

## **AWARENESS.....AND THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS**

### **November 2007 newsletter**

Lying on the floor in 1975, following Moshe's directions, something indescribable began to unfold. It was a product of the movements and the way of attending to these movements yet it was infinitely more than that. What was happening? What was this openness, this presence, this effortless sense of knowing and being?

What is awareness?  
How does one know it?  
What does it feel like?

How do you know life right now? This is not meant as a theoretical question but one that is vividly alive in this particular moment distinct from any other moment. One could ask: "how does life know itself through your conscious experience right now"? This "right now" is very important because the living experience always occurs in the timeless nether world called "now" or "present moment". How do we know this? Any moment that you are consciously alive simply ask yourself "what time is it"- the answer will always be "NOW". Even this "now" is elusive: as a concept it seems like a point between past and future, as a living experience it leaves the realm of ordinary time altogether and enters into the eternal present. The living experience never occurs in these mental constructs called past and future or even the present (though that is the closest that thought and language can get to it). The first distinction we can make in investigating this quality of consciousness called awareness is that it exists outside of conventional 'time'.

So again please take up the living question: "how do you know life right now?" Is it possible to ask this question with true innocence, not in thought exclusively but as a whole Being, a complete organism? As Moshe pointed out, each experience is an integration of various levels of phenomena: sensation, movement, feelings and thought or using more inner oriented, process language: sensing, moving, feeling and thinking. As nouns these exist as things- disconnected from living experience; as verbs these words point directly toward our living experience. Although every moment is unique, the elements that comprise each moment are quite few, just as a composer has a finite number of notes with which to create infinite song.

### **AWARENESS IS NOT ATTENTION**

In my view, awareness, like love, is a spontaneous, effortless arising that can be encouraged but not created. This is the important distinction between awareness and attention: the former is spontaneous, effortless and free, the latter requires effort and habit. Of course we can make a distinction between the conscious intention to 'pay attention' and attention drawn by the world, say in the form of a loud noise. The former is connected to conditioned habits and the latter a reflexive reaction to stimulation. Neither is synonymous with awareness. Although the intentional movement of attention can be an important ground from which awareness blooms, awareness itself requires no directing and essentially can be invited but not controlled. Think of a flower growing. We can tend the soil, water it, protect it from predators, (these are acts of attention) yet the blossoming itself is beyond our control. Actively directed attention is the main modus operandi of "Awareness Through Movement". More than any other movement, perhaps the dominant study in our work is this- the movement of attention,

Said another way, the subtext of every ATM lesson is the conscious movement of attention. Beyond the learning that occurs within any particular lesson we are guiding people toward greater mastery of their attention. Think of a scan or even better, scan yourself right now. Can you read, processing the words as you simultaneously notice your right foot in the background? What a sophisticated use of attention! In ATM's, we are constantly taking verbally encoded messages and translating them into both movements of attention and, often, physical action. In

the scans, we might be asked to linger on the contact of the right foot or heel with the ground. We then move into the sensations of the lower leg and thigh (practice expanding your attention to include these physical phenomena as you read and process the words right now). After sensing these distinct parts, we might be asked: how do you sense your whole right leg now? Note how different this question is: moving from a rather defined place like the foot or heel to the whole leg. Some of us are more adept at taking in 'wholes', some are more familiar with noticing 'parts'-both are essential in the development of our capacity for attention. Mastery in the domain of attention includes the capacity to go from wholes to parts and parts to wholes with ease. Awareness, also called 'the light of knowing', often arises as a result of diversifying our ways of attending to a moment.

Now, sense the surface that supports you. If sitting, notice the density and texture of the chair, ground or sofa. How does the surface yield to your weight? How hard is it? Here, again, we are making a very sophisticated movement from focusing on the body to shifting attention into the external world. This movement of attention from "inner" (inside the bodily envelope) to the "outer" world is one of the most important capacities for conscious humans. The inability to create clear distinctions between inner and outer worlds is usually indicative of a severely dysfunctional condition in adults. While some of us are strongly biased toward either the external or internal world, it is the comfortable movement between these that is fundamental to maturation. We all know people who seem perpetually out of themselves and others who seem lost inside. How valuable it is to have specific means for expanding one's repertoire in these domains to engender greater balance in our perceptual orientation and encourage awareness to blossom.

