

# **FROM BODY-ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPIES TO FELDENKRAIS**

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## About Body-Oriented Therapies

When I First Encountered Moshe's work in the early seventies, I had already been exposed, since the late sixties, to a plethora of approaches (e.g. Gestalt, Bioenergetics, Psychomotor, to mention a few) where the emotional content of bodily experiences was revealed, enhanced, acted out, analyzed and 'therapeutized'. The embodiment of the 'psychological self' was experienced and discovered. Indeed, as is now obvious to many of us, our whole life experience is reflected in our tonal and movement habits.

Like plants we grow according to light and nourishment sources. We twist ourselves in adaptation to life's requirements, seeking affection, struggling with sicknesses, recuperating from accidents, etc. We do or do not resolve our conflicts and tensions with our environment and with our 'closeothers'. The way we do or don't resolve our life situations determines our attitudes, our postures, our character. In fact, our 'self' is the result of all these experiences: We are what we have experienced. Breathing, for example, is centrally related to our patterns of feeling and living. It is involved in everything we do. We learn to breathe the way we do in part through imitation of significant others. We also sculpt our breathing organization, both posturally and functionally, through events of our lives. We thus grow a repertoire of breathing options among the innumerable variety of possibilities. From the first simple breathing patterns of infancy, we find sensory, emotional, conceptual, and socially acceptable choices, and we avoid restricted, unused or yet unknown options.

Now, to pursue our example about breathing, some body-oriented therapists or psychotherapists who work 'with the body' may encourage a client or patient to directly and voluntarily breathe more or differently than he or she usually does. This can be done through a variety of techniques, including hands-on work. By augmenting the volume or intensity, by changing the rhythm or range, the client finds him or herself out of his or her habitual pattern. A frequent effect is the emergence of sensations, the expression of emotions, the production of images, and the creation of cathartic experiences. Memories may be brought back to consciousness and traumatic events may be relived in the here-and-now. Relational issues may be reactivated. Under the heading of 'transference', the

client may reenact his inner experience with parents, friends, or spouse. The therapist or some other person in the therapeutic context may then serve as a projection screen for previously experienced relational patterns. This reliving of past experiences is often connected to anxiety, pain, and resistance from the client. This is quite understandable, since the person is brought within the proximity of feelings, behaviors, and memories which he or she has, often very laboriously, tried to suppress or avoid.

As the material of the client's inner life emerges, the therapeutic process can be applied. For some approaches, the mere emergence of the unconscious material to the conscious mind and its discharge or expression to the therapist or to the group have therapeutic value. For others, the interpretation, symbolization, verbal or movement expression, or the living-with-new-outcomes, are essential.

Now, what happens in your Feldenkrais experience? When you lie on the floor or on the table for a lesson, what happens to your breathing experience, and to your inner life process? Is it not involved? Surely not in the way described here--or perhaps so! And if such 'psychological' events do not occur with that intensity, what is the 'psychological' value of the Feldenkrais lessons? And if they do occur, what can be done about it, if anything?

#### From Body-Oriented Therapies to Feldenkrais: A Culture Shock

Coming From Body-Oriented Therapies And Psychotherapy I Virtually Had A Cultural Shock In My First Contacts With The Feldenkrais Method. My first ATM lessons were a real challenge in being comfortable with myself. I struggled with headaches, anxiety, and waves of emotion. Obviously I could not integrate this experience with my background: When was there going to be time to express ourselves, talk, relive, understand? I could not comfortably stay in this realm of easy movement.

One of my first FI lessons was with an experienced Israeli teacher trained by Moshe. I remember that I immediately associated the experience with motherly caring, which, by the way, did not leave me emotionally neutral! 'Sharing' with the teacher afterwards, I realized she was very surprised that I would experience and even talk about such an intimate event. I myself was even more surprised that an experienced teacher working 'with the body' would not be familiar with such repercussions: Culture shock in its literal and broad sense.

