

Article

Walking Upright: On Moshe Feldenkrais

Friedhelm Kemp

Professor of General and Comparative Literature, Munich

Abstract

Tracts and directives on how to attain sound thinking and doing – right living – have been written since time immemorial. They all advocate some form of spiritual discipline, reflection, contemplation, or rhythmic technique, and suggest doing less rather than more, while persisting on the chosen path without wavering. A number of these teachings have exerted an impact far beyond their places of origin. Nearly all of them fulfill their promise – provided the initiate is really tuned in and has learnt how to act in their spirit. However, anyone who hopes to find an objective procedure, an infallible prescription, will be disappointed, usually failing to take into account what is most important: striving for success blocks salvation, because there is no other aim than the living reality implemented at every step along the way.

I am assured that my freedom has long been an illusion. It is a fact though that I can bend down, straighten up again, turn my head. But can I really? Such actions are often clumsy and ungainly, involving effort and pain. Obviously I must be doing something wrong. The question is how to change that. Or more modestly: How to become more pleasing to myself and thereby to others. A comprehensible little book provides instruction. Moshe Feldenkrais's "Walking Upright" [Tr: as Franz Wurm's German translation of "Awareness through Movement" was originally called] could be of use for everyone. This book is not intended for specialists, the "educated", or cultists, but for all of us lay-people who simply go about our daily lives.

Keywords

Feldenkrais, Self-image, consciousness, awareness, movement, observation

Copyright ©: The copyright for this paper remains with the author(s).

Please cite: (First published in the) *Feldenkrais Research Journal*, volume 1; 2004.

Service marks: The terms Feldenkrais®, Feldenkrais Method®, Awareness Through Movement®, ATM®, Functional Integration®, and FI® are service marked terms of the International *Feldenkrais*® Federation (IFF) and Feldenkrais professional guilds and associations in many countries. In keeping with academic conventions, they will not be service marked in the entire text as may be required in nonacademic use, but only for the first and most prominent use of the terms. In recognition that these phrases are formal terms referring to specific practices within the Method, and to the Method as a whole, capitalization of all the words in each term has been retained.



WALKING UPRIGHT

On Moshe Feldenkrais

Friedhelm Kemp

Tracts and directives on how to attain sound thinking and doing - right living – have been written since time immemorial. They all advocate some form of spiritual discipline, reflection, contemplation, or rhythmic technique, and suggest doing less rather than more, while persisting on the chosen path without wavering. A number of these teachings have exerted an impact far beyond their places of origin. Nearly all of them fulfil their promise - provided the initiate is really tuned in and has learnt how to act in their spirit. However, anyone who hopes to find an objective procedure, an infallible prescription, will be disappointed, usually failing to take into account what is most important: striving for success blocks salvation, because there is no other aim than the living reality implemented at every step along the way.

People say the world is absurd, meaningless, hopelessly lost. We often read and hear such statements. But does that prevent us from breathing, walking, sometimes even bouncing along? I am assured that my freedom has long been an illusion. It is a fact though that I can bend down, straighten up again, turn my head. But can I really? Such actions are often clumsy and ungainly, involving effort and pain. Obviously I must be doing something wrong. The question is how to change that. How to move so that the world would not collapse if I were its pivot. Or more modestly: How to become more pleasing to myself and thereby to others. A comprehensible little book provides instruction. Moshe Feldenkrais's "Walking Upright" [Tr: as Franz Wurm's German translation of "Awareness through Movement" was originally called] could be of use for everyone. This book is not intended for specialists, the "educated", or

cultists, but for all of us lay-people who simply go about our daily lives.

"We act in accordance with our self-image". That is how the book begins. It is based on the premise that our actions are an *Imitatio*, replicas of an already existing mental picture. However, the decisive factor is that we are the originators of this picture or image of ourselves as a moving, sensing, feeling and thinking being. Of course by the time we pick up this book and begin to read, this picture has long been established in elaborate detail and placed on its elevated throne, from where it rules like an usurper over our forgetful self. But since this picture always remains malleable, we can – says Feldenkrais - teach our lord and master, as children teach their parents, or the poet his muse. After all this ruler is neither identical with our self nor an uninfluenceable alien power. It exists as an image of our own making and dominates in accordance with our own free will.

