
Our self-image in action and the use of our eyes

“We act in accordance with our self-image.” That is the opening phrase in Dr. Feldenkrais’ book *Awareness Through Movement*. A phrase that has been fascinating me since reading it for the first time some 25 years ago.

What is my self-image? Do I act according to my self-image or does my self-image form according to my actions? Do I have access to my self-image? Can I sense and feel my self-image? Is that different from sensing and feeling myself?

If it’s an image, is it a visual one or does it have a visual component? Can I see this image?

In this short article I would like to share some of my insights on this subject, especially the intricate relationships between our self-image, our visual system, and our use of our eyes. Understanding these relationships is a tool that we can use for tapping into the plasticity of our self-image, promoting a greater sense of well-being, and healthier use of our eyes.

Complex eyes have been around for 500 million years, and visually guided behaviors have been a driving evolutionary force throughout the ages of evolution. Light detection and its more evolved forms of vision, allow for spatial orientation, detection of essential necessities like food and shelter, as well as life threatening dangers.

For human beings, vision has evolved to become the most developed and accurate of all senses, providing a very wide range of visual abilities:

- We have a dynamic focusing system that enables us to see near and far.
- Merging the images from both eyes provide us with 3-D vision and perception of depth.
- We have high resolution color vision as well as the ability to adapt to low light conditions.
- We can track moving objects and we can fixate our gaze when stability is needed.

70 percent of the sensory input from our external environment is visual information. Controlling this incredibly complex system is a brain that has evolved to process this rich visual information and to apply it in action.

With these details in mind, it is easy to understand how and why our eyes and our visual system become involved also in non-visual tasks, tasks that are not of a visual nature per se.

A simple example will clarify what I mean: Sit on the edge of your seat for a moment, so that your feet are standing clearly on the floor, with your eyes closed. What happens exactly when you just pay attention to the contact of the soles of your feet with the floor? Do your eyes move with the shifting of your attention? Do you “see” the layout of your feet on the floor? Is your visual system not somehow engaged in the shifting of your attention and in sensing your feet?

Clearly, this is not a visual task “per se”; your eyes are closed, and there is another sensory system (proprioception and cutaneous pressure information from your feet) that provides you with the information needed to sense the contact of your feet with the floor.

The example above is one of an infinite number of situations. The shifting of our attention to our bodily sensations, to our emotional state, to a thought that crosses our mind, all involve our visual system and some of the visual control centers in our brain.

You might think that some areas in the brain are uniquely designated for visual processing, and you might be right, but let me give you another example. One type of eye movement is called saccades. Saccades are fast and ballistic, and you use them all the time, even right now reading this text. Saccades are controlled by the superior colliculus, an area in the mid-brain that receives information from many other areas of the brain including some cortical motor control centers. But surprisingly, in this area there are also neural representation of two other types of sensory input: auditory and the body surface. Meaning, that processing and controlling the movement of the eyes is inseparable from knowing the boundaries of your body and the sounds that are around you.

There are numerous examples of how the different neural networks that deal with vision are intricately connected, woven into and integrated with the rest of the brain. It’s enough to see a diagram of the different brain areas that are involved in visual processing and the motor control of the eyes to understand just how pervasive this involvement is.

Thus, every act has a visual component to it or an involvement of the eyes.

Returning to the opening phrase, every act is also in accordance with our self-image, governed by our self-image. But what does this mean exactly?

Let me ask you this: How do you know what it is that you are about to do? How is it that how you act, the way you move, what you say, how you sound doesn’t surprise you? How is it that you know what you are about to do before you do it? How is it

that you can see your own behavior before you act? How is it that you can sense what it would be like to be somewhere or act somehow before the event ever happened?

We have an image of ourselves in action. An image that allows us to **envision** and **foresee** our own actions, the actions of others, and their consequences.

The predictability that our self-image offers strengthens the automatization of our acquired habits and patterns of behavior. We can walk without concerning ourselves with exactly where to place each foot with each step, knowing that we are not about to trip over our own feet. We can speak our mind knowing that some automated system takes care of the oral-laryngeal motor articulations, knowing that we will not bite our own tongue while speaking.

Our patterns of behavior are highly unique to each one of us, like our fingerprints. It explains how we can recognize people we know from far away, in a glimpse of a millisecond, just by the way they walk. We can also easily recognize people by the unique signature of their voice and intonation in speaking.

If our self-image is unique and individual, reflected in how we stand, walk and talk, and our eyes are involved in every action, then it must mean that the way we use our eyes also has a unique habitual signature.

