



My experiences with Feldenkrais

(and answers to some FAQs)

by [Sanjeev Arora](#), October 2007 (some updates from Aug'08)

<https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~arora/feldenkrais.html>

We are all aware that some people's bodies are better organized than ours. I am not just talking about the Roger Federers of the world, but also about that friend of yours from college who seems to pick up new sports effortlessly, and glides through his or her day without any sign of trouble or effort. The rest of us have bodies that seem compromised in various ways. Some have a stooped posture, others walk with a curious shuffling gate, yet others are flat-footed and must wear arch supports or orthotics in their shoes (as I did for 10 years). We see this diversity and tend to think: "This just the way the body/skeleton happens to be."

It has therefore been a source of great surprise to me that most such aspects of the body can be brought under our control and changed using something called the Feldenkrais method. I was led to this method while seeking a solution to a [RSI/typing related injury that wouldn't go away](#). However, in retrospect I realize that in addition to curing my RSI it gave me a much better sense of my body and a much better posture and alignment. Every aspect of my life ---swimming, walking, sleeping, picking up new sports, etc.---became easier and lighter. It let me do things like rollerblading that I was convinced I could never do.

What is the Feldenkrais method?

Here is an [introduction on youtube](#), and a [description on a website](#).

The [Feldenkrais method](#), invention of Israeli physicist Moshe Feldenkrais, is a way of retraining the body. There are two modes of this retraining. The first is group classes called Awareness Through Movement or ATMs, which are reminiscent of yoga or tai chi classes, but very different. (For instance, the instructor makes no movements; he/she sits around and talks while you do the movements!) The second mode ---more capable of causing dramatic improvements--- is one-on-one sessions (called *Functional Integration* or FI) with a trained practitioner, which can cost about \$100 per hour in the US. In such a session you lie fully clothed on a low table and the practitioner gently moves or presses your body in different directions to make you aware of (a) subconscious tension and holding patterns that make your movement less efficient (b) efficient ways of coordinating your body.

FI is the trump card of the Feldenkrais method, which I think makes it superior to yoga, tai-chi, pilates etc. Good practitioners of Feldenkrais have tremendous insight into movement problems, and more importantly, they have ways of getting the "fix" into your subconscious brain (after all, did it ever help anybody to be told "Don't slouch! Sit up straighter!").

A feature of this method is the emphasis on doing movements extremely slowly and gently, which is essential for breaking out of habitual movement patterns and learning new ones. This emphasis on slow movement also makes it ideal for older people or those who are in chronic pain.

Feldenkrais is not an exercise routine, though Feldenkrais principles can be incorporated into exercise routines (including yoga/pilates/weight training/sports). However, exposure to Feldenkrais will lead you to question most received wisdom about traditional exercise routines and strength building. After learning more efficient ways of using the muscles you already have, you may decide that you are already strong enough.

OK, but what are the basic principles of this method?

Moshe based his method on scientific principles and written about them (see recommendations below). This scientific approach appeals to me (as opposed to vague notions of "energy blockage" etc. from Eastern systems). His many inspirations included martial arts (he was one of the earliest Judo black belts in the west), child development, biomechanics, the Alexander technique, brain research, psychology, and Eastern systems such as acupuncture and yoga. His approach is somatic, which means that it sees the mind and body as one whole.

But knowing the principles is not required to benefit from the method. All that is required is to do slow, careful movement, while paying close attention to things pointed out by your teacher. The end goal is better organization of the body, so that it learns to "hang" its weight on the skeleton (specifically, using the extensor muscles, which are the antigravity muscles evolved by nature; these do not tire easily and their work is not registered by the conscious brain), and to reserve flexor muscles for voluntary movement. (This, by the way, is also a principle behind most martial arts, though it is not often described this way.)

If you walk into an ATM class, the sight of people lying on the floor and doing movements might remind you of babies. This is by design. Lying on the ground neutralizes our familiar responses to gravity (e.g., slouching), and makes us explore movement like an infant. In fact, a well-developed child is often a natural at Feldenkrais---I know because I have tested my 5-year old!



(I think the photo is [from Feldenkrais Institute of NY.](#))

The method discourages mindless repetition ("exercise" a la Jane Fonda) or any kind of macho attitude. Movement lessons are meant to be done with a spirit of exploration ---so no two repetitions should feel the same---and with great gentleness towards your body. (Feldenkrais commented that the old and the frail are his best students, the fastest learners.)

