

## Focusing, Feldenkrais, and a little Polyvagal Theory

Developed by Moshe Feldenkrais, Feldenkrais is a method of somatic education that effects neuromuscular re-patterning by directing attention to slow, gentle, often-novel physical movements. By paying attention to such movements, unnecessary muscular tensions throughout the body can reorganize and release. While primarily known as a method of somatic education, many Feldenkrais practitioners feel that the practice not only impacts posture, balance, and coordination but also connects us to an inner vitality that improves overall wellbeing. It is understood to be a practice that impacts people on multiple levels.

Feldenkrais concentrates on “being with” or “in” movement. Unlike some other physical movement practices, Feldenkrais is not about fixing something, strengthening something, or generally aiming to *do* something. Yet, like Focusing, it is a practice that facilitates real change.

Change comes about through learning and according to Burton (cited in Felenkrais, 1949, p53) “learning, in the most general sense, is acquiring new responses to stimuli”. In both Focusing and Feldenkrais, we acquire new responses by being aware of our inner experience and by developing an ability to “be with” that experience. “Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change . . . is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going inside ourselves.” (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Both Focusing and Feldenkrais are experiential, body-based practices that are rooted in an understanding that very little of our human behaviour and inner experience is purely instinctive. Much of what we discover in our inner experience was learned in interaction with the environment and is encoded in the body’s nervous system. Nothing is fixed: it is ever-changing.

This article is based on my own experience of both practices and reflects on:

- Feldenkrais and Focusing as mutually supportive practices.
- How an understanding of the Polyvagal Theory can help access Presence

### Personal Feldenkrais experience

The things that stand out for me in Feldenkrais practice are that it helps me:

- Develop awareness of what is going on in my physical body.  
As my early-life experience predisposed me to a disembodied way of living, this increased awareness of my physical body is of particular value to me. “Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: the past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p.97).
- Learn to attune to what is easy and pleasant.  
This becomes my guide. My awareness shifts from “looking for problems” to noticing what “is no problem” and to savouring the pleasure of easy movement; I discover movement itself to be inherently enjoyable.
- Gain “transferable insights”. Much that I learn about physical movement, I can also apply, in Focusing, to cognition and emotion. For example:

- I have habitual patterns
- These habitual patterns can change
- There is joy in increased ease of movement
- Contraction is painful and interrupts the ease and flow of movement
- There are blank places; over and over again, I find blank places. I get to a certain point and then encounter a stoppage; a place where easy forward movement abruptly ends and I don't know how to continue. I sense it as an uncomfortable "blank space".
  - Sometimes, other muscles (not essential to the movement) kick in, in an attempt to push past the "blank place" with its uncomfortable sense of deadness. I learn to use conscious awareness to stop at the edge of the "blank place" and to inhibit the "pushing past". It feels like resting at the edge of an abyss.
  - Reversing and repeating the movement to the edge of the "blank place" allows me to tolerate the blankness more; to "be with it".
    - Sometimes, in being with it, I'll eventually notice a faint impulse which seems a shy "knowing of" the next step. Such an impulse often seems fragile. Something in me loves to see it and I have a deep sense that "everything blooms, from within, of self-blessing" (Kinnell, 2000). In continuing to reverse and repeat the movement, the faint impulse can become stronger. Maybe later in the day, I notice a lightness in making a similar movement and realise that my system has already reorganized and "remembered" or "discovered" an easier way to move. The new pattern is embodied and has now been selected unconsciously.
    - Other times, connected to "blank places" I'll discover very painful contracted muscles. That the "blank place" serves to block the painful contraction from my everyday awareness is a sense I make of this. I discover that "being with" such a painful contraction (when it is tolerable) can allow the muscles to relax. Occasionally, such muscle spasm is intolerable and I will need to move other parts of my body (a kind of distraction?) until it settles down.

Most importantly, in these learnings in Feldenkrais class, I become familiar with my own personal actual experience of strength, fragility, being stuck, freezing, overriding discomfort, ease, sensing a new option, and so on. I learn what these words mean on a visceral level. I become familiar with how I, personally, experience these things in a way that enables me to discern an echo of the same experience later when Focusing, for example, with a memory, or a thought.

- Actually change.  
Through Feldenkrais lessons, I really change. The lessons allow me the actual experience of a more comfortable posture or easier movement. This results in new patterns that are quickly adopted by a nervous system that prefers pleasant to painful. The new pattern becomes the unconscious default. The learning is embodied and I change.

