

Awareness

Interview with Myriam Pfeffer and Ilana Nevill

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*Myriam, could you say something about Moshe's definition of **awareness** and how he actually "taught it" when you were his student ?*

There's a recorded conversation with Prof. Aharon Katzir where Moshe said: "Awareness is that part of the thinking mechanism which listens to the self while acting." The following was stated as a tentative definition of awareness: "Awareness is knowledge of what is going on while it is happening and of what you are doing while you are doing it. It is a generalized alertness to present events."

Moshe never actually "taught" us straight awareness. What Moshe did, through his lessons, was to allow us to develop for ourselves the tools for awareness and for learning how to learn.

Moshe's leitmotiv was "If you know what you are doing you can do what you want." I don't know if I can do everything that I want, but at any rate without awareness the automatic performance cannot be changed. When asked whether it was better to do wrong knowingly or unknowingly, Socrates shocked his listeners by replying that it was better to do it knowingly. If you know that it was wrong, he explained, you can change. Otherwise you cannot.

In the Hebrew sense, as Adam *knew* Eve, knowing or awareness refers to a relationship. This was very much the case in Moshe's work. Awareness meant relating, a dynamic relationship with our senses, and emotions, and our surroundings.

This knowing happens without mediation, without distraction, in a non-verbal way. One senses oneself absolutely in action, one is in complete relationship with oneself. Simultaneously, we are in resonance with our fellows and with the entire environment. There are no escapes and no doubts. There is no good and bad; there are no faults. The act of awareness is a success in itself. The unity of man, a "unity that embraces all that surrounds him", is recreated.

So how do you do this ?

Moshe guided us in his lessons to sense subtle differences through our kinesthetic sense, as a young child does. Perception of what is happening within and around us develops the quality of our attention, listening, discernment, imagining, etc... It is the way in which we can reach true cognition.

The way the lesson unfolds invites us to be constantly awake, vigilant to what we are doing, to what we are living. That was one of the ways in which he invited us to develop and deepen our awareness.

In the beginning, when I first came to Moshe, I didn't understand the sense of the lessons, and I worked too hard. It took me time to grasp things ... He made a symphony with one, two, or three movements ... like Mozart with three notes.

What helped me to understand were the lectures by Krishnamurti. It was not the same, but it was a way of thinking very close to Moshe's. I believe that through Moshe I understood Krishnamurti better, and through Krishnamurti I understood Moshe better.

Moshe understood the obstacles and barriers are in the way of sensing. We live among people who are "sensory-motor amnesic"; they have lost touch with their own selves. He knew how to create the attitude and the conditions for restoring the receptivity for sensing (which will also improve all the other senses).

So would you say the essence of the Method is a particular way of thinking ?

No, I wouldn't say that. It's the attitude, it's the thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting within the environment – all together as one unity. Aristotle defined the soul through its functions. He characterized life through the sensory centre and through movement. In this perspective, transposed to our domain, change and healing are nothing but becoming more alive, reviving the self. It's about sensing the dams that retain life, the sluices that allow life to flow.

By reactivating the movement, induced by sensing, the practitioner and the student simulate other forms of life, letting go old patterns by finding new ones. We reinvent life from the multitude of possibilities by exploration as a baby does.

When the Method is taught in the way Moshe thought, and probably most Feldenkrais practitioners think, the learning process involves the whole human being, and the environment. That requires the necessary time for maturation – first to reduce effort, to practice slowness, to listen, to be delicate. Once we do less we can be receptive and sense; our attention can be free. It is important to differentiate between awareness, attention and concentration.

When I was teaching Yoga I could do the postures well, and I was showing them to the students, and telling them what to do. Yet, I sensed that there was something missing; I wouldn't say that Yoga didn't help me in some ways—through Yoga, after all, I came to Moshe; but in the beginning it also created some difficulties. When I began introducing Feldenkrais into my Yoga lessons the students would tell me: "Tell us what to do and stop asking questions!" Later on I understood that telling people what to do disconnects them from their own process. Once a person knows what he has to do, he gets closed.