When Feldenkrais teachers assume the perspective that the movement of attention itself is the most basic movement that we are exploring then we will include more non-kinesthetic phenomena as part of our investigations. Connecting to the spatial, visual and auditory world and cultivating the capacity to move gracefully between the kinesthetic and these other domains of experience helps us to deepen in our awareness. To include one's sense of position within a room, distance from the door, height of the ceiling, etc. helps us to form a more complete self-image. After years of focusing almost exclusively on kinesthetic questions with my students, I began to notice that I was teaching internally oriented people to move even more into their interiors when becoming more sensitively attuned to the external space might have been more helpful. How fundamental it is in developing awareness that this movement of attention between the inner and outer worlds be free and spontaneous.

Further, as awareness deepens this distinction between inner and outer eventually breaks down completely and one experiences that quality called 'oneness' (note that moving beyond inner/outer duality is not the same as never forming this distinction). Said another way, once our essential ego capacity to distinguish inner and outer world is fluidly developed, we can enter the consciousness where all experience can be viewed as either inner (where we recognize that the 'outer' world is always experienced within the closed system of our brain) and/or outer (where subject/object breaks down and the perceiver vanishes leaving only perception). These transcendent experiences can be encouraged and facilitated through our work when we are conscious of these distinctions. My friend Dennis Leri reminded me that Moshe comments during the Pelvic Clock lesson in "Awareness Through Movement" that synchronizing the clock on the pelvis and the clock on the floor let's one join the awareness of inner and outer into "one essential movement". It is this joining that I am pointing toward. It is part of the inherent 'spiritual' or transcendent aspect of our work.

One more example: focus your attention on an object in your visual field

- Take in the object in a way that is sharp, clear and distinct. Include the color, shape, boundary, as many details as you can so that you can reproduce it in memory. Also, notice how the rest of your body feels, the quality of tone, the breathing, etc.
- Close your eyes and imagine the object for 10 seconds.

- Now put your palms over your gently closed eyes and let them rest by gazing into the blackness for a few moments.
- This time gaze softly at the object attending as much to the background, the setting within which it is placed as you are to the foreground. Let your eyes assume a soft, diffuse focus rather than creating a sharp image. This might feel more or less familiar than the former practice. Again, include the sense of your whole body.
- Finally, close your eyes and recreate your image of the entire picture you have been perceiving,
- How do these ways of organizing your attention offer a different experience of both the world and yourself?

Some of us are more focused, precision types and some of us tend to be more diffuse in our perception. This is different from the former distinction about big picture/ detail orientations. Also, notice how the attention to the visual world influences kinesthetic experience. Often, people who are habitually visually focused have significant parasitic contractions in their back extensors and jaws. By attending to the process of seeing and working with the "grasping" of the visual world, we can often directly influence the entire organization of the person. Intentionally changing what the Gestalt perceptual psychologists identified as the "figure and ground" (foreground and setting) radically alters the experience of the perceiver. These are very significant distinctions for Feldenkrais teachers.

In ATM we are constantly asking people to make distinctions like these, usually in the kinesthetic domain. We intentionally cultivate our mastery of attention to create conditions for the spontaneous dawning of this quality of consciousness called awareness. Think of the emergence of excellence in other activities. Musicians and athletes repeatedly practice certain movements so that, when the capacity is truly ripe, it can emerge spontaneously and even effortlessly. This is mastery- Yehudi Menuhin when in his flow, Michael Jordan in the zone. People in this state often describe a sense of oneness, where the inner and outer world merge and effortless functioning unfolds. Even in ordinary activity, we experience this state when all the levels of the human being are functioning in harmony. This dawning of awareness is the result of deliberate, intentional work with our attention

"In those moments when awareness succeeds in being at one with feeling, senses, movement, and thought, the carriage will speed along on the right road. Then man can make discoveries, invent, create, innovate, and "know". He grasps that his small world and the great world around are but one and in this unity he is no longer alone." Moshe Feldenkrais, "Awareness Through Movement", p.54.

