

Seeing Clearly: Vision Exploration with Feldenkrais



by David Webber, GCFP
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In 1996, with a successful career as a Computer Network 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 diagnosed 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 worsen 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 proved unsuccessful, I tried holistic ones I was familiar with such as natural vision improvement exercises, but I was unable to relax my eyes and grew even more anxious and frustrated. I also tried meditation. I'd been a longtime practitioner of meditation, but Buddhist practices for healing the eyes

proved equally inaccessible to me. Then, by chance, at the Feldenkrais Center in Toronto, I attended a series of Awareness Through Movement® (ATM) lessons developed by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais. He was a scientist and Judo master who originally developed his method in the early 1940s to self-heal his injured knees. He taught individuals and workshops for more than 40 years. Feldenkrais made a significant difference in many people's lives, helping them to overcome great personal obstacles while enriching their lives. It is our good fortune that he chose this path. He left us a legacy of more than 1,000 lessons, many of which involve our eyes.

I was struck by how easily and rapidly the Feldenkrais Method® enabled me to experience the deep states of calm necessary for relaxing my body and the muscles of my eyes, and practising the Buddhist healing meditations. I began to explore these 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

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

Vision is the primary sense through which we experience the world. Because the movement

of our eyes organizes the movements of our body, our vision impacts upon every movement we make, as well as how we think and feel. Our eyes, neck, back, limbs, breathing and mind are all interconnected. As our thoughts move busily here and there, our eyes respond and move busily here and there. When our 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 frozen.

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 how we feel and in which places our bodies touch the ground as we lie on our back. Supported by the stability of the ground, our central nervous system and whole body-mind soon relaxes without strain and effort. It then becomes much easier to observe the more subtle sensations of breathing. As our breathing slows and deepens, our awareness becomes very sensitive, and our minds relax.

Whether we recognize it or not, the byproduct of a relaxed body – easy breathing and a quiet, spacious mind – is that we feel deeply supported, at peace and very alert and clear-minded. Without effort or exercise, our eyes too, will begin to relax, and long held tensions will dissolve. These are the ideal conditions for creating balance in the nervous system and lasting improvement in the visual system.

The Feldenkrais Way To Clearer Vision

In the Feldenkrais Method®, we employ the same kind of organic learning that all of us

used successfully as infants and toddlers as we learned to see, move, and eventually to walk about and explore the world around us. In these lessons we use practical principles that enable the brain to change its own structure and function. We transform ourselves through the brain's plasticity – its inherent ability to discern differences, reorganize and improve.

Slow, easy movements allow us to refine our ability to feel differences in internal sensations. Our brain integrates these differences and spontaneously discards harmful and unnecessary muscular efforts, contractions and conflicts. The process is simple and we feel improvement in a simple way – as smoother, lighter and more pleasurable mobility.

We do not necessarily notice, but our brain automatically performs this integrating function all the time. For example, in order to see your hand in front of your face, your brain effortlessly integrates the movements of your two eyes, the different visual information streaming in through the left and right retinas as well as memories to create one image with three dimensions, perspective, depth and meaning. In Awareness Through Movement® lessons, we employ a similar process by initially focusing our attention on our sense of touch. The primary touch areas in the brain interact and are interdependent with the areas that organize movement and vision. Together they learn, reorganize and improve.

Whenever we act or exercise with excess effort and force, our nervous system organizes defensively for danger or potential damage. In this way, over the course of time patterns of anxiety and stress throughout our body and eyes become habitual and unconscious. This



the Feldenkrais Method® occurs primarily in the brain, potential improvements are only limited by our creativity and imagination.

A Mini Lesson: Learning By Doing

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 10 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.

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and the soles of your feet flat on the floor.
2. 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.
3. Gently 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.

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

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

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

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

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

Based on his own healing experience, David Webber (GCFP) has been teaching Seeing Clearly® workshops in North America and Europe for the last five years and presented and taught workshops at Vision Conferences around the world. David has also taught workshops and Advanced Trainings for Feldenkrais Practitioners. David will be holding a Seeing Clearly® workshop in Toronto on October 3 and 4 at the Feldenkrais Centre. For more information visit www.feldenkraiscentre.com, call (416) 928-3505.

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In Toronto, please call Marion Harris at 416-928-3505, or visit our website at www.feldenkraiscentre.com, for more information on classes, workshops and private lessons.

The Feldenkrais® Centre, 390 Dupont Street, Suite 201, Toronto ON M5R 1V9.

excess muscular tension is not within the range of our conscious sensation. Nor can we release it with our will. We don't know why, but somehow feel tangled up in knots.

The secret to success is that the less effort we exert, the more sensitive our awareness becomes. In ATM lessons, slow and easy movements with minimal effort enable us to feel these internal knots as tangible resistance. We can then, knowingly and with great precision, release otherwise inaccessible muscular strain and tension. We can learn, for ourselves, how to untangle the tangle.

Feldenkrais lessons are typically 45 to 60 minutes in length. They involve a variety of movement variations, all designed to clarify and improve a specific function or activity. In working with the visual system we investigate three inter-dependent functions that help the eyes optimize vision: muscular effort, movement and focus. You will 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. You will 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, you will learn to focus the eyes accurately and without strain, while seeing in all directions and both near and far.

Some of the movements in a lesson will be familiar to us, while others may seem unusual and unfamiliar. Non-habitual movement variations are introduced both to break up unhelpful neuromuscular habits, and to facilitate beneficial patterns of action and seeing. After completing a lesson we return to test our original movements or perceptions, often finding that our visual acuity and orientation in space have improved.

As we continue to practise and bring our eyes into our conscious range of sensation, we will feel increasing vitality and pleasure throughout our body-mind. Eyestrain and discomfort, along with associated aches and pains in our neck and back, will dissolve. And as I have discovered in my own healing journey, we can adapt these techniques to the goal of seeing more clearly. Since learning in