

Exercise vs Learning

Concepts and questions

While teaching the ATM lesson "Rolling from sitting" (Amherst training, morning, 7/7/1980), Feldenkrais talked about exercising and learning. He asked and answered: "[Do] You know the difference between exercising and learning? [Exercising] means that you know the final result, what you want, and you keep on doing until you obtain it. And that is the most awkward inefficient way of achieving anything. Because it becomes a problem for life. ... [learning] means that you have an action where you do not know the final outcome...".

Throughout the ATM, Feldenkrais continued discussing this issue: "There is no point in laying down and getting up as an exercise...[however] in learning, every movement, every advancement in space and in time, and the changing manipulative, means organizing quality of ourselves...then you'll find that your movement becomes melodious, becomes elegant, meaning that you don't repeat the same movement twice. If somebody does the same movement twice without any change he is exercising".

It sounds as if Moshe Feldenkrais opposed exercising, as if exercising disturbs learning. However, Feldenkrais was a Judo practitioner, so he must have known about the importance of exercising in the process of acquiring a skill. In Judo the *butsukari* (now known as *uchi komi*, or "repetition training" in the western judo world) is an exercise for improving the judoka's performance of throws.

Feldenkrais dedicated his method to learning. He was mostly concerned about people who are not aware that they repeat a movement that they have already performed many times in the past instead of learning another way, maybe a better way, of executing the movement.

My Background

I'm a martial artist and, following Moshe's path, I became a Feldenkrais practitioner.

Over the years I have suffered injuries and thanks to the Feldenkrais Method I improved my awareness of my body in action. Now at sixty-nine, I'm still an active practitioner of the martial arts, a practice that I began at the age of sixteen. Practicing martial arts from childhood until advanced age, requires modifications to match the changes in our body. The method of Awareness through Movement provides the means to continue the martial way (Budo).

The German Guild approached me to write about exercise because I am a martial artist. In the martial arts we exercise with the intention of turning technique into automatic, unconscious movement, so that our response to a threat will occur without hesitation and without delay. Thinking about how to plan your reaction delays the response, whereas instinctive action is automatic and instantaneous. Each occupation has its own phase of exercise (or practice) for the purpose of honing skills and ensuring that we have actually learned.

Our bodies can perform an endless number of diverse movements that, at least, is our potential. However, our self-image, which we have constructed and adopted, stands in opposition to our infinite potential. Exercising encourages automatic movement and so we develop habits, amplify our dependence on certain movements, and thus obstruct our own learning and development.

The paradox is that we cannot survive our daily lives without our habits even though these habits prevent us from realizing our full potential. When teaching ATM, we often see our pupils doing exactly what they already

know how to do and not what they were asked to do. Coping with our self-image is not easy when you consider that it is based on modes of action that a normal person performs thousands, and perhaps millions, of times throughout his life. That is what Feldenkrais is talking about.

I became a senior teacher (Dai Shihan) of Budo Tai-Jutsu in the Japanese Bujinkan school. Since 1995, I have led the instructors training in the Israeli Bujinkan Dojo according to the guidelines of the Israeli law of sports. In other words, I 'teach how to teach' martial arts. In 1979, while serving in the I.D.F., I trained to become a certified Military Krav Maga instructor. I still follow the development of this system. Military Krav Maga is classical example of a how modern martial art has changed in response to changes on the battlefield and in the soldiers' missions.

Action

The declared goal of Martial Arts is learning to act and react in order to survive the threats of a changing environment.

Dr. Feldenkrais wrote: "The different environments affect the organism which changes so as to act and react effectively to the environment. We have, then, a closed loop of four elements: skeleton, muscles, nervous system, and environment." (*The Elusive Obvious, The Organism*). At Amherst he said, "We are going to do an act, ... an act without orientation, without connection with time, without reconnection with other people is not an act, it is just an excitation" According to this concept of four elements, learning to act is achieved by interaction with the environment, which creates a change in our experience.

What is the goal of the Feldenkrais Method? Moshe said "... you see that the question of good movement is primarily whether it assures your survival and self-preservation, and for that it is important to attend to propulsion." (*The Master Moves, Lesson One: Twisting to the Floor*). It would be logical to say that goal of our method is to learn "good movements". Such good movements would fit the goal of the martial arts.

Exercise – a stage in the learning process

Feldenkrais used two terms: learning and exercising. I view the learning process as having three stages: learning, exercising, training. Each stage is informed by the four elements and acting in time/space. Each stage is defined and its results can be measured or assessed.

