

Image, Movement, and Actor: Restoration of Potentiality

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A discussion of the Feldenkrais Method and Acting, Self-Expression and the Theater

This exposition of Feldenkrais' ideas and techniques of movement-training is taken from two of his essays, "*L'Expression Corporelle*" and "*Mind and Body*." This material is interspersed with selections from an interview with Feldenkrais by Richard and Helen Schechner in Tel-Aviv during June, 1965.

MIND-BODY UNITY

My fundamental contention is that the unity of mind and body is an objective reality, that these entities are not related to each other in one fashion or another, but are an inseparable whole. To put this more clearly: I contend that a brain could not think without motor functions. It is probably language's serial formation in time which determines the serial genesis of our thought. Let me substantiate this:

1. It takes longer to think the numbers from twenty to thirty than from one to ten, although the numerical intervals are the same for each series. The difference lies in the fact that the time intervals are proportional to the time needed to utter the corresponding numbers aloud. This suggests that we actually mobilize the vocal apparatus. Thus, one of the purest abstractions is inextricably linked with muscular activity. Most people cannot think clearly without mobilizing the motor function of the brain enough to become aware of the word patterns representing the thought.
2. Macular vision-distinct, clear seeing-is limited to a very small area at a time. To perceive clearly the content of what we

Moshé Feldenkrais is a master in judo, holder of the Black Belt, and author of several books in this field. Dr. Feldenkrais is also an influential kinesthetic therapist and theorist. Feldenkrais uses "body-image" and "self-image" Inter-changeably; he claims that there is no valid distinction to be made between the "self" and the "mind/body." I have followed his not-quite-arbitrary usage. This exposition suffers, no doubt, from brevity. No attempt has been made to offer the available (and substantial) supporting demonstrations, augmentation and data. Feldenkrais' concerns and practice are clearly applicable to theatre training: and, although he does not allude to it here, he has worked with the Habima Theatre in Israel.

- see while reading takes us the time required for the muscles of the eyes to scan the area under inspection. Here again we see the functional unity of perception and motor function.
3. Consider feeling in detail. I may feel joyful, angry, afraid, disgusted. Everyone can, on seeing me, recognize the feeling I experience. Which comes first: the motor pattern or the feeling? I would like to stress the idea that they are basically the same thing We cannot become conscious of a feeling before it is expressed by a motor mobilization, and therefore there is no feeling so long as there is no body attitude.

Schechner: The idea of duality is so deeply inbred into theatre and into acting theory that it is difficult to uproot it I wonder if you could

explain the basis for your belief in the unity, and its sources and consequences.

Feldenkrais: Oh it's a very very long story I have ten lectures on that, showing that we have no real basis for thinking of the duality except the habit of thought You have never yet had an analysis made on the subconscious or the conscious without having the body brought to you. You cannot make a successful analysis without changing the expression of the face; that means it has something to do with the muscles.

Schechner: But the duality-people say that there is a relationship but not an identity

Feldenkrais: I also say that there is no identity. I say there is only one thing. There is a functioning of the nervous system inside and that functioning has two aspects. If you listen to someone, you see the motor aspect and also perceive the mental aspect (the content of his words). Let us repeat that the state of the cortex is directly and legibly visible on the periphery through the attitude, posture, and muscular configuration, which are all connected. Any change in the nervous system translates itself clearly through a change at attitude, posture, and muscular configuration. They are not two states but two aspects of the same state.

Schechner: How did you come upon your technique?

Feldenkrais: I played soccer in my young days and I tore a cross ligament. Later it turned out that in the difficult moments of my life, during the German invasion of France and so on, the knee started troubling me and every second day the knee swelled: I couldn't walk. After a few years I went to see a surgeon. He examined the knee, took x-rays and said, "Look, you need an operation.

You can't go on like that." I asked, "Is there any likelihood that the operation will not be successful?' He said, "Oh yes, it's about fifty-fifty." So I said, "Goodbye, I won't do it." He said, "You can't go on with that knee."

