

THE PURSUIT OF POISE

by David Hall

A practitioner of Feldenkrais & Alexander explores how he uses each method to re-educate a person's coordination.

It's past midnight. I'm lying on a large, soft rug in my lounge room. Everyone else is asleep. Silence ... I roll my head slowly to the right, sensing the space inside my skull, neck and torso. It's new ... I haven't felt it like this before. I stop, feel my contact with the floor ... my ribs move softly ... I breathe, notice my toes. Yes! I sense a possibility of movement. My head to the side maintaining this connection. I go to move ... stop let go in my neck and thoracic spine I move again, stop. Where can I move? How can I ... Yes! Roll my leg too.

Ahh ... Now my neck keeps free, stop ... move mmmm, soft strong ... yes, settling as I move ... Rest. My body long and wide on the floor.

I was doing something that gives me more awareness and control over my body. It's something that works with the whole of me and uses the reflexive nature of my posture. It's re-educational as opposed to therapeutic and gives me an actual experience of a new way of using myself. It enables me to discover unconscious patterns of mis-use, and grow beyond them. It enables me to discover new directions and repertoires of movement. Sounds familiar doesn't it? I'm talking about the Feldenkrais Method.

There are many similarities between the Feldenkrais Method and the Alexander Technique, philosophically, in application, and in the benefits that can be derived from working with them. However, the thinking and strategies employed by practitioners of each method fundamentally differ in many ways. This diversity serves as a rich resource that can be gleaned to gain new perspectives on what we do. I am a practitioner of both methods and this article is designed to give insight into the differences I have encountered between the two.

While I can be quite clear about the distinctions between each method from my own perspective, I cannot speak objectively. There is too much scope for individual expression within either discipline. For every difference I describe there will someone who will surely say, "But I do that." I can only speak from and for my own experience.

I use Feldenkrais in three ways;

To supplement what I am doing in Alexander lessons,
To explore and discover new possibilities in action,
To develop full movement in all directions.

Regardless of either method I'm still really doing the same thing; teaching people how to sense, giving them more awareness and control over their body. Enabling them to discover new possibilities in movement and perception and to adapt themselves to their lifestyle in the most efficient manner.

PROFESSIONAL CHAUVINISM

But what are the difference between the two techniques? Practitioners of each discipline certainly look different. The funny thing is that if someone really does put the ideas of Feldenkrais or Alexander into practice they would be able to achieve the psycho-physical possibilities the other offers; but I haven't seen it. I've never met an Alexander teacher who was able to exercise conscious control over their whole being in a constructive manner or a Feldenkrais practitioner who was a fully mature, self-actualising adult free from compulsive thought or action. That in itself is telling. Both men created an almost Nietzschean ideal for humanity that they or those that have followed so far have not been able to fulfil. Certainly to approximate this level of learning or development a person needs to do a lot of work, far more than the average member of the public is really prepared to do. Consider how long it took before you felt you had really incorporated the practise of Alexander's ideas into your life.

It seems to me that there are usually several key issues that form the foundation of a person's unconscious or automatic perception and behaviour. It is very difficult for lessons in either technique to enable a person to resolve them. Certainly the techniques move people along the way, frequently to the point where their lives can really change, but in their books, Alexander and Feldenkrais promise more. Who hasn't started their teacher training course thinking at some stage, that at the end of it, all their problems will be solved? I cannot take professional chauvinism for either method seriously. As far as I am concerned both methods are incomplete. Conscious control of the self! How can we gain conscious control over something we know so little about? Your dog probably thinks he has control of your car. Are we any different? However, don't get me wrong, I'm very optimistic. I do feel it must be possible to achieve what is promised. However, a lot more needs to be discovered before we can take the next great step.

I am experimenting with both methods. Most mornings I get up at dawn, and spend the first two hours of the day working on myself. It's very exciting. I can sense something is available.

IS 'HOW' THE ONLY WAY?

But back to those differences ... In Alexander work we organise a person to be able to move in any direction at a given time from a 'stationary' balance. The focus is on the 'how' of movement. In Feldenkrais work we usually organise a person to be able to move in a specific direction, (reaching, rolling, standing, twisting, etc.) We teach them to do it in such a way that the movement is reversible and that the person is able to move in any direction at any point. The focus could be on the how, what, when, where or why of movement. We help the person to discover the most efficient way to use themselves to carry out that function given their current structure and environment. For instance, a pupil who habitually stands on one leg will be organised onto both legs during an Alexander lesson. The same may happen during a Feldenkrais lesson but the teacher may be just as likely to re-organise the person's body so it was easier to stand predominantly, on the other leg, reversing all the twists in the person's body. This is a very interesting experience to have, a rather odd feeling, very familiar but totally different. It could be described as a type of sensory inhibition; one that affords the pupil an experience of sensing their whole body in an

instant, juxtaposed against the memory of their habitual organisation. The main thing is that the pupil is given a new experience that is incorporated into their perceptual model of themselves and the world. The person is then able to discover new ways of organising themselves as a result of the new information.

