

“I can point out: Here is a door, but I can’t go through it for you.”

A conversation with Myriam Pfeffer

*You opened the spring section¹ with the question: "Who learns more, the student or the teacher?"
Could you please say something about how you see your role as a teacher of the Feldenkrais Method?*

Moshe said it already several times: He was not teaching, he was allowing people to learn. So what is the difference? Teaching shows that you know and the pupil has to repeat what you know, in other words he or she has to please the teacher. The idea of allowing the student to learn means to provide conditions for learning ... to point things out so that the student can create the new understanding for himself. I think that is a big difference. To discover is the only way of active learning and the "teacher's" role is to facilitate the student's process.

What is your intention if, as you also said, "The idea of change is not in my mind!"?

What I have in mind is to allow the person to have more knowledge of him or herself, to open and unfold, and thereby to develop more options. Having more options the student will have a choice. Old patterns stay with us, but as you find new ways of doing you begin to have a lot of possibilities in your repertoire. With more possibilities we become more sensitive and aware of which choices are appropriate in our life. We learn to respond differently to the same stimulus. We can then act in different ways. That is the most important thing. You can call that change but we would say it's more of a growth-process.

Another thing you said was that there is no 'doing' in Feldenkrais, that the doing is purely in the observation, in the noticing, and what you hope to be able to create is a space for learning.

The trainees' personal state of awareness creates a climate of openness, a mutual recognition or atmosphere of loving kindness and respect. We are not doing things to one another. We are not doing in the commonly understood sense of performing an action, of fixing a person where we are active and the other person is passive. We are interacting. It's an interaction between two persons or between one person and the group. But it's not that I do or tell you to do something. It's more a dialogue. The most important thing is to create a space for learning, to have the sensation of the elements and the ingredients you need in order to learn, to create this process of learning. When are you learning, when are you not learning? For this you have to get sensitive, to find on which channel you are in order to know whether you are learning, or not learning, just imitating. .. or what else you are doing. It's really like switching from one channel to another, you begin to note in which space you are. **You can only be aware when you are present to yourself.** When I am in this open space I can see what state the other person is in. Eventually he will join me in that space and we make a little trip together, we walk together. I point out references, but I don't tell him what to do.

To be in that space means questioning yourself: are you listening or are you not listening: do you want to achieve something or do you not want to achieve; do you want something or are you content just to be? The moment you want to achieve you are already out of this space. If you are confused, if there is a battle in your mind, you surely are not in that space. All that distracts you from being in contact with what is. The more open and receptive one becomes, the more easily one knows what is happening and how it is happening. The present becomes more available.

As a teacher I need to be in that space myself. Through long observation I know where I am in neutral space or where I am out of this neutral space. It doesn't mean that I have to stay there, but I have to come back, back to myself ... go out, come back..., knowing when I go with you. I need to know where I am ... to be present. This requires constant mental alertness.

At one point during an ATM you asked the students "Have you found the space for loving"? Do you see the space for learning, and the space for loving as one and the same thing?

The commandment isn't: "Hate yourself as you hate your neighbour." (Myriam is referring to Leviticus 19:18 " ... but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. ") People are estranged from themselves, insensitive and cut off, I don't think anybody in that state can love himself or somebody else...Or be open to true learning.

In the loving space the mind has a special quality. There is peace and beauty. Sensitivity is heightened, and as the faculties of sensing and feeling get sharpened, one begins to act efficiently.

I can't do anything to get the student to sense himself, become present to himself. What I can do is to go with the student a little way ...I can point out: here is a door, but I can't go through it for you. You have to go ...

To quote you again: "Many of society's problems are due to ignorance, to lack of discrimination and differentiation" - so basically to lack of sensitivity and awareness. What contribution, if any, do you think the Feldenkrais Method can make in dealing with the vast problems facing humanity at the end of the 20th century?

The person who is learning to sense is learning to be human. Humanity is suffering from lack of humanity. A dog is a dog, a rose is a rose, but a human being is not a human being. He has to awaken and unfold, to grow to become human, to develop the higher parts of the nervous system, the possibilities, the potential he has. He has to use that, otherwise ...

