

# Embodiment: Freedom Through Awareness

**Russell Delman**

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*Russell Delman began his study of body/mind perspectives and human potential in 1969 as an undergraduate student in psychology. His lifelong commitment toward awareness and freedom began consciously at this time, along with his practice of Zen meditation. Through workshops at The Esalen Institute, in Big Sur, California, living at the Gestalt Institute of Canada, travels in the jungles of South America, being trained as a yoga teacher, and studying Gestalt therapy with Robert K. Hall, MD, he deepened his self-knowledge. His training and deep personal relationship with Moshe Feldenkrais began in 1975, during the first professional training program offered in the United States. In 1984, Russell became one of the first people in the world authorized to lead Feldenkrais professional training programs. Since that time, he has taught in more than 50 of these programs internationally and directed/designed 10 and has helped in the training of more than 2,500 Feldenkrais teachers. Along with his wife Linda, also a Feldenkrais trainer, he created the Feldenkrais-India Project that brought the method to India for the first time. Through work at Mother Teresa's Missions, particularly in Calcutta, the Delmans taught the Sisters of Charity to work with brain-injured children. Russell credits his friendship with Eugene Gendlin, the originator of Focusing<sup>®</sup>, for furthering his insights into human transformation. About 20 years ago, The Embodied Life<sup>™</sup> School was created as a base for spreading his teaching and training teachers around the world. This teaching stands on three legs: Embodied Meditation, Feldenkrais movement, and Embodied Inquiry. His original insight back in 1969—that cultivating the capacity for Presence is the key to freedom and fulfillment—continues to guide his understanding. Russell regards his marriage of more than 43 years and the raising of their daughter Liliana as the most profound teachers in his life. Here, Russell discusses embodiment as a means for a path of freedom and uncovering our true selves.*

**Q: What is the connection between embodiment and freedom?**

**Russell Delman:** Understanding this connection goes toward the essence of The Embodied Life<sup>™</sup> teachings. First, a bit of history. Early on my path, I had the devastating realization

that I was lost in internal dialogue about the past and future 99% of the time. Like most people, I could navigate on automatic pilot without bumping into too many things, but the richness of my experience of living was severely compromised. Then, a remarkably simple observation arose, when I was in my body, sensing my physical connection to self and the world, I was invariably *present*. My interest in yoga and then more devotedly to The Feldenkrais Method<sup>®</sup> grew from this insight.

When lost in our historical thinking and feeling patterns, we must repeat the past. Our brain only has access to the patterns that are already known, that have already been experienced. To step out of the fixedness of our historic patterns, to move in the direction of freedom, we must find the present moment, as only in presence does the possibility for newness and freshness arise.

A linear line can be drawn: Embodiment—Presence—Awareness—Freedom. To make a *free* choice we must be *aware* of ourselves and our world, or we will repeat the past. To develop this great and rare human capacity for *awareness* we must be *present*. To uncover our presence, it is very helpful to be *embodied*.

**Q: Why do you emphasize “grounded-ness” so much, and what are some ways one can practice or connect to it?**

**Russell Delman:** In The Embodied Life teachings, we emphasize five main physical qualities that tend to align with presence. I am not suggesting that these are the only important attributes of embodiment, rather that after more than 40 years of working with thousands of people, I have seen these as the most reliable predictors. Briefly: (1) grounded-ness, connected to gravity, one's connection to the earth; (2) uprightness, connected to levity, the vitality that moves upward, and dignity; (3) centeredness, awakening the moving center below the navel in front of the sacrum; (4) breathing, awareness of breathing in everyday life; and (5) spatial awareness, sensing outer and inner spaces.

We begin with grounded-ness because this is the foundation. To be rooted on the earth gives the inner sense of support from a greater body. Not only do we stand on our feet and legs alone, the earth carries us at each moment. As one senses this more deeply, there grows a sense of being carried by and connected to something larger than one's self.

The practices are quite direct. We begin by simply bringing attention to the contact sensations of the floor in standing, a chair in sitting, and the bed or other surface in lying. Attending to these sensations and consciously shifting weight will literally take the center of energy in our bodies downward. Most of us are “top-heavy” with thinking, located in our heads and emotions, centered in our chest, dominating. Bringing more attention and interest into the ground balances these tendencies.