Feldenkrais said his only principle was that there are no principles. There are many, many educational strategies employed by Feldenkrais practitioners to improve a person's use. Sometimes a practitioner could just reinforce or support the patterns that are present.

It is possible to move a person's body in a way that is identical to how they move it themselves. For the pupil it is rather like seeing yourself in a mirror for the first time, it generates a very close attention. As one moves through the whole of the body the pupil discovers parts of themselves they have not been aware of. If those areas are poorly organised they will become reorganised and incorporated into the new perception. The type of touch involved is unique to the Feldenkrais method. It's rather like a tactile conversation, very personal. It's possible to speak to different levels of the person. There may be movements that a person is not aware of as they are overshadowed by other movements or habits of being; For instance a very shy person who covers their fear with gregarious behaviour. If the practitioner recreates the movements that relate to that shyness, it can be a very powerful experience. This work can help put people in touch with aspects of themselves they rarely experience.

Feldenkrais devotes chapters in his books to the importance of the balance of the head to the rest of the body (and reading his work on this subject does give an interesting perspective for Alexander teachers) but he doesn't have the same emphasis on primary control that Alexander teachers do. You can clearly see this in many Feldenkrais teachers' use. This is something we have to offer Feldenkrais practitioners and their students.

Nevertheless, this in no way diminishes the ability that Feldenkrais work has to change the whole basis of how a person moves.

The important thing I have experienced is that a person's manner of use can be changed from anywhere in the body. However, a particular area's involvement in the total pattern must be perfectly re-created. In this way the rest of the pattern is reflexively stimulated. If you can then get that part to move differently, still maintaining the contact, the whole pattern will follow. It's not easy. It requires a type of listening on the part of the practitioner that is very patient, focused and open. For instance. I had trouble singing. I was trained as an actor and could express myself with words easily. I had been an Alexander teacher for three years but still when I sang I was always flat and would tighten in my throat in this subtle way that meant I just stuck to the guitar. It was a pity, I used to love singing as a boy soprano and can clearly remember the time I decided, just before the onset of puberty, when given the opportunity to sing with the church choir at Christmas in front of my new found friend, that it wasn't manly to sing. I'd been aware that the singing problem was one of use and listening, and tried for a while, but gradually forgot and left it alone.

During the last year of my Feldenkrais training I had two Functional Integration (F.I.) lessons that dramatically changed my manner of use and left me able to sing in tune without getting caught in my throat.

The first F.I. was designed to give me the ability to use my entire abdomen. The practitioner noted a relationship between hardness at the base of my throat and the top of my abdomen and sponginess at its base above and to the sides of my pubic bone. When I used my abdomen in movement, invariably it would tighten at the top. Once I learned to use my whole abdomen whilst keeping my throat soft, the tone of my voice changed. When I stood up I noticed the absence of a holding pattern in my rib cage, which felt like slumping but when checked in the mirror was aligned. After that I noticed I could keep a tune.

The second F.I. worked on the same area but in a new context and manner. I lay on my back on the knee high table that Feldenkrais practitioners use with my feet on the floor over the end of the table and my head raised on towels. The practitioner lifted one leg at a time, accessing the whole front of my body by moving my legs and head. It was a remarkable experience.

At the end of the session he pushed me off the end of the table in such a way that I went from having a fully extended spine to a fully flexed spine. I was deeply in a trance and remember feeling while squatting at the end of the table like an ancient Egyptian buried in a jar. The remarkable thing was that thirty hours later while driving into the country my hard palate began to let go. It was like the bones of my nose were dropping into my mouth and my hard palate was widening. Suddenly I could breathe through both nostrils. It was fantastic! One of the major reasons I had trouble with singing was respiratory; one nostril was always blocked. From that time I've been able to breathe through both nostrils. It has come and gone but I've been able to continue incorporating the change of structure into my use and now have the ability to sing. I once again sing with a choir.

This delayed reaction to new kinaesthetic information is a result of the nervous system working with the disturbance to the perception of myself. It happened after I did a weekend workshop in awareness through movement (ATM). We did eight lessons in two days and two days later when, walking to catch a ferry at Circular Quay, I smelt something so compellingly familiar that I just had to find out what it was. I traced the smell to a milk bar. It was lime milkshake flavouring. There was a shop assistant making a lime milkshake that could have been for me had it been 1963. The smell conjured not just the memory of the milkshake but the whole experience of being a seven year old boy.