Schechner: What did you do?

Feldenkrais: Before I had trouble with the knee I had had thirty years experience with it. I spent a lot of time using the knee properly, but eventually I forgot that old, good way.

Schechner: So you very carefully reconstructed your movement?

Feldenkrais: Yes; it was a real discovery. I found out that I was holding the ground, that I was afraid of slipping with the knee. I was actually making it slip, but I didn't realize it. I began using the knee correctly and I found it easier.

Schechner: And that started you on the idea of body-image?

Feldenkrais: No, I didn't think of body-image in the beginning.

Schechner: How did you come around to that idea?

Feldenkrais: Well, after the knee was all right, I slipped on a banana skin and the whole thing was undone. That gave me a shock, because until that time I thought I was doing only what I had decided to do. Here I discovered that at the moment of the fall I forgot about my theory and did the wrong thing. I slipped like any normal person would. It was new to me that things were happening in me in spite of my own awareness, in spite of my own decision. I realized that I was moving without knowing what I was doing. I

acted myself in a crisis. I then saw that most people don't know what they are doing; they just don't know that they don't know. So I read a lot of physiology and psychology and to my great astonishment I found that in regard to using the whole human being for action, there was ignorance, superstition, and absolute idiocy. There wasn't a single book that dealt with how we function.

THE SELF-IMAGE AND REALITY

Each person has an impression of his own manner of speaking, walking, and carriage which seems personal and immutable-the only possible way-and he identifies himself with this image. His judgment of the spatial relationships and movements of his body seems innate, and he believes it is possible to change only the vitality, intensity, and capability of them. But everything important for social relations is acquired through a long apprenticeship: one learns to walk, to speak, to see the third dimension in a painting or photograph. It is by the chance circumstances of birthplace and environment that one acquires specific movements, attitudes, language, etc. The difficulty in changing a physical or mental habit is due partly to heredity and individuality, but mostly to the necessity of displacing an already-acquired habit.

It would be well at this point to perform a simple exercise, so that one may actually feel the conditions and possibilities I am describing. Lie down on your back; mentally and methodically scan your entire body. You will discover that you can concentrate on certain parts more easily than others, and that you usually lose consciousness of these other parts during an action. In fact, certain

parts almost never figure in the self-image during action.

For example: close your eyes and try to represent the width of your mouth with your index fingers. It is not unusual to discover an error of up to three hundred percent in exaggeration or underestimation. Keeping your eyes closed, try to represent with your hands the thickness of your chest, first with your hands in back and front, then by separating them laterally, and finally vertically. You will be amazed to see that your judgment changed with the positions of your hands and that for each attempt you produced a different result. The variation is often as much as one hundred per cent.

The self-image's habitual configuration is to a certain extent compulsive; the person could not act otherwise.

When this deviation between the conception of the self-image and the objective (or "real") facts is nearly one hundred per cent, the behavior of that part of the body is generally

defective. For example: someone who holds his chest in a position of exaggerated exhalation will find that according to his self-image the chest seems two or three times thicker than it is in reality. Inversely, someone who holds a position of extreme inhalation will find the self-image underestimates the chest's thickness. A detailed examination of the whole body- particularly the pelvic and genital-anal region-will reveal even greater surprises.

If one simply thinks of his accustomed manner as an alternate term for "self-image," one comprehends, the difficulty in perfecting a particular action. The self-image's habitual configuration is to a certain extent compulsive; the person could not act

otherwise. He substitutes a habitual action for the proposed exercise without being conscious of not doing what he wished.

The difficulty, therefore, is not bound up with the substance of the habit, but with the temporal order-that is the priority of the formed pattern which, in itself, is simply a product of chance. The question, then, is: is it possible to so change the body-attitude that new manners, different by choice, would be as fully personal as those previously acquired, without taking into account the person's past life?

It is important to understand that I do not intend the simple substitution of one action for another (which would be "static"), but a change in the mode of action, achieved through the "dynamic" of activity in general.

