

The *Feldenkrais Method* in the Yoga Class

By Ofer Erez

Yoga classes have always been a gathering point for people with widely diverging abilities, interests, and states of health. Two of my yoga students with very different problems found benefits from *Feldenkrais*® work.

Kathleen Clute had been coming to my yoga classes for several months. Being in good health, she enjoyed the classes but found her lack of flexibility annoying. She had done yoga for years and regularly included the Salute to the Sun (a series of 12 consecutive movements, coordinated with breathing, that are repeated several times) both as a warm-up and to get in shape. One of the more difficult movements starts in a push-up position. From there a foot is brought forward and aligned with the hands.

“I have been doing the Salute to the Sun for many years and have always found it difficult to bring my leg to the front,” she said. “Do you have any suggestions?” I have noticed that this is a common difficulty for many yoga students and have done experiments myself in order to find the source. It seems to result from a lack of rounding in the lower back at the proper time.

I immediately suggested she could bring the foot from the outside instead of from in between the hands, for increased comfort and ability. The suggestion proved helpful for Kathleen. She wanted to find out more about what the *Feldenkrais Method*® can do for her and decided to try a *Functional Integration*® lesson.

She came to the lesson saying, “I don’t have any specific problems except some pain in one leg and one foot that is always pointing inward. Can you do something about it?”

I noticed a connection between the in-turned leg and the difficulty in the Salute to the Sun. Both movements involve the lower back and ribcage in a direct way. If they do not participate well in the action, there is difficulty with most movements of the legs as well as with rounding the back. The muscles connecting the legs to the torso tend to become stiff and stubborn. Her *Functional Integration* lesson involved discovering the mobility of the hip joints and lower back. A lesson of this kind can be gentle yet powerful. It improves mobility of the legs and aids posture, balance and walking.

After the next yoga class she sounded very excited. “I did it!! I brought my leg forward without any trouble... the easiest move in 28 years... better than when I was in college.”

Kathleen now comes to class with a new interest: looking for easier and simpler ways to do the Asana and other exercises we do in class. She is also continuing her *Functional Integration* lessons.

The second student, Marie Mollart, was very stiff due to the effects of Parkinson’s disease. She started doing yoga in order to improve her situation, reduce the effects of the illness and return to the active life she had in the past. “I didn’t want to use the drugs that are usually prescribed,” she

said. “They have unpleasant side effects. I decided instead to change my lifestyle.” She had been attending yoga classes for about a year and her progress had been consistent yet slow and arduous. “Bending in any direction has been very difficult for me,” she says, “But the backward bending Asana are the most difficult. I am improving but would like to improve faster.”

Seeing that her progress was frustratingly slow, in spite of her regular attendance in class, I decided to offer more specialized help - to try a *Functional Integration* lesson.

The first lesson I did had to proceed very slowly. Aside from the stiffness and tremors that are common to Parkinson’s disease, I know there is also a slowing down of the reaction time of the brain which tends to cause general instability and discomfort with fast movements. Within these constraints, I developed a lesson relating to her interest in bending backward. I was careful to incorporate the legs, lower back and ribcage in a useful, functional action. The lesson helped Marie sense the lengthening that is possible through the thighs and chest in front while using the back for movement. This introduced the possibility of a more comfortable posture and faster movement.

At the end of the lesson she felt taller, had more space for breathing and her posture and walking were better. The change was clearly visible during the next yoga class. Considerable improvement could be observed in all of the asana that call for any sort of bending backward - even several twisting ones. Marie was very pleased with the improvement in the postures as well as the added ease with which she was able to perform them.

She remembers how she felt after the *Functional Integration*. “It was a very surprising feeling! I felt taller and lighter. My posture and walking were easier, softer and seemed simpler. I quite hoped it would stay for a very long time, and I still feel it now.”

She decided to come for several more *Functional Integration* lessons to continue her improvement in yoga and reduce the effects of Parkinsons’ Disease in her life.

Ofer Erez maintains his *Feldenkrais* practice in Pleasant Hill, California.