

# SENSEABILITY

A newsletter of applications  
of the FELDENKRAIS  
METHOD® of somatic  
education written by *Guild  
Certified Feldenkrais  
Teachers®*

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## The *Feldenkrais Method*® Plus Yoga

### Getting to Know the Neighborhood

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One of the appeals of yoga is its large number of interesting and inventive poses, called asanas. While a typical illustrated yoga book for home practice shows 30 asanas, a master practitioner in New York, Dharma Mitra, has photographed himself in 908 positions. He has printed these on a wall chart that measures 6 feet by 4 feet. I came upon this chart one afternoon in the ladies changing room at the Sun & Moon Yoga Studio in Arlington, Virginia. As my eyes passed from one photo to the next, I felt a mounting exhilaration. The sense of discovery and invention was amazing. "What," I asked myself, "can the *Feldenkrais Method*®, which also loves inventiveness and versatility, add to this mix?"

The question was relevant because I was at Sun & Moon to teach my own 2 hour workshop combining the *Feldenkrais Method* and Yoga. It was about to start, and of course, I did have a plan.

The *Feldenkrais Method* can take the Yogi into the world of the small. I think of this as being analogous to a traveler who has a definite destination but wants more than to just arrive at the specific place. She also wants to get to know the neighborhood that surrounds her destination. She knows from prior journeys that when she makes this effort of knowing, her trip gains depth and intimacy.

As a *Feldenkrais*® practitioner, I like to take a single yoga pose, identify its components, and explore each in detail. Even over a workshop of two hours, I never feel that we come to the end of discovery. But at the end of the session, the class, and I, will have a deeper appreciation of the gifts of the

asana. We will usually feel greater flexibility, stronger groundedness, more energy, and a quieter mind.

I have been teaching workshops on the *Feldenkrais Method* and yoga in Northern Virginia since January 2001. This Spring I am teaching two, both on Vriksha-asana, Tree Pose. I will share with you how I look at this pose.

Standing Well. Tree Pose is a standing position, and so the first level of search is for an open torso, rooted standing, and easily upright head.

• An Open Torso. I begin on the floor with gentle movements that call attention to the torso. For most of us, this is an area of ourselves that we do not know well. We usually think of the ribs as fixed in place, following the phrase the "rib cage." But, actually, the ribs are designed to move. So I lead the students through movements that invite the ribs to expand and contract in one way, and then in another way, and then in a third way. Most of the people attending my workshops are working-age Washingtonians who sit all day and carry a lot of responsibility. People are stressed, and there is a tendency to hunch. Hunching is not a "bad action" in itself. The problem comes when you do it all the time, and cannot do otherwise. The gentle rib movements show the body that it has other choices.

Next I introduce the ribs to its neighbors, the pelvis and head. We explore the kinetic chains that travel from the ribs downward and upward. We sense how a twisting movement, for instance, feels when the each body part connects

(Cont. on page 2)

(Cont. from page 1)

smoothly to the next, and how the same movement feels when there are interruptions in the chain. Some of these movements are performed on the back, some on the side, and some on the stomach. After this, we rest on the back. Many people notice that they contact the floor more fully, that they feel a new energy inside, and that they feel longer.

• **Improved Contact through the Feet.** Next we stand and explore some movements of shifting weight. We explore the different regions of the foot. We bend in the knees and hip joints. We gently challenge balance. In the old days, when people walked more on open ground, all our joints were naturally stimulated by the irregularities of the earth. But since the advent of sidewalk, we have to provide special opportunities to reintroduce variability.

• **Easier Carriage of the Head.** In order to bring greater awareness to the head and its relationship to standing, we sit and take gentle, rocking movements of the head. For instance, we move the chin softly left and right as though it were at the base of a lightly moving pendulum. As a result, often the breath spontaneously deepens. I then increase the challenge: I ask the students to maintain the head motion and add an equally gentle arm movement, for example, raising and lowering the arms. Or I suggest that they shift the way from one sitting bone to the other. Doing this is a type of effort, not of muscular force, but of attention. Very often it leads to a more balanced head position and easing of neck pain.