MOVEMENT AND POSTURE

Feldenkrais: Can you define good movement?

Schechner: No, except on stage I would say good movement is that which suits the part; but it's easier to recognize bad movement than to say what's good about good movement.

Feldenkrais: Yes, but when you say it should suit the part, you're not offering a definition, and you couldn't teach people good movement with a loose notion of what it is.

Schechner: What is good movement?

Feldenkrais: Well, good movement is more complex than it seems. First of all, it should be reversible. For instance, if I make a movement with my hand it will be accepted as good, as conscious, clear, and willed movement if I can at any point of the

trajectory stop, reverse the movement, continue, or change it into something else.

Schechner: And you think that a basic definition of acting is the reversibility of the gesture?

Feldenkrais: Not only the gesture but the whole attitude. The actor should be able to stop, start again, or do something else. Only then can he play ten nights, one after the other, and do the same thing. Reversibility is one part of it. The next important thing is that the body should be maintained in a state of action where it can start a movement without preliminaries. For instance, suppose I normally stand with my feet wide apart. I have stability this way. but can't walk without first shifting around completely. Though this is the "best" posture by definition, I cannot move forward or backwards. This is the extreme case of bad posture. Now if I stand with a leg forward and back bent, I can of course walk forward or backwards, But if somebody asked me to jump, I couldn't do it without changing my position. But if I stand so that I can, without preliminaries, rise, stoop, move forward, backwards, right and left, and twist myself- then elementary demands of good posture are fulfilled. This is also true for the voice and the breath.

Schechner: So when you talk about movement, you're working with the voice, the breath, the movement, the eyes, the ears-the total body organism. You must be working with the total mental organism too.

Feldenkrais: Absolutely! They are one. I am working with the human organism.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND REBIRTH THROUGH REVERSIBILITY

Schechner: Is awareness implicit in reversibility?

Feldenkrais: Yes. Of course, when you are fully aware of a movement you can change the intensity, speed, rhythm and intonation. An act can be reflective, unconscious, automatic, or fully conscious and aware. Acquiring a new mode of doing needs awareness ontogenetically or individually. When learning is completed the action may become automatic or even unconscious. Phylogenetically learned action is reflective. Thus "consciousness," or "awareness," has no meaning except as a description or qualification of activity.

Schechner: How is this awareness related to body-image?

Feldenkrais: An actor who doesn't feel his changes of position relative to partners has no real spatial awareness—he can never reply. He waits for the other actor to stop and then he says his part.

Schechner: The actor who is performing a role is in a different relationship to his body-image than a person in everyday life. He's enacting someone else's body-image. And in a sense he has to know about it beforehand, and yet it has to seem spontaneous. I wonder if I could ask you specifically how this work would help an actor who is playing Dan Juan or Hamlet?

Feldenkrais: He must be trained to base the fluent ability to act and check what that action means in reality. He should be able to act not only Hamlet, but even a woman.

Schechner: Why does awareness increase the ability of an actor to relate to another actor?

Feldenkrais: It helps the actor listen to the other person.

Schechner: How do you go about teaching this awareness?

Feldenkrais: Our first awareness of the outside world is through the mouth. Most people are aware of their mouths, lips and tongues more than of any other parts of the body. The awareness of the rest of the body in our culture is a matter of chance. For instance, some people are completely unaware of their ears and their hearing. The trouble is not so much that they do not hear, but that they are not aware of the relation of the ear to the mouth, of bearing to speaking. Thus, when they hear their voice recorded for the first time they are completely staggered, because they never listen to themselves.

The crucial work consists in leading to awareness in action, or the ability to make contact with one's own skeleton and muscles and with the environment nearly simultaneously. This is not relaxation, for true relaxation can be maintained only when doing nothing. The aim is healthy, powerful, easy, and pleasurable exertion (eutony). The reduction of tension is necessary because efficient movement is effortless. Inefficiency is sensed as effort and prevents one doing more and better.

