

Balance: An Everyday Miracle

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When we think of balancing, we often think of extreme acts and acrobatics—a gymnast's beam, a circus high wire, a yogi on one foot for days and days. These extreme acts of balance are examples of the awe-inspiring capacities of the human mind and body.

For the rest of us, balance is a kind of everyday miracle. How is it that we get across the room, transferring our weight from one foot to the other, over and over again, without ending up on the ground? We've all experienced a misstep, or a slip on the ice. In that sudden, suspended moment of awareness that we're about to bite the dust, our whole worldview changes. We are no longer graceful, and in control, on our way to complete an important task. We are subject to the laws of physics, gravity and momentum carrying us swiftly from up to down. Balancing is something we take for granted until we're not doing it so well.

For humans over the age of two, balance has a lot to do with feet; standing and walking being our primary vehicles for activity. But when we look more closely, we notice that we are balancing all the time, in every action we make. When I reached for a water glass from my cabinet a moment ago, I transferred my weight to one foot, reached one arm up, counter-levered my free leg behind me, and perched my head over the middle of the see-saw so that I could watch my hand meet the glass. Come to think of it, I was never totally still at any point during this movement. Does this mean that I was not balancing?

If we look at the continuum of actions we make in our daily lives in detail—like in this Muybridge photograph—we can see that BALANCE HAPPENS all the time. When we shift from the everyday notion that balance is static, and understand that BALANCE IS DYNAMIC, then we can actually study and improve our movements in real conditions. *Moving better means balancing better.*

This notion that moving better means balancing better may seem paradoxical, because many of us have the idea that to balance is to hold very, very still—the opposite of moving. However, when we investigate the process of balance more closely, through careful observation of



our own experience, we notice that there is nothing at all still about balancing. The idea of balance as “held” is actually a false concept.

In his book, *The Potent Self*, Moshe Feldenkrais actually makes up a new word to describe the phenomenon of dynamic balance: “*acture*!” Replacing the root of the word *posture* meaning “fixed” with the root of the word *action* meaning “do” or “behave,” he shifts our paradigm—changes the lens through which we conceptualize balance. Balance—sitting, standing, perching—is no longer movement-free, but movement-full.

But why did Feldenkrais call it *acture* and not *move-ture*? Why not just talk about “dynamic balance”? Feldenkrais saw that *acture* is an expression of an individual's self-image. Deeper than any conceptual idea-of-self, this self-image to which Feldenkrais refers is both unconscious and defined by how we perceive our bodily sensations. Rather than Descartes', “I think, therefore I am,” Feldenkrais might say, “I sense, therefore I am.” “I sense,” he



Posture/Acture

might add, “therefore I act.”

Our *acture* is defined by our bodily sensations, which means it is limited by them. Our bodily sensations—the processes through which we monitor our internal milieu and recognize our body parts in relation to each other²—are fundamental to how we know ourselves. Any impediment to our sensing thus impedes our ability to act. As children, for example, our sense of balance is very fluid. We are used to moving in rolling, spiraling movements that translate well into safe falling. Our self-image includes “safe falling” as part of standing and walking. However, as we age, we lose these three-dimensional movement pathways into and out of the floor, because we're specializing in other movements. We get good at sitting still, and not so good at falling. We become fearful of falling. Our self-image no longer includes “safe falling”, but is affected deeply by the fear of falling. The fear of falling settles into us as tension in the legs, fixed segments of the spine, eyes and head lowered to the floor—into our *acture*. We don't know we've changed this way. It's unconscious. We wonder why we can't somersault anymore, and the reason is: we no longer have a sensory image of ourselves moving safely to the floor.

Fear of falling is only one of many contributors to an *acture* that makes balancing difficult. Causes for the deterioration of balance range from neurological diseases to aging. And there is no one of us who will not be touched by some balance challenge at some point in our lives.

Sound dire? Not so fast! Because of the nervous system's two-way-street structure (the brain is a populist democratic leader, not a dictator), not only does our *acture* affect our movements, but **our movements affect our acture**. We can reverse the effects of the fear of falling and other negative impacts on our balance by cultivating movements that change our self-image. Through the *Feldenkrais Method*, we engage the systems that govern our bodily sensations, improve their functioning, and include in our self-image movements that are necessary for healthy balancing.

There are at least six ways the *Feldenkrais Method* helps the mover sense herself more clearly, change her self-image, and improve her *acture*:

1. Increased awareness of sensation

While practicing the *Feldenkrais Method*, students are directed again and again to bring their attention to their sensations—sense while moving, and sense while resting. This is a fundamental practice in the method. Movers become like scientists investigating their own experience. Through careful observation, testing and assessing sensory data, they fill in a more detailed picture of what their

moving bodies are up to, even growing the range of movement possibilities through their “experiments.” Her sensing becomes clearer, richer in information, more able to cope with surprises and varied movement challenges.

