

**Myriam Pfeffer: 2003: Conversation about awareness**

Paris, March 14, 2003

Myriam, could you please say something about Moshe's definition of awareness and how he actually "taught it" when you were his student?

What Moshe said is exactly written in his books.

It's knowing what you are doing. First there has to be attention because you don't go straight to awareness. You have to go through several steps and get to it gradually. What we are really doing is to learn to have the tools - through movement - for being more and more aware.

First of all you have to have the attention free to bring it somewhere in order to feel the sensation, to diminish strain and effort. Then you have the tools to go into deeper sensation, developing your listening, developing your discernment, and that altogether gradually brings you to awareness.

When you talk about ATM you have it all in Alexander Yanai. So you can know exactly how Moshe was teaching. There are all kinds of lessons. Sometimes, when he was teaching awareness through having the sensation, there was more precision. But most of the time the more meditative lessons, as I call them, were rarer.

In the beginning, when I first came to Moshe, I did not know what was meant and I also worked too hard. It took me time to understand:... He makes a symphony with one or three movements...- like Mozart with three notes.

What helped me to understand was that I was often going to Krishnamurti. It was not the same, but it was a way of thinking very close to Moshe's thinking. I believe through Moshe I understood Krishnamurti better, and through Krishnamurti I understood Moshe better.

So would you say the essence of the method is a particular way of thinking?

No, I would not say that. It's the attitude, it's the thinking, the feeling, the sensing - all together as one. When it is taught in the way Moshe thought and, I believe, as most of us teachers are thinking, it is a process. It requires the necessary time for the maturation of the brain - to be sensitive, to be delicate, to be slow, to listen, to do less.

When I was teaching Yoga I was really an ignorant person. I would not say that it did not help me at all, but in the beginning it also created some difficulties because in teaching Yoga you say what has to be done.

I worked ten years at Alexander Yanai and gradually took my Yoga pupils more and more into Feldenkrais because when you integrate something you have to pass it on. You don't have to, but you cannot do it differently. Some people left me. They said: "Stop asking questions! Tell us what to do." Some stayed, new people came and also got into this way of thinking, into this process.

Most of the people at Alexander Yanai came because they had problems. They felt good because they came back. But I don't know: some people probably got it, and some less so.

Friday classes were for professionals, for teachers of dancers and so on, and they were different because Moshe taped his lessons then; and he was different too because they understood more.

I went to all the classes, three times a week, because I was fascinated. Can you do something – something good - if you are not fascinated?

Did you notice a difference between the way Moshe taught the general public, people with backaches and so on, and how he taught professionals?

There was no difference. But later the lessons he had taped for the professionals were given to everybody. Eli Wadler, or sometimes myself, would push the button so the others could do the same lessons. When Eli went to the army he asked me to replace him, and when I was “giving” the lesson [i.e. playing the tape], I gave some explanations and people liked that.

Before or during the lesson?

During the lesson, because I looked at them and could see what they were doing.

Sometimes I saw that they were doing something very different from what was being said [on the tape], or that they were working too hard. So I would stop the tape and tell them that it was about not working so hard, to listen more and to sense more etc.

On the basis of that experience, how did you define at that time and for those people what one is really looking for in awareness?

First, to reduce effort. That is the first thing, because – whether you want to or not - when you do something with effort you cannot sense. That is the Weber-Fechner Law; our brain works like that.

It took me some time to understand that the less you do, the more you listen, the more you integrate, the clearer the representation of what you are doing. And for this you already need maturation – for instance, so as to be able to imagine the movement. Once you can imagine the movement, you can do it. And in order to sense it's like putting light into yourself: Where is the light and where is the darkness?...In some parts you can sense it, some parts you don't sense: Is the sap going through or doesn't it go through? All these things come slowly. I don't think it comes suddenly. Whether the person gets it more or less quickly depends on what place the person is in. This cannot be achieved by willing; so the more you want and do, the less happens. It's an emergent capacity. All this came to me gradually – and even more so when I was beginning to teach.

So what does a person ideally need to “get it”?

That isn't easy...It really demands that you call everything in question. That is the difficulty....Everything has to be called in question, that's it!...It has to be a free

experience – without dogmatism -, free of dogmatic presuppositions, free of attachments, free of mysticism, free of imprisonment in certain biases etc. etc. That is one thing.

...which demands considerable maturity...

Absolutely. One is much freer if one has no fixed beliefs. You understand, someone who knows already can't go beyond a known horizon. We need to go further, we need to go towards the unknown.

What counts is the experience, that the experience takes you where it leads, instead of you directing it towards some prearranged goal. That's it, before anything else! It takes me somewhere, but not because I want to heal my back, stop being depressed or something like that. ...

But it's even more complicated: There is a direction and one needs somehow to come to know it. In other words, we human beings have been given a purpose.

