Talk

Angela 2 — Week 2, Day 5, Session 3 — 15 minutes

Summary: Russell tells how Moshe Feldenkrais, among wartime scientists and drawing on submarine work and judo, pictured the pelvis as an engine and the head and spine as a periscope. He recalls Tai Chi master Ben Lo, recommends The Potent Self, and says his access to Moshe is through the body's wisdom, not through asking what Moshe would say.

A picture from the submarines

[Russell:] Okay, so this is the third year of San Francisco training. This is 1977, and Moshe was — yeah, he had quite a picture.

One of the main analogies he liked to use in his teaching, the physical analogies, was based on his work in World War II on submarines. So that was part of his history.

Let's see. When he had gone from Paris, working in the Curie laboratory in radioactive research, and then the Nazis were coming into Paris, so he took the radioactive research and went to the UK, where he joined the group of scientists who were working in the war effort.

And this was a very important time of his life. Living with these scientists is when he wrote Body and Mature Behavior and The Potent Self. And he stashed The Potent Self in a box, and I was the first person to read it, because I was staying at his house, in his apartment, after his stroke in '82. But that's another story. Let me go back. That's a really — yeah, we'll get to that.

Where did meditation go?

Okay, so Moshe was working on submarines. He was living with these scientists, and each story leads to other stories, because it's an important insight. Does everybody know this part of his life?

Okay. Well, so this time was when he was developing his ideas about this work, and it was also the beginning of cybernetics. It was the beginning of systems kind of work that was going on. The people he was living with were the early people beginning to think of how — like game theory, and where much of the coming computer work came from.

They were working out strategies to predict the German invasion patterns, and how they could try to predict those patterns based on the knowledge they had. So it was a whole different way of thinking. And this is a whole group of scientists living together.

And his understanding of the brain as a system, and of the body as a system, was really growing at the same time. So it was very germinating of ideas on multi-planes.

And so the submarine was when he got the picture of, well, the human body is designed to move from the middle. And he was already teaching judo for many years. Designed to move from the

middle, with the head, the spine long like a periscope. And the periscope should be able to take in the world as much as possible and be empowered from the engine.

So the pelvis became the engine, the spine and head became the periscope, and it was the freedom of the head to scan the world and the power of the pelvis to mobilize the whole self in any direction. And that way of picturing it grew.

Of course, it began in his judo time, but that image came. So he was talking to us a lot from that analogy of the freedom of the head and neck, the link through here, and the empowerment through the middle.

Ben Lo and push hands

A number of us were studying different kind of martial arts in San Francisco while we were in training. So I happened to be studying with this fairly well-known Tai Chi master and push hands master named Ben Lo. Anybody here know Ben Lo? Do you know Ben Lo?

[Student:] Yeah.

[Russell:] Okay, so Ben Lo was kind of famous in a little world. And so we invited Ben Lo to come to the training. And here's this — you know, and he was famous for his tanden, you know, dantian, and his push hands.

Push hands is a kind of martial art where you're softly listening for openings and moving from here, and then being able to shift. And because you're so empowered from here, you're able to generate such energy that with a small touch, the person goes flying.

Well, Feldenkrais was giving us stories about the potency of the middle. And the story of how he — I'll get back to Ben Lo — about how Feldenkrais was trained by the Japanese, private lessons in Paris, to try to bring judo to the Caucasian world, because the Japanese were failing at doing that.

And he had written a book on the martial arts when he was young in Palestine. So they looked at his book. He actually went to a judo contest — a demonstration — and he was sitting near the Japanese ambassador, gave the ambassador a copy of his book. The ambassador gave it to Professor Kano, who was the originator of modern-day judo.

Kano said, this move for taking a knife away is impossible, that Feldenkrais had invented. So Feldenkrais demonstrated it, and they decided he knew something, so they decided to train him. So he opened the Paris judo school.

And he was studying at the Sorbonne — well, training at the Sorbonne, studying there — started the Paris judo school, and then was working in the Curie laboratory. So that was his Paris.