• **Raising and Rotating One Leg.** Returning to standing, we take the movement of raising, bending and rotating one leg so its foot can take a place near the top of the inner thigh of the standing leg. Then we do the same with the other leg. We observe how the balance is on each leg, how high the unweighted leg can come and the overall sense of ease or

difficulty. Then we return to the ground. We take movements that highlight the linkages between the leg and the spine. Although the leg has an identity as a separate part, to function well, it needs good partnerships with the center of the body. When we return to standing, many people find it easier to raise and place the unweighted leg.

• **Raising the Arms.** As we did with the leg, we raise the arms while standing and then return to lying on the floor. Nobody complains about lying down again! We explore the passage of the arms from near the side to overhead. We observe how coordinated movements in the ribs make it easier to elongate the arms.

• **Return to Simple Standing.** We stand in a simple way, and observe the sensation of doing so. When we release our habitual ways of standing and moving, we are likely to find that we feel more grounded and more easily upright. This is because we have returned to the design of the species, which is that our bones have the primary responsibility of holding us upright, not our muscles.

While standing we take the movements of raising and lowering the arms and the leg. We look for the sense of the aligned skeleton—all the bones stacked up—as the basis for maintaining balance. We also explore different pathways of raising and lowering the arms. When the balance can survive variety in arm movements, it is indeed well rooted!

• **Closing.** In the last few minutes of the workshop we sit together in a circle, reflect, and share. Then we return to standing, collect our belongings, say good-bye and turn toward the door. Now comes the next search: how to carry the new state onward, into life. ●●

—by Maureen McHugh, GCFT

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## Side Effects You Want

### The Student Says,

**A**s I wound my way up the highway from Los Angeles, I felt myself relaxing as I got closer and closer to Big Sur. The weather was clear and beautiful, a perfect warm California autumn afternoon. As I slowed down to negotiate one of the narrow hairpin turns, my car was struck head-on by a 60 foot semi. The truck was much too long for the tiny road, and had crossed over into my lane to avoid going over the cliff. At the time I didn't agree with his choice.

After weeks of doctor's visits, x-rays and pain relievers, I was determined to find a *Feldenkrais* practitioner in my area to help with rehabilitation. I'd worked with a *Feldenkrais* practitioner several years previously on the recommendation of my mother who had seen one for chronic pain issues. The ATM lessons I'd taken had noticeably helped my lower back pain, so I wanted to give it a try now that my neck and back were in such bad shape from the accident. After several dead ends, I fortunately found Carolyn Garfinkel, and after several weeks of private lessons, I was getting some flexibility back in my neck and spine.

As I began feeling better, I returned cautiously to my yoga practice. **I started to notice that the yoga classes I took in the afternoon after a *Feldenkrais* lesson were so much more enjoyable, and (western mindset!) productive.**

I mentioned this to Carolyn, and we began to incorporate specific lessons into my work with her to address some of the yoga positions I'd always struggled with. Warrior One, Camel, and of course the dreaded Downward Dog were all asanas I had pretended to enjoy, but secretly hated. Now with my shoulder blades free to slide down my back, and the whole length of my spine able to move and curve, suddenly the asanas I'd detested had become something to look forward to!

So thanks to a car accident, I have a whole new yoga practice. You just never know... ●●

—by Kate Juergens, Producer and Student

### The Teacher Says,

**I** had been a yoga Practitioner for over 25 years when I began my *Feldenkrais* training program. While at training I would be away from home and my yoga practice for three to six weeks at a time. When I returned home, I found that I was able to perform my asanas at a higher level of expertise and with more ease and comfort. I was baffled at first. Why should my yoga get better by practicing the *Feldenkrais Method*? **This improvement in my yoga continued during the four years of my *Feldenkrais* training and still occurs.**

What I learned from *Feldenkrais* lessons was that I had other options for movement that I hadn't realized. Instead of being locked in my same habitual yoga movement patterns that kept my yoga at a plateau, I learned that I had other ways to move my body. Instead of practicing what I already knew, the *Feldenkrais Method* taught me to explore other ways of movement besides my habitual movement patterns into which I had been locked. I learned to release chronic muscle contractions and use more of myself in new ways once I moved away from the familiar to what was more efficient and effective. My yoga practice is always better after a *Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement* lesson or after having received a *Functional Integration* lesson.