Most Feldenkrais teachers discourage questions along the line of "what is the best way to stand/sit/walk/breathe/ do movement x?" Their goal is to make your brain realize that it has many choices for each movement, and to let your subconscious brain pick the best choice for each situation.

Moshe Feldenkrais felt that his method is a general method of learning, and would have applications to many other things besides retraining the body. Some practitioners are using Feldenkrais principles in other disciplines such as music instruction, which sounds intriguing.

Does Feldenkrais lead to relaxation/better posture/solution to problem X?

Quite likely, but these are side effects rather than a primary goal. Feldenkrais's chief insight concerns efficient movement. Inefficient movement is essentially bad coordination among muscles, resulting in internal stress and muscular spasms. Following his methods does result in relaxation. (Thus Feldenkrais is a good alternative to massage in that sense.) It improves posture which is also a manifestation of inefficient muscular organization involving muscles that hold up the skeleton.

Feldenkrais techniques can solve problems that arise from inefficient body organization. By teaching you to pay more attention to your body it can also give you the confidence to solve your own problems. For instance, I used to wear orthotics (custom arch support) that a podiatrist had prescribed for me 10 years ago in response to persistent foot problems. After experience with Feldenkrais I suddenly realized one day that the orthotic was very bad for me (and, I venture to suggest, for most people, since it is based on the fallacy that "if your foot hurts, the problem must lie in the foot"). I threw it away even though it was prescribed by a doctor, cost \$300, and had "solved" my foot pain. I guess I had become more confident and aware of my body. Indeed I have not had any foot trouble in the year since then (though I had to retrain my foot and knees a bit using Feldenkrais principles).

People report all kinds of unexpected payoffs from doing Feldenkrais like a better tennis backhand, or better musical performance.

Feldenkrais also changes your understanding of pain. It makes you see the direct connection between inefficient body organization and many kinds of pain, and furthermore, how to stop such pain within minutes by new movement choices.

My own experiences and suggestions based upon them

I turned to Feldenkrais because a friend I respected a lot suggested it as a solution to my hand and arm pain (RSI). I went to ATM classes and took FI lessons from a local teacher in Princeton NJ. Though these whetted my curiosity, they did not solve my RSI problems.

I found an excellent teacher, [Angel DiBenedetto](#), during a 5-month stay in Seattle. She learned from Moshe Feldenkrais, and is herself a trainer of other Feldenkrais teachers. Eight lessons from her (over a 3-month period) completely changed my view of my body. My hand was much better but still not 100%. Also, I sensed the tremendous potential of this method and wanted to go further. So I took 8-9 Feldenkrais lessons with another amazing teacher, [Anat Krivine](#), during a subsequent 4-month stay in Israel. Anat is also a trainer of Feldenkrais teachers. It was very useful for me to learn from multiple teachers, since no two teachers have the same perspective. One important thing that Anat finally made me realize and give up was my tendency to ask for "the best way to do X" which I think was limiting my learning. Furthermore, unknown to me, she had a special interest in scoliosis (sideways curve of the spine) which turned out to be relevant to my problems. By the end, my hand problems were completely gone and my scoliosis (which the medical profession thinks of as a skeletal problem, with no cure) much reduced. (See the links below for an explanation of scoliosis and the Feldenkrais approach to it.)

So what can you expect when you get Feldenkrais lessons from a good teacher? The immediate sensation is one of calm that you have never known. You may realize that you have lived in a background of muscular tension that you had never noticed until it went away. (Kind of like the change in background noise level you might notice if you moved from Manhattan to Montana.) This can be a powerful, even emotional experience. It is a good idea to savor this calm right after the lesson, and to take a nap. You may feel great, but avoid the temptation to go out and do something strenuous. (Skip your usual exercise routine for a day or two.) The calm may dissipate over the next few hours and days, but in future sessions it will last longer and longer, until it becomes part of your everyday state.

The FI's implant new ideas into your body, and over the next few days and weeks it will slowly imbibe them and change. Do not be surprised if you find yourself doing things differently.

Another thought that might occur to you is that much of what you have known about pain is wrong. You will learn that often pain is caused by faulty movement patterns, not any kind of damage to the body. Thus pain can be produced and taken away at will, using simple change in movements. This knowledge is extremely empowering for people who have suffered from chronic pain.