This awareness could be accessed the next time I lay on the floor to do ATM. It was an experience of softness, openness and flexibility. This sort of experience can destabilise the foundations of compulsive or habitual behaviour.

DEVELOPMENTAL LEARNING

An important thing is that lessons allow competence to develop in specific spheres. The pupil has the experience of positive . growth and development. As ability develops so does self esteem. As this develops it becomes easier to learn.

But how does ability develop? Consider the first seven years of life. It is here that the capacity for ability develops. It is here that the basis of our mask is forged, that the seeds of mis-use are scattered. It is here that Feldenkrais gathered some of his most useful insights and that one finds one of the most fundamental differences between the two methods.

In Alexander Technique we, for the most part, are working with the finished product of the developmental process: standing and walking. In Feldenkrais we, for the most part, work with aspects of the developmental process. Of course standing and walking are aspects of the developmental process, but the way Alexander teachers can sense direction and work on balance and poise in a stationary balance is, in my opinion, much more sophisticated.

In practice it is a fundamental difference, in their philosophies it is a difference in focus.

Alexander saw habitual behaviour and human beings cowed into unconsciousness by instinct, as yet unaware of their inheritance of conscious control. Feldenkrais saw compulsive behaviour and humans as immature beings, enslaved by the interplay between the physiological response to the unconditioned reflex fear of falling and the conditioned reflex anxieties, arising from life within a society that supports facade. Rather than a level to be reached as in conscious control, Feldenkrais wrote of growth and development leading to full creative expression. His definition of health is very interesting and worth quoting, "Living fully your avowed and unavowed dreams free from compulsive habit and coercion."

The process of maturity could be described as a journey from total dependence on another being to complete Independence with full "self" expression. Feldenkrais could see that very few people complete this journey. They stay stuck at various stages of dependence. Very often a predisposition to the level reached will be wired into our nervous system at a very early age. We will develop certain abilities but stop short of others. From this largely unconscious process we form the basis of our perception of ourselves and the world. Most people never risk experience outside of what their early wiring allows. In giving a person more experience of developmental movement, it allows them to tamper with their wiring. It creates the possibility for new perception.

In teaching a person to be able to use themselves well, as we do in the Alexander Technique, incompletions in a person's developmental learning may be completed. It is not, however, the same as working with these stages.

The process is just as valuable as the end product and forms a foundation for the structure, shape, flexibility and predisposition of the person. Consider crawling and the development of manual dexterity. Before a child crawls it grasps things using the fingers in a very undifferentiated manner. As it crawls, placing the hand on the floor and then moving forward, a pressure is placed on the palm and fingers. The child learns to absorb this pressure through the whole body and then push against it to assist propulsion. As this happens the child looks to the next hand or the object to be touched. The re-organisation of the body weight on, and then off, the palm and fingers is co-ordinated with the movement of the eyes away. This is easily reversed to create

the ability to move the fingers in a wide variety of directions of movement, the greater the range of pressures and exertions experienced, the greater the dexterity.

EXPLORING NEW DIRECTIONS OF MOVEMENT

I have found that, by exploring a wide range of movements, and applying Alexander's principles to how I do it, has given me an enormous amount of freedom. Awareness Through Movement (ATM) is a tremendous resource Alexander teachers and students can draw on. It is a way of systematically exploring all directions of movement.

Inhibited anti-gravity reflexes and unnecessarily contracted flexors, particularly at either end of the ribcage and around the genitals, are a norm within our society. We can learn to let go of a lot of it using the Alexander Technique, but this usually comes with hardness in the ribcage and restriction of movement in the pelvis (from the standpoint of what is anatomically possible) unless one does a lot of work. Working through the developmental sequence, learning to come up and down from the floor in all possible directions and exploring the range of movements we did as infants, can produce the softness and flexibility I am speaking about. It is very important to do this again as the proportional relationships of body parts of an adult to a child are reversed.

A toddler's head is much bigger relative to its body than an adult's and an adult's limbs are much bigger relative to its torso than a child's. The anti-gravity problems the child solves are different to the ones encountered by the adult.

It is my view that to really free ourselves from the fear of falling, to be truly poised, we have to learn to get up and down from the floor in any direction without any falling or loss of control; we need to be able to lift our own body weight using our arms and to be able to fall without interfering with our primary control. Feldenkrais devised thousands of different ATM lessons that utilised the learning strategies employed during our developmental years. There is a wealth of movements Alexander teachers can work with to improve a person's use. I could never understand why sitting, standing or walking are any different an activity to rolling onto our side or coming to sit from lying on the floor or any other movements. As long as the end itself is of secondary importance to the means. Working with Alexander's principles in new (for the students) contexts produces new possibilities of movement as well as the benefits of improved use.