Or to be more precise: in accordance with our willingness to submit. We may create all kinds of random images of ourselves, but only one will be really accurate, more or less true to our nature, matching our situation. We are not a fish, bird, or angel; each of us is just a human being, with two feet on the ground and a head pointing skywards. We are also more or less familiar with the laws governing our physical body; we know about them, but we don't sense these laws and lack the awareness to live in harmony with them.

Kleist's famous and much cited essay "On the Marionette Theatre" describes what confusion consciousness brings to man's natural gracefulness. Only "if knowledge has passed through an infinity as-it-were" can this lost elegance reappear "in its purest form

in a human physical frame which either lacks all consciousness or is endowed with infinite consciousness, is therefore either marionette or God". In his search for a human method located somewhere between those two utopias, between a prehistoric state of unawakened awareness and an ultimate state of total awareness, Feldenkrais attempts to obtain a complete picture of the jointed puppet – which we are in terms of our skeleton, muscles, and tendons – and to govern its movements by way of that image.

“L’imagination au pouvoir” (“The Imagination to Power”) was a wall slogan at the Sorbonne in May 1968. Whether the imagination evoked here would be capable of governing the social body may be somewhat questionable. (One would particularly like to ask: whose imagination?) However, there is no longer the least doubt that within me the imagination is the “reine des facultés” (the queen of our faculties), as Baudelaire called it, - provided the faculty of imagination is understood to mean more than inventiveness, and also to include such aspects as keen observation, attentiveness and empathy, and provided the fact that we ourselves are its nearest object, subject matter, and field of activity is taken into consideration. Society is an abstraction, or occasionally a mythological entity. Instead of being a completely self-organized whole like a human being, it is too complex to be easily grasped, and precisely that fact explains some of its capacity to instil idolization. But I and each single one of us - we are our own equipment and our functioning, and can shed light on them and thus gain understanding. We are able to gain mastery over ourselves as a jointed marionette. We only need become more conscious of that puppet if we want it to learn how to move with greater ease, effectiveness, and elegance.

In this book, this kind of consciousness, which is not located in the head but always in the place where we move (or could move), is called “becoming aware”. And what kind of movements is recommended in the book’s twelve exemplary lessons? The most

effortless, smallest and softest, leading to unexpectedly amazing results. Rolling, turning, circling, swinging, rocking, see-sawing, swaying; gentle stretching, lifting, lowering; sometimes freely and fluidly, sometimes towards a previously determined point - going in the same direction as other movements or in opposition to them; movements that are observed while being carried out and then implemented merely in the imagination (which considerably enhances their effectiveness). Everything is simple, and of course difficult as is any simple action for those who lack practice; but there is something to be discovered, and all experience can be checked on the spot. You begin to appreciate yourself as a miraculous machine consisting of levers (initially material and bodily). While those levers continually act on one another, they also teach our nervous system and brain, and thus ultimately our feeling and thinking.

Are we an image? We don’t see it. Are we a word? We don’t hear it. Are we pleasure? We don’t feel it. We are content with dull routine where we could be virtuosi. We demand the extraordinary and expect to find it in the future, on the other side of the moon. Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s poem “Dream of Great Magic” declares:

“Cherub and Noble Master is our spirit,
Does not abide in us, and in the highest stars
He places his throne and often leaves us
orphaned.”

