

How can I get to Carnegie Hall?

By Alan S. Questel

There is one thing I know *for sure* that can make a difference in someone's ability, skill and understanding. It's not more training or reading. It's not another certification, degree or title. It's not testimonials, a fancy office or sophisticated advertising.

It's one simple thing...*practice!*

Practicing something, anything, is the real source of learning and understanding. Even if you know very little about something, if you practice it a lot you will, over time, make more distinctions, recognize different qualities, improve in your abilities, execution and proficiency.

What we call our work as Feldenkrais Practitioners even implies the importance of this idea. We have) a 'practice' or 'private practice', as do doctors and lawyers who are self-employed. This is the actual application of ideas and theories that implies: quantity-how much we practice; time-how often we practice; and understanding-the ability to articulate what we are doing, which is the result of the quantity and time invested.

In the professional training programs I teach, from the very first segment, I *strongly* encourage trainees to practice as much as they can, as often as they can, with whoever than can do it with. The result I see clearly in those who practiced, when they return in the next segment, is that they have different and better questions for furthering their learning. These are questions arising out of their direct experience, about the places they feel stuck or are confused about.

In my advanced trainings I tell participants that I require two things. One, that they are inept in what they do over these days. Because, if they are really learning something new, it makes sense that, at first, they will feel inept at it. This always gets people to smile as we all know how to do and feel that. The second requirement is that they have to practice everything they learn in the workshop with *at least 10 people over the next 3 weeks*. That is where the real learning takes place. That is what can make a difference in developing their understanding and their ability to utilize anything I may have taught them.

More than just repetition

Now, there is practicing something and *practicing something!* The difference is what is underlying everything we do in the Feldenkrais Method: *awareness*. This difference may seem obvious, but as we all know that is sometimes elusive. Just practicing something again and again, over time will still likely produce results. But practicing with awareness will exponentially increase one's learning and abilities.

One place I learned this was with my students in my private practice. They would practice some homework I gave them and sometimes that would make them feel worse. Too often, when we practice something with only a result in mind, it becomes a process of achievement. There is nothing wrong with that, but this is seldom enough to sustain our interest in whatever we are practicing. Practice without attention to what we are doing, without attention to how we are doing it, and without sensing ourselves as we are doing it, is not completely without result. But, it is also what leads to boredom while practicing something, which usually leads to not practicing it at all.

We need to have some place we can put our attention so as to maintain our interest and make distinctions that help us further whatever we are learning. As Feldenkrais Practitioners, every time we give (practice) a Functional Integration lesson, we have an opportunity to pay attention to our sensory experience; how we feel ourselves and how we feel another person. This is one of the secrets to practicing anything; to practice with the sensory awareness of what we are doing AND how we are doing it.

When we listen to ourselves in this way we can also discover that what we are practicing is actually never the same. Each time we repeat something it is always a little different. The question is 'can we notice the difference?'; especially the little ones? Over time, these little differences add up and become much bigger ones. Until one day we turn back, looking at where we came from, and may wonder how we got to where we are today!

Whether is it practicing a sport, a dance or a musical instrument, this is the difference that can make practice into ***practice!***

The adult dilemma

I think the importance of practicing something is pretty clear. And for some it might be enough to just be told, 'You need to practice', and they do it. But for many others this moment is daunting. They run into what I call, The Adult Dilemma that: *they should already be good at something before they have ever done it!*

Once I had a trainee that came up to me and said, 'I am not going to talk about the Feldenkrais Method, until I can talk about it!'. She was quite happy with herself at arriving at this obvious (and safe) conclusion. I said to her, 'That is like saying, I am not going to go onto the mountain until I already know how to ski.' Of course, we all know that is ridiculous. To learn how to ski you have to actually be on the mountain and fall many times. And that only through this kind of practice there will be any chance to learn how to ski. I practiced describing the Feldenkrais Method (and I am still practicing) so many times before I finally felt I was able to able to describe it. But she is not alone in her experience, as I said, it is *the Adult Dilemma*.

Hubert Dreyfus, a linguist from the University of California-Berkeley, authored a very interesting article, **The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment**, The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy, 4 (Spring 1996). He elegantly

describes 5 stages of learning; from novice, to advanced beginner to competence to proficient to expertise. He shows the development of how one progresses until one is able to move on to the next stage.

One of my favorite parts is how he describes the competent learner, he says...

Stage 3: Competence

With more experience, the number of potentially relevant elements of a real-world situation that the learner is able to recognize becomes overwhelming. At this point, since a sense of what is important in any particular situation is missing, performance becomes nerve-wracking and exhausting, and the student might wonder how anybody ever masters the skill.

When I show this to people they often respond with, 'Wow! I guess I am competent!' But then what does one need to do to move further along? Practice! Right, we know that already. But what do we do when we feel unable to practice? This is the really tricky moment for many of us. The place where we inhibit ourselves and retreat and don't practice.

This turning point is worth investigating and understanding to help us move past it and return to the process of learning through practicing. The thoughts we have that stop us from continuing often sound like this...I'll never understand this...I am no good at this...I am wasting my time...everyone can do this better than me...what was I thinking...I am going to quit.

