

local people

A new way of moving

Many of us know what it feels like to carry chronic pain or stiffness around. It might have started with an injury, or maybe it's the result of a bad habit that has been repeated for years. Geoff Helisma investigates the Feldenkrais Method.



Awareness Through Movement classes can help people learn how to reactivate muscles that have long been inactive.



Tom Vudrag guides a client's movement during a Functional Integration lesson.

On Easter Monday, my manager at the Review awoke in agony. Paralysed with back spasms, she was unable to get out of bed and was going to call an ambulance. But next to the phone on a bedside table, the business card of Tom Vudrag, a Yamba practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method, caught her eye. She called him instead. Ninety minutes and a house call later she was standing straight, and most of her pain had dissipated. "I want you to write a story about the Feldenkrais Method," she told me when I next saw her.

My own back pain has been something I've actively managed since acute spasms saw me bed ridden half a dozen times in the mid 1980s. My self management strategy consists of 20 minutes of yoga stretching each morning and the occasional visit to the chiropractor – when the wallet can afford it. This had been working quite well over the years, but recently my back and neck pains were getting harder to handle, so the opportunity to play guinea pig for the sake of a story was a fortuitous opportunity.

Tom Vudrag first became interested in how the body moves, or doesn't, through an unexpected discovery. "I worked on the Kiribati Islands in the central Pacific for three years and met these bone doctors," he says. "They showed me things that I didn't think were possible. I'd had a motor bike accident and injured my chest and had developed a cough. One of these bone doctors heard me coughing and said it was caused by an injury – it wasn't a cold or flu or anything like that.

"He gave me some treatment and it was so powerful and effective that I went to sleep for 24 hours. After that, it became a fascination that set me searching for a similar mode of treatment."

Sometime later, living in Cairns, Vudrag suffered a severe whip-lash injury. "I saw a chiropractor and I got relief, but there was no way to self-manage myself, so I had to keep going back and it was costing me a fortune. I came across the Feldenkrais Method years later and started doing it, got results and eventually got to the point where I could self manage."

So profound were the results for Vudrag, he moved to Melbourne, studied for four years and became a certified Feldenkrais practitioner. "To my pleasure it was one of the best four years of my life," he says. "I learnt a huge amount about how we move, how we think we move and how different we actually move to what we think."

"Half the people in the training were physios who wanted to learn the method because it is so effective. I was quite surprised that one of the world's best trainers started off as a physio; now she trains people to become Feldenkrais Method practitioners."

So, what is the Feldenkrais Method exactly? "Movement is life. Life is a process. Improve the quality of the process and you improve the quality of life itself," is a Moshe Feldenkrais quote often used to illustrate the philosophy that informs his method.

An engineer, physicist, inventor, martial artist and student of human development, Dr Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984) has written a series of books about the method, and, in developing his work, he studied among other things, anatomy, physiology, child development, movement science, evolution, psychology, a number of Eastern awareness practices and other somatic approaches.

According to the Australian Feldenkrais Guild, the method "facilitates learning about movement, posture and breathing to

"I learnt a huge amount about how we move, how we think we move and how different we actually move to what we think."

ultimately increase the ease and range of our movement [and] improve flexibility and coordination. Through gentle movement lessons, we become more aware of how our habits may restrict our moving through life easily and pleasurably. We learn new, easier options for movement."

It's about the body learning or relearning how to function efficiently, says Vudrag.

"Feldenkrais designed a series of lessons called Awareness Through Movement (AMT), which is taught in groups, and a hands-on process called Functional Integration (FI) that is administered by a practitioner to suit a client's individual problems.

"The method is designed to disrupt bad habits so that we can establish new and better habits, or improve good existing habits. It teaches people how to stop inhibitory muscular function ...

and to tell the right part to stop and let go so the other part can work."

In other words, the method teaches people how to become aware of how their muscular and nervous systems work together under the influence of gravity, and how to make improvements to the body's movements. "For example," Vudrag says, "if your back muscles are working all the time and you cannot inhibit them, then you've got problems, so learning to understand your personal system is what the method is about.

"It's not necessarily age that deteriorates a person; it's bad habits, some of which may have come through injury – the body protects something and the injury heals, but the protection [put in place by the muscles] remains. We shouldn't let events from the past be a dominant feature of our lives. We should allow ourselves to learn: the more we learn and the better we can move ourselves well, the better our self-image is."

After four Functional Integration sessions with Vudrag, I'm feeling better: the pain hasn't gone, but overall there has been a marked improvement – and several people have commented that I look healthier and appear to be happier. Apart from the physical improvement, I feel more at peace with life and less affected by things that would have stressed me.

However, after each treatment there were some negative effects, like some strange pains and the feeling of being a little less coordinated, but these usually passed after a day or two. "There can be a lot of toxins stored in the muscles," Vudrag says. "Some people do have adverse reactions after they've loosened their muscles, because the toxins that were locked in due to the ongoing muscular contraction have been released.

"The new reorganisation of the muscles is unfamiliar to the nervous system, which can aggravate something. A client might have an old injury in an area that has been opened up and, because the nerves in those muscles haven't been working, the pain that has been blocked there is suddenly released. That's why I advise people not to do anything after a lesson. When you open an area up it can, on one hand, be relaxing for the nerve, but on the other hand it can be traumatic for the nerve – the nerve is unfamiliar with the new information."

Being able to manage my aches and pains, once I have learnt all the relevant movements at Awareness Through Movement classes, is a big factor for me, and my wallet, too.

Rebates are available through most health funds. More information can be found at www.feldenkrais.org.au

The Review covered the cost of my treatments.