During ten years taking Alexander Yanai ATM Lessons, I brought my Yoga students closer and closer to the Feldenkrais Method. Some people left me, but some people stayed; new people came and also got slowly into this way of thinking, onto this path. They understood that they can learn only from themselves.

A lot of people came to Alexander Yanai lessons because they had problems. They knew it was important for them, and after the lesson they felt better and came back regularly. Some people probably got it, and some less. Not everybody grasped the spirit of the lesson.

Friday classes were for professionals, for dance teachers, teachers of all kinds of movement, therapists, and so on. These were more challenging for Moshe because the students could understand more of what he meant—and these are the lessons Moshe recorded.

I went to all the classes, three times a week, because I was fascinated. I could see how important and meaningful this way of “teaching” is for the human brain. Today, biologists have shown that the brain is activated in the same way by imagination as it is by the motion itself. This is what Moshe achieved. He would turn F.I. lessons into A.T.M. sessions. He wanted to bring it to all humanity.

Did you notice a difference between the way Moshe taught the general public, people with backaches and so on, and how he taught professionals ?

There was no difference. Later, the lessons taped for the professionals were given to everybody. Every lesson carried the germ of the thought, and that was what made an impact.

On the basis of your experience how did you define – at that time and for those people – what one is really looking for in awareness ?

First, it is essential to reduce effort. This is the first thing, because—whether you want to or not—when you do something with unnecessary effort you cannot sense. That is the Weber-Fechner Law.

It took me some time to understand that the less you do, the more you are attentive and listen, the more you sense and the clearer the representation is of what you are doing. You are thus able to “simulate” and anticipate the movement. Once you can imagine the movement, you can do it. That’s like shining a light through yourself. Where are the impediments of transmission of strength ? Is the vivifying sap going through, or does it stop somewhere ? Things often come slowly. I don’t think such insight comes suddenly. Whether someone gets it more or less quickly depends on that person’s level of maturation. This cannot be achieved by will power, the more you want the less it happens. It’s an emergent capacity. It came to me gradually—I learnt the most when I began to “teach” ATM and FI.

So what does a person ideally need to “get it” ?

The closer you get, the further is the horizon. It isn’t easy ... It really demands that you call everything into question. That is the difficulty. It has to be a free experience, without dogmatism, without presuppositions, free of attachments, free of imprisonment in certain biases etc. It needs a full shift in the way of thinking, sensing, feeling, acting, and therefore a general change of attitude and values. It is a real metamorphose.

Once Larry told us that Richard Bandler (one of the founders of N.L.P.) asked Moshe what he is doing, and Moshe answered, “I help people to feel, sense what they would sense if they could do what they can’t.”

.... which demands considerable maturity ...

Absolutely. Most of us are conditioned and full of fixed beliefs and presuppositions. You understand ... Someone who knows already can't go beyond his known horizon. To go further we need to go towards the unknown ... What counts is experiencing with the experience taking you where it leads instead of you directing it towards some prearranged goal. That's it more than anything else ! It takes me somewhere, but not because I want to heal my back or stop being depressed or something like that.

How do you see what is required for a person with whom you are working ?

A flower wants to be a flower, you see ? And we ? Most of the time we remain in buds. There are so many parts of us that are not fully alive, so many parts that do not flow in relation to other parts. We are not open ... and suffering is precisely that. We have been given everything. We have enormous possibilities ... but somewhere we are imprisoned, we get stuck in all kinds of ways. We repeat the same mistakes, the same problems, over and over again; we make the same gestures, express the same emotions, and meet the same frustrations. It is as if we were airplanes without a pilot.

Moshe said : "I have only one principle and that is not to have any principles". I have found a principle for myself. Not knowing beforehand is my principle, especially when I give a F.I. lesson, but even in everyday life. We must be available for whatever arises. That is the direction in which to go. Man is made to innovate, to go out from fixed repetitions. It's innovate or die, you understand—it is to be creative, which is what life is all about. We have no other choice.

