

T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method[®]

Different windows on a common vision

by Ralph Strauch

When I met Moshe Feldenkrais in 1980, I had been doing T'ai Chi for about 10 years, and had thought a lot about the lessons it has to teach about how we move and function in the world. I had a good sense of the possibilities to which it could allow access, and realizing those possibilities had become a major focus in my life — though I knew I had far to go. I was attracted to Moshe by the sense that he was working with the same possibilities, and had a better handle on them than anyone I had ever encountered. So I decided to study with him, and radically altered my life in the process.

The more I came to understand his work, the more clearly I saw parallels between Moshe's vision of human functioning and the vision embodied in T'ai Chi. I want to examine some of those parallels here, and in the process, to explore that common vision¹.

The obvious differences

First, let's consider the obvious differences. (For the most part, the mechanical comparisons in throughout this article relate to the T'ai Chi *solo exercise* and to Feldenkrais *Awareness Through Movement* lessons, while the conceptual and theoretical comparisons relate to the systems as a whole.)

T'ai Chi is done standing up, while most Feldenkrais lessons are done lying down. T'ai Chi, on the one hand, uses a single (fairly complicated) fixed form which is learned and then repeated for years. The Feldenkrais Method, on the other hand, works with an infinite variety of simpler lessons which may never be repeated exactly. These are differences in form and not in substance, and are far outweighed by the similarities.

¹Feldenkrais's writings include *Body and Mature Behaviour*, International Universities Press, New York, 1949; *Awareness Through Movement*, Harper and Row, New York, 1972; *The Elusive Obvious*, Meta Publications, Cupertino CA, 1981, and *The Potent Self*, Harper and Row, New York, 1985. Among the many books available on T'ai Chi my favorites are *T'ai Chi*, by Chen Man-cheng and Robert w. Smith, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Rutland VT, 1967, and *T'ai Chi Chuan for Health and Self-Defense*, by T. T. Liang, Random House, New York, 1974.

Another major difference lies in the theoretical models used to describe the methods and explain their effects. The traditional explanatory model for T'ai Chi is based on the Chinese concept of *Ch'i*, an esoteric life-energy without parallel in conventional western thought. Moshe Feldenkrais, on the other hand, explained his work in neuromuscular terms, involving learning in the nervous system. He was adamantly against esoteric explanations, and never accepted (at least publicly) any concept of life-energy as operative in what he did.

But differences in explanatory models do not necessarily mean that the phenomena being described are really different. The world is much more complex than our verbal-intellectual descriptions of it, and it is not uncommon to find apparently incompatible descriptions of the same phenomenon. The Newtonian and Einsteinian concepts of mass and energy, for example, are totally different, yet both models of physics provide the same predictions in the range of everyday experience².

Natural human movement

T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method both see natural human movement as involving the entire person in a smooth and flowing way, balanced without effort in the field of gravity, under a special kind of effortless control. Feldenkrais calls such movement "elegant," while the Chinese speak of a body "so light that a feather will be felt and so pliable that a fly cannot alight on it without setting it motion."

Feldenkrais describes that effortless control as "reversible movement" — meaning that the mover is never committed to continue on a trajectory, but can stop, start, or change direction at any time. A man sitting down in a reversible way, for example, would not fall if the chair were pulled from under him. A woman hurrying along a hallway could stop if

²For more discussion of perception and the role of explanatory models, see my book, *THE REALITY ILLUSION: How you make the world you experience*, Station Hill Press, Barrytown NY, 1989

someone suddenly stepped in her path. The T'ai Chi master in combat cannot be bluffed or fainted into a compromising position. He has, in the words of the Chinese classic, *Tao Te Ching*, "no spots where death may enter."

We don't encounter this kind of reversible movement much in our everyday lives. It's far more common, it seems, to fall if a chair is pulled out from under you, or to collide with someone who steps in your path without warning. People normally violate this ideal in other ways, as well. Movement is often fragmented and choppy, with the body stiffly held in gravity and moving as a set of disconnected pieces rather than a smooth and flowing whole. For many people, "effort" is almost synonymous with "movement."

Why is the *normal* movement we encounter in our everyday lives so at variance with the *natural* movement that both T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method seek? Here again, both offer the same basic answer. We move so poorly they say, at least in comparison to the potential that exists within us, because we lack self-awareness. Unaware of what we do and how we do it, we cannot choose well, so we function less efficiently than we might. Moshe Feldenkrais summed this up in one of his favorite sayings — "If you don't know what you're doing, you can't do what you want." Improvement depends on *learning* — learning more efficient possibilities for action, and incorporating them into your life.

