

Listening as Sensing: How *Awareness Through Movement*[®] Is Different from Most Exercise

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Listen, let's make an important distinction

Many kinds of movement training distinguish themselves by the kinds of exercises that constitute their programs. One might focus on strength, another on flexibility; yet another might claim to improve both. Teachers of *Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement* have a different view altogether. We teach students how to learn about themselves, rather than to repeat exercises.

Here is an instruction for a movement you might encounter in any movement class. Go ahead and give it a try. . . .

1. Sit at the edge of your chair.
2. Place your right hand on the top of your head, with your right elbow pointing out to the right.
3. With your right hand remaining on your head, and without sliding your hand around up there, lower your right elbow downward, in the direction of the floor.
4. Repeat this several times.

. . . Now that you've done the movement, reflect back on it for a moment. What were you paying attention to while you were moving? Was it your hand, your elbow, or some other part of yourself mentioned in the instructions? Maybe you were paying attention to the floor, your apparent destination? How fast did you move? Did you have any pleasant sensations or sensations of discomfort while you were moving?

It might very well be that you don't have any answers to my questions. You were just doing the instructed movement. That is how it has been most of our lives; movement education is a series of instructions to follow, and so we move. Generally, we call that exercise.

Now, follow the instructions again, with the italicized comments in mind:

1. Sit at the edge of your chair.

As you sit, notice how the bottom of your pelvis makes contact with the chair's surface. Does the chair seem to press on one side of your pelvis more than the other?

2. Place your right hand on the top of your head, with your right elbow pointing out to the right.

Did you notice the path of your hand as it journeyed from its resting place to the top of your head? Did it go past your ear? Your nose? Which way was your palm oriented? Repeat just this part of the movement, raising and lowering your hand, so you may find out more about how you prefer to do it.

3. With your right hand remaining on your head, and without sliding your hand around up there, lower your right elbow downward, in the direction of the floor.

What parts of you are involved in lowering your elbow this way? Do you sense a change of shape in your spine? Do your ribs fold? Does your pelvis change its contact with the seat, perhaps one buttock pressing more into your seat as you lower your elbow?

4. Repeat this movement several times.

Each time you do the movement, come back to the questions asked above. Begin to fill in the gaps—what is clear and what is not clear? Continue exploring in the direction of a movement that feels pleasant. Experiment broadly with how you might bend and shift your weight each time.

Stop and rest with your hand down, remaining at the edge of your chair. What do you notice about yourself now? What sensations stand out to you? Is there something different in the way you contact your seat? What do you notice about your breathing? What do you notice about your overall comfort?

This second set of instructions is quite different from the first, though the movement described is exactly the same. These instructions immerse you in the *Awareness Through Movement* process. In *Awareness Through Movement* you are invited to turn your attention toward yourself while moving. Your teacher guides you to notice concrete sensations—like the contact your buttocks make with the chair. Again and again, you are brought back to your sense of yourself, in stillness and in movement.

Why not exercise?

“If you don’t know what you’re doing, you can’t do something else,” Moshe Feldenkrais famously said. His hundreds of *Awareness Through Movement* lessons are each laboratories of human action, in which you are both the research subject and the researcher. You sense yourself before, during, and after each movement, guided by your teacher’s instructions, so that YOU

may discern for yourself WHAT you do and HOW you do it—not abstractly, but in a real, nitty gritty, “This is how it is for me right here right now” kind of a way. “When I lower my right elbow to the floor, it drifts forward toward my knee. I didn’t realize I was doing it THAT way” . . . and then self-awareness opens to the possibility of growth and learning. If you sense that you do it *this way*, you can then sense and do it another way, as well.

The invitation to continually sense oneself during movement distinguishes *Awareness Through Movement* from most exercise, because it prioritizes learning-about-oneself over the achievement of a goal that comes from outside yourself. When learning is emphasized over achievement, something very interesting happens: the mover and the mover’s movement are felt to be one, unified in time, space and action. Where most exercise treats “the body” as an object for improvement, and movement as the vehicle driving toward that objectified, idealized end, *Awareness Through Movement* is a place for a human to live and be in, flush with living textures like questions, feelings, observations, inner dialogues, compulsions, pleasures, and all the lovely, messy stuff we bring into our full, embodied presence.