However, the same poem finishes by saying that this spirit lives within me, “as I live in my own hand”. But who really has a living experience of their own hand, the third toe on the left, or the right earlobe? “Unfolding the powers inherent in human nature will only become possible when the whole world is unhinged” proclaims the most recent gospel. Feldenkrais does not want to do more than help us become aware of the hinges around which our real powers – not our imaginary ones - pivot, powers that might open some doors into our own future, beginning right now. It is not the hinges of the whole world,

which nobody can manipulate, that are at issue here; but our bones, muscles, nerves - the rather splendidly fashioned dust we are made of.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung, January 19, 1969

Letter (originally in French) by Moshe Feldenkrais to Friedhelm Kemp

Tel-Aviv, January 28, 1969

Dear Dr. Kemp

I have just read your review of my book "Walking Upright". The first thought that came to me while reading was a wish to meet you in person. Not many people really understand me; apart from you there is only Professor Hugo Bergmann, head of the Philosophical Faculty at Jerusalem University, who is interested in the essence of this subject matter and sees it as a rung on the evolutionary ladder of the human mind.

If I also tell you that I like your subtlety of nuances and elegant ease in dealing with the subject, which can hardly be described in a few words, you will understand why I feel impelled to write to express my unreserved admiration. I would like to have written your article myself.

Hoping to have the pleasure of shaking your hand.

M. Feldenkrais

LET'S GET THINGS RIGHT!

Friedhelm Kemp

Is there a method for changing one's bodily, mental, and spiritual state and behaviour without effort, simply through attention? To lasting effect, and even to be achieved at a

ripe old age? Let me repeat: by means of attention; and of course also a little patience with oneself, one's body and its habitual inclination to behave awkwardly, or even inappropriately. How can one's general state – usually more or less unperceived except when there is pain – be improved and transformed into a feeling of well-being, heightened by effortless ease and flexibility? How can a sense of a truly living experience of joy and pleasure be attained without having to look for that in pushiness, speed, frenzy, or "ecstasy"?

How do you transform yourself – through learning, relearning, making up for missed opportunities (without ever being too late) - into a more likeable fellow citizen both for yourself and others, with the possible spin-off of making a modest and inconspicuous contribution towards improving "the state of the world"?

That method does indeed exist: not as a secret doctrine for initiates who can afford long and expensive courses at the foot of holy mountains, but accessible to all in word and print. There is only one condition involved in benefiting from this method: you have to submit to it for a certain time; or rather let yourself be guided towards consciously experiencing what the method has to teach in order to become and remain "aware of yourself". This process begins with so very little that you might be inclined to attach no importance to such irrelevancies, but very soon you begin to notice in your own body how such tiny little steps can lead to the most unexpected changes - step by step, repeated several times, and then again and again; how these changes can be experienced as improvements and ultimately developed into helpful habits.

"Every perception of an object, every movement toward a goal, is a single, stably structured act; and in every act perception and movement are firmly linked" (Viktor von Weizsäcker). However, the degree of "linkage" can be modified: perception can be intensified; repetition can both ease and

increase the connection. This process is accompanied by a change in the quality and degree of awareness. And all this takes on heightened meaning when the perceived “object” is your own body submitted to intentional, repeated movements, which are themselves continuously being altered through controlled repetition. Attention is primarily focused on minimal changes. Perception becomes more refined through focusing on small details. If your own body is its object, every refined act of perception will transform the body’s behaviour, and by way of behavioural changes ultimately the body itself.

Do I possess my body? Am I my body? Both of these questions are wrongly posed. We are always a body in terms of biology, physiology, physics, and chemistry. However, at the same time we keep on influencing, training, or harming this body. We handle and maltreat this given datum, which is of course dependent on – and experiences constant interchange with - the world and our specific environment. Living thus means to be embodied within the world, to move and have our being in this world as an incarnated creature. We can change this world, and are doing so all the time. But we can also change ourselves - by means of attention and unceasing practice; and there is no end to correction and improvement. The goal is not completion or perfection, higher achievement or a new record, but instead greater precision, refinement and differentiation. That also involves the need to slow down and stay awhile without rushing off to the next experience. Provided we are not already somewhere else, we may even succeed in being at home in ourselves.