**Q: Can you explain here what “essence” and “presence” are and how embodiment relates to them?**

**Russell Delman:** In Zen, we ask the question, “Who are you before your parents were born?” This kind of unanswerable question points us in a potent direction—before thinking, before your ideas about self and world, before your historic self-identity, who are you? When I think of “essence,” I am pointing in this direction.

To taste the flavor of essence, we must step out of our habitual thoughts and feelings. Presence is the doorway to this “fresh” sensing of the moment. Now, I do not want to imply that presence always brings us into a consciousness of essence, rather that it is a precondition. Also, I do not want to imply that being in touch with essence does not include thinking and feeling. No! Rather, that often our habitual thinking and feeling and even rote ways of sensing our body can be obstacles to fresh perceiving of the living moment.

**Q: What are the entryways to “essence”?**

**Russell Delman:** The embodied qualities listed above are reliable entryways to presence. We can say that presence brings you to the right street address; the next step is entering the house. By this, I mean intimacy with essence. Although your essence is always here—it is closer than your skin—to experience this intimacy consciously occurs through something such as “grace.” We cannot intentionally create this state *and* we can create conditions where it becomes more likely.

There are a few attitudes and qualities that prepare the soil for this gift. The first is humility. By humility, I mean the courage to stand in one’s experience of the moment with a sense of “not knowing.” This “not knowing” is the first principle of Zen and also of Feldenkrais: a willingness to put aside certainty and withstand the angst of openness. Through openness, we can have the experience of presencing or bearing witness to the moment. In my experience, this requires a reliable sense of grounded-ness and dignity. Grounded-ness is our connection to the earth, and dignity is connected to our uprightness. When these are alive, we can be confident enough to be permeable. This sense of healthy permeability, where one can be free from a rigid sense of separate self, is essential. Ironically, we cannot discover ourselves within ourselves. “Know thyself” is a misleading directive. We know ourselves in relationship to the physical and social environment. To be deeply connected to the “outer” and “inner world,” we must be permeable. Finally, I notice that when human beings are not lost in fear and self-protection, we are naturally good-willed. In Buddhism, this is called basic goodness.

This humility, openness, presencing, permeability, and good-will are another way of defining love. These are all doorways to essence.

**Q: What is the impact of awareness in terms of uncovering essence?**

**Russell Delman:** To put these oft-used and ill-defined terms into a helpful framework, I would say it like this: essence or who we are at our core never goes away, it is our fundamental birthright and intrinsic condition. To experience this Essence or True Self consciously, cultivating a consistent sense of presence is very helpful. Like the signs in the old bingo parlors: “You must be present in order to win.” We can cultivate presence through various attention practices, and as I said before, being embodied is extremely valuable for this cultivation. When a threshold of attention and presence has been reached, there is the dawning of a new state of consciousness called awareness. In this sense, awareness is not intentional; it arises when conditions are ripe. This can happen spontaneously through grace and luck, though preparing the soil can help invite this occurrence. Awareness is effortless and spontaneous, though one can do many practices to encourage this “spontaneous” event.

**Q: Is there a particular type of breathing that you have found to be most beneficial? Please explain the concept of spontaneity and naturalness as it relates to breathing.**

**Russell Delman:** I agree with Feldenkrais that there is no one “right” way of breathing. For my students and myself, I encourage teaching ways of breathing that are highly adaptable, freeing the breath rather than controlling the breath. When our brains have easy access to many ways of breathing—including varying rhythms, freedom in the chest, upper and lower abdomen, and numerous qualities such as strong, light, smooth, long, short, deep, and so on, then the organism can adapt to a situation. Even learning to pause the breathing cycle mindfully can be helpful, kind of like rebooting the system. When the breathing is adaptive, we can spontaneously adjust to the demands of the present moment. When people impose a “right” breathing pattern, adaptability and spontaneity is compromised.

**Q: Is a meditation practice essential to embodiment and this path of awareness? What meditation style have you found to be most central on this pathway to embodiment and presence?**

**Russell Delman:** Although meditation is central to my path and my teachings, I know people who develop an embodied presence without a regular practice. For me, meditation is a gift to self and the world. Learning to be at ease with “not doing” and resting in presence has immediate influence on the social environment. As your inner state changes, people around you might be changed also. This is more than personal; in a mysterious way, the willingness to sit with one’s own thoughts, feelings, and sensations, in non-reactive ways, is a path for peace in the world.

