

Yoga and The *Feldenkrais Method*®

-by Diane Valentine, GCFP

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Born with three fused vertebrae in my neck, by my early twenties I was beginning to experience pain down my spine and into my low back and hips. It was very difficult to sleep at night or to keep still for long periods of time without a rush of pain. By my early thirties the pain was enough to send me to see an orthopedic surgeon. He informed me that nothing could be done and that most likely, because of the arthritis already apparent in my spine, I would be in a wheelchair by my fifties.

With his words ringing in my ear I began a search for a solution and luckily found a yoga teacher who had also suffered from arthritis and had been able to successfully combat it through yoga practice. She helped me to begin accepting the possibility of health and I began the journey toward wholeness.

Yoga gave to me the specific tool of gentle movement for my arthritis-stricken body as well as the gift of hope. I began to feel more parts of myself and to move in ways that brought the pain under control. The more I practiced the more I became aware – not only of my muscles, joints and bones – but also of myself as a body, mind and soul. How I dealt with the challenges in my life took on a different meaning as I began to delve deeper into the “difficult situations” in the asanas (yoga poses). I began to question what my habitual patterns were and how I had adapted to carry myself through life. I discovered a microcosm of my own life in my yoga practice. With this increased awareness, my body and mind became more flexible. The daily cultivation of patience and a growing understanding with myself during the asana practice gave me the choice to move more freely in my life without the restriction of pain.

Several years ago, as I was driving to my yoga class, I was involved in an accident that left my elbow in severe pain. After trying many therapeutic methods (chiropractic, acupuncture, massage, etc.) the pain remained. One of my students suggested I try a *Feldenkrais*® *Functional Integration*® lesson and it was during that first session that the pain in my

elbow disappeared and never returned. I was absolutely amazed at the results of just one session and continued to pursue *Feldenkrais* work. Six months later, within weeks of opening my new yoga studio, I enrolled in a four-year *Feldenkrais* professional training, knowing that this was something I wanted, not only to incorporate into my practice, but to share with my students.

With a strong foundation in yoga, the *Feldenkrais Method* was like another door opening into my adventure of self-discovery. The gentle, simple, inquisitive process of self-discovery in a *Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement*® lesson opened and deepened my kinesthetic knowledge of myself. The emphasis on small, pleasurable and subtle movements in these lessons gave me more insight into the way that I habitually moved. This improved my yoga poses and deepened my practice, guiding me to move more smoothly and easily. My yoga practice became more effortless, graceful and yet invigorating at the same time.

Both yoga and the *Feldenkrais Method* draw one’s attention inward away from distractions. According to Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra 1.2, ‘Yoga is the ability to direct and focus mental activity’ (the mind) with non-attachment (without distraction). 1.3 ‘With the attainment of focused mind, the inner being establishes itself in all reality’. Moshe Feldenkrais said, “What I’m after isn’t flexible bodies, but flexible brains. What I’m after is to restore each person to their human dignity.” Both yoga and the *Feldenkrais Method* are based on finding pathways that connect and integrate the body, mind, and spirit.

While informed by science, Moshe Feldenkrais’ work parallels the Eastern path of acknowledging the oneness of mind and body, intention and action. “Body-mind integration shifted from being a medical or scientific concern to becoming a path toward knowledge and beauty,” said *Feldenkrais* Trainer Dennis Leri, in his article in *Gnosis Magazine*, “Learning to Learn,” Fall 1993.

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...Yoga and the Feldenkrais Method

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The *Feldenkrais Method* is based on the idea that each of us develops unhealthy movement habits through years of going about life automatically, overusing the body in repetitive ways and accommodating to previous injuries. Our culture and socialization also play a role in how we use ourselves. In the need to please our parents, and subsequently our peers, we let go of our own natural and effortless ways of learning to adapt, rather badly at times, to the rules of others. In this way, we abandon our natural intelligence and develop ways of moving that do not work for us. We forget how to move with the ease and natural grace we had as children.

