

# How does the Feldenkrais Method work?

## A layman's perspective on the process of change.

A stream of thoughts and feelings came and went,  
A foam of memories hardened and became  
A bright crust of habitual sense and thought,  
A seat of living personality  
And recurrent habits mimicked permanence.  
- Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*

After experiencing my first Feldenkrais session I was left with the question: "How does it work?" The results felt like magic: I could not understand why my back pain was gone and my body was moving differently.

It was June 2001, in the early stages of my relationship with Sabine. She still lived in Germany and I was living in Dublin. I got up at 4am to catch the early morning flight to Frankfurt and then the train to Nuremberg to see her for the weekend. My back was aching. I had injured it playing soccer at age 17 and had experienced back problems for over twenty years. I have been for various therapies and treatments; doctors, hospitals, acupuncture, faith healers, craniosacral, physiotherapy and chiropractors. I recognised this ache and realised that the muscles were quite close to going into spasm, which often led to being immobile for days and possibly an injection to relax them. If I caught the problem in time, then usually I could get some Chiropractic treatment to realign the spine and sacroiliac, but what could I do away in Germany for the weekend?

When I told Sabine about my back she offered me a Feldenkrais 'Functional Integration' session. "What's to lose?" I thought, while privately very sceptical. She had told me a little bit about the *Feldenkrais Method*, developed by Dr Moshe Feldenkrais, a physicist, engineer and Judo master. I recalled that it involved some kind of movements and helped various conditions and co-ordination of body. At the beginning of the session Sabine asked me to walk a little and to observe how I was standing on the ground, how my feet moved etc. I usually walk with 'duck feet', meaning that my feet point outwards towards the sides. I had been told once that this

somehow puts a strain on my back and that I should try to walk with the feet parallel. I tried this for a while but it required a lot of concentration and effort and caused pain in my knees so eventually I gave up.

Sabine put me lying on a table and then proceeded to gently move various parts of my body – my shoulders, feet and pelvis mainly. As she was doing this I was wondering how on earth this was supposed to help my back – she hardly touched it during the whole session. Besides, the movements were so small I couldn't see how they would make any difference. But it was a very relaxing experience. I almost fell asleep. At the end of the session Sabine asked me to walk around again and see if I could notice any differences. My back pain was gone! Not only that, but my feet were moving in parallel without any awareness or conscious effort. How could this be? How did this work? But I soon forgot about the session and my back problems and enjoyed a romantic, sunny weekend in Nuremberg.

I am most physicians' nightmare. I have no interest in what they are doing, only in a 'quick fix' and, if I get any relief, cease treatments as soon as possible. I know there is much I could do to enhance my physical well being, but I just don't bother. "If it isn't causing me severe pain, don't think about it" is my motto. Some friends, who are more physically aware than me, get annoyed with this perceived lack of personal responsibility. But I know from experience that New Year's resolutions and good intentions don't work for me.

As I reflect, I see that much of the positive changes I have made in my life somehow happened 'automatically'. I can be aware of behaviour - physical, emotional or mental – that is less than optimal, and seem to be unable to change it. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, I find that the behaviour has changed. For example I used to have great fear of speaking in public. I dealt with this using therapy and Deep Imagery, without any apparent success. Then one day – bingo – I'm not afraid to speak in public anymore. How does this happen? And what exactly caused the change?

I have worked as a consultant with individuals, teams and organisations and have seen similar patterns. They 'know' they should behave differently, they sometimes 'try' to behave differently, but, unless there is some inner change, most of their efforts will fail. I suspect

that if I could understand how Feldenkrais works, I could understand how many other types of change work. So here goes: a layman's perspective on Feldenkrais and change.

First, a bit of 'science'. Many natural systems – such as humans, societies and organisations, plants, ecosystems, weather patterns and even galaxies – can be described as *complex adaptive systems*.

They are *non-linear*, which means how they change in response to their environment and stimuli is complex and often impossible to predict, rather than being described by mechanical laws of cause and effect. They *self-organise*, meaning that their structure often appears without explicit pressure or involvement from outside. Their form or organisation results from the interactions among the components and is usually independent of the physical nature of those parts. They are *emergent*. They adapt in response to stimuli. Depending on initial conditions, the type and force of the disturbance and other factors, they may remain stable, transiently change to a new state and then revert back, collapse into chaos and disintegration, or evolve to more complex, stable forms.

This seems to relate to what happens with Feldenkrais. The body-mind can be viewed as a complex adaptive system, which is emergent and self-organising. How we perform many automatic functions, such as walking or driving, can be thought of as guided by stable patterns held in the connections between our neurons. We don't need to think in order to walk across the room. The information required to coordinate the body is already present and activated, usually without any conscious involvement of our neo-cortex - the 'thinking' part of the brain. Moshe Feldenkrais described this functioning as related to images we hold in our brain. He postulated that if we change the 'picture' we hold in the brain, our behaviour will automatically change – just like my duck's feet corrected themselves.

In terms of self-organising systems, we could say that the subtle movements involved in a Feldenkrais session provide new information to the body-mind - a perturbation in the system. The system may then self-organise in response to the disturbance, resulting in differing automatic modes of behaviour. So, for example, my body may learn to perform some movements in a more coordinated and less stressful manner. Becoming aware of these changes also increases the probability that they will stabilise as new options available to me.

During our lives we learn many sub-optimal behaviours -physical, emotional and mental - due to our unique individual histories. It is quite difficult to change them once they are 'set'. We can try with the 'thinking' part of ourselves to change, but the old habits die hard. Will power definitely has its place, but I am excited about the self-correcting potential within the body-mind, once it has learned and integrated new information.

When we gain a new experience, and internalise it, there is a far better chance that this will lead to sustained change than a purely intellectual understanding. The intellect governs a different area of the brain and so it is more difficult for it to influence learned, deep-set, unconscious habits. This can also help to illuminate why meditation and awareness training can be beneficial. After going into a meditative state, synchronous patterns can be observed emerging across the brain that may prompt emergent new behaviour. Awareness of behaviour or thought patterns, as opposed to *trying to change them*, may also allow new patterns to emerge and, paradoxically, can lead to altered thought patterns and behaviour.

When I experienced the changes induced by my first Feldenkrais session I was delighted and thought: "This is change for free. I don't have to do anything and yet my body behaves differently." But I was expecting too much from one session. Alas, my old duck's feet came back a few days later. My system was only temporarily disturbed and the old patterns re-established themselves. I needed some more sessions to reinforce the new patterns so they could become the new 'established order' within my body.

But this session was, and still remains, an important event in my life. It has given me hope that I can change many things in my life that previously I would have accepted as 'fated', or just too difficult to change. I am hopeful that I can find new ways to work with individuals and organisations to help them learn to adapt and to evolve in more beneficial ways. I have been frustrated with how long it takes individuals and organisations to effect deep change, regardless of the therapy or intervention used. The Feldenkrais Method points to the inherent self-adapting capacity that we all possess. I am now searching for ways of facilitating systems to self-organise rather than trying to 'impose' order from outside.

**Tom Lane – September 2006**