



David instructing a class.

Seeing Clearly™

A *Feldenkrais Method* Exploration of Vision

By **David Webber, GCFP**

In 1996, with a successful career as a Network Systems Integrator, I was suddenly diagnosed with a severe case of uveitis (a disorder of the immune system causing inflammation within the eyes). No medical cause was determined. For the next six years, I was in pain and afflicted with complications including significant damage to my optic nerves, cataracts and glaucoma. I had five operations. My ophthalmologist told me that my condition would probably get worse and that I could expect to be on immune-suppressant drugs for the rest of my life. By 2002, I could barely count fingers in front of my face and my visual acuity was 20/200. I was declared legally blind.

I was desperate to find a way to save my eyes. As Western medical techniques were proving unsuccessful, I tried holistic ones I was familiar with, including the Bates Method of natural vision improvement. I'd been a longtime practitioner of meditation and tried ancient Buddhist yoga exercises for healing the eyes.

These techniques all required the complete and total relaxation of the muscles of the eyes. I was told that this would result in seeing dark blue/black when the eyes were closed and covered by the palms of the hands. However, to my great disappointment, my damaged optic nerves and visual system threw off a continuous stream of visual "noise" in the form of white/grey flashing lights in the center of my visual field. As I tried these various exercises, I grew even more anxious and frustrated. Eventually I gave them up.

During this period, I attended weekly *Awareness Through Movement*® (ATM) lessons at the *Feldenkrais*® Center in Toronto, Canada. Developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, these lessons improved my general sense of well being to such a great extent that I enrolled in a *Feldenkrais Training Program* in Toronto in 2000.

Two years later, in 2002, I discovered an early *Awareness Through Movement*

lesson by Dr. Feldenkrais that explored the essence of Dr. Bates's relaxation method for the eyes and three of the four Buddhist eye exercises I had learned. To my great surprise and delight, during the lesson, I suddenly experienced a release of unnecessary tonus in the muscles of my eyes. At that moment I knew, for certain, that I had found what I needed to heal my eyes. And so, I began to explore these three practices in concert.

The normalization of my immune system and the recovery of my ability to see were rapid and remarkable. Today, I no longer need medication and my corrected vision is 20/20. The impossible became possible.

Relaxing the Eyes

Vision is the primary sense through which we experience the world. Unfortunately, the quality and clarity of our vision can weaken and degrade over time. However, through easy and gentle movements as prescribed in the *Feldenkrais Method*, we can learn to recognize and eliminate many of the most common habits that interfere with easy, effortless vision. We can also learn new skills that transform the use of our eyes, helping us to see more clearly.

Because the movement of our eyes organizes the movements of our body, our vision impacts and interacts with every movement we make throughout our whole body, as well as how we feel and think. As our thoughts move busily here and there, our eyes respond and move busily here and there. When our neck and posture is tight and tense, our eyes will be tight and tense. When our breathing is held or frozen, our eyes will be held and fixed.

In every method of natural vision improvement practised throughout the ages, the essential point is to eliminate strain and muscular tension in the eyes. In guided *Awareness Through Movement* lessons, we start this process by observing our whole body at rest, bringing our attention to the different places where we touch the ground as we lie on our back. Supported by the stability of the ground, our central nervous system and whole body/mind relaxes without any strain or effort. It is then possible to observe the more subtle sensations of breathing. As our breathing slows and deepens, our awareness becomes very sensitive and our minds, easeful and quiet.

Slow, easy movements in these lessons allow us to develop our kinesthetic sense – our natural ability to detect and notice differences in our body's position, weight and the movements of our muscles, tendons and joints. As we refine our ability to differentiate these internal sensations, our brain effortlessly learns and improves. It spontaneously discards unnecessary muscular efforts, contractions and conflicts. The process is simple and we feel improvement in a simple way – as smoother, lighter, more pleasurable mobility.

The byproduct of a relaxed body, easy breathing and a quiet mind is that we

feel deeply supported, at peace, alert and clear-minded. Movements feel fluid. Without effort or exercise, our eyes, too, begin to relax, and long held tensions begin to dissolve. These are the ideal conditions for healing the eyes and improving the visual system.

The Feldenkrais Way to Better Vision

In the *Feldenkrais Method* we employ the same kind of organic learning that all of us used successfully as infants and toddlers when we began to move and reach and walk about. We learned how our skeleton and muscles could effortlessly support the lifting of our head and eyes for looking around. As we explored and discovered the world we learned to see and focus our eyes on colours and shapes and all the mysterious objects that surrounded us.

We used our kinesthetic sense to coordinate the movements of our eyes with our sense of touch. In particular, as we used our hands, our brain created meaning out of visual information. We learned to aim our two eyes at objects in space that needed or attracted our attention. You might say that, in a very real sense, we learned to see with our hands.

Movements of our body and vision are linked and interdependent. While we might not be conscious of the process, our nervous system spontaneously performs this integrating function all the time. To illustrate, please slowly move your hand somewhere in front of your face and look at your thumb. Then, move your thumb left and right while following your nail with your head and eyes. Soften your breathing and become aware of the apparent movement of the background in what seems to be the opposite direction to the movement of your thumb.