According to Dr. Feldenkrais, each person already presents the ideal body – the ideal way to move – chosen by one’s ability to perceive the choices of movement available. The *Feldenkrais Method* simply creates the conditions necessary for us to experience more choices. The lessons are introduced in a slow, gentle, and pleasurable way, allowing us to discover ourselves and become interested and curious. With a sense of safety and this increased curiosity, we can begin to shift away from our restrictive habitual patterns and begin to sense and feel new choices, new directions, new ways of moving more freely; gracefully developing awareness, flexibility and coordination. This new learning method becomes easy to meld into the practice of yoga. Over time, the intention of the practice is that it stays with us and becomes a part of our everyday living and moving.

The *Feldenkrais Method* brings us back into organic learning in a way that is easy, fun, and worth repeating. In order to learn we must go slowly and take the time to observe and to become aware of how or what we are doing. When we use minimal muscular effort, our brain is free to make important sensory distinctions.

There are two complementary ways to benefit from the *Feldenkrais Method: Awareness through Movement* and/or *Functional Integration* lessons.

In *Awareness through Movement* (ATM) lessons, the instructor verbally guides students through a sequence of basic movements in lying on the floor, sitting, standing or sitting in a chair. *Functional Integration* lessons, on the other hand, are learned through slow, gentle touch from a practitioner who guides the student gently through various movements to release tension and holding.

After a lesson, you may notice that you feel taller, lighter, breathe more easily and you may begin to feel a sense of grace and elegance in your movements. Feldenkrais says “make the movement pleasurable, easy, enjoyable – something you can do easily for 5 minutes without stopping.” These small minute movements, done slowly, make my experience of yoga an adventure, sparking my curiosity about how I move in relationship to space. During the beginning of my *Feldenkrais* training one of the trainers teased me about making such ‘large’ movements in the *Awareness through Movement* lessons because of my yoga background. As I began to notice smaller and more subtle ways of moving I found that this brought a greater sense of joy to my yoga practice.

The *Feldenkrais Method* can help yoga students break asanas down into little sequences. By slowing down, we begin to sense and feel ourselves more clearly. By moving slowly and “listening” with attention to habitual patterns we become aware of how we are using ourselves in our yoga practice. While yoga poses are designed to create awareness, they too can become habitual in the way they are practiced. The *Feldenkrais Method* allows us to get in touch with our natural functional patterns of action, the ways that we learned to move as infants and children, when we were free from pain and the social constraints of our peers.

Although it is unknown if he practiced yoga himself, many of Feldenkrais’ *Awareness Through Movement* lessons seem based on common yoga asanas. From invigorating Upward-facing Bow Pose, to various twists, Lotus, Headstand and Shoulderstand, the *Feldenkrais Method* frees the body to more fully engage in the asanas. Just as my yoga practice gave me a strong foundation upon which I based my experiential understanding of my body, the *Feldenkrais Method* has allowed me a gentle entry into going ever deeper with ease and pleasure.

In my yoga classes I like to suggest that the student move into the pose while looking for easier and simpler ways into and out of the asana: moving slowly, with ease; making small delicate movements and then lengthening into and out of the asana with greater awareness. The movements become more about play and less about work. I will often encourage the student to look to see what is holding them back in the asana, where the areas of restriction are, and then suggest taking the asana into various ranges of movement. By going slowly and paying attention to their breathing and areas of holding, students can often breathe more easily in the pose and experience more enjoyment, flexibility, and aliveness. When teaching *Functional Integration*, I will often have the student move into an asana and, through slow, gentle touch, guide them into areas of holding that may be restricting the pose. They are then better able to let go of their habitual pattern.

Today, not only am I not in the wheelchair predicted by the orthopedic surgeon, I am leading a full and functionally active life. At sixty I enjoy many physical activities that my peers have given up due to discomfort and ‘old age.’ The pain in my neck and body has diminished greatly from what I experienced in my earlier years. Teaching yoga and *Feldenkrais* to others has fulfilled my dream – not only freeing myself from pain and discomfort but also helping others to find their own way into the ease and joy of life.