## Focusing and Feldenkrais

I see Focusing and Feldenkrais as practices that share foundational understandings and approaches to effecting change.

### Understanding: Life story is embodied, personal, and ever-changing

Both practices consider that the body holds a person's life story.

For Gendlin (1978): "Not only do you physically live the circumstances around you but also those that you think of in your mind. Your physically felt body is, in fact, part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people, in fact the whole universe". In a way, the "felt sense" acts as an entry point to an interaction that is the ongoing story that is "me" in this "whole universe".

For Feldenkrais (1985): "environment, mind and body are an indivisible one". He noted that, of all animals, the human baby "is born with the smallest fraction (approx. 1/5<sup>th</sup>) of the ultimate weight of the adult brain" (Feldenkrais, 1949, p52). Because so much development of the nervous system occurs after birth, human beings have few truly instinctive (reflex) responses. Even basic instincts like the food and self-preservation instincts are subject to environmental influence in humans in a manner that doesn't happen for other animals (Feldenkrais, 1949, p198). The growth and formation of a significant proportion of neural pathways and interconnections is postnatal, allowing the environment to exert a greater influence on the development of the human nervous system than it does on the nervous system of any other animal (Feldenkrais, 1949, P54). For Feldenkrais, in humans, genetic tendencies act only as background to a nervous system that develops and fine tunes responses and actions, in a highly individualised way, from a vast range of possible nervous system interconnections, within the unique personal environment of each human child. The environment, in the widest sense (including physical, social, psychological, cultural influences etc.), shapes the development of the nervous system. This interaction between the developing nervous system and its environment *is* the life story of the person and it is written into the nervous system in the form of the interconnections *actually* formed from a vast range of *possible* connections and the consequent patterns of behaviour, thinking, feeling etc. that develop. "The human motor cortex is unique in its reactions and no two of them are identical." (Feldenkrais, 1949, p197).

Because so many of our voluntary movement patterns are learned and subject to environmental influence, it was inevitable, for Moshe Feldenkrais, that some faulty or inefficient somatic functioning is established and that some potential is not realized. The earlier in life, that faulty patterns are learned, the more ingrained they appear and the more rigid they remain, unless somehow undone and reshuffled into a better configuration. The method Feldenkrais developed aims to support such reshuffling, allowing parts of the brain related to voluntary motor function to learn new and more efficient default neural pathways and muscular patterns (Feldenkrais, 1949, pp55-56). Feldenkrais held that there is nothing permanent about learned responses except our belief that they are so (Feldenkrais, 1949, p9); they are only habits that can change.

However, the 4/5<sup>th</sup> of the brain that develops after birth is not just about voluntary motor function. Vast numbers of other neural pathways and patterns are also formed and become the foundation of complex patterns of inner experience (that include cognitive, emotional, and physical components) and external behaviour. Again these patterns both of inner experience and behaviour can appear

ingrained and remain relatively rigid unless somehow undone and reshuffled. I see Focusing as a method that both recognises this complexity and supports its reshuffling.

#### Understanding: The “part” can reinstate the “whole”

Both Focusing and Feldenkrais recognise that “part” of an experience can reinstate the “whole” of an earlier experience.

In terms of the nervous system, there are only two possible responses to a stimulus, contraction or relaxation. However, the human nervous system contends with an enormous number of impulses that arrive through the senses at any one time and is therefore in an ongoing state of highly complex adjustment (Feldenkrais, 1949, p58).

Generalized response patterns simplify the situation and can be efficient. From Pavlov’s work on conditioned reflexes, Feldenkrais noted that when a dog has learned to associate a sound with the arrival of food, he eventually salivated on hearing the sound alone; that is, *part* of the situation (sound) reinstated the *whole* situation (expectation of food). While generalized response patterns can be efficient, they can also be inappropriate when the “whole situation” that is extrapolated from “the part”, is not a good approximation to the current situation that we face.

While acknowledging that both the bulk of human responses are learned rather than reflex actions, and that human brains are complex in structure, Feldenkrais felt that much of Pavlov’s work on conditioned reflexes, including the power of a part to reinstate the whole, could be applied more generally to all learning.

It is now widely recognised, particularly in relation to traumatic experiences which elicit survival responses, that a small part of an experience can trigger the whole original experience and reaction. “Long after a traumatic experience is over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger” (Van der Kolk, 2014). Complex higher-order functions of thinking, memory, speech and language, complex perception, orientation, attention, judgment, planning, and decision-making etc. may all be involved but the principle is the same; part of the experience can reinstate the whole experience.

