

# A Note on Moshe Feldenkrais and Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation

John Harries

In 1949, when Britain was still recovering from the effects of the Second World War, Noa Eshkol was in London, studying at Sigurd Leeder's School of Dance. Many friends and acquaintances visited Noa and participated in lively discussions of many subjects. These subjects included the need for a valid movement notation, which Noa felt had not been met by any of the existing methods. Those who visited the basement kitchen of her lodgings (some frequently, some almost daily) were from very diverse backgrounds: painters of the Borough Group (especially Peter Richmond); poets – Dannie Abse, David Gascoyne; the composer Herbert Brun; the actor Theodor Bikel; the erstwhile captain of the ship Exodus Ike Aharonowicz... and Moshe Feldenkrais, an engineer and physicist who had worked during the war on the development of sonar for the British navy. His first book explaining his new approach to physical therapy<sup>1</sup> had just been published, and he explained his developing methods in conversations with Noa and some of her friends, even physically demonstrating some principles in practice – including for example the most efficient way of performing a head stand. This exercise is today associated with the Feldenkrais method even by people who know nothing about the approach; it became famous in a photograph of David Ben Gurion performing it, following instruction from Feldenkrais.

In the 1930s, when Feldenkrais was working in France with Frédéric Joliot-Curie at the Radium Institute, he had met and befriended Professor Jigoro Kano, the founder of modern judo, who suggested that he study the martial art with Mikinosuke Kawaishi. He became proficient, and was eventually a co-founder of the Ju-Jitsu club de France, the Paris centre for judo. In discussions of human movement with Noa Eshkol, Feldenkrais brought her attention to this discipline, taking her to see a demonstration given by G Koizumi.<sup>2</sup> This was the beginning of Eshkol's interest in martial art forms, and it was also Feldenkrais who alerted her to Tai Chi Chuan at a time when its existence was not yet well known in the West.<sup>3</sup>

The friendship between the two continued when both had returned to Israel. Not only did their discussions concerning human movement continue, but Feldenkrais also gave practical lessons on his method to the members of Eshkol's first experimental Chamber Dance Group in the early 1950s. By this time Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN) had come into being, bringing an added thread of analysis to their discussions. This led to the publication of books in 1971, 1976 and 1980<sup>4</sup> which consist of notated records of Dr Feldenkrais' Lessons, and contain an Introduction in which he expresses pride in the original way that Noa Eshkol had adopted and used what she learned from him. He also states that, like a musical score, the written

notation makes clear aspects that are hard to perceive without the aid of an analytical record. He further points out the value of the employment in EWMN of a spherical system of reference, which makes clear the nature of the interrelation between the limbs of the body. He maintained that the training of the body in all possible forms and configurations of its parts in relation to one another promotes a profound change in a person's self-image, and alludes here to the way in which he and Noa approached movement of the human body in their different fields. Eshkol was undoubtedly attracted by a system in which the movements of the body were treated as pure movement, aimed at the improvement of physical capability, with no semantic attachments.

The original aim of EWMN was to provide a notation comparable to musical notation, capable of serving the composition of dances, without being limited to any particular style. However, Eshkol's aspirations did not end there. Her agenda of conducting studies of various dance and movement disciplines by means of Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation had the aim of testing the viability of the method as a universal movement notation, and not remaining exclusively a dance notation. The application to some of the areas studied led to extensions and improvements to the original version of the notation, and this is reflected in the books mentioned above.

Feldenkrais made many audio recordings of his lessons, and the books closely match his explicit verbal explanations preserved on these tapes. Noa strove to express in the notation the hints and omissions in Feldenkrais' verbal instructions. Thus for example, when Feldenkrais said 'raise your arm' or 'lower your arm', the score matches this with signs that do not include an indication of the movement path (e.g. no explicit plane) – an omission not previously found in EWMN scores. Furthermore, the selection and ordering of the lessons were made by him, in such a way as to provide the essence of his method, learning it from the books.<sup>5</sup> The challenges that this movement material posed for EWMN included the representation of movements in which the sequence and the interrelation of simultaneously moving parts of the body are dominant whereas their duration is expressed in relative terms.

Typically the exercises begin with a position which is departed from and returned to repeatedly in movements of increasing and decreasing range. This is matched in the movement scores by a more extended use of repeat signs than had hitherto been seen in EW scores.

Indications of acceleration and deceleration in the course of a movement are given. These are expressed as general

instructions without exact definitions, following Feldenkrais' desire to encourage timings that were personal to each individual participant. Inhaling and exhaling are treated similarly and a separate space is provided for this in the scores. Since the exercises mainly involve positions such as sitting or lying on the ground, attention had to be paid to extending the range of notation symbols indicating contact so as to be applicable to various parts of the body with the ground, whereas work previously recorded in the notation had almost always involved only contact of the feet with the ground.

This creation of the symbolic record of a method dealing with physical activity at the most fundamental level led on the one hand to a further flexibility of the notation system, and on the other hand to the creation of a faithful record of a contribution to the quality of life of anyone prepared to make the effort. The dialogue in words and in practical applications between Moshe Feldenkrais and Noa Eshkol was an unusual meeting of minds leading to a positive contribution with relevance to two different branches of physical culture: **therapy and dance**.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Body and Mature Behavior :A Study of Anxiety ,Sex ,Gravitation and Learning*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> At the Royal Albert Hall ,London.

<sup>3</sup>Tai Chi Chuan was later the subject of study by Noa and her co-workers, culminating in the publication of movement scores.

<sup>4</sup>*Twenty-Five Lessons by Dr Moshe Feldenkrais*. Movement Notation Society 1971; *Twenty-Five Lesssons by Dr Moshe Feldenkrais* (revised edition). Movement Notation Society 1976; *50 Lesssons by Dr Moshe Feldenkrais*. Movement Notation Society 1980.

<sup>5</sup>The books were introduced by Tirza Sapir as texts for study as part of the EWMN course in the Dance program at Seminar HaKibbutzim, Tel Aviv.

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**John Harries** first met Noa Eshkol in 1948 at Sigurd Leeder's studio in London, and became her first student, and colleague, collaborating in the preparation of the first book on Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN), the system developed by her together with Avraham Wachman. He continued to work with Noa Eshkol on the formulation of the explanatory texts and was a member of the first of her experimental dance groups, the Chamber Dance Group. He was a founder member of the Movement Notation Society, and was a member of the Research Centre for Movement Notation at the Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts, Tel Aviv University, 1973–1979 and 1983–1992. He introduced the application of EWMN in visual art, and continues with this work, especially in abstract video art. He has written two books and articles in a number of international journals on the subject of notated visual art, and collaborated with Tirza Sapir in books on the subjects of time, and on body and space in EWMN.