In The Embodied Life School, we practice “Embodied Meditation,” which is based in the Zen practice of *Shikantaza* or “just

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sitting.” This is the least manipulative form of genuine meditation that I know. We consistently orient to the present moment through the sensations of sitting and breathing. These are the ground state. Then, we welcome the various ways life appears through sound, light (we keep our eyes open), other bodily sensations, feeling states, and thoughts. The attitude is basic friendliness toward whatever appears with a consistent intention to return to “just sitting.” We grow a warm-hearted relationship with even the most challenging mental and physical states. Growing compassion and care for boredom, anxiety, compulsive thinking, challenging mental phenomena, and physical pain changes our relationship to body, mind, and life itself. Also, experiencing more blissful and deeply peaceful states without holding on to them is an essential learning for living.

### Q: How does Feldenkrais fit into all this?

**Russell Delman:** To answer this with depth would require another article. To be brief, although Moshe Feldenkrais is known for his creative approach to movement and healing the physical body, his main interest was the potential for freedom in the human being. His approach to movement was based in giving the brain opportunities to grow new motor patterns so that the organism could freely adapt to the requirements of a specific situation. He saw compulsion, even the compulsion to be “good,” as our basic disease. My work is often subtitled “Freedom Through Awareness,” which I believe is a good slogan for his method as well.

I see four main ways that Feldenkrais fits into The Embodied Life:

- (1) As one senses the physical body more accurately and completely, there is more capacity to be embodied and thus present. There are more cells that come alive, there is more “there, there.”
- (2) The movement lessons are brilliant at unwinding habitual motor patterns and helping the nervous system to learn new possibilities. This loosens the infrastructure of our historic self-identity.
- (3) As one feels better, more harmonious and flowing, the attraction toward being present is much greater. Rather than pain leading us away from wanting to be present in our bodies, the positive sensations of lightness, fluidity, grounded-ness, ease of breathing, and so on draw one toward the present moment.
- (4) As historical emotional patterns, especially those based in fear, decrease (again, because these are always carried through a physical infrastructure), one has more confidence to be open and present in life.

Overall, we can say that the Feldenkrais movements prepare the ground for awareness. Feldenkrais was disappointed at the end of his life that the physical changes did not reliably generalize to changes in the personality, as he had predicted early on. Sometimes, the whole person and their relationships would be transformed and often not. In some ways, The Embodied Life work offers some of the missing links that helps this generalization to become more reliable. Not 100%, but more consistently.

### Q: What are some ways that people can begin the path toward integrating embodiment into their daily lives?

**Russell Delman:** The best way I know is to develop a practice of pausing numerous times a day, at least once an hour, for a minute. Step off the train of thought, out of the momentum of the day, and enter a state of timelessness through presencing the moment. How? I suggest one of our core practices called “Ground, Sound (or space around), Breath”:

*Ground:* Close your eyes (after some practice this can be done with eyes open) and sense the precise ways that the ground supports you. In sitting, sense the chair, as well as the sensations in your bottom. In standing, notice the texture of the floor, as well as the sensations in your feet and the rest of your body. In lying, notice the qualities of both your back and the support surface. Sense the reality of support that is offered by the gravitational pull of the earth.

*Sound (space around):* We are always living in a physical and social environment, a larger space. To be truly embodied in a moment, the outer space needs to be included. Focusing on the physical environment for a few moments, just the facts, not the opinions or reactions, is very helpful. Sounds can help us sense into the surrounding world. Be like a tape recorder, no judgments or preferences, just receiving the auditory world. In addition, since our brain is always mapping the external environment, we can, without looking, tune into the sense of space around us at any moment.

*Breath:* Every moment from birth to death we are in some phase of our breathing cycle. I recommend following three breaths from beginning to end. Intentionally have a short pause between each inhale/exhale and each exhale/inhale, thus creating a four-phase breathing. This whole process can be done in less than one minute and, done regularly, is truly and reliably transformative. Enjoy... ■

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**Russell Delman**, Founder of The Embodied Life™ School, travels intentionally leading Embodied Life seminars, retreats, and a three-year Embodied Life Mentorship Program. With his wife Linda, he also maintains a small retreat center in northern California where he teaches and sees private students. Russell’s practice includes traditional Feldenkrais sessions, in addition to offering meditation and spiritual direction.

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