#### THE FEELING OF THE LIVING MOMENT

We now can appreciate the colors comprising the palette of human experience. Each moment- in Moshe's language each action- is a collage of sensing, thinking, feeling and moving. What is most important is the fact that we know ourselves through the enactment of certain actions which include these various elements. The combinations of these basic elements are infinite. When looked at with even more precision, we will see that what we call 'feelings', in the sense of the 'felt sense' of an emotion is actually a combination of bodily phenomena (the broad sense of kinesthetic including pulses, tingles, temperature, tightness, lightness, etc.) and thinking. We can also recognize that all movement is known through sensation. Is it possible then that each unique moment is a weaving of these two elements: sensing and thinking (including intentionality and imagery), everything else being derivative from these? Is the feeling of being alive an infinite combination of bodily sense and thought (in its largest sense)?

It is important to appreciate how feelings arise as a combination of emotion and thought. In this context, I am using Damasio's distinction of basic emotions being biologically based responses designed to help the organism survive. In all animals with limbic systems one can see the

rudiments for human emotional life. Basic fear patterns including Moshe's "Body Pattern of Anxiety", dominance behavior, withdrawal responses, attractions to others, humiliation, anger etc. all developed as organizers of behavior in the physical and social world. Just as reflexes organize a more basic level of behavior, our emotions are bodily responses to environmental situations and when functioning well, enhance survival of individuals and groups. Later we will see how this can go amiss. Damasio distinguishes feelings as the living experience of these emotions, how they 'feel' to the perceiver. In other words, a tight feeling in the belly, constriction in the throat, erratic breathing pattern, cool sensations in the fingers, sense of disease and hyper alertness might be connected to the emotion called fear. Of course, along with these sensations, we have thoughts and images based on memory that generate the whole feeling of the situation.

So we see that for human beings, these biological responses usually become connected with mental stories, thoughts, images, anticipations, which together comprise what we can call having a feeling. Ask yourself right now, "What am I feeling". Take a moment to sense your feeling life. It is possible that more than one feeling is alive in the moment but it is not possible that you are feeling 'nothing', though it is possible that the feelings are vague and/or difficult to sense with any clarity). For example, are you interested, bored, curious, upset, energetic, sad, or.....? Now ask yourself, how do I experience this feeling in my body, how is this feeling alive as embodied phenomena? At this moment, as I sort for words to express my ideas I feel excitement (increase in vitality, hands move faster, clearer vision, overall positive sense) along with interest (tingles in my forehead) and also frustrated (tightness in my mouth, subtle contractions in my gut, an undesirable sense of threat) as the words become elusive. Although there is a definite 'overall' feeling it is difficult to summarize this 'felt-sense' in a word right now. The feeling state is an appraisal of the desirability of the moment (positive, negative, neutral), though it is infinitely more than this. While its true basis is somatic, there is usually a detectable storyline or series of stories that relate to those sensations, e.g. "I want this article to be of interest", "maybe these thoughts are too esoteric". I suggest that Feldenkrais teachers have much to offer the world in relation to the feeling life of people. By helping people connect more deeply to the kinesthetic roots of their experience the possibility arises to enter the direct bodily experience rather than focusing on the story. In my experience, this allows the troubling emotions to serve their function and move quickly through the organism as they do in infants, rather than being reinforced through unconscious internal dialogue colloquially called 'thinking'. This is where the awakening of awareness is essential for freeing ourselves from the behavioral and thought patterns that sustain habitual, unfulfilling feeling states.