I see Focusing as a practice that also recognises the power of “a part” to reinstate multiple aspects of larger experiences. An initial “felt sense” of an event can open up to reveal elements of cognition, emotion, memory, imagination etc. alongside physical sensation. In Focusing, we uncover the ways that these elements are connected through felt experience in the creation of meaning.

#### Understanding: Everything is connected

That part of an experience can reinstate the whole experience implies a connection between all parts of experience.

No part of the body can be moved without all the other parts being affected (Feldenkrais, 1949, p76). In a Feldenkrais class, for example, I learn that this is true when after a lesson that primarily involved neck and shoulder movements while lying on the floor, I sense that my weight to be distributed differently on my feet after I stand up; this is largely an unconscious learning. But Feldenkrais also facilitates more conscious learning when in a class, I notice that on moving my right shoulder, something also happens in my left foot; I have now learned that by moving my left foot, I can impact my right shoulder and with close attention I may be able to track the whole path of the connection.

In Focusing, connection is discovered when the felt sense of a relationship difficulty yesterday, opens to a sense of tightness in your chest, that has some quality of how you felt in another circumstance with another person, that you then recognise as anger and that somehow reminds you of daffodils and cycling down a country lane.....and so on. Again, in Focusing, some shifts can be largely unconscious, while others include conscious insights and connections.

For me, understanding arrived at through the experiential practices of Feldenkrais and Focusing is of a different order to understanding arrived at through logical analysis. It is more fundamental, more real and more solid; an embodied sense of interconnection that points to vast complexity.

[Understanding: Awareness of inner experience changes external behaviour \(and vice versa\)](#)

Both Focusing and Feldenkrais direct awareness to the body as it is experienced from the inside. Both practices result in a reorganization of inner experience that is then embodied in behaviour and therefore affects the external environment which in turn again impacts inner experience. "Steps of Focusing and steps of outward action often alternate. Each aids the other" (Gendlin, 2003).

[Approach: Pausing and directing awareness to lived experience](#)

In an attitude of gentle curiosity, both Feldenkrais and Focusing direct awareness to what is happening right now, as it happens and is felt in the body. Both practices are concerned with pausing everyday activity, slowing down and directing awareness to the observation of lived experience.

In Feldenkrais, most lessons take place lying on the floor. This provides a bodily-sensed difference from regular everyday activity. A class typically starts by directing conscious awareness to how the body or specific parts of it are organised right now; students lying on the floor might, for example, be asked to check how each shoulder blade rests on the floor or to check if one side of the pelvis seems heavier than the other. While the aim is to simply become aware of how things are, we frequently get "freebies" in the form of an insight into how we respond when something isn't the way we think it should be. 😊

In a lesson, all movements are performed slowly, with conscious attention directed to the observation of what is happening primarily on a neuromuscular level, noticing for example, the first impulse that initiates the movement, when parts of the body, not strictly essential to the movement, become involved, and so on.

In Focusing, conscious awareness is directed to the bodily "felt sense" of particular events, people, situations, or patterns in our lives. The initial "felt sense" generally opens up to elements of thinking, feeling, physical sensation, memory etc.; the whole multitude of manifestations that is inner experience. In Focusing, awareness is directed, over and over again, to the "felt sense" of all these elements. Focusing is done in a dedicated Focusing session which is a stepping out of regular, everyday activity or in Focusing moments in the midst of regular everyday activity; the important aspect is the degree to which everyday processing is paused and conscious attention is directed to observing or being with what is actually happening in our inner experience, particularly to the overall "felt sense" of something in our lives.

### Approach: Valuing subtle sensation

Both practices value subtle sensation: Feldenkrais is interested in fine-tuning the kinaesthetic sense by which muscular motion is perceived and Focusing with the “felt sense”.

Feldenkrais noted that some people use their bodies efficiently while others do not. For example, one person easily takes a cup down from a high shelf, while another person strains and makes a lot of effort to do the same thing. Even though, there is an easier way to do it, the person who finds it difficult to reach the cup, tends to persist with the more effortful way of doing so. Feldenkrais suggested that finding an easier way is only possible when people have a finely-tuned kinaesthetic sense. The fine-tuning gives them the ability to discern small changes in tonic contraction and this, in turn, allows them to adjust and select the easiest way to complete a particular movement at each and every step along the way. People who are unable to detect small changes in muscle tone fail to adjust in this way and will generally continue to use more effort to complete the same movement. It is the level of refinement of the kinesthetic sense that makes the difference.