If everything is already known to me, and I keep returning to the same patterns, then there is no adaptability, creativity, and evolution.

That takes us to the question : What is the environment we have to create, what are the conditions for really helping people become aware, understand ?

There are many methods, many paths that can be helpful. Moshe thought that the best way was through the methods he devised: Awareness Through Movement (ATM) and FI. There are practitioners who make an amalgam of all kind of methods, but it is important to deepen one method and not to dissipate oneself. Is it better to dig down 10 metres in one place to find a source of water than to dig one metre in 10 different places? But sometimes one has to first dig in ten different places in order to find the place where to deep profoundly.

How did Moshe create the appropriate learning conditions – especially when you began studying FI work with him ?

He was never judgemental. We worked with partners—mine was Yochanan, but he would also touch us, and we reciprocated. I can still feel his touch, his hands, full of presence, attentiveness and care. He always said: "Ok, very good", "good", and so

on. He never said that you don't know, or similar negative statements. While teaching FI, he was never in a hurry or stressed. He was very patient, very patient. I remember how a student asked what he thinks about when he gives a functional integration lesson, and Moshe answered that he thinking about the mathematical equation of the ideal function he works with. Another time he spoke about low grade energy and high grade energy, and I had no idea what he was talking about. I asked him once more and he answered me very patiently. The next day I went to his house and again asked the same question: "What does it mean?" Very patiently, he explained everything once more in a different way. What's important is that he didn't give you the feeling you were an idiot if you didn't know... He understood that the information needed to germinate in my head, so he was very patient and very kind with me....

Nevertheless, he was seldom content with what people did to or for him. Usually it was not done in a way he would appreciate ... It was difficult to satisfy him because he was on another level. His sensing, his perception was very clear. Sometimes I thought that the person to whom he gave FI lessons was transparent to him. He was extraordinarily precise in what he was doing.

Did Moshe sometimes actually talk about awareness to get people to understand what he really meant?

He gave lectures about it at the university of Tel-Aviv and often to us too. He explained all kinds of things that were not so easy to explain. He had to understand people 'where they were'. We were 13 students in the training (later called "the Israelis"), but we had very different backgrounds, histories, and ages, so it was not easy.

We need to have consideration for the other person, to go together with that person, to walk, live, breath together, so that each respects the other's rhythm. That is very important in our work.

Yesterday I saw a woman in the street. She was going very quickly pushing a pram, and with the other hand she was dragging a child. The child cried and the woman dragged, and I thought: 'Even a mother goes at her own rhythm, and not the rhythm of her child...'

We need to allow students to be comfortable with their own rhythm of learning. That is a necessity in our work and in every relationship—not to weigh on the other, and especially in the family. Prof. Barthes called that "delicacy".

When and how did you begin to notice this delicacy in yourself? Do you remember noticing that suddenly something was different so you knew you were really learning what you had come to learn?

I wouldn't say it's sudden, but rather that this 'suddenly or spontaneously' happens after a long time. Suddenly, you know that you know—that you have understood something, that something has emerged, that you sense differently, think differently, walk differently, touch differently... It's like a baby who suddenly stands up and begins to walk.

Suddenly you know it, but there is a long preparation for this “suddenly”. Suddenly there is a new leaf, a flower opened in the garden. It took some time for the seed to get there.

The philosopher Koyré wrote about the organisational theory :

“One can say that the germ is what it is not. It is already what it will become but is not yet. It is because otherwise it would not become. It is not for otherwise how could he began what it will?”

“The germ is at once the matter that evolves and the force that makes it evolve. The germ acts upon itself. It is a “*causa sui*”; if not that of its actual being, at least that of its development.”

The potential is within us, waiting for fulfilment. We are the sculptor and the sculpture. Till the death we are our own future. This might be our freedom.