Often people who find their emotions overwhelming- who feel like they are always going from one emotion to another- find great solace in learning to 'ground' themselves in more neutral kinesthetic phenomena. Just feeling their feet on the floor, the weight in their bottom when sitting, seems to allow the emotion to pass through the body rather than take up residence. Attending to the breathing and the parasitic contractions can also help this kind of balancing.

There is another way in which kinesthetic awareness can serve as a 'missing link' in helping our students (and ourselves) uncover greater balance and wholeness in the experience of life. Many people report being disconnected from their feelings or, as likely, their loved one's report this gap. Often those who live lives where feeling states predominate have intimate partners who are 'heady' and seem to be out of touch with their feelings. I have noticed that waking up to kinesthetic phenomena is often a doorway into the feeling life. These people are often disconnected from the somatic base of feelings and the constant intellectualization doesn't help them to feel what is going on at a deeper level (deeper refers to depth in the brain where thinking is higher and emotion deeper). Learning to pay attention to these sensations, usually with guidance, can help the dawning of awareness of this other level of experience. People often feel more whole when both the thinking and feeling life are more easily accessible. As Feldenkrais teachers we can function as guides for this awakening, including, though not focusing on, the emotional aspect. In addition to our usual questions (weight, breath, which leg

is longer etc.), it is helpful if we include other distinctions like: pulses, tingles, temperature, sense of emptiness or fullness, constriction in throat, tightness in the belly, empty feeling in the chest, etc. To use of language and imagery that connects the kinesthetic sensations to feelings can be very helpful for some of our students.

This integration of feeling, thought, intention and action is the hallmark of aware functioning. As Moshe points out, " Without awakened awareness we perform what the older brain systems do in their own way, even though the intention to act came from the higher third system (i.e. cortical). Moreover, the action often enough proves to be the exact opposite of the original intention". (ATM, p.46-47). Said another way, older, emotionally based habits that developed while we were in a period of absolute dependence will dominate our behavior unless we develop the requisite awareness to cultivate alternative possibilities.

One of the key and essential distinctions between our work and that of many other awareness based approaches is that we include a functional exploration of action, not simply learning to sense, feel or think differently. This functional aspect seems to influence the capacity of human beings to integrate the learning at a deeper level. I suspect that "just" sensing, "just" feeling, or "just thinking", while helpful, usually fall short in creating lasting transformation.

#### AWARENESS AND THE MOVEMENT FROM FEAR TO LOVE

Moshe saw the dawning of awareness as a new stage in the development of consciousness on this planet. It does not mean that awareness did not exist in earlier times, it means that for the first time humanity has the capacity to generalize this capacity, radically changing how we live. Although we don't use the word love so often in our method, I call this change: the movement from fear to love as the basic operating principle of humanity.

As we said before, fear arises in evolutionary history with the development of limbic (mid-brain) animals (reptiles have protective, mating, fight/flight behaviors but no evidence of emotional life). The capacity for fear is essential for survival as are the basic 'flight or flight' responses. Many of our movements toward and away from things/beings in our environment are linked to basic fear responses initiated by the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. This system, which developed in a radically different environment than we live in today, often responds in ways that are ill suited to the current world. Alarm responses to loud noises are effective in the jungle and often, though not always, unhelpful in New York City.

A hyper-vigilance of an overactive sympathetic nervous system with the corresponding profusion of adrenaline, though helpful when dealing with reality based dangers, is often counterproductive for modern humans. To walk around with a more or less chronic startle reflex, complete with contracted flexors, tight sphincters, raised shoulders, contracted neck, inhibited breathing, fixated or darting eyes is not conducive to effective survival responses in the world. As one learns to gain confidence in both their equilibrium and capacity to recover gracefully when knocked down, the 'set point' of the autonomic nervous system can change. Fullness in the lower abdomen, vitality without tension in the pelvic floor, freedom of the diaphragm, smooth movement of the head and eyes are all reflections of this change. With neutrality defined both in terms of Moshe's "acture" (the ability to move in any direction without a prior reorganization) and autonomic balance, we can get a picture of a functional, responsive, capable human being.