The gradual reduction of useless effort is necessary in order to increase kinetic sensitivity without which a person cannot become self regulating. The Fechner-Weber Law shows clearly that for a certain range of human sensations and activities the

difference in stimulus that produces the least detectable difference in sensation is always in the same ratio to the whole stimulus.

To explain it in simple terms, if you carry a piano on your back, and a fly lands on the piano, you will not be able to feel any additional weight. But if a big dog sat there you might notice. Now the question is: what is the amount that you have to add or subtract to notice it?

Schechner: The proportion will always be the same.

Feldenkrais: Yes: for the kinesthetic sensation, the feeling of weight, it's about a fortieth. So you see, if you want to perceive the differences (feel the fly), you must reduce the amount of stimulus present (and carry something rather lighter than a piano). That's why I get the students down on the floor. Unless the necessary muscular tension is reduced, they couldn't detect any changes.

If you perform a careful examination-exercise with the head, dipping, raising, and turning it slowly, focusing attention on spatial orientation and the relationships between the different parts of the left side (the head with the shoulder, the collarbone, the spine. etc.. you will find an equal change of latent tone on the whole left side. These important conclusions may be drawn: 1) When the two sides participate symmetrically in the movements of lowering and raising the head, the tonic change, the feeling of well-being, and the ease of control gained is experienced only on the side where the spatial relations are clear and conscious. Both sides participate equally, but only one side benefits from the movement. 2) The change is produced somewhere in the central nervous system, for one whole side was affected -- exclusively the side on which

we worked. 3) The change does not disappear instantly, but can last several hours or several days, depending above all on the clarity of conception of the spatial relationships and the mnemonic retention of the difference between the two sides.

The importance of what has happened in the nervous system is accentuated by the fact that one can produce the same effect in the other side by predominantly mental work. While the first effect was obtained in a half-hour or hour, methodical concentration on differences in kinesthetic sensations in the two sides--from the toes to the top of the head--takes only two or three minutes, and is completed when equalization of sensation is experienced. Perhaps the most important point is that however satisfied one might have been with the habitual carriage of his head or foot when beginning the exercise, the work produces a contrast which compels one to appreciate how far habitual self-management is from what it could be.

By judicious selection and appropriate exercises, one eventually eliminates the habitual restrictions on possible configurations in action. Mechanical repetition of an action is not a valuable step in image-expansion and exploration; it is only a muscular exertion. In order for an exercise to produce the development and clarification of the self-image, it must include concentration on: 1) each part of the action itself, 2) what is felt during the action, 3) the total body-image, and the effect of the action on the body-image. Only with this constant surveillance and reassessment can one progress to new actions, orientations, and adjustments.

The value of reversibility resides in its application to specific actions, which thereby become not only more fluid, but also more

widely applicable. The improvement of the self-image, then, increases the number and range of possible actions. Improved reversibility is linked with a renewed awareness of the orientation-relationships in time and space.

A careful application of the theory of reversibility produces these results: 1) the configurations and relationships of the skeleton are made conscious; 2) the latent tension of the whole muscle structure is reduced and equalized; 3) reduction of effort in all areas of activity; 4) simplification of movement and therefore facilitation of all action; 5) improvement of the power of orientation; 6) reduction of fatigue and therefore greater capacity for work and perseverance; 7) improvement of posture and breathing, and therefore an improvement of general health and vigor; 8) improvement of coordination in all actions; 9) facilitation of learning in all areas, physical or mental; 10) a more profound self-knowledge.

EUTONY

Feldenkrais: Most people do not realize the amount of useless strain they have in their eyes, mouth, legs, stomachs. This strain is harmful mostly because the keenness of our self-realization depends on the amount of strain that is present.

Schechner: In other words, to really concentrate, the strain must be decreased. Doesn't this relate to some of Stanislavski's theories of relaxation, that to concentrate one must first know how to relax?

Feldenkrais: But not just to relax, because if you really relax you can't do anything! A properly relaxed person has difficulty in collecting his members to move. What we want is eutony, which doesn't mean lack of

tension, but directed and controlled tension with excessive strain eliminated. This is not flaccidity, but muscular tension only equivalent to the demands of gravity.