Diane Valentine, Teacher, author and practitioner, is the director of The Yoga and Movement Center in Walnut Creek and has been teaching the therapeutic aspects of yoga for 20 years. As a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner*^{CM} she brings to her students and clients the combined gifts of Yoga and *Feldenkrais* in a beautiful blend of movements. Diane teaches retreats both locally and internationally and conducts a yearly Advanced Studies/Teacher Training based on the therapeutic aspects of yoga.

Dancing With Awareness

An Interview with Rich Goldsand, GCFP

—by Nicole Manus*

NM: How would you describe the *Feldenkrais Method*® to a dancer in a single sentence?

RG: The *Feldenkrais Method* helps dancers to coordinate their movements so that they are moving in a more efficient and less painful way.

NM: This is a class that is offered through the dance department but you have students who come from many different disciplines across the university. Who takes *Feldenkrais*® classes and why?

RG: Moshe Feldenkrais, the developer of the Method, was an engineer and a physicist and where he wanted to spend his time and energy was in helping people to mature in such a way that they came ever closer to their human potential. That is what the Method strives toward and we use movement to do it. The work is as applicable to an engineer as it is to a dancer or to a student in interdisciplinary studies. How each one uses the information or integrates it is dependent upon their background, their experiences and their genes.

NM: What happens in a typical class?

RG: There are two ways that you are able to learn the Method. One is a group lesson and that is called *Awareness Through Movement*®. The other means is a tailor-made lesson called *Functional Integration*®. What we do on Monday nights, here at ASU is *Awareness Through Movement*. Typically we start out lying on the floor on our backs, scanning how we sense ourselves on the floor. In the course of the class, we will generally move progressively through two lessons – each one lasting approximately an hour. During the lessons we come back occasionally to scanning and resting and feeling ourselves against the floor and taking note of what changed. What parts of ourselves do we feel differently compared to where we started?

NM: Hmmmm.....*Awareness Through Movement*....I understand how and why the general population could afford to increase awareness of individual movement patterns and behaviors but it seems to me that dancers would be more aware than most of this aspect of themselves. What then is the benefit for a dancer?

RG: In my experience, a lot of dancers are unaware of their movement but they're very flexible. They equate flexibility with awareness but these are two very different things. Awareness, in this context, is sensing how you contract certain muscles, when you contract them and how you can

coordinate those contractions with other contractions to help you accomplish whatever the task is at hand. A lot of dancers have a lot of pain – their lower back, their knees, their hips.... That comes not so much from the fact that their knees or hips or backs are bad, but that those parts of themselves are contributing more to the specific function or task at hand than is necessary. When other parts of the body are integrated and used more fully, then the knees, hips, etc. are relieved – they don't have to bear so much of the load. At this point the pain either goes away or is significantly lessened. It's almost too simple!

NM: I've heard you say that this class is both the easiest and the hardest thing that a student will ever do. What do you mean by that?

RG: It's the hardest thing you'll ever do because it requires genuine inquiry into yourself. For a lot of people, that can be a very difficult, scary place to go. It can also be a magnificently wonderful place to go.

It's easy because you're doing "easy movement" but then it's difficult because you find out about yourself and some of what you find out is less than what you expected it to be.

NM: When you speak to 'finding out about yourself' are you talking purely in terms of movement or is there more to it than that?

RG: The basis of the Method is that there are four different parts of ourselves: feeling (emotional), acting, sensing, and thinking. Everything we can know about ourselves can be encompassed in those dimensions. There isn't anything that cannot be expressed in these terms. Moshe Feldenkrais wondered how he could best help individuals increase their human potential – or even come to know their human potential. From a scientific standpoint, movement seemed to be the dimension that he could most easily replicate. You can analyze and repeat a particular movement over and over and over and make subtle changes and adjustments to that movement in a very precise way. It's very difficult, perhaps impossible even, to do the same thing with emotions, for example.

Movement is the catalyst for us. We use movement to better understand the other dimensions of ourselves. So my answer to your question as to whether the work is just about movement would have to be no. But it is the work through movement that helps us to gain a clearer view of our own selves. We discover our blind spots and our biases.

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NM: You've said that the movement explorations are structured around "easy" movement. Does this mean that the work is accessible to anyone?