Additionally, there is already a biological model for more parasympathetic, cooperative responses to difficulties. Recent brain research has been placing more emphasis on the positive emotional circuitry in our brains. For years the emphasis has been on fear and pain with little interest in the neurology of love, peace and happiness. Also, after a history of extreme imbalance, recent neurological research is including more women in many experiments and making some surprising discoveries. When combined with data accumulating on long-term

meditators, new models are developing for the neurology of caring, positive emotion and various states of consciousness. For example, there is a molecule called oxytocin, which seems to facilitate caring behaviors and attachments between people (let alone penguins!). It is very prevalent in lactating mothers (all species with oxytocin show care for offspring and usually life-long monogamy) as well as in men and women during orgasm and deep bonding experiences. While more powerful in females because it is facilitated by estrogen, it also has an influence on male behavior. The theory of a "tending instinct" to go along with the "fight or flight" model grew from this research. Nurturing each other is also a significant part of our survival strategies and history. In fact, for numerous sociological, economic, and gender based reasons the "struggle for survival" is the dominant story we hear about in popular descriptions of evolution. Newer models now include "the cooperation for survival" as at least as strong an influence on the unfolding of life. Imagine the cultural paradigm shift if this attitude acquires the same traction as the competitive side!

Of course the sympathetic nervous system is essential for survival and I am not suggesting that its protective, defensive and aggressive responses should be eliminated. The issue is one of balance. Many people in the modern world feel overwhelmed by constant, high level sensory inputs. As we get addicted to louder, brighter, faster stimulation, our threshold increases requiring even stronger exciters to make an impression. I wonder if we are conditioning ADD in our children with the drive toward bigger, faster and louder sensations. Even in the last twenty years, I have noticed a huge increase in the number of children who complain of boredom when electronic stimulation is absent. Further, the mass media, knowing that the brain is wired to pay attention to danger, uses fear induction techniques to call our attention. When added to the fact that we are wired to orient toward the 'new' (in evolutionary history 'new' meant important and potentially life threatening) our obsession with 'news' becomes understandable. Combined with large doses of caffeine and sugar, we glimpse a culture that is hooked on adrenaline and sympathetic autonomic stimulation. Many dysfunctional and most disease states are caused, reinforced or exacerbated by this imbalance.

As Feldenkrais teachers one of the main influences we can have on the culture is through our effective means for helping to balance these autonomic responses. Ultimately, this might be our greatest potential contribution to the world today. Now, it is not easy to move from fear to love (think of love as a condition of openness to life, an attitude of nurturance) as the dominant way of meeting life. Why is it so hard for people to change? Why is awareness such a key component in such behavioral change? With any change of behavior two very strong biological forces encounter each other: the conservative impulse to keep things as they are and the impulse toward growth.

As soon as water is poured down a slope the tendency for future water to follow the same path is already embedded into the hillside. Something similar happens in the brain and in behavior. Any action that has not resulted in great threat or pain has a greater chance of being enacted than a behavior that has never occurred. There is already a series of neural nets that embody that behavior. Organisms are conservative in the sense that they repeat behaviors that have not compromised survival and/or has had any life giving benefit, no matter how situation specific and, perhaps, ultimately compromising for one's health and happiness. This is why habits can be so hard to change. Secondly, there is a natural selectivity for cautious, but not too cautious behavior. Most of our ancestors who were immune to fear did not survive.

On the other hand, healthy life seeks to grow (think of a dandelion growing out of a sidewalk in a polluted city) and healthy human life seeks, new experiences, new learning, and new possibilities. Most infants enjoy exploring their world and most healthy adults keep exploring life in one form or another. Even in minor ways, people want to know what is new, what is changing, what is different. This is curiosity in action. Those of our ancestors, who were unwilling to change and, for example, move to places with more abundant food sources and protection, also did not survive.