Can you give an example?

Once you are on the path, something is emerging and growing every day in your brain, like yeast; and as you go along you realize something real is being uncovered: the light emerges from the darkness. This is the greatest joy. Often it happens after one has some problem. I learned a lot when I broke the neck of my femur. I understood more deeply the difference between *having* and *being* – in other words, I saw I could think from the perspective of the femur neck, the femur head, and the acetabulum, placing it in relation with the other parts of the body.

This was a message for me, a very important message, and I learned a lot. I was lying for three weeks [in a hospital bed rigged up in the sitting room]. I was astonished that I had the courage not to have an operation even though everybody told me I was crazy. Mara and Patrice were against it too, like most of the doctors who looks at the x-rays. But there was one doctor who said it was possible, and that was enough for me.

Where did you get the courage from? Did you ‘know’, have the intuition, that it would be alright, or did you say “I’m just going to risk it”?

The risk would have been too great. I thought it would be possible since the bone was not completely in two parts. I knew it was still connected. When I arrived at the clinic the doctor was ready to operate immediately, but I said “Let’s wait. We shall see...” and that even if I want to be operated, I would like to choose my doctor.

I wouldn’t advise anybody to do this without years of experience in the Feldenkrais Method -- and not having a clear representation of the hip joint and how it functions. While lying, I was “gluing”, simulating the movement and walking in my imagination. In an holistic way, with all the other parts.

What people don’t understand is that before they do something everything in themselves is already geared up for the action. You are already anticipating, you simulate the movements before starting to move. As I see it, a lesson is an imaginary journey towards ‘verticalisation’, towards rising up and getting taller, all connected

with the actual feeling of growing lighter. We are learning how to imagine dynamically which is the most important psycho-physiological function.

Today there are a lot of people who want to cure themselves by visualization and all kinds of things. We need to have a clear distinction between visualization and kinaesthetic imagination, which is dynamic. Also, you have to know how the parts function in relation to the whole in order to be able to imagine clearly. Then you can use imagined movements instead of unnecessary muscular effort.

We need to have a lot of strategies, and strategies develop through real learning. Here you learn from yourself; you don't learn from somebody else. You are your own master or guru. A movement learned by imitation or following instructions under critical supervision obstructs imagination. We are the violin and the violinist. Who would suspect that we are our own theatre?!

The strategy we use it to go into a particular detail of our functioning, and then to return to the whole of the person; then we work on another detail, and return once again to the whole. In this manner our self-image is completed; we are aware of the details, but we are a unified organism.

So would you say that one aspect of the learning environment we have to create as Feldenkrais teachers is to give people opportunities to discover for themselves that there are many different strategies for doing something and not just one way?

This is also a good question. Some teachers let students explore, explore, explore, and nothing happens... It is very important to give some clues for the exploration. You also have to propose some auxiliary movements, constraints, proximal, distal, the neutral where the potential energy is stored, the reversibility of the action, and so on. At the same time you develop the tools for sensing, discerning, graduating to have the right measure, and so on. Then the person can learn how to differentiate, how to find the "neutral".

The practitioner has to see what is clear for the person—knowing that he/she does not yet have the representation of the function. For instance, bending the leg while lying on the back. When I say "Explore how you bend the leg", some people are bending it straight. Then I say "Do it in different ways, as easily as possible ... Bring the knee outward, inside" etc. For them the easiest way often involves a lot of effort; some for instance lift the opposite hip a lot in order to compensate for lack of mobility in the hip joint and ankle etc... So they need more other lesson.

... drawing attention to a part that is not present in the person's awareness ?

That is not enough. If a part is not present, the practitioner has to offer ways of bringing it into the student's awareness in relation with other parts. You have to give another lesson. For instance about how to bend the ankle, because if the foot does not invert or overteer or the hip is not differentiated, how do you bring the heel up to the "appropriate" place? And then you come back to the knee, and also to the back, and the pelvis, and then you differentiate the leg from the head, or clarify different relationships, and the missing part will fall into place in the three dimensional puzzle.