PHOEBE'S STORY

Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method combine very well and some people need to work with both in order to solve their difficulties. I had a student of 63 years who had a broken hip and a history of bronchiectasis. She had had about two years of Alexander lessons and had done very well. She kept long and wide and was able to relieve many of her symptoms. However, with the passage of time her pain increased and she became very restricted in what she could do. Car travel, walks, most household jobs became too painful. Her family watched in sadness as over the next couple of years she deteriorated and her spirits began to sink.

She decided to have Alexander lessons again and came to me. In working with her I could sense that she had learnt well. She lengthened and this once again relieved her symptoms, but I could also see that this wasn't going to be enough for her to be able to look after her own use, and restore her previous level of functioning. She was very frail, fragile and frightened to move because the pain lasted for so long afterwards.

I could see how rigid her spine, chest and hips were. She had learnt to breathe well and to soften her torso as a unit. But it was virtually impossible for her to bend because fear of the pain prevented her. So by taking her through a developmental sequence giving her experiences of rotation that didn't cause much movement in her hip, she was able to gain confidence and experiment a bit. There were many movements she had forgotten about and her body had become rigid in their absence.

Very often pain is associated not with areas of the body but movement patterns. This knowledge is used all the time in the Feldenkrais Method.

When I worked on Phoebe's legs on the table it caused a great deal of pain. However, she could go from standing to sitting without pain, so I was suspicious. I decided to teach her to be able to get up and down from the floor. (Imagine how difficult housework is without being to do this ...)

I used chairs and cushions to change the height of the floor so we could get down there in stages. She was able to do this in a few sessions and even though the movement in her hips was far greater than when I worked with her on the table, it wasn't associated with a painful movement pattern and so didn't cause pain. Later, showing her what she'd done enabled me to be able to recreate the hip movements on the table without pain.

Once Phoebe had learnt to get on and off the floor we began to explore rolling, and specific directions of movement, that allowed her to be more agile. For instance, she was not able to bend down to put on her shoes and socks. She could only think of bending forward (as was her previous habit) which was associated with pain. By learning to bend sideways this became a possibility. Once she realised she could also lift her foot backwards and sideways it even became graceful.

Over a period of months we worked in this manner, periodically coming back to Alexander Technique to include the new functional awareness within her concept of direction. She was now able to get out for walks and do a lot more. Her spirits were really lifting.

She told me one day that her parents were very strict. When she visited other people's homes her parents had told her not to look around as it was rude! Phoebe was a good girl and had obeyed and this unobtrusiveness had continued through her life. I could sense that the lack of permission to sense her environment had a lot to do with the lack of permission to sense herself. I began to do ATM's relating to the eyes and other senses as well as getting her to snoop around in my home while keeping her neck free. It was liberating! At the same time I realised she hadn't had the opportunity for real joy in her body for a long time. I began to do standing ATM lessons to gentle samba music. She had always wanted to dance but was never really able to do it. This was

tremendously effective. She came back next week having been dancing at home all week. It was now a lot easier to travel in the car and she'd improved a great deal.

She was later able to attend her daughter's wedding, dance and really enjoy herself. This year she went off to the Northern Territory for a holiday. Phoebe has a rich repertoire of direction, inhibition and movement exploration to take care of herself and enrich her participation in life.

CONCLUSION

In working with people I find out what it is they do and want to do and show them how to use primary control, inhibition and direction. I help them learn to move in all the directions necessary for them to achieve everything they need to do. For instance, rowers need to be able to sit on the floor with their legs extended. They need to be able to pull an oar and extend their legs with maximum power whilst maintaining Primary Control. Gardeners need to be mobile and poised in kneeling and squatting and to understand how to align and organise themselves for pushing, pulling and lifting.

I have found that my perception of my own, and other people's, twists and curves, and my knowledge of how we move, has really been enriched by my involvement with Feldenkrais. It is a wonderful resource that has enabled me to be able to get into areas and access directions of movement that would have taken ages to discover just using the Alexander Technique.

Both disciplines have much to offer the other. Feldenkrais practitioners could definitely benefit from the finely developed awareness of use that is unique to Alexander teachers. Alexander teachers could definitely benefit from the rich repertoire of movement, the flexibility of approach and the understanding of developmental stages as a learning tool.

I am sure we will refer to each other in the future and, even if we didn't, with the proliferation of more teachers from each method people will vote with their feet.

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