

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1972 ESALEN NOTES OF MOSHE FELDENKRAIS

By David Zemach-Bersein

In 1972, Moshe Feldenkrais was invited to teach at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, for a sustained period of five and a half, weeks. He had visited the United States twice before; first in 1958, to teach and study at the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine in New York City. And again in 1970, for a brief stay at the Esalen Institute.

Founded in 1962, the Esalen Institute was an important center for the development of new ideas in philosophy, education, psychology, eastern spirituality, medicine, somatics and what would later become known as the field of 'embodied cognition'. Esalen was a combination of a gathering place in which intellectuals from these various fields could interact, and a place where they could test their new ideas by teaching workshops which were open to the public.

Dr. Feldenkrais' invitation to teach at Esalen for five weeks was a landmark event, signaling the first swell of interest - outside of Israel - in his approach to human development. Many of the participants at the workshop were already leaders in what was termed 'the human potential' movement. This social and cultural movement had emerged primarily out of humanistic and existential psychology, and its central tenet was the idea that each individual has the potential for growth, self-fulfillment and self-determination. Feldenkrais' ideas about the plasticity

of the brain, and our ability to learn new ways of sensing, thinking, moving and acting, fit in perfectly. The world was finally catching up with him.

Sponsored by Esalen, and organized by psychologists Stanley Keleman and Will Schutz, the invited participants in Feldenkrais' workshop included psychotherapists, Seymour Carter, Jack Downing, Betty Fuller, and Richard Price, and *Alexander Technique* Teachers, Frank Ottiwell, Ilana Rubinfeld, and Judith Stransky. Both the participants and Dr. Feldenkrais considered the course, as a 'Teacher Training' in *Awareness Through Movement*, and at the end, each person was given a certificate allowing them to teach ATM.

The Esalen Notes are not really 'notes', but actually transcripts made by workshop participant Judith Stransky, from audio tapes of the classes. The *Awareness Through Movement* lessons featured in the Esalen course were each 45 minutes long. In addition to recordings made by the Esalen Institute and the participants, Feldenkrais taped each lesson himself, because he was considering the possibility of publishing them as an audio cassette program.

By the time he accepted the invitation to teach at Esalen in 1972, Feldenkrais had completed his seminal book, *Awareness Through Movement* (HarperCollins), and had finished training his first group of *Feldenkrais Method* Practitioners, thirteen dedicated students, in Tel-Aviv, Israel. But, in many ways, Feldenkrais' course at Esalen was a 'first'. Teaching for an uninterrupted period of five plus weeks, provided Feldenkrais with a rare, sustained teaching context,

the likes of which he had never had before. In his public classes in Israel he frequently had two or three classes in a row, but each class had a new group of students. And, his Tel-Aviv training program (1968-1971) took place on only one day a week, over a period of three years. Because his Tel-Aviv training students had been attending his Alexander Yanai group classes for many years, the primary focus during the training was on learning the individual work, which would soon be named, *Functional Integration*. In fact, it was at this Esalen workshop in 1972, during a brief discussion with the workshop participants, that the terms *Awareness Through Movement* and *Functional Integration* were chosen to replace group technique and individual technique.

At Esalen, Feldenkrais was freed from the constraints of the market place. He was able to direct himself to one, consistent group of highly engaged students, and had the opportunity to 'start at the beginning', following a path of both developmental and intellectual continuity, putting his thinking into action. And, that is exactly what he did. Each day was divided into two *Awareness Through Movement* lessons, two lectures or talks, and two *Functional Integration* lessons given to members of the group. Unfortunately, but thankfully, our only available record of the workshop, is Judith Stransky's transcript of the *ATM* lessons.

The Esalen course marks the beginning of the most creative period of Feldenkrais' life work. In order to make certain useful distinctions, we can describe the period between 1945-1955 as Feldenkrais' 'early period', in which he developed his theoretical framework and the form of group lessons. From

1956-1970 Feldenkrais, no longer working as a physicist, developed his unique individual 'hands-on' approach and the great majority of his group lessons. In his 'late period', spanning the years 1971-1981, Feldenkrais was at his most generative and synthetic, integrating his insights from psychology, physiology, pedagogy, evolution and physics into a uniquely comprehensive and ultimately potent viewpoint for human transformation. In many ways, Feldenkrais' 'late period' represents the full realization and energetic transmission of his project. Of course, these time related markers are inexact. But, I believe that there are important and interesting distinctions to be made between Feldenkrais' teaching in Esalen, Amherst, and the Quest workshops, compared to most Alexander Yanai lessons. Esalen signals the dawning of the most creative, experimental and generative period in Feldenkrais' life.

I would suggest that The Esalen Notes is one of single most important documents we have of Feldenkrais' teaching of *Awareness Through Movement*. It is a veritable *tour de force*. The ATM lessons are taught in a clear and deliberate sequence of gathering complexity, giving us an unusual insight into Feldenkrais' pedagogical priorities and developmental thinking. In other words, we are able to see Feldenkrais explicating his thinking by the means of *Awareness Through Movement*, and easily understand what exactly was most important to him. In addition, Feldenkrais wants the participants to understand the theory behind what he is doing, and so he offers a level of explanation about the lessons not to be found anywhere else, except for in the San Francisco training program, which would begin in 1975.

From the perspective of a *Feldenkrais* Teacher, The Esalen Notes are the best resource we have for teaching ATM to the public. Apart from the *San Francisco Evening Class*, also published by *Feldenkrais Resources*, no other source material exists in which we can observe Dr. Feldenkrais making deliberate lesson selection for a naive group, over an extended period of time, with a clear demonstration of how he would build gradually from the simple to the more complex, from the easy to the more demanding. Further, in my opinion, every lesson taught at Esalen is full and rich in a way that is rarely found in the Alexander Yanai lessons. I recommend that you start as Moshe intended, at the beginning, do two lessons a day, and allow yourself at least one hour for each lesson. Soon you will feel the full transformative power of *Awareness Through Movement* and appreciate what a jewel the The Esalen Notes are.

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Post Script: How did these 'notes' come to be available? After eight months studying with Dr. Feldenkrais in Tel-Aviv and London, I returned to the United States in 1974, to begin graduate school in psychology at Cal State University Los Angeles. I began attending *Awareness Through Movement* classes that Judith Stransky was teaching on the west side of LA. Judith had lived in Israel from 1957-1959 and attended group lessons led by Lydia Macoosh, a student of Moshe's. At some point, she asked me to substitute teach for her and generously gave me a copy of her transcripts of the 1972 Esalen workshop ATM's. What a bounty of riches! Until

that time, my only resources for ATM lessons were notes I had taken during classes at Alexander Yanai, and audio cassettes of Feldenkrais' 1973 five-week long Berkeley workshop, most of which I had attended. When, in 1984, Elizabeth Beringer and I started *Feldenkrais Resources*, the first thing we did was ask for permission to publish The Esalen Notes. We owe Judith a profound thank you for creating The Esalen Notes, to Elizabeth for publishing this new, handsome edition, and as always, to Moshe for his enduring genius and legacy.