full attention and without any effort, the movement becomes less of an automatism at that moment—meaning it no longer follows a fixed habit or pattern.

The movements

Many of the movements are performed lying on the floor, because this avoids the effort of the muscles that keep us upright. In this way, the movements can be done gently and with minimal effort. The less force you use, the better you can perceive the automatic movement pattern and break through it.

The goal is not to achieve something, but to follow the process of how you do something. By consciously following the course of a movement, a change occurs in the programming of the central nervous system. Afterwards, when you stand up again, you incorporate this change into the way you deal with gravity. This can produce very interesting results, for example in terms of the “posture” you adopt—both physically and mentally—or in the way you view the world and yourself within it.

Playful, attentive, small, gentle, and slow

The learning process of young children is playful, adventurous, and exploratory. Feldenkrais tries to bring this same quality into his movements. Mechanically repeating the same movement without attention is not sufficient; otherwise, a postman would eventually become a runner simply by learning to walk better.

Often a movement starts small in order to discover which body parts are actually involved. When the movement is made larger, it becomes clear that not all parts cooperate equally well. In fact, some parts even work against the direction of the movement. In this way, you learn to better distinguish the components of a movement (“differentiate”). Ultimately, the pattern of the entire movement becomes much clearer and more efficient: all parts contribute more evenly to the whole movement.

Body parts that you are not well aware of are harder to differentiate. As a result, the movement becomes less smooth and gentle; it may feel jerky or proceed as if in a “block.” A movement that you can fully follow and are consciously aware of is smooth and can stop or reverse direction at any point.

Movement in imagination

The exercises often consist of a sequence of movements that gradually involve the entire body. One side of the body or movement in one direction is explored completely. The effect can then be clearly perceived by noticing the difference between the two sides of the body.

Next, the same series can be repeated in imagination, this time for the other side. What becomes apparent is that vividly imagining the movement also brings about change. The body may even change more through “only” moving in imagination, and in a shorter amount of time. This only works if it is done with very precise attention. This points to the importance of attention and to the fact that the effect of the movements does not lie in muscle strength or flexibility, but in coordination and programming within the nervous system.

It should therefore be clear that there is no age limit for practicing *Awareness Through Movement*. Everyone can expand their possibilities.

The ribs: a “cage”?

One of the distinctive features of the Feldenkrais Method is the reintegration of rib mobility. Many people are not aware that the rib cage actually consists of 24 individually movable ribs (12 on each side). For them, the chest feels like a rigid “cage” rather than something elastic. When the ribs move smoothly and are well coordinated, this also creates more space for breathing.

Although many methods focus on the neck, pelvis, hips, and spinal posture, no method differentiates the ribs as clearly as Feldenkrais does. We can safely say that when the chest area becomes mobile, the connection between head and pelvis can truly function properly. The ribs take on a large part of the load during lifting and are essential for posture. When the chest becomes wide and soft, you will notice that you stand differently and more firmly on your feet. Conversely, people with, for example, back problems often have limited mobility of the rib cage.

Application

Feldenkrais achieved great success with problems of the muscular and nervous systems. Although he did not have a medical background, he was a very well-read and skilled man who managed to resolve many health problems in an unorthodox way.

He also worked extensively with performing artists to develop more all-round expressive abilities. Conscious use of expressive possibilities is closely linked to one’s (physical) self-image. Often the problem is that people focus too much on the result and too little on the process.

The essence remains: increasing self-awareness and learning to change habits. This is of great value to every human being.

“If you do not know what you are doing, you cannot do what you want.”

Life itself is a school, and this method seeks to connect with learning through living.

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