Schechner: And how do you train to get this perfect balance?

Feldenkrais: We have an inexhaustible series of techniques. First, very small movement. If you lie down and try to lift your head, say one hundredth of an inch, and lower it again, and do that quickly thirty or forty times, and then stop, you'll find an incredibly heightened awareness of what's happening there. Stand flat-footed, and then raise your heels and let your body drop back. Fifty small movements like that and you'll suddenly detect incorrect standing. Go on. do it.

Now try to walk. What do you feel? A coming down?

Schechner: It's really weird. Much lighter.

Feldenkrais: Some people have one leg shorter than the other and they never discover it until they do that. Then they suddenly discover which is the shorter leg and what they can do about it. If you press and stiffen your spine thirty seconds or so, and then let go, you'll see that it changes your posture more than a month's training. This is accomplished by changing relationships of muscles throughout the spine.

Schechner: Then you finally learn how to do these things without physical stimulus?

Feldenkrais: Oh yes. You can reinstate the same organization in yourself without doing anything.

Schechner: Suppose an actor learns to develop his consciousness, his sense of his self-image. There is the feeling among actors that if they lose their spontaneity, they lose their art.

Feldenkrais: If you look at it properly, what we mean by spontaneity is just to be an idiot. How on earth can an actor be spontaneous?

Schechner: Well, they want to maintain "the illusion of the first time." They want to feel what they call free.

Feldenkrais: But they can't do it they're not aware of what they're doing, and those actors who claim to do it give an abysmal performance on one day and a perfect one the next.

Schechner: Are you aware of Lee Strasberg's work?

Feldenkrais: Oh yes.

Schechner: Well?

Feldenkrais: Strasberg wanted me to teach. He said he would open a school for acting in Israel if I was willing to be a teacher there. I came to the Actors' Studio and he presented me to all the people there and we talked about it very favorably.

Schechner: How long ago was that?

Feldenkrais: Four years ago.

Schechner: Nothing came of it?

Feldenkrais: Nothing.

Schechner: But of course the work that he does at the Studio seems contrary to the kind of work that you do.

Feldenkrais: I saw the work of the Studio many times. I liked it. I don't think it's ideal from my point of view, but Strasberg's method interested me.

Schechner: It hasn't produced, in the United States at least, a dependable style of acting. An actor can be very good one night and very bad the next. It surprises me that you like Strasberg, because he's working toward a lack of consciousness rather than toward consciousness.

Feldenkrais: I am a funny person. I like the work, but that doesn't mean that I agree with it. His whole technique is deficient, and I believe that if he corrected it from my point of view he would get much better results. You see, his is a limited demand on the actor. But when the actor is well trained, aware of his body, his mouth, his eyes, his volitions, and has full contact between the outside and the inside, he can pick his own way.

Schechner: What you're doing is basic human training.

Feldenkrais: Yes. You have a cortex, some parts of which are at all times mobilized. It is this constant stimulus which must be reduced. The Fechner-Weber Law is true for sound, (or light, for odor, (or touch, for anything. The index for light is about one in one hundred eighty; for hearing, one in two hundred. That means that if you lit one hundred light bulbs and put one out you could be aware of it. But if there were one thousand bulbs, you'd never miss the one. So, to balance the cortex means to reduce all points of excitation to normal activity. In

this pursuit, you will find that there is no point of excitation possible without an inhibition. In reducing the excitation, you also relieve the inhibition. When you level the cortex, you bring it to that state which some people call nirvana and we call *eutony*. Suddenly your brain becomes quiet and you see things that you never saw before. The possibility of making new combinations, which were inhibited before, is restored. The great value of this technique is that by reducing tension in a particular group of muscles, it provides methodical study of the entire self-image, and through study, improvement. The technique shows clearly that the faults in self-organization are due to arrested self-development. The correction of these flaws is neither conceived nor experienced as the treatment of a disease but as a general resumption of growth and development on all levels.