These two forces: the conservative- i.e. life's tendency to repeat itself and the growth oriented, i.e. the urge for change are in a dynamic struggle much of the time- the classic immovable object (conservation) meeting the unstoppable force (growth). This dynamic tension arises in healthy systems. Historically, the tendency toward the conservative has dominated, with change arising only under great pressure. Most evolutionary development arose out of environmental pressures. Can we continue to depend on catastrophe to create change? Can we survive this proclivity given our current technological capacity? Protection patterns and the tribal consciousness that historically resulted in only local destruction can now destroy the whole world.

Awareness is the capacity that can help the human being uncover new behaviors without the threat of imminent danger. It can help us overcome the fear-based orientation of our lower brain when such fear is not congruent with reality. Through this 'waking up' which literally means sensing the fear based patterns in our bodies, noticing the stories that arise in our thinking, developing the capacity to remain conscious prior to mobilizing action, as well as learning alternative organizations, we can encourage our impulse to sustain and nurture life to become dominant. As Moshe revealed so clearly, when we have the capacity to stand on our own feet, to move comfortably and powerfully from center and to breathe freely, we can have the confidence to approach life with curiosity, openness and love. Awareness is the inner condition that allows this movement from fear to love.

What does awareness feel like? When sitting on a cushion practicing Zen meditation, one begins noticing thoughts and sensations coming and going. At first the meditator feels like the 'subject' perceiving these 'objects'. The sense of observing from within oneself, (often from within one's head) dominates. Sometimes, this sense of perceiving from a particular location gives way to the deep sense that the experience and the experiencer melt into each other. This is not a thought, it is the perceived reality. There is an indescribable sense of wholeness, of knowing and knowing that one knows. I think something similar can happen in ATM.

I often ask my students and myself, "What are the signs of life you notice right now"? What are your most basic sensations, as much as possible, free from acculturated story, evaluation and judgment? This question is always fresh, new and innocent. Think of a preverbal infant sensing the coolness of the sheets underneath, the tingling skin, moving gasses, blinking eyes, shining colors, vibrating sounds to appreciate this freshness. Yet does the infant really 'know' in the way that adult consciousness can 'know'? As one drops deeper into these living experiences as an adult, the capacity to simultaneously experience and know that one is experiencing emerges. The knower, the known and the capacity for knowing all arise together. In this moment one can say awareness has dawned. The light is on. One knows that one knows without thinking. Afterwards, one can use thought and memory to report on the experience (though experience might be the wrong word because in the actual moment of experiencing there is no experiencer just as there is no moment). Though this sounds somewhat esoteric, it really is known to all of us. The difficulty is that the report that 'we' make to 'ourselves' on the experience happens so quickly that unless we attend quite intimately we have the sense that 'I' am doing it.

Once again we can look to modern neurology for a model to guide us through this confusion. The concepts of brain modules (somewhat autonomous regions with specific functions) plus the fascinating, almost spiritual question of whether there is a central "I" which functions as the chief executive of these modules, are helpful. Is it possible, as many neurologists propose, that the entity that we call "I" is actually a reporter who signals, after the fact, that something has happened- that a decision has been made or behavior initiated? While we have the conscious image that the "I" which feels like 'me' is the chooser, the leader, the one who wills these events, might this be the ultimate self delusion? If so, then might it be more accurate to imagine the "True I" as the light, the awareness, which makes these inner workings known? The analogy of a film projector is illustrative. While watching a movie, most people identify the 'self'

with the characters in the film and/or the storyline. Perhaps it is more accurate to think of the 'self' as the "light" which allows the character and the story to be known.

Really, in the living moment, awareness just dawns, it is quite impersonal until owned by a particular mind as 'their' experience. The deepest moments that I know in ATM have this quality. It feels like knowing without a knower and expresses an intimacy that feels very ancient yet utterly new. Although I couldn't have described this then, this was the first deeply moving experience I had with Moshe back then in San Francisco. The lessons were not so interesting to me and I did not appreciate the subtleties until later. I do remember lying there in the third or fourth week of my first year of training in June of 1975, effortlessly inhabiting vast inner/outer space, the light on internally and the sense of returning to my true home.