Think for a moment about your ears

Sound comes into your ears at all times, but you don’t hear every sound in your environment. There is a state change when you choose to “listen.” This state change is how we distinguish listening from hearing. When we listen we “open our ears” to music in the concert hall, to the sound of birds and insects in the trees, and to a conversation we want to follow.

Pauline Oliveros, one of the most important composers of the 20th century, was a lifelong listener. She made a pedagogy of her listening practices, and called it [Deep Listening](#). “Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening,” she declared in her book, [Deep Listening](#). We *Feldenkrais* teachers could reformulate Oliveros’ maxim with our own words, “*Awareness Through Movement* is not the same thing as exercise and exercise is not the same thing as *Awareness Through Movement*”.

Think of what you do with your attention when you shift into “listening.” You quiet yourself. Sometimes, you close your eyes to nullify distraction, so you may place more attention on the sounds. In *Awareness Through Movement*, you will often (not always) recline, quieting the reflexes that help you keep upright, so you may sense your movement without interference. You sometimes close your eyes so that you can better tune into your sensations. The teacher encourages you to move slowly and in small amounts, so that your attention can follow your movements which might otherwise race ahead. This deepens your ability to perceive more about yourself, and with greater nuance.

Oliveros says about her practice “Deep Listening for me is learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound—encountering the vastness and the complexities as much as possible.” She continues, “Simultaneously one ought to be able to target a sound or a sequence of sounds as a focus within the space/time continuum and to perceive the detail.” In other words, when practicing Deep Listening, you discern the differences between small things in order to perceive how they are part of the whole.

This is also the case in *Awareness Through Movement*. Your teacher’s instructions guide you to deeply listen to your bodily sensations, opening your inner “ears,” so to speak—to your sense of

touch, pressure, and temperature; your movement's direction, timing and quality; the sense of the length, width, size and shape of your limbs; your sense of effort, pulsing, liveliness, spaciousness, and more. Over and over, you are guided to sense the specific, and then brought back to feel yourself, newly, as a whole.

Listening Deeply

There is another aspect of listening which makes it such an apt metaphor for the *Awareness Through Movement* process. When you say, "I am listening" to a loved one, you refer to something more than just hearing. You turn toward the person, letting them know that you are receptive, attending to their words without preconception. You are accepting of what comes. This is how you turn toward yourself during *Awareness Through Movement*. Your teacher reminds you to hold yourself in your own kind regard, to expect little and leave goals aside. The structure of each lesson carries you through carefully paced activities and rest, unfolding with delightful surprises that provoke your curiosity. The lesson can sweep you up into the quality of non-judgement that allows you to tune into your own needs and preferences. You begin to learn—playfully—more about what you are doing, and how you are doing it, and so you have the option to do it differently.

Take a moment to return to the edge of your seat. Revisit the above movement, slowly, and in a comfortable range, resting as you need. Spread your attention through your whole self; let your curiosity bloom. Listen to the subtle sensations that emerge while you move. If you find yourself looking for "right and wrong," remind yourself that no judgment is required right now. Notice, is there more nuance available than when you began? More specificity in textures, tones, shapes and paths of movement? Or is there more of a sense of wholeness that comes up at this point in the process—just you in motion?

Put your hand down and look around the space you are sitting in. Experiment with tuning into yourself and the room at the same time. End your process by walking; imagine, how would you like to walk into your next challenging situation. Would you like to walk this way? What do you feel in yourself now that you would like to evoke again?

Awareness Through Movement is not exercise, just as listening is not hearing. It is a "deep listening" process, in which you learn about yourself by "opening your ears" to the most fundamental way you have of being in the world—through your actions.



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