The Weber-Fechner law (which relates to physical senses) holds that the *least* detectable change in a physical sensation is proportional to the overall sensation: for example, if with your eyes closed, you hold a 10 lb weight, and find the smallest additional weight you are able to detect is a further 1/2lb, then you are able to detect 1/20<sup>th</sup> of the original stimulus. The smaller the weight you hold, the smaller the added or subtracted weight you are able to notice (Feldenkrais, p147). When applied to the kinaesthetic sense, the Weber-Fechner law explains why people with inefficient movement patterns tend to persist in these patterns. Once more effortful movement (high tonic contraction) becomes habitual, the ability to discern small changes in tonic contraction in the course of movement is lost. Thus the situation is self-perpetuating; a crude kinaesthetic sense tends to become cruder while a fine kinesthetic sense tends to become finer (Feldenkrais, p148)

The “felt sense” that we learn to discern in Focusing lies at the subtle end of the scale. It is less intense than the ordinary feelings or physical sensations. Without quiet concentration one may lose hold of it” (Gendlin, 1984). I believe that the Weber-Fechner Law also applies to the “felt sense”; it is possible to become increasingly sensitive to small changes in “felt sense” and a more finely-tuned felt sense can change everyday behaviour.

### Approach: Ease signals positive change

Positive somatic change is signalled by a bodily felt sense of easier flow in movement. “To understand that the new mode of action is better is not enough; you must feel it to be better through the physical experience of the body” (Feldenkrais, 1985, p223). The Feldenkrais method therefore teaches all possible ways to perform an action. For example, it does not teach “The Correct Way to Breathe, but all possible modes of breathing” (Feldenkrais, 1985, p154). Conscious awareness and an increasingly refined kinaesthetic sense allow the body to discern the mode that requires least effort. Once it can discern it, the body always prefers the easier way.

Likewise, in Focusing forward movement (felt shift) is frequently sensed in the body as relaxation or release. This relaxation for me, signals an easier way for the body to hold its sense of something. Some small insight or connection has occurred to facilitate an easier holding of something in the body: a change in meaning that becomes embedded in the nervous system.

And so . . .

The main way that Feldenkrais initially supported my Focusing practice was in allowing me to befriend physical sensation and to discern subtle changes in physical sensation. This search for “the subtle” helped me discover the Focusing “felt-sense”.

By concentrating on physical movement, Feldenkrais allows me become familiar with sometimes difficult visceral physical sensations without the system overwhelm that can occur when the starting point is thought or emotion. Sometimes, higher-order brain processes and emotions have formed complex patterns with so many loops and interconnections that they seem to have a life of their own, designed to keep me away from underlying visceral sensations. In noticing such visceral sensations in Feldenkrais, I learn that these sensations have not killed me and I can tolerate echoes of them in the inner experience encountered through Focusing.

As somebody familiar with the survival-related freeze response, experiencing movement as inherently joyful through Feldenkrais was, to say the least, a “Eureka” moment. There is some way that this this learning transfers to Focusing for me, in helping me detect the beginnings of a forward movement; it’s like a quality of unfurling and swirling that is inherently joyful.

Increasingly, I find a two-way street between Focusing and Feldenkrais. The “language” of the body that I’ve become more familiar with in Focusing (in the form of images, shapes, or qualities like hard, soft, metallic etc.), I now also use in Feldenkrais work; for example, maybe a vague sense of a “cone shape” sneaks into my awareness of my shoulder in a Feldenkrais class and I find that keeping such an image in the background of my awareness, supports a neuromuscular re-organisation in my shoulder. Something wants to happen that is encapsulated in this “cone shape”. The sense of a “cone shape” is enough for change to happen: it is not necessary for me to conceptualize it any further detail.

### Presence and the Polyvagal Theory

This reflecting on connections between Focusing and Feldenkrais has led me to a deeper understanding of how they are linked through the nervous system and I would like to finish with some observations around the nervous system and the awareness that, in Focusing, is termed Presence. Presence is the awareness that has no agenda and is the ideal vantage point from which, in Focusing, we attend to inner experience. It seems to me that this awareness is our natural state when we feel *profoundly* safe.