- Learning – Teaching the technique to the level that the trainee knows how to perform the technique. The trainee is taught a technique until he/she has learned to perform it correctly.
- Exercising –Repeating the learned technique until the trainee can perform it competently with confidence, accuracy, and speed. Exercising ascertains that we are able to repeat what we have learned even though conditions, such as varying the speed at which the technique is performed, may be changed.
- Training – Performing the technique in demanding conditions, in a more challenging and stressful environment (threats, darkness, bad surface). Soldiers should train in an environment similar to the battle field. A simple example from daily life is, after we have learned an alternative way of using our pelvis and hip joints through an ATM or FI lesson, changing our body organization as we walk in the world. Now, when walking on our modern "battlefield" (crossing streets, sidewalks, and avoiding unforeseen obstacles) the quality of our movements and interaction with our environment keeps us safe and more likely to survive.

Exercise should be performed immediately after mastering the technique. The ability to repeat a technique proves that learning has indeed occurred. The exercising is between the stages of initial learning and the advanced stage of training. Results might suggest that more exercising is needed or a lack of accuracy in performing the technique may become apparent. The latter case demands re-learning, and then exercising the updated performance.

The paradox of exercising

As Feldenkrais practitioners our concern is learning and our main technique is ATM lessons. How do we know when we have learned a new movement? When would be the right time to start exercising?

Studies claim that one needs to repeat a movement 10,000 times to acquire it as a skill. T.P. Leggett (British judo teacher, author, translator, and head of the BBC's Japanese Service) states, "Judo is not a question of merely knowing a series of moves, but a question of carrying them out at sufficient speed to defeat the opponent's counter-action. You have to get the "feel" of them... after ten-thousand repetitions you begin to get the 'feel' of a throw, and after about hundred thousand repetitions the throw begins to come naturally" (*Budokwai Bulletin*.)

The questions raised here are paradoxical. If every movement needs 10,000 repetitions to adopt it, would 120 years of life be enough to learn what is really needed? What assures that we have learned? How will we know that we should start exercising? Do we create automatic movements and habits that inhibit us from changing and impede continued learning? What will happen if we repeat wrong movements? Those questions doubt the efficiency of exercising in the learning process.

The movements we perform in ATM lessons are more complicated than the movements we perform and learn in Budo training. So, what makes the difference in learning between martial arts and the Feldenkrais Method? We find that the difference is in the stage of exercising with connection to the environment. For instance, sensing the connection to the body of our training partner or speeding up to contend with time restraints or paying attention to achieving the perfect structure of movement.

Final words

In the Feldenkrais community we refer to the Feldenkrais Method as a creation of genius. Everyone knows that Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais had a black belt in Judo. This is a fact. Looking deeper into history we find that Moshe's genius was revealed much earlier. When still quite a young man, but already a martial arts practitioner, Feldenkrais designed his "own jiu-jitsu" and in 1930 published a book for the Haganah (Jewish paramilitary organization in the British Mandate of Palestine, which became the core of the Israel Defense Forces, active between 1920-1948) titled Jiu-Jitsu and Self-defense. This was the first Hebrew book about self-defense and the beginning of the legacy of the Israeli martial arts. Today many know about Krav Maga, the Israeli system of self-defense, but few know about Moshe's contribution to development of this system.

Feldenkrais based his own jiu-jitsu on the concept of the unconscious/instinctive response, which leads to quicker learning and skilled acting on the battlefield. At Amherst he presents the seemingly opposite perspective and warns learners against repeating habitual movements, calling it exercising. I would compare it to Feldenkrais teaching soldiers Practical Unarmed Combat (1942), in ten lessons. They learned one new technique, but without knowing the ramifications of the technique. Then they exercised, meaning they repeated the learned technique until they could do it accurately and quickly. Feldenkrais started the eighth,

ninth, and tenth lessons by asking the soldiers to repeat what they learned in the previous lessons. In Amherst, Feldenkrais may have wanted to go through the same process, so he was very sensitive not to impede the learning or skipping it by exercising, meaning repetition with no awareness. In ATM lessons he instructs us to repeat the movement, I think that now we better understand what it means to repeat as learning, not exercising.

The term martial art simply means military/combat skill. The benefits of learning martial arts are developing coordination, orientation, and dynamic stability. A unique benefit is the fighting spirit that develops during this learning process.

Talking and writing about his method, Feldenkrais constantly refers to survival and self-preservation, Judo and boxing. From this perspective we should allow ourselves and our students benefit from learning according to the Feldenkrais Method by daily exercising and the meeting the changing environment with confidence.

And lastly– let's call the Feldenkrais Method the Feldenkrais Art.

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