Slowness, repetition, and awareness

T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method offer similar prescriptions to correct this lack of self-awareness. Both rely on slow gentle movements, done many times. To move better you must know what you are doing, and to know what you are doing you must observe and refine your movement.

To improve your understanding of a tangible object such as a complex painting, you hold it still and study it. But movement is transitory and intangible. If you hold it still you destroy it; if you don't, it is over and gone. But if you repeat it, slowly, many times, you begin to perceive details and nuances that escaped your notice at the start. Repetition can provide the same opportunity for prolonged study of movement that static observation can provide for a painting.

Just looking at a painting, of course, does not guarantee enhanced understanding. You can sit and stare for hours without learning

anything. The same is true of movement. Repetition without awareness does little; you can repeat the same movement endlessly and never improve at all. Many people "exercise" in this way, thinking that repetition and "practice" per se will somehow bring about positive change. They will not, and with some kinds of strenuous movement, can actually cause damage.

Slowness plays an important role in learning because it gives you time to notice what you are doing, but it also does more. When you move rapidly habit takes over, and part of your habitual way is to move without awareness. When you move more slowly than usual, that habit pattern is weaker, making it easier to be aware of what you do.

Movement as a self-correcting process

No matter how long you observe a tangible object like a painting, no matter how much you learn by doing so, the observation does not change the painting. But movement is a self-correcting process, and simply becoming aware of how you move will itself improve your movement. Indeed, improvement may come faster and more easily if you don't attempt to consciously direct it but allow it to happen by itself.

We are naturally programmed to move well. For millions of years our ancestors depended on their physical abilities for day-to-day survival. Fluid efficient movement was a biological necessity, and evolution responded by building such movement into the human organism. The poor movement we now accept as normal is not our natural state, but a distortion fostered by the conditions under which we live.

Good movement requires self-awareness. To function efficiently, you must know what you're doing. Yet our culture systematically discourages self-awareness, beginning when we are very young. Any six year old knows, without a doubt, that sitting still is not a natural activity for a young human being. But as six year olds we were put in classrooms and made to sit for hours at a time. We were taught to subordinate our natural knowledge to standards imposed by external authority, and this lesson was reinforced many times as we matured.

We lose touch with ourselves, and develop highly inefficient patterns of functioning as a result. We get in our own way without noticing that we're doing it, so simply becoming aware

may bring about change. T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method seek to get us back in touch with our natural knowledge, rather than to impose a way of doing things from the outside.

Movement in gravity

We live in the field of gravity, and our response to that field plays a central, if unnoticed, role in our functioning. Two different body systems, the muscles and the skeleton, contribute to supporting your weight. How easily you move depends upon the division of labor between them. If you carry your weight in balance on your skeleton, your muscles are free to perform their primary function of movement. You experience lightness and ease, like a balanced mobile which can be set in motion by the slightest touch.

If your body is out of balance, on the other hand, muscular effort must be used just to hold it in place. You stiffen your body to support the unbalanced weight, so movement requires additional effort to overcome this stiffness. You feel heavy, because all this effort is subjectively experienced as weight, and your movement feels difficult and sluggish. Both T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method seek to improve your body's balance in the field of gravity, but they go about it in quite different ways.

Feldenkrais lessons are done primarily in a lying position, in order to minimize the effects of gravity. When you stand in an unbalanced way, muscles must be tensed in order to support unbalanced weight. Those muscles are not available for movement, or for learning. The Feldenkrais Method takes you out of the field of gravity, allowing those muscles to relax and open to other possibilities. As habitual tension patterns fall away, your body can realign itself in an easier, more efficient way. When you again stand in the field of gravity you can do so more lightly, with less of this maladaptive tension.

T'ai Chi, on the other hand, is practiced in an upright position, moving slowly to magnify the effects of gravity so that you can improve your response to it. In normal movement, most people are off balance and falling most of the time, without being aware of it. You don't fall all the way down because you unconsciously shift to a new support before the imbalance becomes critical. You fall from one leg to the other as you walk, or drop into the chair as you sit. This works most of the time, but can get you into trouble if you don't find the solid support you expect. You may fall if you step off a curb without looking, for example, or if someone

pulls a chair out from under you as you sit. You will probably run into someone who steps in your path as you hurry down a hallway.