He goes to England, starts a judo club in London, then they go off to the UK with the scientists, they're working together. And that was when he started actually teaching Awareness Through Movement — converting judo, where this work originally came from, into movement.

He had this great realization: I don't need to teach people how to fight, I need to teach them how to be well organized in their bodies. Moving from center, lengthen their spine, freedom in their heads, well grounded — that if they can have that, they won't need to fight. They'll be secure in themselves. They'll be capable of dealing with situations.

It was a pretty brilliant original insight, I think. Somebody — especially in that era.

The greeting

Okay, so we're in San Francisco, and Moshe's been teaching us, and we tell him, Ben Lo is coming to meet you. And we had told him about Ben Lo, and Feldenkrais was very politically incorrect, almost habitual. It was like he almost couldn't resist it, right?

And so — stand up a second. So Ben Lo comes in. I was escorting Ben Lo, and Feldenkrais is walking across the room, and he kind of waddles around. He goes up to Ben Lo, and he — just walk your way.

He didn't say anything. And then Moshe ended.

[Student:] What happened?

[Russell:] So that's my two favorite tanden stories: me with the Japanese guys, and Eisenbuch then sent there, and then Lo with Moshe.

Yeah, you're right. He was okay. Everyone laughed after that, and then he just hung out. But the initial greeting was just — and walked away as if that was going to be it.

But he was pretty comical. He saw himself as an actor too.

The Potent Self

I feel just — right now, no. I feel so right at this moment in touch with Moshe, and it's great. It's a blessing. I feel so grateful. I feel so very grateful for his courage and his brilliance.

Yeah, one of the books I recommend — I usually recommend it in your third year, but I think you have the whole reading list. Didn't we put out the whole — yeah — is The Potent Self. And The Potent Self is a really fascinating book to work with, to read.

It was, again, he wrote it concurrently with Body and Mature Behavior, but he was reluctant to publish it. Because Body and Mature Behavior — those of you who've read it, it's also a really brilliant book — is much more the kind of scientific underpinnings of the Feldenkrais method. And he's talking as a physicist. It's heady, right.

But this is when he was living with the scientists, and he was feeling absolutely insecure about coming out in the world. Because the rigorousness of the thinking, and now he's talking about sensing and listening, so he had to make a neurological, physiological, and physics case for how we can get more sensitive.

And he did it, in terms of what it takes for the nervous system to make finer distinctions, and how, if it can't make finer distinctions, it can't learn new patterns. And to get finer distinctions, you had to get more sensitive in what you could sense. And to do that, you had to use less effort, because if you use more effort, you couldn't make subtle distinctions.

And so he brought this whole case that could make sense to a scientist, about why you'd lie on the floor and move so little bit.

But The Potent Self was his psychological justification for the work, predominantly. I mean, it does talk about the nervous system in there also, but it's much more — and so he didn't want to be seen as a flake.

And so it was in a box in his apartment. And some Israeli people said, you know, have you ever seen that book of Moshe's? You know, he said he has a book in a box that he's never published.

So I said, Moshe, what's this book you've never — he goes, oh, it's over there. I wrote it a long time ago. And we were just — so I said, well, can I read it? Can I look at it?

So, Moshe, this would be great to publish. He goes, you think it's still interesting? You know, and then other people read it also, and I had no hand in publishing, but it then came to fruition, and it's really got something.

I don't — all of it doesn't line up for me, but much of it is brilliant.

What would he say

[Student:] In a focusing, self-focusing session that you would do for yourself, would you ever ask yourself what would Moshe say?

[Russell:] No, no, no. I'm much more confident in the wisdom body than in my image. Now, I'm not saying everybody should have that. Other people can think of Buddha or Moshe or Christ or somebody as a reference. For me, that begins to become a little conceptual, and that's just me.

For other people, they can internalize another in a way that I don't. But I can — he lives in me, but my access is through — not through thinking about him, or what would he do.

Just the different ways we go inside, you know.

Well. Actually, we need to walk first. We've been sitting for a while.

It worked!