Indeed, it is so!

Not only is the use of our eyes deeply integrated into every act, but their use becomes a personal habit inseparable from our personal self-image. We habituate ourselves to “seeing” ourselves in a very specific way. So specific that we become blind to the fact that it is how we construct and view our self-image that makes us who we are.

The way we use our eyes is interwoven so deeply into the way we experience ourselves that it would not occur to anyone that to change how we sense our-selves we should examine how we use our eyes.

Yet, examining how we use our eyes is not a trivial thing as their use is highly automated and reflexive. So how do we go about exploring these relationships between our habitual use of the eyes and our self-image?

First, by understanding the internal language of our nervous system: For every act there is an internal image, or an internal representation, and our eyes are involved in the construction and the execution out of that image into action.

Second, by exploring the image of our own body. Paying attention to our bodily sensations discovering the image that we have of our own body. “Looking” attentively and respectfully at this image is an avenue with great potential that is worth

exploring. Once a part of our body image is revealed it can be expanded, elaborated and developed. How? By using the same internal language of our nervous system that created it in the first place: an image.

A picture is worth a thousand words... So, let's try putting these ideas into practice...

Find a place where you can sit comfortably, without straining your back, making sure your head is sitting on top of your spine and your face and eyes are oriented forward towards the line of the horizon.

Close your eyes, and just take a moment to sense the shape of your head. See if you can pay particular attention to the width of your head. Can you evaluate how wide your head is, the distance between both sides of your face? Notice, if your eyes are somehow involved in the way that you scan this bodily sensation. Do your head and face feel symmetrical? Does the involvement of your eyes feel symmetrical?

After a moment or two lift your hands in front of you, your elbows bent close to your chest so that there is no need to stretch your arms forward. Orient the palms of your hands towards each other, as if you are holding a ball in front of your face. Sense again the width of your face and "see" if you can correlate the size of the ball with the width of your head. How do you know how wide your head is? How do you know how wide the ball is? Note, is there is a visual component in this self-reflection and an involvement of your eyes?

Now, deliberately bring your hands closer together until you can sense with absolute certainty that the size of the ball that would fit now between your hands is smaller than your head. Stay there for a few seconds and then do the opposite: move your hands away from each other to the sides until you can sense with absolute certainty that the size of the ball that would fit now between your hands is bigger and wider than the size of your head and the width of your face. Alternate slowly a few times between holding the smaller ball and the bigger ball always "sens-seeing" (not a typo) the ball in relation to your own head and face. Notice how your eyes react to the transition between the two balls. Is something in your eyes becoming smaller with holding the smaller ball and becoming bigger when holding the bigger ball?

Gradually, diminish the delta between the two, the difference in size between the bigger and the smaller balls. Meaning that your hands would move less and less until you can find a range of movement, in which the certainty of "smaller than my head" and "bigger than my head" becomes blurred. Meaning, that it would be hard to claim with certainty when your hands are wider and when are they narrower than the real width of your head.

Within this small range, in which the ball that you are holding becomes smaller and bigger, notice again if there is a reaction in your eyes.

Now, if you are within the range of uncertainty in relation to the width of your head, can you see in your mind's eye how **both** ends of the range reflect the size of your head. That once your hands represent a slightly wider head and once, they represent a slightly narrower head. If the difference between both ends of this spectrum is very small you might feel as if your **head** is really changing size in accordance with movement of your hands or, more precisely, in accordance with how you sense and see your fluctuating self-image.

This is one example of many of how we can tap into our body-image, by **using** an image that serves as a reflection but also as a means to promote the completion of our self-image.

Realizing that we have the potential to change is not exclusive to our body-image. The somatic experience can serve as a launch pad and as an inspiration prompting us to explore many more aspects of ourselves. Any act that we wish to improve can be examined through the language of our nervous system, exposing the internal images and the internal representation that dictate how we feel and how we act. Taking the time to see ourselves through our own eyes and gradually find the plasticity and flexibility for change and improvement.

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Currently, Raz runs The Ramat-Aviv Feldenkrais Center where he treats a diverse population of all ages and backgrounds, including special needs children. Raz has mentored and conducted advanced training for Feldenkrais Practitioners for many years, exploring the different techniques and many applications of the Feldenkrais Method® in-depth. He is known for his ability to convey the richness and depth of the Feldenkrais Method in an intelligible, stimulating way while sharing his true passion for the human ability to overcome difficulties.