Stephen Porges has coined the term neuroception to “describe the ways our autonomic nervous system responds to cues of safety, danger, and life-threat within our bodies, in the world around us, and in our connections to others (Dana, 2018, P4). Neuroception differs from perception in that it is largely unconscious: it is a “detection without awareness”. Porges’ Polyvagal Theory identifies three neural pathways (ventral vagus, sympathetic nervous system and dorsal vagus) connected to neuroception. In terms of evolution, the oldest pathway is the dorsal vagus (freezing and shutdown responses), then the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight responses) while the most recent is the ventral vagus (social engagement system). All three pathways neurocept “in the service of survival” (Dana, 2018, P22); that is, they are all concerned with keeping us alive. These neural pathways are among the pathways that Feldenkrais and Gendlin recognise as developed in

interaction with our environments, particularly in childhood. The most recent pathway in evolutionary terms (ventral vagus) is the most impacted by environment and the least instinctive.

At any time, the level of safety or threat neurocepted determines the most active pathway: in times of “safety” it is the ventral vagus, a system which supports relaxed social interaction, in “danger” it is the sympathetic nervous system which readies the body for fight or flight and when “life threat” is detected, the dorsal vagus becomes dominant, causing a freeze response, shutdown and numbing of the system. The autonomic nervous system neurocepts based on our lived experience. Sometimes, for example, in the process of extrapolating the “whole” from a “part”, “danger” is neurocepted when no danger is present right now. Based on experience, these neural pathways do their best to make sense of the present situation *fast*; thinking is too slow when it comes to survival.

In practical terms, “safety”, “danger”, and “life threat”, generate body states like relaxation, vigilance or collapse. To live is to continually shift state. When neuroception remains unconscious, we are swept along by the flow of what is neurocepted. By directing awareness to what is happening within our bodies (which is a primary tool used by both Feldenkrais and Focusing), we interrupt this flow and add the influence of perception to neuroception. This shifts us from a state of “being in” to “being with” (Dana, 2018, p42).

I see the Focusing Lead-In as a process that that orients the Focuser, through the senses, to cues of safety experienced, in the present moment. The Lead-In provides a bodily experience of safety that supports attunement to Presence. I feel the Lead-In is very important.

However, even when safety is neurocepted, so that the dominant pathway is the ventral vagus, and the system is in a relaxed state, it seems to me that it is in the nature of living organisms to be concerned for survival. The ventral vagus pathway itself is concerned with ensuring survival through social connection. So, I’m using the term “*profoundly safe*” to describe the level of safety that, for me, underlies Presence. To me, it seems the kind of safety experienced when we recognise ourselves as, what spiritual traditions term, True Nature or Self. “It is only by knowing that one is Self, and by remaining as the Self, that we go beyond this fear (*of death*)” (Mohan, 1993, p10).

Few of us recognise ourselves as True Nature/Self and certainly not at all times. Therefore, for most of us, to be with our inner experience from Presence may be largely aspirational. But it seems enough to have some sense of the qualities of Presence and we come closest to the qualities of Presence in what, for the Polyvagal Theory, is the ventral vagus state. Therefore, observing what supports us to be in the ventral vagus state can be helpful in Focusing.

## References

Dana, Deb, 2018. *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the rhythm of regulation*, New York, U.S.A.:W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Feldenkrais, Moshe, 1949. *Body and Mature Behavior: A study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning*, Reprint, California, U.S.A.: North Atlantic Books, 2008.

Feldenkrais, Moshe, 1985. *The Potent Self: A study of Spontaneity and Compulsion*, Reprint, California, U.S.A.: Frog Books and Somatic Resources, 2002.

Gendlin, Eugene T., 1978. *Focusing: How to Open Up Your Deeper Feelings and Intuition*, Reprint, United Kingdom: www.randomhouse.co.uk , 2003.

Gendlin, Eugene T., 1984. The client's client: The edge of awareness, viewed 20 January 2021, <[http://previous.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol\\_2149.html](http://previous.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2149.html)>

Kinnell, Galway, 2000. 'Saint Francis and the Sow' in *A New Selected Poems*, U.S.A: Houghton Mifflin.

Mohan, A.G., 1993. *Yoga for Body, Breath and Mind: A Guide to Personal Reintegration*, U.S.A.: Shambala Publications, Inc.

Van der Kolk, Bessel, 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, U.S.A.: Viking Penguin.