(Update Aug 2008): During the year since I first wrote my page, I have continued to do ATMs every week, and felt continuous and noticeable improvement. However, I also slowly became more and more aware of the asymmetries still left over from my scoliosis. These were interfering with my enjoyment of activities I had newly started ([Capoeira](#), rollerskating, and running). In Summer 2008 I got a few lessons from another excellent teacher, Reuven (Robbie) Ofir, in Manhattan. (I heard of him from a friend.) Robbie is also a Feldenkrais trainer and a former head of physical therapy at a leading NYC hospital. Robbie helped me work out some deep asymmetries and tensions in my body. Robbie also taught me do ATMs at an even slower and gentler pace that I used to, which has taken my learning to a higher level. I feel truly great now. But

Robbie has helped me appreciate that there is no end to the process of improvement with the Feldenkrais method. (Encouraged by this, I also took my aged parents to Robbie for a few lessons, which helped them a lot. They are from India and Feldenkrais is unlike anything they have experienced.) I plan to get an occasional FI or two in future years to continue this learning. In particular I plan to explore the use of the method in voice and music.

Some Suggestions

I suggest going to the best Feldenkrais teacher you have access to, even if it entails a long drive. One lesson from a great teacher can be better than several lessons from a so-so teacher. (You can find teachers in your geographic region from www.feldenkrais.com. The number in the parenthesis after the name indicates their "graduation year" from training, which gives some idea of how experienced they are. A teacher who trains other Feldenkrais practitioners should be a good bet; usually you can find out from the teacher's website if he/she is a trainer.) If possible, try to get lessons from more than one teacher.

ATMs can be a tremendous learning resource to supplement FI lessons. In retrospect, I realize that the best lessons my teachers gave me was on how to do ATMs. ("Give a man a fish and he can feed himself that day. Teach a man how to fish, and he can feed himself for the rest of his life.") Another eye opener was this [amazing video of 60-year old Ruthy Alon](#) quickly going through various standard ATMs. (Note that when first learning the movement you do it infinitely slower than Ruthy does in this video.)

Various teachers have recorded excellent ATM lessons on tapes and CDs (see recommendations below). But attending a live ATM with a good teacher can teach you (a) the right speed and attitude for doing ATMs (b) learn variations that may be suitable for you (c) encourage you to experiment and lose the attitude of trying to find the "best" way to do the lesson.

As for FI, do not make the mistake of treating it like a massage or relaxation session. The right attitude is one of curiosity and play. (However, some teachers discourage extensive talking during the session since they think that this kind of learning needs to be physical and nonverbal).

Finally, I strongly feel that one can only go so far with receiving FIs passively. Instead one should have an exploratory attitude towards the body at all times, and should invent/explore new movements. After all, infants do not wait for adults to teach them how to move. They continuously explore movement and try all sorts of variations until a new person emerges.

Suggestions for advanced learners

Many people only take a few FIs, until their immediate problem is resolved. This is fine. If you choose to go further, I suggest learning some of the basic theoretical concepts of the method. Here are some.

"Fechner weber principle." It says that the smallest difference in stimuli we can discern is proportional to the magnitude of the larger stimulus. (See [explanation here](#).) This is the reason why slow gentle movements are emphasized in the Feldenkrais method. When you are doing movements with very little effort, your brain is able to easily register differences between various movement options and to pick the one that is most efficient.

"Reversibility." Almost every voluntary muscle in our body has an opposing muscle which produces the opposite action. Reversible movement occurs when opposing muscles work harmoniously; such movement feels light and can be reversed at any point.

"Proximal versus distal." Proximal means close to the center of the body (ie., pelvis) and distal means further from the center of the body. Thus the elbow is more proximal than the hand, but more distal than the shoulder. The shoulder is in turn more distal than the lower back, etc. Often the same movement can be produced using different mixes of proximal and distal muscles, and efficient movement is that which derives most of its power from proximal parts. Of course, one can't possibly sit and analyze every movement in these terms all day, but it is good to know these concepts when exploring new movement patterns. This knowledge can also be the basis of powerful pain relief: substituting the work of a muscle using more proximal muscle, even for a minute, can sometimes get rid (even forever) of pain that you thought was chronic.

