

Feldenkrais master teacher David Zemach-Bersin with a student



Intelligent Body

Practicing the Feldenkrais Method

Ibelieve that all performers are interested in having the most intelligent bodies they can, which to me means being able to get your body to do exactly what you want it to, when you want it. And it is the Feldenkrais Method that provides the organization that's needed to develop an intelligent body," says David Zemach-Bersin, a Feldenkrais master teacher and co-director of the Feldenkrais Institute of New York. "Improving your organization—the foundation from which all your body movement emerges—will allow you to use your body more effectively, to do what you want to do with less effort. And the issue of effort is universal to every kind of artist. For actors, dancers, musicians, to be able to reduce the effort in their action means that they will be able to express themselves with greater clarity and effectiveness."

According to Zemach-Bersin, studying the Feldenkrais Method will also improve a performer's flexibility, core strength, posture, coordination, and ability to recover from and prevent injuries. It is a way of rewiring the brain and freeing the body from old, inefficient movement habits. One of the original American students of Moshé Feldenkrais, the method's inventor, Zemach-Bersin operates a private Feldenkrais practice in Manhattan and Bucks County, Pa., and is one of only 30 or so people in the world certified to train Feldenkrais instructors. He operates teacher training programs in Baltimore and in Berkeley, Calif., and in August he will start a new training program for Feldenkrais practitioners in New York.

"What initially attracted me to the method is the fact that it works immediately," Zemach-Bersin says. "It's not something where you have to put in months or even weeks of time in order to see results. And the results are so predictable and so quick that every student feels them even after just one class. They feel as though they're moving more easily and that they have an improved level of flexibility. They feel as though the effort in all of their movements has been reduced. Singers feel a greater ability to produce the quality of sound they want. Instrumentalists feel that by using less effort in their hands or shoulders, they can get greater nuance in their playing. And actors, well, the results for them are enormous. If you consider that for an actor, the task is to express his intention as clearly as possible, then the more unconscious, parasitic, tangential, or contradicting movements and efforts that can be eliminated, the better. Dr. Feldenkrais himself worked a great deal

with actors. Peter Brook, the director, often invited Dr. Feldenkrais to work with his company in Paris. And the state theatre of Israel, which is called Habima, had Dr. Feldenkrais teaching weekly classes there for over a decade."

Feldenkrais, who died in 1984, was originally an engineer and physicist and worked for many years at the Curie Institute in Paris, contributing to the research of Nobel Prize winner Frédéric Joliot-Curie. Fleeing the Nazis during World War II, Feldenkrais was fortunate to get on what turned out to be the last boat of escapees leaving France for England. While in England, and by then in his 40s, he found himself unable to walk as a result of a car accident and chronic injuries dating from his youth as a soccer player and judo practitioner.

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It was through a method of self-investigation that Feldenkrais tried to solve his leg problems and figure out how he could walk again. He had gained a lot of knowledge about the body during his days as an athlete and from his wife, who was a physician. Explains Zemach-Bersin, "He came to the understanding that there is a profound relationship between how we move and acculturation, or how we have been reared as children—in other words, our psychological and emotional habit patterns." While Feldenkrais' work is undeniably original, his discoveries about the fundamental relationship between body movement and the psyche came at a time when Freud's theories were very much in vogue. "At that time in Europe, every intellectual had to figure out where they stood in relationship to Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis," Zemach-Bersin notes. "So the questions Feldenkrais was exploring, those of mind-body relationships, were definitely in the air."

Two Main Components

The Feldenkrais Method contains two components. The first, "awareness through movement," consists of thousands of highly structured exercises, which the method terms "lessons," that are typically taught in a group setting. The second, "functional integration," involves

a trained practitioner helping to move a student or client with a hands-on approach.

The "awareness through movement" lessons include a multitude of exercises specifically tailored to the problems of dancers, musicians, singers, athletes, and other professionals who work with their bodies in specialized ways. For example, the Feldenkrais Institute of New York offers classes designed for singers, in which the focus is on issues involving the mouth and jaw and on breathing and voice production. There are also classes for people with particular ailments, such as back problems or shoulder or neck pain. Next January the institute will offer a weeklong symposium on applications of the Feldenkrais Method for dancers.

"The Feldenkrais lessons address nearly every movement function or difficulty you can think of," Zemach-Bersin says. "Yet they're all designed around the same basic principle: to provide information to the brain, or to the nervous system, that is essential for learning how to move more easily. All of the exercises are structured in such a way as to access more-organic ways of moving. If you can hold that evolution has taken place, then our brains have a long history of evolving through movement. Movement is the way that we've learned to survive as a species over time. Therefore, movement has an organic basis that is not a set of rules created by culture. Of course, for the dancer this is a big issue, because each school of dance has its own certain rules about how to move. But the Feldenkrais lessons have an ability to communicate with the brain in an almost instantaneous way by accessing the organic ways of moving that have proved reliable over our evolutionary history. So the lessons are considered not so much exercises, but a context for providing the information necessary for the brain to learn how to move more easily."

Feldenkrais work is very self-referential. Even though you may do it in a class setting, you don't look at yourself in a mirror or at what others are doing; you don't necessarily even look at what the teacher is doing. "I think that as a physicist, Feldenkrais was very concerned with the idea of variability," Zemach-Bersin says, "and that fixed habits, even if they're good habits, are still a form of rigidity, a lack of freedom. One of the great benefits of the Feldenkrais Method is improved flexibility, not only physically but also in terms of increasing one's options for how one can move, act, or perform. And one could say that such variability is essential for health."

Currently, there are approximately 2,000 Feldenkrais practitioners working in North America and about 6,000 worldwide, Zemach-Bersin says: "Historically, Europe has been much more enthusiastic about the Feldenkrais work than we have been over here. It's much more integrated there—into physical therapy programs, into university performing-arts programs—and in most European countries the healthcare system pays for people to take Feldenkrais classes or to work with a Feldenkrais practitioner. But in the last few years, the interest here has been increasing enormously, particularly in the performing arts community."

To find out about Feldenkrais classes, workshops, and training programs in your area, or to get a free catalog of books and other resources, call (800) 765-1907 or (212) 727-1014 or visit www.feldenkraisinstitute.com.