What is the difference between an animal and a human being? One of the big differences is that the animal is repeating always the same pattern. A dog for thousands of years and today is a dog. A human 500 or 5,000 years ago and today is not the same. You have not the head of a Cro-Magnon man, your learning is more complex, and the next generation is learning on top of what you are learning. **When you grow and evolve you also make humanity evolve.** We think we are witnessing evolution, but we forget that we are the actors in what is happening. You have a brain of a human being of the 20th century. There are some brains belonging to the 21st century, they are advanced. Our physical brains are almost the same - in potential there is not such a difference - but the usage of the brain is different. The usage of the brain of Einstein and the usage of the brain of Myriam Pfeffer are very different ...

To be violent is given to everybody, but to be gentle and delicate takes learning. Smoothness, gradation, delicacy, elegance is the highest function of the human nervous system. To be able to grade - discriminate and differentiate - not to be compulsive, that's important.

Why do we have a nervous system? What is its aim in general terms? The nervous system is there to make order. Everything is there, there is chaos, and into this disorder one has to bring order. That's what a young child is doing. But what happens with children who cannot make order, children with cerebral palsy for instance? They cannot repeat the same thing, they don't make motor connections and therefore it's all going like this ... (Myriam imitates the uncoordinated movements of a spastic person). If you repeat a movement several times when you work with him, the child gets feedback from himself, he is learning for himself and makes order in the brain. As he senses he repeats the same movement. I don't have to tell the brain - it begins to organize by itself - I just have to play and to discover what step the child needs for his development. I can see what is not organized, Maybe you have seen some videos, for instance when Moshe works with Becky (whose tongue and jaw are going in all directions because she has no control), pulling her tongue and moving it right and left, and her hands and legs start to respond in a more quiet and organised way ...

So what we need is to make order. God made the same thing. In the beginning there was chaos, everything was there but it was disorganized, and from this He made Light on one day and so on and then He said "It is good." That was not a moral or an aesthetic judgement. He was not applauding Himself. What is 'good'? It's viable! That's very important. So we have to think it through: To be good is viable, that we can continue to survive and to evolve ...

Our work is much more profound than we think.

Could you say a little about yourself, your personal history? That must have something to do with making you into the dedicated awareness teacher you are.

That is a theme on its own ... It's a question of 'chrono-therapy' I would say, of time-therapy. You see most people live in the past, the present is the past, the future is the past. So what I can learn is to live more in the present and to go to the future, because the future is not coming to me, I am going to the future, I am imagining the future. Sure, my past is influencing it too because we are past, present, and future, ' .. but the investigation of time helped me a lot. It also helped me to understand the work of Moshe. **I think at the root of all our problems is our attitude to time.** You can see that most people are very stressed, nobody has time. So they miss the present moment, the space in which they can really be aware, live and love. Instead they always want to achieve...

How did you meet Moshe Feldenkrais and what convinced you of the value of his ideas and his work?

Once I met a woman in Paris who told me that she had pain in her back, then she went to Moshe Feldenkrais - he was already quite famous - and came back without the pain, and that clicked in my head. And later I read in the newspapers that he was putting Ben Gurion on his head and it clicked again. I wanted to go and see what kind of miracles this man was doing. At the time I was a teacher of Yoga and very much interested in these kinds of working and thinking. When I came to Israel I went straight to him - together with a friend who was also interested in Yoga.

Moshe was sitting in this big room where his pupils were doing the lessons. He was smoking and reading a newspaper while a tape recorder was going. For all the lesson we had to do movements with the head, bending it to the right and to the left, thinking about what the nose was doing, and what was happening to the chin and so on ... and when we came

out we both had pain in the neck. And my friend said "Never again! It's not a nice place, it doesn't smell good..." and so on, and I said "There is something that I don't understand. Probably there is something behind this that I don't understand ..." and I continued to come and to come and to come until some of his students and myself asked Moshe to do a training for Functional Integration. I was always on at him: "When will you begin to teach us?" and one day - that was about 10 years after I had first met him - he called us up and said "Myriam, we'll begin the training." So for 9 or 10 years I followed his ATM groups - three times a week - and sometimes I replaced Moshe to push the button. The lessons were usually on tape and sometimes he made some remarks, but often he taught and at the same time taped the lessons, and then he would say nothing to people in the group.

During the training in Israel (involving 13 students from 1967 to 1970) we sometimes all worked on Moshe, one after the other ... and the next day he couldn't move his head and said "What did you do to me?", because he often fell asleep. He gave lessons to accident victims, people with MS, or cerebral palsy etc., and afterwards he explained to us how he was thinking. When he worked on us he sometimes gave explanations while doing it, and sometimes he explained the theory behind his thinking afterwards. At the same time he gave lectures about his method at Tel Aviv University and we went to the lectures. I taped them all but I didn't listen to them again. I have so many tapes, so many things ...