And there is something important here: It's not to give stereotype lessons but to go with the group. It is crucial to sense the group field, to open a dynamic dialogue, to be aware of the students' needs.

We also have to realize that the students learn more from our way of being and acting than from our teaching. The practitioner's organization and clarity are essential for the student's learning. You cannot transmit what you don't live in everyday life. We are always beginners, every day we know more and more what we don't know. We discover that this part isn't integrated, that isn't clear, that there is no light in this place, and so on.

How do you see that in your students?

In the way they move, the way they speak, the way they look, how they shake hands, how they take off and place their shoes when they enter the room (this is specially relevant in our centre.) You can see if they are awake, attentive, what their intention is. There is a Zen saying: "Learn to see the emptiness in the cup." Often, there is too much noise in the brain for new ideas to be absorbed.

That's the importance of being open to the student's individual needs and being comfortable with not knowing.

That addresses a basic problem: people want certainty, people want security.

How can you transmit that to students?

Yesterday an assistant told me that one of his friends had a slipped disk. He even brought some x-rays: "What do you think? He doesn't want to have an operation, but the doctors say he needs one." So I told him "We don't take the responsibility. We are not doctors..." Personally, I would do anything not to have to undergo an operation... Even if the operation is successful, his basic functioning (he is a musician) will remain the same, so he may have other problems afterwards. But it's another way of thinking. We do not seek to alleviate disturbing symptoms by focusing on a specific area; we strive for personal growth, which includes the whole person, and which effectively transcends the problem.

While giving a FI lesson we create a secure environment, but we don't take responsibility. The decision whether to have an operation or not is up to the person concerned.

How can you get across to the students that they really have to live with the knowledge that they can't have or give security, that they have to live with not knowing and learn to be comfortable with that?

That's a difficult task.... Movement is always a process of reinventing. Life is never stable, and neither is the environment. In order to grow, you have to take some risks, to try and find security in insecurity. It is the same as the skill of balance. Paradoxically, most of the people who say they have no balance are too stable. They look for stability in contact with the ground, and their support-base gets stuck, rigid,

allowing them very little mobility. The foundation of stability is changing on the move, flexibility. You have to take risk in order to walk. The same is true in a mental sense: one must be flexible, mobile, dynamic.

During the four years of training, I try to help the students develop a feeling and a comprehension that everything flows – that in one second everything can be different; that there can be no definite security because there is an ongoing process which never stands still. Circumstance of life change every moment; you have to pedal the bicycle, otherwise you fall.

We are looking how the trajectory of the flow and we can see where it doesn't go through. The moment the flow stops somewhere, life stops, there is a problem. I call it "arrêt sur image". Then you are stuck and don't let anything new emerge. The Feldenkrais Method, as I understand it, brings neglected parts back to life. It points out possibilities of "unblocking". It offers ways of starting the process by new sensations and new feelings, by sensing different relationships, and by dynamic creative imagination (particularly through awareness of the skeleton with regard to verticality).

Does this sense of security have anything to do with the degree of presence in the moment, in the situation one is in?

Of course. There is no awareness without presence here and now. We are only aware when we are aware that we are aware. Knowing and being are the two faces of the same reality.

But one can also close oneself up in presence. It's "être et advenir" (being and becoming), it's an ongoing process... Once you walk, "le chemin" (the path) is important. You are walking, and sometimes there is a stone, or something else gets in the way, and you are not the same twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes the sun shines, and sometimes it rains, but if you keep walking, being in touch with yourself, things don't get so dramatic, and you know better how to cope with problems. We find the source of our joy.

Do you find that has an impact on your emotional life?