I don't at all agree with the sentence "If I know what I do, I can do what I want". I can't do what I want, and certainly not what I want to succeed in doing...It's about what is wanted, not what I want, you understand? What is required, that will work, only that, not what I want.

What do you mean by what is wanted or required?

Ah, that needs to be found. Everybody has to discover that for themselves. It is a matter of living with a sense of meaning. Life has a meaning, a direction...

...but many people don't believe in that, many are nihilists...

That is their business. You see, we are subject to gravitational force. You could try to do things differently... I don't know, when I see Glen Gould play he seems to cope quite well ..., but I believe his way of playing probably did cause him trouble. So one can be a genius and still...I can't say, that's something else.

Can what is wanted or required be put into words?

That is a very difficult question.

To be more precise, can you see what is required for a person with whom you are working?

A flower wants to be a flower, you see? And we? Most of the time we remain in bud. We are not open... and suffering is precisely that. We have been given everything. We have enormous possibilities...but somewhere we are imprisoned, we get stuck in all kinds of ways. A thought might be enough, an emotion or something like that. You repeat the same questions, the same problems, over and over again. We are not at all masters of our own attitudes.

Moshe says that he has no principles: "I have only one principle and that is not to have any principles". I have found a principle for myself. I want not-knowing to be my principle. That is the direction in which to go. I can't have something if I don't yet have

any representation of it, whether this involves sensations, feelings, or thoughts. Man is made to innovate. It's innovate or die, you understand. We have no choice.

If everything is already known to me and I keep coming back to the same patterns, that is not possible.

Have I shown you the letter I wrote for the New Year? Every year I write a letter for my students. This time I wrote that we have to strip off everything and go towards the unknown without cheating.

Could you say a little more about that, for instance about students who "cheat" in the ATM situation?

They are not present, you see, and that is often not their conscious choice. They try to succeed, to do something they already know. We have many dancers in our training. They can move magnificently but they have no self-knowledge. They stay in their patterns and often do serious damage to themselves because they lack knowledge. They cheat themselves – you don't cheat anybody but yourself – and they are not aware of that.

I don't remember which philosopher once asked: "Why are we not happy? ...when we have everything, maybe even more than we need...Why are we not happy?"

There are several things. First of all, there is a lack of love. Philosophers say it's lack of wisdom...ignorance, that's it!

The only thing you can do is create the conditions and that's what we are doing.

That takes us to the question: What is the environment we have to create, what are the conditions for really helping people become aware, understand...

That is written everywhere in the Alexander Yanai lessons and everywhere else.

How did Moshe create the appropriate learning conditions – especially when you began studying FI work with him?

He was never judgemental. He touched us and we touched him. He always said: "Ok, very good", "good", and so on. He never said that you don't know or anything like that. He was never in a hurry or stressed. He was very patient, very, very patient. I remember when he talked about low grade energy and high grade energy and all kinds of things and I had no idea what he was talking about, I asked him once more and he answered me very patiently. Next day I went to his house and asked again and - very patiently – he formulated differently and explained everything once more. What's important is that he did not give you the feeling that you were an idiot if you didn't know... He understood that it needed to germinate in my head, so he was very patient and very kind...

But he was seldom content with what people did for him. Usually it was not done in a way he would appreciate...people could not understand. It was difficult to satisfy him because he was on another level. He was totally different, he was precise in what he was doing.

For instance at the place where we were working in Alexander Yanai Street some of the natural fibre mats were sometimes torn. Nobody would move and do anything about that, and so he would get up and arrange things.

Did Moshe sometimes actually talk about awareness to get people to understand what he really meant?

He gave lectures about it at the university and often to us too. He explained all kinds of things. I don't remember...But most of the things I have written down so I can check for you... It's not so easy, we have to understand the people where they are. And in a big group you have all kinds of people. There are some who hate your meditative lessons and others like them. There are all kinds of ages and backgrounds, so it's very difficult...

Once I saw a woman in the street. She was going very quickly pushing a pram, and with the other hand she was dragging a child. The child cried and the woman dragged and I thought: 'Even a mother goes with her own rhythm and not the rhythm of her child...' And that is what we often do in FI.

We need to have consideration for the other person, you understand, go together with that person, walk, breathe, live together so that each respects the other's rhythm. That is very important in our work...in the relationship, not to weigh on the other but to respect the person. The same applies to the family and to relationships in general. Barthes called that "delicacy". It is delicacy if I don't weigh on you.

When and how did you begin to notice this delicacy in yourself, how did you become conscious of being yourself 'in awareness' while studying with Moshe? Do you remember noticing that suddenly something was different so you knew you were really learning what you had come to learn?

I wouldn't say it's sudden, but rather that this 'suddenly' happens after a long time: Suddenly you know – and this is awareness – that you understood something, that something emerged, that you sense differently, walk differently, touch differently.