Schechner: And these combinations will be as legitimate and as real as the old ones?

Feldenkrais: Yes, perhaps more so. You discover- rediscover yourself as your structure is capable of being, yourself to the limits of your body. You can be reborn.

RESTORATION OF POTENTIALITY

Generalized and improved behavior of the skeleton results in the full exploitation of anatomical possibilities. Most often, the limitation that one imputes to a lack of suppleness is actually due to the contraction and shortening of muscles through habit and lack of conscious appreciation. These habits produce deformations and unbalanced movement. The degeneration of skeletal articulation automatically enforces a new limitation on the muscles which then seek to avoid painful and uncomfortable movement.

Thus the vicious circle begins, leading to a deformation of the skeleton, the spine, and the spinal discs: this makes the body prematurely aged, reducing the range and variety of movement. Experience shows us that age has only a minimal influence on such limitations, and that the ability to perform all movements allowed by skeletal and anatomical structure can be restored.

Reasonable, healthy people, free from serious disease, can achieve this remarkable state by an hour of work for each year of age, up to sixty years. Beyond that, intelligence and desire determine the amount of time.

Schechner: There are exciting possibilities here, because the theatre is the only art which demands the re-creation of human beings. I mean complete human beings.

Feldenkrais: Yes.

Schechner: You said with some of these exercises that you came back to the basic human walk, and only the peculiarities of a person's walk distinguish it from another's. What would seem to happen with that training for an actor would be the arrival at a state of neutrality. Without this neutrality you are not conscious enough to take in the peculiarities of the character. So your idea is to achieve a kind of neutrality front which any direction is possible.

Feldenkrais: Yes, and you find that you can do it.

Schechner: There are many explorations in terms of consciousness expansion and it seems that this is a much more systematic approach to the same business. Perhaps neutrality isn't the right word, but a broader 'consciousness that actually transforms

rather than just brings the human being back to neutrality.

Feldenkrais: It is actually quite different from the idea of neutrality. That generality I am talking about is bringing the motor cortex, which has evolved without training, into an even state of excitation. Now if you take a normal cortex which has evolved without training, then out of the whole possibilities of the human body, out of the seventy languages that are possible, he has picked one. And where are all the other combinations? In the motor cortex we have fixed connections, patterns; and the wide range of possibilities that were there from before are circumscribed and cramped. You have linked them into fixed patterns and that's that.

Schechner: So we're really talking about potentiality.

Feldenkrais: That's it exactly. I want the neutrality only to free you from the inhibition of having one specialty.

Schechner: Now in terms of the normal everyday human being, this will allow him "to be more himself"?

Feldenkrais: Yes, sure.

Schechner: This will allow the actor or dancer to assume whatever characteristics he wishes for the role?

Feldenkrais: Yes, with great clarity and ease. Today you can find an actor portraying a hunchback and talking like a gigolo, because he doesn't feel any connection. He wants a "nice" voice. Most actors, no matter what the role, speak the same way. If you record them and play them backwards you will hear

the same rhythm, no matter what he says or what part he plays. And I find it boring.

Schechner: Did you speak to Auhron Meskin about what he meant when he said that Vakhtangov and Stanislavski had the sonic intentions as you?

Feldenkrais: He said that he only now realizes the meaning of what they said. They often showed examples but could not teach what they wanted.

Schechner: That was because they didn't have a systematic approach to it?

Feldenkrais: Because they had no body awareness themselves. They didn't know how to do it. If I start to tell you that the movement is wrong, I will convince you by rules, aspects, definitions that everybody will try. A hundred people, a thousand people will all agree that that is right and wrong. But with Stanislavski and others, if he said something was right or wrong, it was only his own impression. He was right very often because he was a great man.

Schechner: Are you going to work for a theatre? It would be very interesting to see a generation of actors, ten or fifteen or twenty actors fully trained in this technique.

Feldenkrais: You see, I am now involved in so many things that unless there is demand from the outside....