Very much, very, very much... Every thought and every emotion has its expression in tonus, in breathing, in volume, in our sense of being heavy or light. (I often say that we are 'weight watchers'!) Kinesthesia is the basis to emotions. Sensing these relationships, you master more of your emotional life. Awareness of the skeleton can lift us out of a past that may drag us down. Sensing the skeletal support, I mean really sensing it, gives access to another perception of oneself and the world and can change the character of the person, as the muscles are getting free for movement, they don't need to hold the skeleton and the emotions are inscribed in the muscles.

Would you say that relating the skeleton to gravity is the essence of security?

It is one of the most important parts because we are growing up in a gravitational field and a big part of the nervous system is occupied with this. Being allied with gravity instead of fighting it also allows an upward movement for spiritual life. Verticalisation is a profound necessity.

"Gravity is the root of all grace..."

Lao-Tzu

Do you think Moshe had something like that at the back of his mind.... Maybe you should say something about his Hassidic roots ...

His way of thinking is a Hassidic way of thinking. Some practitioners talk so much about the body, body, body. It's not awareness of the body, it's awareness through movement... And what isn't movement? Movement is life, in all its expressions.

So basically it's awareness of life?

If you want to put it that way, yes. Like his forefathers, Moshe was devoted not only to his students but to humanity as a whole. He once told me, over a meal, that he could have married and raised a family ... I asked him if he had regrets. "None whatsoever", he answered. "The world has plenty of children, but who will ensure their life and quality of life?" Moshe thought about the survival of our species and how to support that process. He had a humanitarian message like his great grandfather. His noble and sincere aim was to restore lost dignity to humanity.

And did Moshe's Hassidic background find outer expression in his teaching?

In all his work. If you look more profoundly, he was embedded in it as I said before. He was embedded in it, yet at the same time he was a scientific man and he wanted to make a convergence between theory and practice. That was his strength: putting abstract ideas into practice. That was his genius. He understood that experiencing is essential for us. You can have the best explanation about anything, say about music, but you will never be a musician. It's not to have an experience, but experiencing, which is important: to live it fully without looking for something, being in the neutral place where thought and movement are fully available.

How would you say that you personally, in your teaching, get people to this point where they start experiencing ?

You cannot get them there. I hope they will get there and I think people are coming to me because of that. How do I know? Because they come back, and they bring friends, and also come to do the training. Even if it is not easy for many reasons, they sense that this is very important for themselves, and for all humanity. And I can see that a lot of them are really flourishing and bearing fruit.

To sum up. How would you define awareness after all we have talked about?

I would define awareness as perceiving oneself and really knowing what one is doing, or knowing what is going on while it is happening. In other words, knowing what you are doing while you are doing it. I don't remember who said "The eye sees the eye".

We create conditions and facilitate the process of developing proprioceptive sensation in ourselves through movement (kinesthesia). The student, I would almost say, is constantly called on to be vigilant (if he follows the lesson), to be attentive to what he is sensing, to what he is living. This leads to more and more refined perception of the self and of the situation.

As I understand it, ATM is an organic learning and it is a mode of how we are built and applies to everyone and in all kinds of situations. We are getting more differentiated, differentiates also between awareness, attention and concentration, which is very important for the advancement.

The lesson is about creating conditions, to listen, to sense, to taste, to have the flavor, to feel that they have entered a process and can learn new ways of functional thinking and moving, have a lot of choices, and can feel graceful power in themselves. The conditions prepare the soil. Then the seed can flourish.

It is similar to the learning of a little child before he knows how to explain and label things, or do them as they "should" be done.... The child has no purpose, it is just playing and thus in tune with its inner and outer substantial nature.

The lessons prepare the path for ascend by having the student experiment new feelings, the feeling of light originating, a feeling of getting light.

He becomes aware of the power in within himself, the higher grade of energy which develops the inner transformation: getting HUMAN!

The Feldenkrais method amplifies the process of AWARENESS. A learning which makes growth and evolution possible. It can act as a kind of launching pad for a new life, for a new society.

(This conversation was mainly in English with some French episodes.

It was recorded, transcribed, and edited by Ilana Nevill, and then revised and expanded by Myriam).