Needless to say, when the first year of the Amherst training started, I was totally unprepared for two months of non-verbal, non-expressive rolling on the floor with more than two hundred other anonymous, apparently non feeling, often zombie-like trainees.

I could not stand or understand that Moshe was leading this first year of training without even recognizing the relationship of body movement to the inner life process, and without acknowledging a 'whole person' kind of awareness. I spent seven of the first nine weeks wondering how I would suffer through this ordeal and if I would stay at all to see the end. Was this man really unaware of all this inner experience that his movement sequences raised in us-or at least in me and a few of my kind? Moshe rarely gave personal support, nor did he inquire about our process. I particularly resented the fact that there were some two hundred and twenty of us and that we received no personal attention, recognition, or personal caring. In fact, Moshe created the perfect setting to keep everything of the inner personal life in the background, in the unconscious, in the not-said. (As it turns out, such a setting may also be the best one for people to learn how to take care of themselves, by themselves.)

After seven weeks of this circus, Marcia Germaine Hutchinson (another psychologist 'under the influence') and I courageously wrote Moshe a very direct question:

Dear Moshe: Why are you not saying anything about what is provoked in ourselves by the movement! What should we do about all these phenomena; free floating anxiety, out-of-context emotions, confusion, reappearance of assumed-to-be-buried old patterns of behavior, such as obsessional thoughts, food cravings, etc.; also unusual perceptions of oneself, of the world, and finally various bodily symptoms: nausea, headaches, disturbed sleep, pimples, to mention only a few.

It was noon on a Friday. The weekend went by slowly. Marcia and I felt quite anxious. We knew we would be slammed at, in Moshe's usual style. On Monday afternoon, finally, Moshe took the question out of the pocket of his eternal blue shirt and started to nag: "A question from experts," he said, "psychologists." Basically, relying on my biased memory, he said something like this:

All these discomforts in your inner lives are manifestations of your powerlessness and insecurity. Learn to make yourself secure.

Either Moshe was out in the blue about psychology or he was pointing to a major new aspect.

From Therapy to Learning

It took me a whole year to massage in this message. As I am writing this now, I have lived long enough with the quest

ion and with Moshe's pointer to realize that through my troubled training I discovered the difference between therapy and learning. What some of us experienced in A TM was discomfort with our inner life processes. Therefore we looked for therapy, from a therapeutic point of view. The more we did what we did in the way we did it, the more we had therapy material entering into our picture, and the more we suffered from powerlessness. On the other hand, Moshe alluded to the fact that our compulsive behavior created the discomfort. We were facing our own powerlessness to give ourselves 'better' inner qualities. What we experienced was the result of our own actions. Our discomfort with all our symptoms was therefore a provoked discomfort, and partly the result of good training in dealing with problems and restrictions. Our difficulties were a reflection of our wanting to go too quickly, too directly, without knowing how to take care of ourselves. Even if we tried our best, we were repeating a strategy that simply amplified our discomfort and our emotional 'charge'.

What I later learned to call 'functional integration' was missing. What needed \_ to be learned was how to develop a sense of possibilities and ease. In short, a long way to go for us and our professional outlook.

In the very notion of therapy, as well as in healing there is a reference to a paradigm, an ideal platonic model of how things should be. Being sick is 'getting away' from the model. Most therapies and most medical models deal with problems, diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment plans in order to put things straight, back to the ideal model. So, to do psychotherapy, one needs to find the psychological problem. Comparatively, learning deals with the development of new skills, new possibilities. It puts less accent on the experiencing, the amplification, the interpretation and the expression of the feelings related to the restriction. The learning strategy concentrates on the creation of alternate ways to get what we want.

