Martial Arts

Moving From Your Center In All Directions by Leslie Wilder, GCFP

I love to introduce the Feldenkrais Method® into my teaching. My first Awareness Through Movement® classes were, in fact, taught at the dojo where I have practiced Aikido for 24 years and have been teaching for 15 years. In the 13 years since I began my Feldenkrais® training, I have observed that my personal practice has been clearly enhanced and my Aikido instruction has been enriched. I am 58 years old, and I know the Feldenkrais Method has allowed me to keep practicing Aikido in a very full manner. My technique continues to improve, my Ukemi (the ability to respond to the technique without harm) gets smoother. I continue to take break-falls and do Suwari Waza (knee-walking).

I would like to talk about two specific ideas that I believe have allowed this.

First, the ability to ‘move from your center in all directions’ is of the essence in martial arts and is a major theme in the Feldenkrais Method. Moshe Feldenkrais was a Judo practitioner, and many of the lessons he developed are consistent with the spirit of martial arts.

For example, there is a lesson called the pelvic clock. In its simplest form the student, while lying on the back, pays attention to his/her ability to make a circle with the pelvis around the numbers of an imagined clock face. By exploring this circle, usually one discovers some numbers are more accessible than others. So what is this about?---It is about the ability to move in all directions---but on a much smaller scale. Like the clock lesson, other lessons investigate themes that clarify and improve one’s ability to move; not only in one way but in several ways.

The second idea is more concerned with taking Ukemi. My favorite examples are the wrist ‘stretches’ usually done during warm-ups. They prepare the Uke (partner taking Ukemi) for receiving these very wrist techniques during practice. I tell everybody that the idea is not just to stretch—stretch—streeeeetch, notice how the force on the wrist goes to the elbow—and the shoulder—and let your shoulder blade move! And what effect does this have on your back?”

So perhaps when strong wrist technique is applied, the movement and energy will transmit down to the center, where in fact Nage (partner) is aiming, and the poor wrist will be saved. By receiving and transmitting the technique through the body, Uke can truly learn to fall without harm because the whole self will be contributing and no one single joint will be over-worked.

Leslie Wilder has been a mover since her dancing days. This has led her into physical therapy, 18 years working with children, her Aikido practice, in which she has earned 4th Dan, and of course her Feldenkrais Practice. She runs the Feldenkrais Center of Park Slope with a partner in Brooklyn, New York, and can be reached at les2wilde@aol.com.
When Steven first came to see me, it was about his yoga practice. He explained to me that he had been born with spondylolisthesis (horizontal shift of one vertebrae relative to the next). This, he informed me, gave him lots of back pain, short hamstrings and an inability to do good forward bends. As we worked together, we both learned about how determined his lower back was to remain in an arched curve, and how his pelvis preferred stability to any kind of movement.

After a combination of private Functional Integration® and Awareness Through Movement® group classes, Steven’s back and pelvis were allowing occasional moments of actually reaching his toes. That was when he confessed his true wish. It turned out that he had been studying Aikido for almost 20 years. In all those years, he had been unsuccessful at doing a forward roll. Because he had been at the same dojo (school) for many years, people assumed they could just throw him down and he would roll. But because of his back, it was always a painful crash. While Steve loved the martial art, he was getting weary of his injuries and frustration.

Instead of trying to “fix” his lower back, I decided it would be more rewarding for Steven to work with the actual practice of rolling. Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais had developed many lessons around the Judo roll. One of the benefits of learning how to roll properly is that it offers an avenue of reversibility when falling. If your only option upon falling is to crash-land on the ground, fear of falling can interfere with every step – whether you are a martial artist or a person walking down a street. By discovering the option of rolling, there is less chance of injury when you do fall.

While the Judo roll is slightly different than the Aikido roll, the development of the soft, rounded back and the smooth diagonal movement across the back are the same. I piled a bunch of yoga mats and blankets in the middle of the studio and Steven and I began to “deconstruct” the roll. We began very slowly, actually doing lessons lying on the back that explored the possibilities of flexion in the spine. This eventually led to variations on back rolls. For many weeks, each time Steven rolled back, we’d both feel the “thwack” of his lower back flattening against the floor. I noticed that as he rolled back, he held his breath and tightened his stomach. Slowly, these parasitic habits Steven had developed over years of pain and fear of re-injury began to release their hold.

Eventually we came to hands and knees, exploring lessons where Steven learned to bring his head and arm under the arch of his opposite arm. Each exploration proceeded with great slowness and care. Steven’s alarm system was so finely tuned to danger, that the slightest stress would return the powerful tonus (tension) to his lower back. Sometimes, we would stop doing the movements completely, and I would return to Functional Integration, helping to remind him about all the different ways he had learned to bend and breathe.