Moving quickly enough to make unconscious corrections, you normally keep yourself unaware of the precariousness of your balance. The slow movements of T'ai Chi, however, make that lack of awareness impossible to maintain. When you lose your balance while moving very slowly, you must either stiffen to support the weight differently or speed up to get a foot down before you fall. In either case, the loss of balance and the need for the correction are amplified and brought to consciousness. Becoming aware of imbalance when it occurs, you can learn to control your balance in an easy natural way.

“Walking with an empty foot”

This leads eventually to what the Chinese call “walking with an empty foot.” To see what this means, let's look at the process of taking a single step. I'll refer to the foot on the ground as the “standing foot” and the foot in the air as the “moving foot.”

Normal walking, as I noted above, is a process of falling from one foot to the other. You begin falling when you commit weight to the moving foot while it is still in the air. There's no support under that foot, so you fall forward until it makes contact with the ground. In “walking with an empty foot,” on the other hand, no weight is committed to the moving foot while it is in the air (hence it is “empty” of weight). Weight shifts only after the foot comes lightly into contact with the ground. Walking in this way, you maintain balance on the standing foot while the moving foot is in the air, shifting balance only when both are on the ground. (Your pelvis must be free and your standing knee slightly bent, so that your moving foot can reach the ground while you are still balanced on your standing foot.)

“Walking with an empty foot” is what Feldenkrais called “reversible movement” — movement under sufficient volitional control to allow stopping or reversing at any time. For the T'ai Chi master in combat, this eliminates a period of vulnerability that would exist if he fell from one foot to the other. (Normal walking is not “reversible” during the period of falling. Once begun, the fall must continue until support is regained.)

For the rest of us, for whom vulnerability in hand-to-hand combat is not a pressing consideration, walking in this way still has

advantages. You may not encounter an opponent who will try to sweep your feet out from under you, but you may step absentmindedly off a curb or trip on a skateboard left in your path, or walk into someone who steps in front of you. "Walking with an empty foot" reduces these hazards, because you aren't committed to your moving foot for support until it is down and can provide that support.

I had a personal lesson in this several years ago, walking barefoot on the beach. I felt something sharp under the foot I was just setting down. I withdrew my foot, brushed the sand away, and found the bottom of a broken beer bottle with an inch-long shard sticking up. If I'd been letting my weight fall from one foot to the other as I walked, I'd have gotten that shard in my foot.

On a less dramatic level, this kind of movement is less wearing and easier on the body. When you fall from foot to foot, each step sends a minor impact throughout your body. The impact from any given step may seem negligible by itself, but over a period of years these impacts have a cumulative impact. Your body has to last you all your life, so it makes sense to minimize the unnecessary abuse to which you subject it.

Sensitivity of touch

Practiced over an extended period of time, both T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method lead to a sensitive awareness of self and of the surrounding environment — in particular to an extremely sensitive touch. This sensitivity of touch allows the T'ai Chi master in combat to sense, understand, and counter his opponent's attack. The same sensitivity allows a Feldenkrais Teacher doing *Functional Integration* (the one-to-one form of the Feldenkrais Method) to sense blocks and limitations in the client's body and guide the client to awareness of better ways of functioning. Feldenkrais described the sensitivity as "merging with the other's nervous system," while the Chinese speak of "feeling the opponent's ch'i."

Movement as a metaphor for life

T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method focus most obviously on improving things like balance, flexibility, and ease of movement. Yet both have the potential to go far beyond that — to improve functioning in all aspects of life. The T'ai Chi master draws his effectiveness in combat from his ability to comprehend his environment and control his reactions to it, and

those abilities are useful anywhere. Feldenkrais often spoke of the need to develop "flexible minds" as the objective of his work, and of the development of flexible bodies as a tool to that end.

For me, personally, my first conscious application of T'ai Chi in conflict involved not physical combat but a bureaucratic conflict when I worked as part of the Washington technocracy. By applying the principles I had learned through the practice of T'ai Chi, I was able to achieve my goals without the battle that the situation would otherwise have required.

Flexibility of mind and body are inseparable; you can't have one without the other. Movement is a metaphor for life, and the lessons T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method teach about movement have direct analogs in other areas. "Reversibility," for example, can serve us well in everything we do.

The converse of Feldenkrais's dictum that "if you don't know what you're doing you can't do what you want" is also true. If you *really do know what you're doing, you can do almost anything you want!* Our limitations are largely self-imposed, and T'ai Chi and the Feldenkrais Method provide tools to help us understand how we impose those limits and to rid ourselves of them.

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