

The Body Training Of Moshe Feldenkrais

By Kristin Linklater

In October, 1971, Moshe Feldenkrais came to the United States to give seminars in body training at the Esalen Institute, at Carnegie Mellon, and at the School of the Arts at New York University. The interest shown in his work by these institutions reflects an important change of emphasis in the area of movement training for actors.

The choice, put simply, is between training the body to perform skillfully as a well-exercised, aesthetically pleasing physical instrument, and freeing the body of its habitual tensions and programmed patterns of behavior so that it can respond uninhibitedly to impulse, and genuinely reflect individual imagination and emotion.

There is a trend away from the use of the formal disciplines of ballet, modern dance and classical mime as exercises. Actors are turning to Yoga classes, are being Rolf'd, are taking Alexander classes and T'ai Chi. The search for a psycho-physical approach to body-training found a temporary answer when Grotowski's exercises became available, but, although "the cat" has remained a popular warm up, most of the exercises he developed for his company were too esoteric in their detail and philosophy to survive a cultural transplant to this country.

Moshe Feldenkrais has spent a lifetime (he is 75), exploring the physiological and psychological make-up of humans. He was a physicist until he was 40 and has brought the scientific training to bear on the questions of how we learn, how we unlearn and how we re-learn. He worked with F. Matthias Alexander, became a judo black belt, and studies Yoga, Freud, Gurdjieff and neurology. He has several thousand exercises for the body, and does not believe in repetition of exercises to develop muscle. In his classes in Tel Aviv, Feldenkrais may spend an hour on an exercise and not do it again for a year. He works to establish or re-establish connections between the motor cortex and the musculature that have been short-circuited or re-routed by bad habits, tensions, and psychological or environmental influences, etc. The aim is a body that is organized to move with minimum effort and maximum efficiency, not through increased muscular strength, but increased consciousness of *how* it works. There is innate physical strength in a body that is functioning normally, and it must be noted the "normal" is not to be confused with "average." Average functioning in nearly all human beings is sub-normal.

Mind-body unity is the basis of the approach; subtlety and heightened awareness are the conditions of work, and the exercises are never goal-oriented. "If it hurts, don't do it." "Never do more than you can do within the limits of pleasure." "Waste your time." These are the instructions given with every movement. The process releases the mind from its habitual "I can't" response and denies it the programmed follow-up of "But if I really try, if I compete, if I push and pull and welcome the pain, I can make it." The result, though merely a by-product of this process, is nearly always a surprising achievement way beyond what one had thought possible. The reward for sacrificing pain is to find within the mind and body an infinite potential for motility waiting to be released. There is no uniform standard to be achieved, the individual discovers his own unique physical behavior free from habitual tensions and free from lifelong conditioning.

In his book *Body and Mature Behavior*, Feldenkrais describes "successful action" as that which is performed with the least exertion from a potent state of mind and body. This "potent state" is described as "a special pattern of nervous activity, in conjunction with a

muscular configuration and a corresponding pattern of vegetative impulses, in which the capacity and liberty of the frame to attempt and realize any act is at its greatest.” He goes on:

As no segment of the body can be moved without adjustment of all the others to a new configuration, the description of any act must necessarily be extremely cumbersome. Any act involves so many muscles and so complete an activity, that it is more useful to describe the function than the mechanism. And this is: (1) that the proper posture of the body is such that it can initiate movement in any direction with the same ease: (2) that it can start any movement without a preliminary adjustment; (3) that the movement is performed with the minimum of work, i.e. with the maximum of efficiency.

To arrive at this state implies a re-adjustment that cannot be only physical – sensory, intellectual, emotional and somatic responses are indivisible.

The structure of the nervous system is such that it is hard to imagine purely sensory, or motor or vegetative impulses. The most abstract thought has emotional-vegetative and sensory-motor components. Abstract thinking is possible only in conjunction with a special configuration or pattern or state of the body. The whole nervous system, therefore, participates in every act; whether it is easily observable or not is only a matter of what and how to observe.

How an actor works on his body will determine the degree of wholeness and spontaneity it has as a communicative instrument. The more sensitive the instrument, the more subtle the communication. The synthesis of thoughts, feelings, senses and muscles makes for easy power. To give an idea of Feldenkrais’ approach, I will try to communicate some of the work he did during the series of seminars in which I participated. The first exercise that I will describe was done standing. We were asked to shift the weight to the left leg and to begin caressing the outside of the right thigh with the right hand at the most easily accessible point, not trying to reach lower than was comfortable. As the hand went down, the weight was rocked onto the ball of the right foot with the right knee flexing and the right heel lifting. As the hand came up, the heel was lowered, the knee straightened, and an easy rocking motion began with the focus on the pleasant, very slow, circular caresses of hand on thigh. We were asked whether we were holding back any part of the body that wanted to go with the motion, and I realized that, though my head was bent forward as I watched my hand, I was stiff in my waist. Letting go the muscles I was holding, the top of my body began to go with the rocking, following the circular movements of my hand, and immediately the circle became larger so that I was caressing an area down to my knee—comfortably and pleasantly.