These thoughts can be quite powerful and quite debilitating and easily lead to inaction. I think beneath these thoughts is one basic feeling: fear. Fear of not being good enough... Fear of not being the best... Fear of never understanding it... Fear that I am wasting my time and money...fear of... And on and on and on.

Utilizing a Feldenkrais concept

So, what can we do? I would like to suggest something that hopefully will resonate as it's clearly a concept we utilize all the time as Feldenkrais Practitioners. *Differentiation*. In moments like this we need to differentiate our feelings (and thoughts) from our actions. *We need to be able to have and acknowledge our feelings and...act in a different way.* A more differentiated way.

For many years I practiced (yes, *practiced*) Zen meditation. Every day I would wake up and go sit on my cushion for 40 minutes. Honestly, if I listened to my thoughts and feelings I would never do it. In fact, the window of opportunity to do it was so small I could easily just skip it. I lay in bed and I could think...I am too tired... Not today... It's not so important... I don't know what I am doing anyway... I could have easily listened to any of that and just roll over and go back to sleep.

But I didn't. I let myself think/feel all of that and then I just got out of bed and sat on my cushion. It was a really good training for me. To be able to *have* thoughts and feelings and *act* in a different way. And the funny thing was, the minute I was sitting on the cushion I felt fine about it. I think this is the same with exercise. Otherwise why would Nike come up with the slogan, Just Do It! But that way of engaging is too often comes through ignoring the thoughts and feelings we have, which over time, will either result in a kind of compulsive behavior or simply not doing it anymore.

Understanding and implementing this is part of the awareness I spoke about earlier. 'Just Doing It' without awareness can lead to injuries. The awareness that the somewhat daunting experience of recognizing we are 'competent' can become a positive experience and even compel us to continue pursuing what we, up until now, have only imagined ourselves to be.

I think this is at the crux of practice, or how we go about practicing. Its important we don't just get into the 'Just Do It' frame of mind and ignore what is going on inside of us. We need to fully acknowledge what is going on, include it and then act in another way, a more differentiated way.

In order to 'practice' we need to 'practice' this. So that we can actively and intentionally move forward and discover that this is how we can and will improve...over time. Time is the other big part of this.

How much time?

With my trainees and with practitioners I do what I call Personal Supervision, where I lie down on a table and they get to 'practice' things with me. It can be about their thinking, their self-use, the quality of their touch, pretty much anything. For example, I might direct someone to a more skeletal touch, utilizing more of the surface of their palm so as to make fuller contact and resulting in having more of me in their hand.

If this is something very new to them I ask them, 'How long do you think it will take to get good at this?' They too often say 3 weeks... Or 3 months... Or even 6 months. I always say that would be great but I think its unrealistic. And then I tell them that I think it's more likely to take one and half to two years. And this always freaks them out... Two years!!!

I ask them to think about it. If you give yourself 3 months and in 3 months it's still not working for you, you just, once again, start feeling bad about yourself. That can lead right back all the negative thoughts and feelings we all know so well. But if you have two years and in 6 months you are not there yet, you can remind yourself that you have one and half years more to practice. And in one year, if your skill still isn't what you want, you still have another year.

This shift in perspective is exactly what practice is about, doing something over time. And of course, the more people you practice with during that time, the more it accelerates the entire process. And eventually you can move from being competent to proficient to expertise!

I only know one way to get there... *Practice!* And then practicing *how* you and *what* you practice! And then practice that some more!

I hope that you learn to differentiate your feelings and thoughts from your actions.
I hope you are courageous...even when you are scared.
I hope that over time...you can look back...to see how far you have really come.
And I hope that you are never very far from a smile...another good thing to practice!

A tourist visiting New York City stopped an old man on the street and asked him...‘Excuse me sir, but can you please tell me how I can get to Carnegie Hall?’

The old man looked and him and said, ‘Practice, practice, practice...’

At the end of each segment in my training programs I give the trainees Time Off Guidelines, structures to help them further their learning. Here is what I give them when they graduate. I hope you find it useful as well.

TIME OFF GUIDELINES FOR YEARS 5...6...7...8.....

- 1. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 2. Continue to learn...continue to be a student...don't be afraid to let your students know this...learn together!**
- 3. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 4. Talk to everyone you can about the Feldenkrais Method!**
- 5. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 6. When something in your practice is not working....
...figure out how to make it work!**
- 7. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 8. Be willing to try things you have never done before!**
- 9. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 10. Trust what you *don't* know!**
- 11. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 12. Learn from what you *do* know!**
- 13. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**
- 14. Talk to each other and other practitioners when you are confused!**
- 15. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....**

16. Enjoy your habits...you'll need them!
17. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
18. Reinvent the method and yourself!
19. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
20. Be happy for and learn from all your failures!
21. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
22. Always be close to a smile when you are working!
23. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
24. Give up many times...and always start again!
25. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
26. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
27. PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE...PRACTICE.....
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