Pain, recurring emotions of frustration, obsessive behavior, failure in relations, psychosomatic symptoms, to name a few examples, are common manifestations of not getting what we want. The original reason, the context within which we produce the undesired result or cannot produce the desired result, can be amplified and studied. By comparison, the learning approach creates situations where the system can develop the required skills to move towards his or her intended result. When in our A TM or FI we progress in movement with a general sense of comfort, looking, and sensing, for pleasure and ease and harmony, our inner life does not 'bother' us. We feel less afraid or less concerned, less powerless. Our inner life reflects our harmony in doing, rather than reflecting our 'problems' in not doing. We can cope with what we experience, without the compulsion to share or the necessity for therapy. (In fact, some therapists, mainly psychoanalysts, stop their patients from doing Feldenkrais exactly for that reason:

The problems tend to disappear, the anxiety tends to reduce, the projections tend to be reappropriated. So where has the therapeutic material gone?) Understanding our problems and their origin, expressing our felt difficulties, symbolizing them, are all possibilities, and surely better ones than behaving as if our limitations were not there. Many of the approaches from the Human Potential Movement of the 60's, and most therapeutic forms, have helped us to be in touch with our feeling selves. I know of nothing better than an analytical process to understand and interpret our present behavior from our past history. Much as medicine and physiotherapy can be helpful for healing, psychotherapy can also be helpful for healing. But learning how to not trigger our 'problematic behavior' and getting better at succeeding in getting what we want for ourselves and making ourselves secure is also another possibility, and perhaps a most relevant one if our interest lies in new behavior. Such a learning perspective does not eliminate the ups and downs of life (as someone said: "One cannot hide from life"), nor do the inner experiences associated with the taming of novelty and the shaking of habits disappear. But the Feldenkrais approach is to learn with ease and grace through ease and grace

(The medium is the message, the pedagogy is the learning). This is quite a step away from wanting to become better by working on our limitations. The direct-to-the-problem way may be necessary or useful in many situations, and most disciplines know how to do that well. But in Feldenkrais, it is not our specialty, nor our purpose, nor are we trained for it. As I often tell my students: If you cut your finger off, don't come here. Put the finger in ice and go to your micro-surgeon. But if you are interested in learning new modes of action, new behavior, then Feldenkrais has something really interesting to offer: A concrete way to do just that.

#### From Psychotherapy to Organic Learning

A few months ago i was visited at my studio by an old acupuncturist who, reading the sign "centre feldenkrais", decided he would come in. i had a few minutes between lessons so we began chatting. "Feldenkrais?" he asked. "Isn't he the man who wrote La Conscience Du Corps/" (Awareness Through Movement, in French.) "Yes," I answered. "Oh, wonderful," said the acupuncturist. "I used to recommend his book to my trainees as an essential reading. This man has reconciled the body and the mind." I sat there, very impressed that only from reading Moshe's book, this man had figured it out so clearly.

But what did the acupuncturist figure out when he said that Moshe reconciled the body and the mind? He realized through reading Moshe that a person is always a full person and that we cannot cut him or her in pieces. You don't just lift a head; you move a person from his or her head. Anything that affects ourselves affects our psyche. One cannot really do 'psychotherapy' or 'body' therapy. Or perhaps we

should say, if the therapy works, it is because it is a full-person learning of the organic self, not just a 'psychotherapy' or 'body' therapy.

Many people nowadays think that they discovered that the psyche affects the body, that "the mind can heal you." Another discovery is that "the body teaches the mind." This is another interpretation of Moshe's contributions: the body-to-mind effect. But the next discovery, the 'real' Feldenkrais discovery, is that "the mind is the body and the body is the mind." The progress of one is the progress of the other. Thus, one can choose any point of view of a person. He who is aware of the full self will not believe he is doing psychotherapy, physical education, psychosomatics, or movement education. Some people, some teachers or therapists, are more comfortable with such or such aspect of their person. But it is the full person that is 'organically' learning or healing. In fact, Moshe Feldenkrais was one of the first to express with such clarity the inseparable integrity of ourselves: All of ourselves, including all the parts of our 'body' and all the aspects of our 'mind' are involved in everything we sense, feel, think and do. Clarity of such an intention on the part of a teacher, practitioner or therapist may make a big difference both in awareness and learning strategy. When working like this, one can access the person from their voice, their teeth, their emotions, their handwriting, or their dreams. Only one "handle for the suitcase" is needed: A security-giving and interest-raising one for the teacher-and, most of all, an appropriate one for the student.

