

# On Sitting

For many years I have cultivated a practice of sitting. I get up most mornings, rest comfortably on the floor in a seated position, and breathe for anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes. I've been doing this for nearly 30 years.

I use my Feldenkrais training to make the experience more palatable. I do not judge myself when I come in and out of focus, but instead seek to notice when I do. I tend to pay attention to how I balance over my sitzbone and what effect my choices in sitting have on my breathing.

When I began taking the Cognitively Based Compassion Training, a guided meditation class developed through the Emory-Tibet Partnership, it gave me new insight into my sitting-time. Many ideas that I've played around with for years about meditation are becoming well-defined and concrete. I am also thinking in new ways about what I do as a *Feldenkrais* practitioner.

The Cognitively Based Compassion Training has a number of guided meditations. Typically we are asked to sit for 6, 12 or 24 minutes and follow one of them. Each goes a little deeper than the last, beginning with the recollection of nurturance, and continuing with interesting analogies related to the feelings that come and go in meditation.

A few days ago I got curious about what would happen if I went longer than 24 minutes. Having just woken up from a nap on a day in which I had nothing else happening, I decided to do the longest meditation of my life. Because I knew it was unlikely I would want to go back to sleep, I decided this would be a good time just to breathe and "notice" for an hour and see what happened.

Many things happened. A wide variety of experiences, emotions, and events came and went. I felt angry, tired, questioning. My children came in and out of my room asking for things. I even hallucinated that my ceiling fan was a wasp.

Because I was so calm and uninvested in any of the things I was seeing and feeling, my detachment resulted in an unusual insight. I was a constant, lying here breathing, and all of these other experiences were merely transitory. I had the freedom to decide how important any of these experiences were.

I was delighted to find that I could take this insight beyond my sitting. I always have the control, and my decision about the importance of my sensation determines what I do. If I experience despair, or even euphoria, I can decide how important the feeling is and decide whether to act on it, dwell on it, or ignore it as irrelevant and inconsequential.

To someone who feels buffeted by feelings and emotions, this is a revelation. I need not be the victim of pain, emotion or compulsion. All I have to do is reassess these feelings, and if I want, I might actually ignore them or relegate them to a small part of my experience.

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I feel certain I was prepared for this key insight by my years of study in the *Feldenkrais Method*. I find it interesting to compare the act of meditating, which seems only incidentally to be a physical act, with the Method which relies so much upon mechanical aspects of the human skeleton and musculature. Perhaps my insight can add a little clarity back to a few of the more elusive concepts in the Method.

In our goal of increasing the awareness of the organization of ourselves and our clients, we like to do battle with what we call “habits.” We see them as the enemies of awareness, shortcuts or short circuits that, in their quasi-efficiency prevent us from noticing more effective means of functioning. These habits are so powerful that we will prefer them to better ways of doing things, even in the face of a certain amount of pain or trauma, until we hit a crisis or finally get curious enough to question them.

Perhaps we can redefine these habits as pathways which we have assigned too much importance. Like the thoughts and feelings that come unbidden to our minds which can easily be mistaken for the totality of our experience, these habits are also mistaken for who we are and what we can do. And as meditation provides an opportunity of examining our state of mind from a higher perspective, so too does the Method offer us an interesting, objective look at our functioning.

I suspect that among Feldenkrais’ motivations for creating his method was a recognition that many people clearly lack the patience or the insight to easily recognize the fallacy of their subjective experience, that habits of mind trump everything because we see the world through our cognitive perception. By adding a physical component to the act of self-examination, he increased the opportunity for a person to become curious, or to have an experience which did not fit within their habitual paradigm. This physical approach is deceptive as it appears to be a simple examination of the capabilities of the human body under certain constraints ranging from gravity to contrived contortions of the skeleton.

Ideally what happens to us as we play Feldenkrais’ game is that we examine our actions as we attempt to fulfill the challenge of the lesson. As we succeed or fail to follow the instructions, we must judge the effectiveness, that is, the importance, of our particular strategy for rolling or bending or folding. A recognition that a particular strategy is ineffective does not necessarily register as a challenge to our core identity or reality, the way it might in a simple sitting exercise. It can, of course, if the lesson’s challenge comes up against something we believe is important for our success, survival or self-esteem. Yet if the lesson is well taught, if humor, compassion and a constant reduction of the seriousness of the situation is reinforced, then we can see a failure of the importance of our strategy simply as a poor choice in the moment.

Again, if the lesson is well taught, and the client is kept in the realm of solving an ostensibly silly or abstract movement problem, then there is little incentive for them to hold on to a poor strategy. All that remains is the reassigning of their attention to helpful sensations that will lead to resources which can be employed to create a better way to solve the problem. Larger issues of emotion and trauma can be kept at the fringes.

It is possible, of course, that at the end of the lesson a person may have overcome their habit without realizing how they have done so, and will not consciously register the “unimportance” of the habit because it is gone. For those of us who appreciate the higher benefits of the Method, beyond the “improvement of movement,” this is a bittersweet victory, a kind of smaller success.

I might be tempted to point out to the client the larger lesson, and I might not be criticized for doing so.

Yet perhaps my insight into my client's inner landscape is not so important after all. Perhaps it's enough for them to be happier and more efficient than they were, without having the metacognitive experience to carry around. My desire to connect the dots for them may come from a less than holy place in my own outlook, in which I must prove my value to them and to myself.

Perhaps they will come to such insights themselves. It could be that after several of these experiences they may see a common thread. Or perhaps they will gain the insight to begin reassessing the importance of things in their lives simply as a result of having changed their fundamental way of relating to the world.

It's something for me to sit with. In any case, I appreciate knowing that I can offer that experience, if only viscerally, provided I am able to determine the true importance of what I am communicating in the moment. It may be that I have as much to learn about what to pay attention to as they do.