The day Steven rolled without crashing was a complete surprise. He just rolled, without preparation, without anticipating failure or success. It was to be the reference movement for our lesson. From a standing position, he executed a perfect Aikido roll. He was so shocked, he couldn’t repeat it that day. But we both knew that something had changed. He had learned a new way of moving with the whole of himself, without interference, without fear.

Although I moved away shortly after that, I heard from Steven that he is still enjoying his rolls, his practice and has continued to integrate the Feldenkrais Method® into his daily routine.

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Applying the Feldenkrais Method® in the Martial Arts
—by Charlie Velez, GCFP

Today’s martial artists are concerned about what can they do to be more flexible, and injury free. As a martial artist I can appreciate this first hand. After my training in 2001, I started to incorporate Feldenkrais® Awareness Through Movement® lessons in my classes. Many students were hesitant because of the strategy of moving slower, as opposed to moving fast.

After starting with actual lessons addressing functional martial arts moves many students were amazed at how much more coordinated they were. In addition, their injury rates dropped considerably.

One of my strategies is to break down a movement into component parts, and have the student do each part separately. This is an effective idea I learned from my martial arts teacher and is also a key element to the way Moshe Feldenkrais designed his awareness through Movement lessons. As a result of my incorporating the Feldenkrais Method into my classes, students now only spend a quarter of the time warming up, so they have more time for practice.

Joe was a student complaining of chronic back and hip pain. He was unsure if he could return to top form in competition. After a series Functional Integration® lessons and using mini-Awareness Through Movement sequences before and after training, he recovered completely. By making the connection that kicking is not just about using only the leg, but involves the ribs and pelvis, and where his head is in space, his balance improved and he no longer experienced major pain.

As Bruce Lee said in his epic movie Enter The Dragon, “Don’t think, feel; that is where the secret lies.” As a Feldenkrais practitioner and martial artist, there is no end to the process of learning to use the self in many different ways.

You can incorporate the following Awareness Through Movement sequence into your martial arts workout.

Hip and Torso Integration:

Try an infamous “round kick” on each side, how does it feel for you today?

1. Lie on your left side, support your head on a pillow or left arm. Right palm on the floor in front of your chest. Both knees are bent, as if you are sitting in a chair.
2. Lengthen your right leg in line with your body. Slowly begin to slide your right leg forward, towards your face and back behind you. How far do you go easily?
3. Keeping your right leg long, begin to roll your pelvis slightly forward and back (as if you are rolling toward lying on your belly, and then toward lying on your back). Does your leg roll? What does your head want to do? Take a short rest on your side, with your knees bent.
4. Lengthen your right leg again. Allow your head to roll forward and back a few times as your pelvis rolls forward and back.
5. Continue, now rolling your head in the opposite direction to the movement of your pelvis. How does this feel different than when you keep your head still? Take a rest again. (This allows your nervous system to integrate the changes that are taking place.)
6. With your right leg long as before, just roll your torso forward and back. What does your right leg do?
7. Now as you roll your torso forward and back, allow your right leg to slide in the opposite direction. Take a short rest.
8. Go back to the first movement. With your right leg long, slide it forward toward your face and back behind you. Is there anything new in your experience? Take a rest on your back, and then slowly stand up.
9. Execute your favorite round kick. How is it now, compared to the beginning?
10. Lie on your right side. In your imagination, carry out the movements on the other side.
11. Good kicking for you!

Charles Velez is a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner and martial artist who was inspired by the spirit of Bruce Lee at an early age. He practices Bruce Lee’s Junfan Kung Fu, Muy Thai, Escrima, Wing Chun, and Brazilian ground work. He is also a New York City fireman, and can be reached at: engine79ladder37@aol.com.
Dr. Feldenkrais and the Martial Arts

Moshe Feldenkrais was a master of Judo; his contributions were recognized throughout the world. He opened the first European school in France in the 1930’s. His two books, *Judo* and *Higher Judo: Ground Work*, as well as numerous articles, are still highly praised by martial artists. He remained connected with Judo training for the rest of his life. On his visits to Japan, many Judo teachers would attend his demonstrations with their students.

In the mid-fifties, the legendary G. Koizumi, a 6th Dan, and Chairman of the European Judo union, called 500 black belts together for an international congress on Judo. When it came time to teach about saika-tanden (or chi), he had Feldenkrais teach the day’s material. Koizumi wrote that the *Feldenkrais Method* “clarifies the interrelationship and the intermingled working of gravitation, body, bones, muscles, nerves, consciousness, subconscious and unconsciousness and opens the way for better understanding” of Judo.

Feldenkrais’ influence on the martial arts is felt even more strongly today: many *Feldenkrais* practitioners study martial arts. From Nin-jitsu to T’ai Chi, from Karate to Aikido, students and practitioners are finding the *Feldenkrais Method* and the martial arts complement and enhance their work on and off the mat.

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