Suddenly you know it, but there is a long preparation for this "suddenly".

Can you give an example?

This often happens after you have had some problem. It happened to me when I broke my femur neck. - But it also happens, I would say, every day. Once you come to a certain level, something is emerging. It's growing every day. - It comes to your brain like yeast and as you go along you realize it's the greatest joy. Something real is uncovered... Suddenly I had a femur, as if I hadn't known before!

It was a message for me, a very important message, and I learned a lot. I was lying for one month [in a hospital bed rigged up in the sitting room] and I was astonished that I had the courage [to refuse going to hospital], because everybody told me I was crazy. Mara and Patrice were against it too, and most of the doctors who took x-rays. But there was one doctor who said it was possible, and that was enough for me.

Where did you get the courage from? Did you ‘know’, have the intuition, that it would be alright or did you say “I’m just going to risk it”?

The risk would have been too great. I thought it would be possible since the bone was not completely in two parts. I knew it was still connected [the break was serrated]. When I came to the clinic they were ready to operate immediately, but I said “Let’s wait. We shall see...” and even if I want to be operated I would like to choose my doctor.

I wouldn’t advise anybody to do this without Feldenkrais experience, because I had the representation already, I was already walking in my imagination.

What people don’t understand is that before they do something, everything in themselves is already geared up for the action. You are already simulating, you simulate your movements before starting to move, you simulate everything. That’s the place where we have to go.

Now, there are a lot of people who want to cure themselves by visualization and all kinds of things. We first need to make a distinction between visualization and kinesthetic imagination which is dynamic; it’s a different world altogether. Also one has to know the movement in order to imagine it. (Just read what I wrote about imagined movements instead of muscular effort...)

You need to have a lot of strategies, and strategies develop through real learning: Here you learn from yourself; you never learn from somebody else. You are your own master or guru.

So would you say that one aspect of the learning environment we have to create as Feldenkrais teachers is to give people opportunities to discover for themselves that there are many different strategies for doing something and not just one way?

This is also a good question. Some teachers let them explore, explore, explore, and nothing happens...It is very important that there is not only exploration. You also have to create some auxiliary movements and other things so that the person can find it...

I have to see what is clear for the person and give him other things to explore – knowing that he does not yet have the representation. For instance, bending the leg while lying on the back. When I say “Find how you bend the leg”, some people are bending it straight. Then I say “Try to do it a different way...Bring the knee outward...inside” etc. For them the easiest way often involves a lot of effort; some for instance even lift the hip ...So you have to give another lesson...

...drawing attention to a part that is not present in the person’s awareness?

That is not enough. To have it present, you have to know it. You have to give another lesson, for instance about how to bend the foot, because if the ankle does not bend how do you bring the heel...[to the appropriate place] And then you come back to the knee, and also to the back, and the pelvis, and the head, and the neck, and all and everything.

Now what happens when a new person comes into the group? I simply say “Place the heel below the knee”. I say that because the others have already found it.

You see, we are ignorant people. I was ignorant as a yoga teacher, I didn't know that the strength comes from the pelvis, that I had a spine which had a big volume and curves forward in the lower part of my body. Did I know that? Did I know exactly where my hip-joints are?

You help people to find out such things. You let them find out, but with some auxiliary means; you have to play with this and repeat it a hundred times: "Which part of yourself is in your field of consciousness?...Is your mouth..., are your teeth clenched?...Are you breathing?" If you say "How do you breathe?" it's already another lesson, or several lessons.

And there is something important here: Not to give lessons, but to go with the group. I can see even very "good" teachers in quotation marks giving a lesson: They talk to themselves instead of seeing what people need. And that is not so easy. In order to have it, you have to have it in yourself. You cannot do what you did not integrate... We are always students, but it's knowing more and more what you don't know. You know that this part isn't integrated, that part isn't clear, there is no light in this place, it's darker there...

How do you see that in your students?

In the way they move, the way they speak, the way they look...in everything.

We are always thanking the pupils: "Thanks to you I am growing in awareness." ...

Now you see the importance of my emptiness, of being open to what is happening... and quiet, so that there is not so much noise in the head...never judging, not even valuing...for who I am?

Yes, it all depends on where a person is, and in what he or she is interested. ... And it's always putting in doubt.

Isn't that a bit uncomfortable to live with?

Not at all. It's a matter of being comfortable with not knowing.

That addresses a basic problem: people want certainty, people want security.

How do you learn that? How can you transmit that to students?

We don't take the responsibility for that. Yesterday an assistant told me that one of his friends had a slipped disk. He even brought some x-rays: "What do you think? He doesn't want to have an operation, but the doctors say he needs one." So I told him "We don't take the responsibility. I am not a doctor..." Personally, I would do anything not to have to go through an operation...And even if he has an operation, his functioning (he is a musician) will remain the same, so he may have other problems afterwards... Nowadays the operations may work very well, I don't know...But it's another way of thinking. People want you to take responsibility. No, as assistants, trainers, and practitioners, we don't take the responsibility.