Your brain effortlessly integrates the movements of your hand and arm, two eyes, head and neck. It organizes information streaming in through your left and right eyes with memories, thoughts and feelings. It creates one coherent impression in colour with perspective, depth and meaning in a dynamic relationship with other objects around us in space. This vast and ceaseless activity engages every part of our self. It is effortless, interactive, virtually instantaneous and continuous in time and space.

In Seeing Clearly lessons we use the practical principles of *Awareness Through Movement* to relax the muscles of the eyes, improve circulation to the eyes, improve the range and quality of the movements of the eyes and refine our ability to coordinate and aim the two eyes. We harmoniously integrate these neuromuscular changes with our whole body and personality – integrating our eyes and our whole self with what we want to see and do in the world.

We transform ourselves, improve the health of our eyes and our ability to see clearly through our brain's plasticity – its inherent ability to learn, reorganize and continuously improve both internal structures and how we function. This can result in significant— and sometimes astonishing— changes and

improvements in how we see, feel, think and act in the world.

Three Visual Functions

In working with the visual system we investigate three interdependent functions that help the eyes optimize vision: muscular effort, movement and focus. We learn to lower the muscular tonus of the muscles that move the eyes, and feel what it is like to have relaxed eyes – one of the necessary ingredients for a quieter, more receptive nervous system. We also learn how to maintain fluid movement of the eyes in all directions, and to let go of the unnecessary effort that creates blind spots in the visual field, as well as effecting common movements such as turning, bending and walking. Finally, we learn to focus the eyes accurately and without strain, while seeing in all directions and both near and far.

Less is More

Whenever we act or exercise with unnecessary effort and force, our neuromuscular system organizes defensively to protect us from potential danger and damage. In this way, over the course of our lives, we build up conflicting patterns of anxiety and strain throughout our body/mind and the muscles of our eyes, patterns that become habitual and unconscious. Try as we might, we cannot release this strain by force of will. We know for ourselves that with habits we want to change, the more we try to resist or change the habit, the less effective we feel and the stronger the habit becomes. We don't know why, but somehow we feel tangled up in knots.

The secret to success is that we learn, through guided ATM lessons, that the less effort we exert, the greater the change and improvement. As we become more discriminating and sensitive to our internal sensations, we can feel the knots as tangible resistance to effortless movement. We can then knowingly, and with great precision, chose to release otherwise inaccessible strain and tension. We learn how to untangle the tangle.

Some of the movements in a lesson are familiar to us, while others may feel foreign or unusual. Non-habitual movement variations of our eyes and body are systematically introduced. These variations enable the brain to release unhelpful neuromuscular habits while relearning and creating efficient pathways for better action and seeing. After completing a lesson, we test our original movements and perceptions, often finding that our visual acuity and orientation in space have improved.

As we continue to practice and bring our eyes into our conscious range of sensation, we feel increasing vitality and pleasure throughout our body/mind. Eyestrain and discomfort, along with associated, possibly chronic, aches and pains in our neck and back, spontaneously dissolve. And as I discovered in my own healing journey, the results can be beyond expectation.

A Mini Lesson to Try

Eyestrain and discomfort reduce our ability to see clearly and can make us feel tired and anxious. With a little practice a few minutes a day, smoother and more fluid eye movements can be re-learned.

It would be best to read the following instructions into a recorder and follow by listening. Leave plenty of time for both the movements and the rests. Repeat each movement variation five to ten times using less effort each time. Allow your movements to become slow, small and discrete. Find the pleasure hidden in light and effortless movements. It is important to breathe easily throughout, and rest for a minute or so between each sequence so the brain and eyes have time to change. It is important to pause or stop if you feel *any* discomfort, strain or pain.

Lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet flat on the floor.

With your eyes closed, feel the back of your head resting on the floor. Gently roll your head an inch or so to the right and to the left. If you reduce your effort each time and do not hold your breath, you will feel the rolling of your head becoming easier, smoother and more pleasant. Rest a minute.

Slowly open your eyes and look at some convenient spot on the ceiling. Gently roll your head a few inches left and right while leaving your eyes anchored to the spot. Reduce any strain that you feel in your eyes, jaw and neck. Breathe easily. Rest for a minute.

Close your left eye, or use an eye patch and look at the same spot only with your right eye. Roll your head an inch or so left and right. Rest.

Close, or patch your right eye, look at the spot only with your left eye and roll your head gently left and right. Rest.

With both eyes open and softly focused on the same spot, roll your head gently left and right. Rest.

Close both eyes and roll your head left and right. Notice if your head rolls easier than when you began. Rest.

Slowly open your eyes and come up to standing. Look around and notice the colours, details and textures that you now see.

Based on his own healing experience, David Webber (GCFP, 2004) has been teaching Seeing Clearly™ workshops worldwide, including presenting at the North American Conference on Natural Vision Improvement, the 20th and 21st International Conference on Holistic Vision. David will be teaching a Seeing Clearly workshop at the July 2010 FGNA conference in Chicago, IL.