#### About Moshe's Bias for the Movement of the Body, and About Alternative Biases

Historically, Moshe favored the movement of the body as a main access to the person. Movement is indeed central to all life and action. Also, the body is very concrete within the physical environment. Moshe described in his book, *Awareness Through Movement* his vision of action. Action, or we could say 'behavior', involves sensing, feeling, thinking and moving. Each component also implies the others. Moshe's choice in concerning himself with body movement is theoretically well justified. It is also the reflection of a personal preference of his. His interests in Judo, sports and physics manifest this. A Jewish male of his era would probably be less likely to choose emotional expression as a favored access to the person.

I had a rather brutal insight on the cultural bias and background of Feldenkrais when, one day in Israel while training, I was working with a woman who had on her left arm the tattooed number from a concentration camp. I realized immediately that doing therapy of the regressive form would be a stupid thing to do. I was so happy I knew just enough Feldenkrais to focus on how to be more comfortable, how to move more easily rather than fish for emotional expression and regressional experiences. One cannot cleanse the past, though some of us can try by feeling and expressing our feelings for years. This may be helpful up to a

point. But to change what we feel we can only act differently, adding new experiences and letting ourselves heal naturally, organically. (By the way, I am in no way minimizing the importance of the ability of expressing what we feel. My point, which I will develop in a further article, is that emotional expression has to be considered functionally in context. If someone steps on your foot, how much expression do you need? It may vary a lot, but the intent is to free your foot, isn't it? Or are we interested in expression of feeling?)

Moshe had a cultural context that somewhat forced the invention of a new way, "through movement." This new way is now theoretically and practically available to us for learning. We can find tremendous value in approaching our difficulties in behavior from the point of view of movement and learning. Even if in the beginning we may have very little to feel good about, we can look for ways of feeling better and making ourselves more secure. This is an approach very different from the ones that work on our problems.

Now, once the organic learning approach is 'invented', we also do not have to do it in the same personal and cultural way as the innovator. Some of us may be more comfortable, more interested, and better trained in dealing explicitly with emotional expression and intimacy. The Feldenkrais approach reaches all aspects of action and behavior. One does not need a 'bad shoulder', physical discomfort, or some intriguing neurological disease to benefit from Feldenkrais. In fact, it is unfortunate that in our Feldenkrais professional trainings the vast majority of case examples come from the physical kind of complaint. Why not study requests for learning in human relations, in sexual behavior, in coping with anxiety attacks, as well as in sports situations and artistic processes? From my point of view, if the practitioner/ teacher has the availability to hear such requests comfortably, the FI or ATM process can remain quite orthodox! I often receive requests, feedback and reports of the 'psychological' kind and I nevertheless approach it through quite simple FI situations. (But the way to go about this is yet another subject for the forthcoming article.)

In Short. . .

Moshe's approach to action and behavior takes as its main focus our body movement. This in itself is a great contribution: Reaching our full person with sensing, feeling and thinking included, through movement. Furthermore, Moshe brought an accent on learning behavior, rather than healing behavior. This way of doing can be applied not only through movement, but also through any other component of behavior; sensing, feeling and thinking. All aspects are always present in behavior. They are indirectly reached if there is awareness through movement. Awareness through sensing, feeling and thinking can also be directly

addressed through this learning approach, not as a 'psychotherapy', but as an integral part of learning behavior.

#### The Loop in a Short Metaphor

Many beginning tennis players experience effort and overwork in the early stages of their attempts to learn how to play. But the experienced player flows with artistic elegance. What is the value of experiencing and expressing the frustration, anger, despair and pain of not knowing how to play? If you learn 'comfortably' how to play 'comfortably', where will the difficult inner experiences go? How long must one work hard to learn artistic ease? In fact, not very long, if from the beginning you go easily and you learn to do more with the ease.

#### Note:

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