But we in Israel as well as people in the other earlier trainings, didn't have all the material that is available now. The first students had to be differently creative, they had to work differently, which is an advantage and a handicap at the same time, For instance I was very much following Moshe; but once when I gave a workshop, I forgot all the books and notes, and it still turned out wonderfully. Then I began to be more myself and became more mature. I think in the United States they bring in other things like NLP and Milton Erickson, and very good explanations of Moshe's work in terms of Cybernetics, Systems Theory, and so on. They explain the work of Moshe very well. Moshe himself said "You will grow and bring the work much further", and I think that's what's happening now.

What in your view is the common ground, the common denominator that unites the profession?

Everybody has their own handwriting but you can see immediately that their lesson comes from Feldenkrais. You see that in how the lesson is built, the way of thinking behind it.

What do you consider particularly important in creating a good environment for learning?

The trainer should be able to sense the "group-field".

The 'lesson' should be presented in a playful way. It's very important that it's not too serious. If your learning is connected with a story you remember it much better. For instance, I talked about 'delicacy' today and some students played and mimed how the 'strong' man didn't crush the butterfly.

(Various qualities and degrees of strength had been enacted by students miming a 'strong' man. As it turned out, true strength includes awareness and supreme control so that even a delicate butterfly comes unharmed out of an encounter with it.)

It's essential to be supportive, to give the sense of security and reliability. Not to be judgemental. To get to know the student, to follow him rather than rushing too much ahead of him.

It's also very important to give images or let people create their own images. Make it rich, play with your 'fantasms', your strategies. If you have only one image it's obsessional.

Can you think of an image that you like particularly much in helping people to understand?

Yes, the image of a tree. The spine is like the trunk and the sap is coming up. The arms are like branches, and the ribs like leaves or flowers or something like that ... I gave some workshops telling people "Imagine you are a rose. When the rose bends its head what's happening to the stem, and the root ... ?" **It has to be playful.**

See how the child is learning so quickly ... So you take all the elements and you use them. Then it's like a miracle, but it's knowledge. You'll see how many "miracles" you will do. People will say it's a miracle if you know how it functions, if you look and observe.

Do you know the NLP story about the factory that came to a standstill? They called the top engineer in the town. He came and looked right and left. Then he takes a hammer and knocks and everything is working again. Everybody goes back to work and he goes to the bookkeeper who asks "How much do we have to pay you?" He answers "You have to

pay me \$1000." "Are you crazy, \$1000 for one knock?" The engineer replies "For one knock \$1, but for knowing where to knock \$999."

How long did it take you before you knew 'where to knock' and were happy with what you were doing in Functional Integration?

(Myriam laughs) ... That is a difficult question. **It's an ongoing process.** You work and after two years you think "You didn't know this and you gave lessons! How stupid you were!" After several years you think the same thing and it happens all the time. It's like reading. You read the book when you are 10 and read the same book - say a classic like Shakespeare or Byron - when you are 20. What's happening? The more you understand yourself, the more you understand the book. It's the maturity of the brain, that's the same with everything. Did the book change? What changed? There was everything inside. .. Often when I look at the books about the work I think "How stupid you were, you haven't seen this sentence before. How could you miss it?"

The same thing happens with the videos of Moshe at work. Every time you look it gets better. How does it get better? You are more mature, you understand more. It's a refinement, a maturation ...

How do you see the future of the Feldenkrais Method?

I think it's growing very nicely. It's springing from the same source, but I find that all of us have grown, it's more ourselves although it's still recognisable as the Feldenkrais Method. **We have changed a lot and we will continue to grow because it's not a closed system.**

More and more people are interested too. It was Moshe's dream that the lessons should be broadcast by cable all over the world. I think things are moving towards that, his dream will be realised, the method will be admitted into schools all over ...

A lot is happening already in the United States and in Germany. Feldenkrais is known all over in Germany, it's available even for pregnant women in hospitals. I wondered a lot about why Germany should have accepted the method more than any other country. It's so very different to the old general German way of thinking, to how it should be, how it has to be, how it must be: the discipline! ... Maybe it is precisely for that reason that it is so successful!