How can you get across to the students that they really have to live with the knowledge that they can't have or give security, that they have to live with not knowing and learn to be comfortable with that?

That's a difficult task.... There is security and insecurity...I would say that you know that everything flows; that in one second everything is different; that there can be no security. We can't have security here. Moshe said it and everybody knows it: You need to feel like a king and also know that you are no more than a grain of sand. I so often say: "Put a crown on your head. You are a king, a queen; it is a sin not to be that. But at the same time you are no more than this..." When you know that life is a process, and when you are in the process, you know it flows. The moment you stop the process you freeze. It's idolatry - I call it "l'arrêt sur l'image" (fixated on the image) – and life stops, ... Of course it goes on, but in another way.

I often repeat: "Only what is provisional is going to last." ... You have to find your own answer to the question: "Where am I coming from and where am I going?" If you know that, things become more and more clear.

Does this sense of security have anything to do with the degree of presence in the moment, in the situation one is in?

You see, one can also close oneself up in presence. It's "devenir" (becoming), it's something ongoing, not a presence that is always already over. Once you walk, "le chemin" (the way) is important. You are walking, and sometimes there is a stone, or something else gets in the way.

The most important thing is being aware that you are walking. That's all! It's easy like in Zen: eating when you are hungry, sleeping when you are tired or need to sleep...complete in the action.

You are not the same twenty four hours, you know. The sun shines, sometimes there's rain, but things don't get so dramatic and you know more how to face them.

Do you find that has an impact on your emotional life?

Very much, very much...Going to the awareness of the skeleton is another way: going to what lifts us out of our terrible past.

Would you say that relating the skeleton to gravity is the essence of security?

It is one of the important things, because our brain is working in gravity all the time.

The law of gravity applies to our physical nature. Would you also think that through this work you become aware of another law which links us to what could be called a higher world? Maybe there is something - and this is a question - which Moshe may have had at the back of his mind...from his Hassidic roots...that can also connect you with another dimension?

When you say it like that you split things up...It's one. It's the same. Moshe says "It's a coin seen from both sides". It is the same coin. He talks about that in his books time and

again: Body and mind and spirit are not separate and we shouldn't separate them. Some people talk so much about the body, body, body. It's not awareness of the body, it's awareness of movement... What isn't movement? Movement is life. Without movement there is no life.

So basically it's awareness of life?

If you want to put it that way, yes.

So would you say that Moshe's Hassidic background influenced his teaching?

I am sure it did.

Did it find outer expression?

In all his work. If you look more profoundly, he is embedded in it. He is embedded in it, yet at the same time he was a scientific man and he wanted to make a conversion between both [to show that each can be converted into the other] through practical thinking and also to explain it in a scientific way.

The thing is you need the experiencing, you understand? You can have the best explanation about anything, say about music, but you will never be a musician. It's not to have an experience, but experiencing that is important: to live it fully without looking for something, just being there...naked.

How would you say that you personally, in your teaching, get people to this point where they start experiencing?

You cannot get them there. I hope they will get there and I think people are coming because of that. How do I know?... Because the group is full of people, they come back, and they bring friends and so on. And they also come to do the training. They don't run away. Some people might also run away because it's too slow for them etc.

I can see who is growing and who is not growing, and sometimes I ask myself "What is this person doing here?" But they stay, and I know that next year they will come and be different. The person I thought is open may be closed. But that is life.

To sum up. How would you define awareness after all we have talked about?

I am asking myself now: "Am I aware of how I sit?" You see, it's a question of awakening at the same time. When I am awake, I ask myself the question and I know.

In the beginning I ask, later I don't need to ask...I know when I am not full-minded or when I'm absent. I also know there are all kinds of inner states: "What state am I in?"

You just develop insight ...into what belongs inside and also into what belongs outside.

When we teach we focus on movement. But all that goes together; for how can movement be reversible if my mind is there and my emotions are elsewhere? For example, can I get up from the floor and go down again so this is reversible if my mind is somewhere else?

... So what we are learning is “graduier” (to graduate). Only when you know how to graduate do you know the right “measure” – sometimes more, sometimes less - otherwise it’s all or nothing.

Another thing is, you have to be – to be or not to be. When you are, you are at your best; and that is the best.

I need the quiet, I need the emptiness, I need to listen to you.

The lesson is about giving a person the flavour, the taste of the thing...So we also prepare the soil for it. We are planting seeds. The seeds are the lessons...  
But now you have to cultivate it, you have to put it in the sun, you have to let the weeds go.

We are not teaching at all. We are allowing people to learn.

(This conversation was mainly in English with some French episodes. It was recorded, transcribed, and edited by Ilana Nevill)