2. Smoother quality of movement

When a mover experiences increased awareness of sensation while practicing the *Feldenkrais Method*, the quality of her movements become more apparent. She is more tuned in to where (in herself) and when (during the process of moving) that a movement is strained, rough or painful. When she observes this unsatisfying movement quality, she is able to choose to cultivate a smoother, more comfortable quality of movement. Movements that are smoother are better movements, balancing the actions of the muscles more efficiently.

3. Improved skeletal support

More efficient actions of the muscles, experienced in the mover's awareness as smoother, freer movements, are movements that best utilize the mechanics of the skeletal system. While it is the muscles' job to move the bones, it is the job of bones and joints to provide direction for movement and support for the soft tissues and organs. When the muscles are inefficiently pulling or pushing at the bones in contradiction to the skeleton's design, we get “traffic jams” in the musculoskeletal system. These traffic jams can cause injury and interfere with balance. Practice in the *Feldenkrais Method* helps the mover align the bones, in movement and stillness, with less pressure on the joints, and a more harmonious relationship to gravity.

4. Better Coordination

Bringing together the three benefits of moving with more sensory information, smoother movements and a more efficient use of the skeleton, we can see how the mover might experience better coordination of his parts in time and space. The complex activity of walking, for example—a true symphony of weights and levers, forces and releases, falls and rightings, and multi-sensory communication—becomes high performance in everyday life. The Feldenkrais student's movements are no longer an unconscious tangle of inefficiencies and inhibitions. The process of observing the sensations with care, cultivating smoothness in small, isolated movements, and finding the clearest skeletal support adds up to a whole-self experience of coordinated movements.

5. More nourishing breathing

In a kind of win-win, “chicken or egg” paradox, the mover who practices the *Feldenkrais Method* both improves breathing to improve moving, and is rewarded with better breathing by the improvement of those movements. When

the mover practices sensing himself during *Awareness Through Movement* or *Functional Integration* lessons, he becomes more aware of the movements of his breath. During movement, he observes when his breath is inhibited, when the rhythm of the breath is uneven, and when breathing becomes less than satisfying. The breath becomes a measure. In asking, "Is how I'm moving interfering with my breathing?" the mover is fine-tuning his movements for greater efficiency.

Conversely, one who moves more smoothly, more efficiently, and with better coordination, is better organized for the kind of nourishing, uninhibited breathing he experienced as a baby. Imbalances and inefficiencies in the musculoskeletal system put parasitic demands on the breathing apparatus. When these are released, the ribs, diaphragm, and other parts involved in breathing are free to do their job with less interference. Does better moving improve breathing, or does better breathing improve your moving? Feldenkrais says, "Both!"

6. Internalized change that occurs organically, "from the inside out"

The best part about the way the Feldenkrais Method helps improve the performance of the somatosensory system is that the student achieves improvement through her own efforts, observations and practices. This is because the method directly addresses the governor of all the systems in the body—the nervous system. The nervous system is "turned on" by the mover's careful attention to her sensations; it is soothed by her cultivation of smooth, comfortable movements; and it is tuned to coordinate the musculoskeletal system efficiently in new movements and unfamiliar situations. This is an organic process, much like our learning in early childhood, when no one taught us how to move. We discovered rolling, crawling and walking through testing and observation.

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Practicing the *Feldenkrais Method* can help improve balance at any time of life, at any level of performance. In my classes and private practice, I work both with elders facing the realities of falling and breaking bones, and young dancers, ambitious to stand on one leg longer and more powerfully. All benefit from encountering their acture. Breathing better, sensing more clearly, and moving more smoothly, more efficiently and with better coordination,

helps the mover maintain better balance throughout a lifetime.

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¹Feldenkrais, Moshe. *The Potent Self*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, p. 108.

²Fogel, Alan. *The Psychophysiology of Self-Awareness*. New York: Norton, 2009, pp. 10-11.



POSTURE RELATES TO ACTION
AND NOT TO THE MAINTENANCE
OF ANY GIVEN POSITION.
ACTURE WOULD PERHAPS BE
A BETTER WORD FOR IT.

Emotions and Posture #11

Tiffany Sankary, *Feldenkrais Illustrated: The Art of Learning* (in press). www.movementandcreativity.com. Quote from Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self: A Study of Spontaneity and Compulsion*. Frog Books and Somatic Resources, Berkeley, CA. 1985 & 2002. p.109.