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Exercise Two Ways

Scott Clark
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George came to me for help with his shoulder. He had a good job in a major financial institution, but what he wanted help with was his tennis serve. An accident had torn some ligaments in his shoulder; these had been surgically repaired by "the best shoulder man in the country", but his serve was still really difficult. It wasn't very effective as a serve and it also hurt him to do; the pain that resulted would last for several days.

We worked together for a few months, quite successfully. It was no miracle — you won't see him on Centre Court at Wimbledon — but he can do a lot of things now that he couldn't do before. And while his pain hasn't disappeared forever, it does have a very different relationship to his life: pain now tells him when he is moving badly or when he is doing too much, and he knows what to do. He knows how to change the way he is moving, or at worst, he can rest a bit. Then the pain, like any good alarm, stops: its message has got through.

But an interesting obstacle arose in our work together. From our first meeting, he was keen to take something away from the session, to be given exercises or what we could call 'homework'. Wonderful! I was glad to give him homework! When he arrived the next week, I asked how he got on with it and he said "Well, I did it twenty times every day, but I'm not sure I was doing it right." My heart sank, because I knew from this that he hadn't understood what I was asking him to do. Worse yet, this happened a few times in a row.

What was wrong with his answer? What was I asking him to do? This is the heart of the question. In life we want to *do* things, to *accomplish* things, and that's often the attitude we bring to exercise. If we are moving well, that's great; such an attitude leads us to practice and we grow stronger. But if there is a problem with the *way* we are doing, with the *way* we are moving, we end up exercising our errors, and the errors grow stronger. Instead, we need to take time out from *doing* and *accomplishing*, and change the *way* we are doing. In order to change the way I move, I have to feel the difference: I could move this way or that way. In a real change, one of these ways will be new, will be something that I didn't know before. So there are two ways of exercising: strengthening what we already know, or learning to feel differences that we don't yet know. George thought I was asking for the first, but I was asking for the second.

The approaches couldn't be more different. In the first, you exert your *muscles* in order to physically take in the message: "I must grow stronger! I need more strength!" In the second, you must exert your *attention* to take in, equally physically, the message: "I have choice; like this ... or like that." Neither message is intellectual — I can't just *think* that my muscles have worked, they must *feel* their exhaustion and therefore their need to grow.

Similarly, it isn't enough to *know* about different ways of moving or acting, I must *feel* the different choices, in fact I must feel them more deeply than words can reach. Quite a tall order. Perhaps an example will help. When George would attempt his tennis serve, he would reach upward with his arm but at the same time, instinctively pull his shoulder downward, in a kind of reflex anticipation of pain. He didn't know he was doing that — he had only the vaguest notion what his shoulder was doing. And of course, if the arm reaches one way and the shoulder goes the other, the joint in between doesn't have an easy time. This unconscious reflex produced the very pain it was anticipating; truly a vicious circle. How could he learn to get out of it?

You might think that it would be a simple matter of just stopping, just stopping the reflex action of pulling the shoulder down. It might be have been that simple, but if it had, I'm sure he would already have solved it himself. But the action of pulling the shoulder down was, like so much of our movement, *unconscious*. George didn't know that he was doing it, indeed he couldn't even tell that he was doing it when I pointed it out. So the first thing we did was to practice exactly what he was already good at: pulling down his shoulder! By doing it on purpose, in a number of different positions, pulling it down more, pulling it down less, pulling it down in a slightly different direction — we built up his ability to sense what he was doing with his shoulder. Then we explored pulling the shoulder down while the arm did this movement, that movement; all sorts of unlikely combinations, finally leading into the unlikely combination that was his habit.

To do this really thoroughly took a little while. As we were doing it, I would give him homework to help develop his sense of these movements. And at first, he wanted to do the homework as if it were about strengthening things he already knew, rather than building a new awareness of how he was moving. But eventually we arrived together at this description of how to do the homework: **In Feldenkrais, every movement has a question.** Not just "Can you do this? Can you do that?" but "What is the difference between this and that? How does it feel? Where do you feel the difference? Where else *might* you feel the difference?" Questions designed to forge an awareness that wasn't analytical, wordy, head-oriented, but instead an awareness that was immediate, sensory, feeling-oriented.

When George was really clear how his shoulder *could* be part of his tennis serve, then he suddenly found it easy to recognise his habit, and also easy to do things differently — to move his arm and shoulder together, in a way that was more comfortable and certainly produced a better serve as well! And then he could also go back to the usual way of exercising, the way that strengthens muscles by tiring them out. As Moshe Feldenkrais would often say, "When you know what you are doing, you can do what you want!"