"Stretching is usually counterproductive." Stretching has for years been a part of physical culture despite little scientific evidence in its favor. Of course, stretching an aching muscle feels good temporarily. But the stretched muscle will then snap

back and start aching again (sometimes even worse than before). A basic principle in Feldenkrais is to go **with** the movement of an aching, tight muscle rather than **against** it (i.e., let it contract even more, either by external force or by a more proximal movement) and then it will suddenly release. This is the basis of the magical release from muscular tension that your teacher can give you in an FI. If you observe carefully what they are doing, after some lessons you can do the same tricks on yourself. You can also read Rywerant's book mentioned later. (However, I don't recommend practicing on others, especially if they have any kind of chronic problems.) It is also the basis of why your movement becomes light and easy during an ATM lesson. This avoidance of stretching is one way in which Feldenkrais is the opposite of yoga (and safer for most people, in my opinion).

"Learning new movement patterns." This is the truly magical part of an FI. If your body is missing a basic movement pattern, it cannot pick it up on its own (even by observing others). Many manipulations in an FI session are meant to introduce new patterns. Watch out for them! Some of them can produce deep change.

"You have to lose it many times before it is finally yours." This was a mantra of my teacher Anat. Many times your body learns something new in an FI session and you discover some new talent; eg a very light and easy way to walk or stand or sit. Savor it while you can. Do not be discouraged (or demand your money back!) when you lose it. You will lose it and regain it a few times before the body/brain feels safe to replace the old movement pattern with the new.

Recommended books and tapes/CDs

The best introduction is a few FIs from a good teacher and a few ATMs. Some additional resources appear below.

Useful websites: [Feldenkrais Guild](#), [Feldenkrais Resources](#), [Achieving Excellence](#), and [Feldenkrais Institute](#).

Some good recorded lessons available from the above sources. I emphasize that recorded ATMs are a means of "self-study" in this work, and should be complemented with at least a few FIs. Feldenkrais is too counterintuitive to pick up by "self-study" alone. (i) CDs of Moshe's 1977 San Francisco workshop. The sound quality is a bit iffy though acceptable, and Moshe displays crankiness (Israeli directness?) at times, which can be entertaining or annoying. Sometimes his instructions are unclear. Sometimes these ATMs can be physically or at least conceptually challenging. So these are best attempted only after several FIs from a good teacher. (ii) Alan Questel's recordings are clearer, and his style a bit touchy-feely in a good way. His ATMs are fun and often less physically challenging than Moshe's. (This is not a put-down; remember that macho attitudes have to be checked at the door.) (iii) Frank Wildman's lessons are extremely clear and precise, though I did not find the end result as inspiring as Moshe or Questel. (iv) I recommend Elizabeth Beringer for beginners; she has a direct but user-friendly style. (v) (Added Aug 2008:) I now also recommend the Open ATM project (linked below); it is good and it is free.

Good books: Most popular books I have found do not do justice to the method because they seem to be trying to turn it mainstream like yoga or pilates. ([Frank Wildman's book](#) seems best in this popular genre.) My entire interest in the method derives from the fact that it was invented by a scientist and has some scientific principles that make sense to me. Moshe's ["Awareness through Movement"](#) (especially the 15-20 pages leading up to the description of the movement lessons) is perhaps the most succinct introduction to the basic principles. Moshe wrote several other books which are chockful of insight but at times he seems to be in need of a good editor. With that caveat I recommend them, as well as the [the book by his disciple Ruthy Alon](#). For more advanced material, read [Yochanan Rywerant's book, which is quite clearly written](#). You may be able to find many of them at a good library (as I did).

Other links:

- [Explanation of scoliosis](#) and renowned Feldenkrais teacher [Anat Baniel's approach to it](#).
- [Kinesophics](#), a website and blog by a Feldenkrais teacher. Features recorded ATMs and blog entries about them.
- [Collection of articles](#) on the method.
- (Added Aug 2008) [The Open ATM project](#). A great website by two teachers who have recorded some of Moshe's classic lessons (hitherto available only to teachers) and made them freely available. I like their exposition, and have especially benefitted from Tracy Godek's lessons. Her exposition is new-agey and eclectic but in a good way. She has clearly put much thought into her lessons and included information that was missing in Moshe's CDs. I suggest doing her lessons in sequence since they have a certain internal logic. I hope more Feldenkrais teachers will follow the fine example set by Tracy and Sharon, or contribute to their Open ATM project.

- To get some idea of the ease with which ATMs can be done, check out these videos of Ruthy Alon. [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#). The new-agey exposition is, in my experience, somewhat atypical of Feldenkrais practitioners.