If I am thus at home within myself – without effort and agitation – a sense of deep satisfaction may arise, a sense of being sufficient unto myself, and that will extinguish all need for admiration. Now I begin to be aware of myself, to sense and feel myself, to move consciously and with intention: living in and through myself as a highest good; as if nothing could happen to

me any more; as if I should begin to radiate light, to give voice to my individual sound. While this state of transformation lasts, everything is as it has always been, and yet different - thanks to that sense of “homecoming”. Although that state will gradually fade, I now know from experience that it can be repeated, can be recognized when it is re-experienced – though always as something quite fresh and new. Intensified newness and surprising freshness are the outcome of repeated attention, increasingly acute and tranquil, when this attention is focused on the imperceptible, as possibly what is most important.

This process may be accompanied by a surreptitious desire to give up old habits. That does not require ascetic discipline. Those who begin to observe something more “right” about themselves will experience a more or less spontaneous awakening of the inclination to let go of this or that unwholesome habit. The habitual pattern simply drops away. Attention – an imperturbable, effortless, indeed occasionally slightly distracted mindfulness - is simply otherwise and more pleasurably engaged. With what? Well, simply with learning, as part of a continuous, ultimately hardly conscious learning process that gradually becomes one with life itself.

A number of things would change, a lot turn out to be superfluous, if this learning and consequent transformation were to become general practice, if we were to become more skilful instead of sticking unswervingly to one particular opinion and solution, and insisting with grim determination on having to “achieve results”, which are intended to guarantee instantaneous success, more money and status, but often add up to nothing but a waste of time, what Virilio calls “headlong standstill”: How many hours are spent in front of the TV set every day? How many hours in transit on the way to a weekend in Salzburg, Prague, or Paris? For what purpose? To cast a tired glance at the sights there, to visit culinary magicians in

order to overload your stomach with their delights ...

In contrast, the method I am talking about here keeps you constantly on the move and benefits body and mind – free of charge, requiring no particular effort on your part. The kind of movement you learn keeps changing and improving through mindfulness, turning into pure enjoyment; the more skilful and conscious this gets, the more it becomes normal behaviour – of its own accord.

Of course once we begin to notice the positive effect on ourselves as we follow the decree “You must change your life!”, other worries start assailing us, for instance when we have to stand by and witness how our children are pushed to “get through the curriculum” – just as the students at our universities are forced to engage in a marathon through masses of secondary literature; how virtually all of them hope to reach a goal and purpose before they have found themselves. In “cultural life” as in sport, there is one and the same maxim: achievements, results, records please! Speedily, insolently, vulgarly absurd! These abominations are dished up with “contemplative” and esoteric garnish in order to tranquillize us, when our attention should be focused on one burning issue: How can I avoid becoming ordinary, drab, insensitive, and worn out? How can I be bright, lively, multicolored: “living to marvel and wonder”?

People say we are heading towards a multi-media information society; we are promised a world data bank where all knowledge is stored, ready to be retrieved at any time by anybody as needed or fancied. Potentially we could deem ourselves omniscient and omnipotent. However, we forget that data and facts are of value only to those who know how to use them. Data has no inherent value as such. Its worth lies in what we do with it, how we deal with it. If we continue to remain strangers to ourselves, if dumb ignorance of ourselves keeps increasing, that informational macro world could easily get

out of hand, plunging us all into catastrophes; and this would leave us even more helpless than prehistoric cave-dwellers when our technology has packed up and we are faced with the smoldering remains of nuclear power stations.

If you have looked around a bit, you will know what I am talking about. “Awareness through Movement” was developed over many decades by Moshe Feldenkrais (d.1984), who also made the method accessible through a number of well-known books. His teaching, which does not demand faith and is averse to all “mysticism”, shows him to be a benefactor of humanity, who intends to teach us nothing but what we can discover about ourselves and thus also about the world by way of autonomous learning. Teachers of a new kind, who are also the teachers of our adulthood, do not wish to overpower us with blinding revelations; they assist us on our path to self-knowledge, helping each of us to become the person we - and we alone – could become if we did not allow ourselves to simply drift negligently through life: more or less all of us; everybody day in day out; lacking loving kindness, a blight for ourselves and others.

1995/1999

Friedhelm Kemp, Professor of General and Comparative Literature, born 1914 at Cologne, lives in Munich as a writer, translator and expert in his field.

Translations by Ilana Nevill