RG: Absolutely anyone....people in wheelchairs (my daughter is in a wheelchair and loves the work), competitive athletes, as well as people who are just interested in their own perception of themselves and getting a more accurate sense of who they are... and what that means to them.

NM: As a semester course that meets just once a week for two hours, how far into the work can a person expect to get and can they accomplish much in only 15 classes?

RG: Well, we all start like an onion. We peel off what we can peel off. We start where we start and we can't do more than that no matter what we do or how much time we have. During the 15 weeks there are some very challenging lessons and some less challenging ones. Neither are meant to be more or less valuable. What is challenging for person A might be very easy for person C. But another lesson that person C explored with ease might cause person A to really struggle. You might find that you struggle immensely with earlier lessons, those that we would consider more simple and yet the more 'advanced' lessons somehow make sense to you. The path is different for each individual and it is not necessarily just a matter of progression. You might have to come back to the so-called 'simple' lessons again and again before your body makes sense of them – even if you have integrated more complex information in other lessons. The amount learned is dependent largely on how closely or how intimately you can listen to your own movement. The quieter you can become, the more clearly you can 'hear' your movement, the more accurately you can move toward your intention.

Moshe had a saying that "first you have to know what you are doing before you can do what you want."

Another famous quote of Moshe Feldenkrais is this: "I'm not after flexible bodies. I'm after flexible minds and restoring people to their human dignity." What he meant by that was that in doing the work and coming to understand your whole self better through your movement patterns, you are then able to make choices in your intentions, your movements, your emotions. That process of choice brings you to a place where you are more genuine. You don't move or

act in a particular way because someone else said that it was the right way. Rather, you are moving in a way that is genuine to yourself – that honors where you come from.

It is my experience that during the semester, you start to get a glimpse into a place where your thought and your action are separate enough that you have creative control. Understand that there is a moment in time between the thought of an action and the action itself. That moment, that space, is where creativity lives. For dancers, I think that, because of formal training (even with the best of intentions), you are taken away from that space. The *Feldenkrais Method* helps you to find it again.

**This article originally appeared in the Herberger College of Fine Arts Weekly Bulletin*

Richard S. Goldsand was trained in Marin County, California. Rich lectures and teaches at hospitals and colleges in Arizona. He was first introduced to the *Feldenkrais Method* in 1988 through his oldest daughter who was receiving lessons for her own movement difficulties. Rich has worked with a range of clients, from infants to Olympic athletes. He has co-organized the Delman-Questal Associates 1997 *Feldenkrais* Training Program that took place in the greater Phoenix area, along with maintaining his own private practice.



A Dynamic Systems Approach: A Revolutionary Perspective on Childhood Development Theory

—by Ann Harman, GCFP

For at least half a century, the prevailing idea of childhood development has been that the basic sequence of infant and child development, which includes learning to roll, reach, sit, creep, crawl, stand, and walk is genetically predetermined. The “normal” sequence, with only minor variations, is relatively consistent from one child to another. However, the dynamic systems approach developed by Esther Thelen brings an alternative viewpoint that challenges this established theory.

Part of the established theory is that developmental sequences are controlled by the maturation process of the brain. In this concept, there is a central controller in the brain (which has never been identified) that leads the infant through a process beginning with primitive reflexes. With maturation, the primitive reflexes are suppressed, and more mature movements develop.

One of these primitive reflexes is the stepping reflex. A young infant, when supported upright, makes stepping movements that appear to be a precursor to walking. This reflex disappears after about two months, supposedly due to the maturation of the brain.

Dr. Thelen, a professor of psychology and cognitive science at Indiana University, noticed that babies older than two months make kicking movements, while lying on their backs, that resemble the stepping reflex. She became curious and did an experiment of supporting the infant in a tub of water, so that gravity was less of a factor. The stepping reflex returned! Then she took infants who still had a stepping reflex, put weights on their legs, and saw that the stepping reflex was inhibited! She theorized that the stepping reflex was not inhibited by the maturation of the brain, but by the weight of the infant’s legs. (Babies double their weight within six months of birth, and a two-month old normally has a great deal of fat on the legs.) This was only one in a series of experiments done by Thelen and her colleagues that brought doubts to established theories of development.