Next we were asked to continue the hand movements but to rock the weight back onto the left foot, knee flexing, with the toes of the right foot lifting as high as possible off the floor, leaving the heel down and letting the right knee straighten. Rocking back to center, the weight came onto both feet. It was the same rhythmic movement, the same absorbed examination of what was giving and yielding in the body and what was resisting. It became clear to me, when asked to check the pelvic girdle, that if it let go it would move to the left as I bent to the right, and when I let that happen I found I was caressing as low down as my calf with no reaching or strain. The hand was slowly describing a long ellipse from the top of the thigh when upright to the mid-calf.

For a long time, we alternated the two rocking movements—first with the right heel raised, then the right toes raised—interspersed with periods of walking around the room to feel how the sensations developing in the right side of the body differed from the left. No guidelines were given on what we **should** feel—nothing was labeled “right” or “wrong.”

Using the same weight-shifting process, we then added the left hand caressing the inside of the right thigh and leg to the right hand movements. (My right leg was feeling very pampered.) It was suggested that, if it could be done without any strain or effort, we should touch the right knee with our lips. I found that by then my hands were stroking my ankles on the downward movement so that to kiss my knee every now and then on the way was simple—and rather nice.

We had been continuously rocking, bending, stroking, and occasionally walking for about 30 minutes—all on the right leg. The next suggestion was that if we gave in a little bit more we might let our hands stroke the sole of the right foot on the circular caress. It was very simple to do. The movement now took in the whole length of the leg and involved the whole body in diagonal, lateral, and vertical movements.

Finally we abandoned the stroking and, with legs straight, hung head-downwards, letting the hands touch the floor wherever it was easy. There was to be no stretching, reaching or trying. I have never been able to touch the floor with my legs straight, and I found that I could easily let my palms or wrists rest on the floor without strain.

When we straightened up and walked, there was an extraordinary sense of lightness in the torso, ease in the legs and a balanced alignment through the ribcage and shoulders.

Feldenkrais said that he preferred to work on one side of the body throughout a class and the other side the next day. Because there were contrasting sensations in each side, my physical awareness increased. This helped me to combat the urge to push and strain for what I thought was the aim of the exercise. So automatic is goal-oriented work that one doesn't recognize effort, as such, until led to a heightened state of awareness where subtle energy differences can be perceived.

What had happened in the course of 30 or 40 minutes was that our back muscles had slowly released while our attention was elsewhere. While the focus was on hand and leg, the back was decontracting and limbering.

The emphasis on back muscles is evident in all Feldenkrais' work, his point being that their great intrinsic strength must be tapped for efficient body usage. For the actor this is of paramount importance as it takes effort away from the complex, delicate structure of the abdominal muscles, leaving them free to allow natural, relaxed breathing.

The other process that was applied to several exercises and should therefore be described, was, in my experience, unique. Having worked in slow, gentle detail through a gradually building series of movements on the right side of the body for about half an hour, we closed our eyes and, transferring attention to the left side of the body, *thought* through the same series of movements without doing them. This took perhaps half the time of the original physical activity but had to be imagined very fully as being *done*, not just thought about, so that messages from the brain seemed to travel through the body without, however, culminating in any action.

It was found that having limbered up the motor cortex by *thinking* the preparatory exercises through the left side of the body one could then perform the action physically on the left as easily as had been achieved on the right with muscular preparation. For instance, the aim of one of these series of movements was revealed to be that we should be able to wrap a leg around the back of the neck. We did it sitting on the floor, and although I, personally, only arrived at placing my right foot on top of my head, that was amazing enough. Forty minutes of complex, detailed, gentle work had resulted in that moment when, for the first time in my life, I felt my hair with the sole of my foot. We then merely thought through the whole series on the left side; after 15 or 20 minutes I lifted my left foot and placed it on top of my head.

For me, one remarkable aspect of the work was that I experienced no stiffness or soreness after any of the sessions, though my body had been taken through totally new configurations for well over an hour each time. It is clear that the mind can take over much of the work that the body claims automatically, but not necessarily efficiently; that thinking muscles perform with great economy, and that the unifying of mind and body on a deep level is essential to change body habits. In his book, Feldenkrais describes "learning, or the acquisition of new responses" as "a normal and suitable activity for the human brain" and goes on to point out that:

. . . this great ability to form individual nervous paths and muscular patterns makes it possible for faulty functioning to be learned. The earlier the fault occurs, the more ingrained it appears, and is. Faulty behavior will appear in the executive motor mechanisms which will seem later, when the nervous system has grown fitted to the undesirable motility, to be inherent in the person and unalterable. It will remain largely so unless the nervous paths producing the undesirable pattern of motility are undone and reshuffled into a better configuration.

His exercises constitute this reshuffling process, and although his work is not aimed specifically at the actor, two areas seem particularly relevant to the actor's needs. One, obviously, is in the release of limiting, habitual tensions and the opening up of the body to receive new messages and respond to new impressions without new tensions. The other is in shifting physical controls from the forebrain (or "new" brain) so that the reflex actions of the "old" brain can organize the body on a level far deeper than we can legislate intellectually. This means that animal connections can be re-established between instinctive emotional impulses and muscles that reflexively react to them. To have immediate access to emotional sources and to allow emotional energy to flow unblocked through a free body demands some re-ordering of the brain's priorities. Feldenkrais offers a detailed road-map with which to explore one's territory and make conscious decisions about its use.