My experience as a yoga practitioner and yoga teacher has given me insights into how to help my students—many of whom say they feel stuck with certain poses in their yoga practices. In my *Feldenkrais* practice, I help students improve their yoga postures. To begin a lesson, I will have my student do a yoga pose that they want to improve and then I will give a *Functional Integration* lesson to the student. The student will then practice the same pose and is usually astonished at the difference.

**Practicing the *Feldenkrais Method* has elevated my yoga practice and that of my clients to a higher level.** We have learned to perform postures in comfort—not through muscular effort and we have experienced very satisfying feelings of achieving poses that were once thought to be impossible. ●●

—by Carolyn Garfinkel, GCFT

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With 14 years of experience as a Certified Kripalu Yoga teacher and 7 years as a *Feldenkrais* practitioner, I have had a great deal of fun experimenting with how yoga and the *Feldenkrais Method* are similar and different, and when and how it makes sense to integrate them. I have discovered that it doesn't have to be an "either/or" situation, nor a blending together into an unrecognizable hybrid. Below are some examples of how I bring yoga into my *Feldenkrais* teaching/learning and how I bring *Feldenkrais* into my yoga teaching/practice. I do this with the intention of being clear about when I am doing *Feldenkrais* and when I am doing yoga.

In a *Feldenkrais* Awareness Through Movement or ATM Class:

When I took my very first ATM class, the instructor asked us to "sit and turn to see something behind us," a movement that reminded me of the yoga spinal twist. Then, lying on the floor, we spent nearly an hour doing an ATM lesson, exploring small movements that were new, interesting, and different than yoga. At the end of the class, we returned to sitting and turning. I was amazed at the changes I felt. Instead of the familiar feel of turning easily where I am most flexible and the feel of stretch in the tighter places, the motion was smooth, more distributed along my whole spine, and more pleasurable. I could breathe easier and turn farther without strain. I later learned that there are hundreds of ATM lessons which can be used to improve almost any movement (breathing, your golf swing, walking, or ANY yoga posture). So now, when I teach ATM to improve yoga, I use a similar structure to the one I experienced in my first class:

1. Guide students to sense how they do one specific yoga posture.
2. Teach an ATM lesson designed to clarify an aspect of the posture.

3. Guide students to revisit the same yoga posture and notice details of what is different. (Students report benefits such as greater ease, comfort, flexibility, harmonious use of the whole body, more clarity of what they are doing, more strength or power with less effort, freer breathing, improved alignment, and more.)

In a Yoga Class:

When I bring the *Feldenkrais* Method into a yoga class, I insert a "mini ATM" to improve or clarify one aspect of a posture. For example, when I am teaching the cobra pose, I may use the following "mini ATM" to deepen or clarify the use of the eyes.

*Feldenkrais* "mini ATM" for the Cobra Pose

Do the cobra pose and notice how much ease you bring to the posture and how far toward the ceiling you can see without straining. Now pause and rest your forehead on the floor. Gently and slowly, move your eyes (head remains still) to look down toward your feet and up toward overhead a few times. Pause. Now explore lifting and lowering in and out of the beginning of the cobra pose in a comfortable, easy range, softly gazing down as your head lifts up and gazing up as you lower your head back to the floor. You are exploring having your eyes and head smoothly moving in opposite directions. Do this four or five times and then rest briefly. Now return to the cobra pose and notice anything different about how you experience the posture (comfort, ease, the use of your eyes, how far you see, how you breathe, or any other aspect of the posture).

I hope this has given you a sense of how these two wonderful methods of self-discovery can be used in support of one another. Enjoy your exploration! ●●

—by Marcia Giudice, GCFT, MS, OTR,  
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