Dr. Thelen also observed that the developmental sequences of children are more variable than was previously believed. Yet, almost all children arrive at certain milestones such as crawling, standing, and walking, although by way of different routes. She theorized that certain movements are “attractors”, but the paths to these attractors are variable. Children are drawn to these attractors, but each finds his or her own pathway through trial and error. In other words, the process depends more upon experimentation, curiosity, and learning than was previously thought.

Eventually, Dr. Thelen summarized the system by which children learn by the acronym EVASO:

E: Explore

V: Variations: Experiment with variations in moving.

A: Attend to how new systems self-organize.

S: Select patterns that are better

O: Optimize for functional effectiveness and movement quality.

When Dr. Thelen was exposed to the *Feldenkrais Method*[®] of movement education, she was astounded to find that this system not only used these principles of infant learning, but also applied them in a practical manner to adult education and rehabilitation, and was already well-established and developed! She undertook the four-year training to become a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner*[™]. If it had not been for her untimely death from cancer, she would have retired from research to apply these principles in the context of a *Feldenkrais*[®] Practice.

When we think of early childhood learning, this is the period of life in which learning is faster than at any other time. A newborn has a very limited movement capacity, does not know language, and cannot even recognize what s/he sees or hears. Within a few years, the child learns to identify sights and sounds, walk, run, climb, and speak the native language. This is a truly amazing amount of learning that happens within a few years, and this rate of learning slows in later life. (In fact, past concepts of maturation have included the idea that maturity means having learned all that we need to know!)

Does this evoke your interest about how to learn better and faster? To learn by using curiosity, and to explore and choose elegant solutions? If so, consider studying the *Feldenkrais Method*.

Ann Harman is an osteopathic physician as well as a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner*. She teaches continuing education seminars using the *Feldenkrais Method* to health care professionals, as well as teaching to the general public and yoga teacher trainees.

“To make the impossible possible, the possible easy, and the easy elegant” —Moshe Feldenkrais

Featured Region: The *Feldenkrais Method*® Throughout New York

—by Kathy Yates and Sonja Johansson, GCFPs, NY Regional Representatives

What makes the New York Region so unique? We are the most active region and have in New York City one of the (if not “the”) highest density of *Feldenkrais*® Practitioners in North America.

As a New Yorker, how do you go about exploring the benefits that the *Feldenkrais Method* has to offer?

The New York region, encompassing the whole of the state of New York, has its own featured website: www.FeldenkraisNY.org. At our website you can learn more about the Method, find a schedule that lists most group classes being offered throughout the state, view upcoming workshops at a glance with our events calendar, or locate a practitioner near you for a personalized lesson.

Within New York you will find certified Practitioners and Student *Awareness Through Movement*® teachers who apply the *Feldenkrais Method* when working with many specialized groups from high performance athletes and dancers, individuals with chronic pain and special needs children. There is even a snowboarding expert!

For the past 11 years practitioners have gathered together annually to present new ideas to each other and the general public at their own regional Conference. And currently there are two Guild-accredited *Feldenkrais* trainings taking place in Manhattan.

There is a series of free introductory workshops being organized for the coming year. We hope you will bookmark our website so you can take advantage of these events as they are posted.

For people on a limited budget we offer a Low Fee Clinic where for \$20 you will receive a private *Functional Integration*® lesson from a new practitioner under the supervision of a senior practitioner. For more information or to schedule a session contact: Diane Nicole at 212 877 8227 ext. 212.

Besides locations that are dedicated to the *Feldenkrais Method* such as the *Feldenkrais Institute* (one of the largest centers in North America), The *Feldenkrais Learning Center*, and *Feldenkrais Associates*, there are *Feldenkrais* practitioners teaching in Y’s, sports clubs, Physical Therapy offices and universities. You will also find us exploring movement in the most unlikely places; for example, on a pier overlooking the East River at the MS Charity Walk, Gilda’s Club, and in open fields in Central Park.

With this variety of locations and individual practitioners you are sure to find someone with whom you can feel confident and comfortable engaging in this unique and empowering process.

Visit us at: www.FeldenkraisNY.org

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