Moshe thought that we are in a transitional stage and I believe his method is one way that will allow our brain to develop, to continue our evolution. We shall survive and really get more human and use more of our potential than at present.

Do you think that you are actually contributing to the spiritual growth in our world by teaching something that looks like a physical method?

It's not physical. It is awareness through movement and functional integration. Moshe understood that the quality of our focusing - the quality of attention that is brought to the present moment - is more important than its object. **The movements are not a random selection but offer the foundations for both inner and outer practice, for entering a process of growth.** Moshe comes from Judo and from Zen and he was a man who was very curious. He had this childlike curiosity, and he was like a child, always learning new things. He tried out all kinds of things all the time. He went to J.G. Bennett (one of the main exponents of Gurdjieff's teachings). He read all of Gurdjieff's books. He went to Mathias Alexander, he went to Heinrich Jacoby (see Feldenkrais Journal U.K. No.4, p. 12), to Noguchi, to Milton Erickson. - He didn't lose his time, he went to the top person where he could really learn. He said himself that he didn't invent anything new; what was new about his contribution was his ability to make concrete the most abstract things. For instance there is the tonic reflex of Magnus. Moshe did something with that immediately, differentiating the eyes from the head. He did all kinds of differentiations and used them for the better functioning of the human being. I remember when I once came to him he was reading Kant, the philosopher, and he said "You see, Myriam, that's a man who never worked with his hands." **Moshe was able to concretize ideas practically, that was his strength.**

Could you please say something about Moshe's concrete use of the concept of "energy". The other day you told the students "Energy has to flow. The vital fluid, the sap has to rise life has to go through...Let existence go through you!" using words Moshe would probably have avoided. Is that because you think differently or do you spell things out that he possibly did have at the back of his head?

He used the word 'energy' sometimes – not as they used it in San Francisco or Esalen but in a different context and

with a different meaning. What he hated was the usage some people made of the Feldenkrais Method, treating it as a vessel for beliefs and practices that had nothing to do with it. He employed the word 'energy' as a physicist, an engineer would use it ... The movement you are generating has to go through the skeleton. It musn't stop, Where it stops it creates a problem, as everything fixed and rigid creates a problem.

In "Moshe Feldenkrais - NLP of the Body" Robert Dilts wrote about Moshe Feldenkrais's way of thinking: Is energy going through or not, is it bifurcating etc.? Moshe imagined the trajectory and wrote about it himself. For instance in "The Case of Nora" he describes how he visualizes what is happening with the person. He visualized energy going through, not with words, but as imaginary colours.

He was also familiar with the Japanese and Chinese use of the word. He didn't use it so much in this sense, but he was thinking in this way too. And he knew acupuncture, he had the needles, he had everything. I was present when he used it. During our training people who didn't have any money came from outside and he worked with them as models. Once a man came to him who had had an accident and the arm was just hanging by his side. He was a worker who depended on his hands and couldn't earn his money any more. He came to Moshe Feldenkrais because the doctor had told him that there was nothing to be done any more, the nerves were all cut off. Moshe gave him some FI lessons and then used acupuncture needles to see if there was still a little life. When he found that there was nothing he said "Listen, you can live very well with one arm. You just have to change your profession." He also mentioned Gide's brother who had only one arm and was a champion in Judo.

Can you please say a bit more about the influence of Judo on the method Moshe developed and eventually called 'Awareness Through Movement' and 'Functional Integration'.

When you read Moshe's books especially the preliminary chapter of "Judo Groundwork" - you'll see it's always the same premiss, it's the same way of thinking, but more elaborated and more scientific. He wanted to explain what he did scientifically, but it was not so easy to explain at that time. And he wasn't always accepted. For the layman he was too knowledgeable, for the expert he wasn't knowledgeable enough. He said himself that he was very good with his hands, with sensing, with imagining, but not so good with words, with giving lectures ... He didn't feel inferior to the medical profession. He thought very differently and in the beginning he was a pioneer with his way of thinking. Today many people think like him, but at that time it was something very new.

What are the ingredients of this particular new way of thinking?

That is a huge subject in itself! **On the one hand seeing the person globally as one unity, and on the other seeing this unity as part of a bigger unity.** Seeing how the nervous system influences the muscles; how the muscles influence the skeleton; and how the environment influences the nervous system all the time - so that everything is working together ... **everything is interacting.**

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