

An organic approach to breathing: Part 2

by Niall O’Riordan

A Feldenkrais Method approach: shoulders, ribs and pelvis in relation

In my last article in the June issue of PAN we set down some principles which will form the foundation for our holistic approach to the exploration and improvement of how you breathe in playing the flute. We will consider the human structure as a whole rather than as separate parts. Before continuing with this lesson it would be useful to go back and read over some of these ideas again.

This lesson explores the dynamic relationship between the organisation of the pelvis, ribs and shoulders in relation to each other. Many people become very fixed in their patterns of how these areas move, thus limiting many breathing options. This also compromises stability and skeletal support. The shoulder blade has many muscular attachments connecting into the spinal column, so as well as having a dramatic effect on how you breathe, this lesson also improves shoulder functioning and mobility.

The Feldenkrais Method is not exercise or a form of stretching. It is an educational method focusing on learning and movement, which can bring about improved movement and enhanced functioning. Primarily you will be communicating with your nervous system about how your movement patterns are organised and providing it with new options. Slow gentle movements are key!

How to approach these lessons

To gain the most from this experience I suggest you follow these recommendations:

- Move within a range that is comfortable.
- Avoid pushing beyond your limits. Go slowly so that you can pay attention to what you’re doing. Avoid moving in a mechanical way, but rather move with awareness focusing on the quality of movement.
- In these lessons the process is far more important than the destination. If you experience pain or any discomfort, stop.
- Rest briefly after each movement and observe the longer rests.

I suggest that you read through each section first and then explore the theme. Another option would be to have a friend read out instructions as you do the lesson. Above all enter this experience with a sense of exploration and inquisitiveness.

First Impressions

Our nervous system learns most effectively when it can make subtle distinctions when changes occur. Feldenkrais used to say often ‘If you know what you are doing, you can do what you want.’ For this reason it is worthwhile to take time to explore in a standing position how comfortable it feels holding the flute in a playing position. Notice if there is one leg that takes more of your weight, and compare the sense of the lengths you feel from under each armpit to the top of your pelvis and what moves as you inhale. Shift your weight from one foot to another and see how easy this feels. Get an overall impression to return to later.

On the Floor: Some Further Impressions

Lie on the floor with your arms and legs long and notice how your body makes contact (see Fig 1).

- Compare your right and left sides. Notice the area of contact your right shoulder makes with the floor. How does it compare with your left shoulder?
- How much of your upper back makes contact with the floor?
- Feel how your pelvis rests on the floor and compare the area of contact between your right and left sides.
- Compare how your right and left legs make contact with the floor.



Fig. 1

Movement of Your Breath: Some Deeper Observations

Without changing anything, observe the movement of your breath.

- What expands as you inhale?
- Do you perceive movement in your abdomen?
- Is there movement in your rib area and chest?

- Pay particular attention down the right side of your torso from under your armpit to the top of your pelvis. Is there movement there? Attend to your left side in the same way.

Starting Position



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

- Come to lie on your right side (see Figs. 2 and 3). Your knees will be roughly at right angles. In this position you should find a position where your upper body feels balanced and the large muscles of your trunk are not engaging in unnecessary effort.
- As in Figure 2 place your right arm along the floor above your head and rest your head somewhere on your bicep. For some people this position will not be a comfortable option. An alternative will be to have your right arm in front of you, resting your head on some folded towels at a comfortable height.
- Place the palm of the left hand on the floor in front of you with the left elbow resting somewhere against your torso. This resting of the elbow on your torso is an important part of this lesson; the position of the left palm on the floor and your elbow against your torso should allow your right shoulder to be free. Experiment a little to find your comfort.

Movement of the Left Shoulder

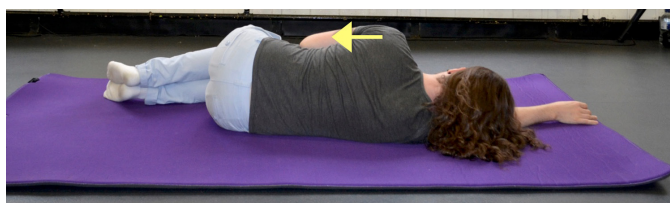


Fig. 4

- In this position observe your breathing. Do not breathe in any special way. Draw your attention to where you perceive movement and observe how the breath moves you. In particular, notice your left shoulder blade. Does

your left shoulder move as you inhale and exhale? If you are not holding any unnecessary effort in your left arm and it is resting comfortably against your torso, you may notice your left shoulder moving upwards towards your head and downwards in the direction of your pelvis as you breathe in and out. This movement could be very small. (Some may not even perceive this, which is fine, just take some time to observe what is happening in this area for you. You could even imagine this soft movement.)

- Pay particular attention to the downward movement of your left shoulder as you exhale, noticing the direction and pathway that it is naturally taking.
- When you have become familiar with the downward pathway that your shoulder takes naturally as you exhale, slowly begin to blend with this direction by taking your shoulder further down in the direction of your pelvis. I like the imagery of your shoulder riding the wave of your breath and you gently blending with the movement that is already being made. Do this a number of times, resting after each movement.
- Gently, a few times, hold your shoulder in this downwards position and breathe a few cycles slowly inhaling and exhaling. Rest on your back and observe any differences in how you make contact with the floor. Compare the length of each side and the resting position of each shoulder.

Movement of the Pelvis

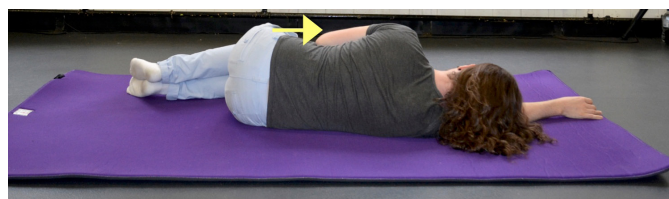


Fig. 5

- Return to your right side and become aware of how your pelvis is resting on the floor in this position.
- Take your left hand and touch the left side of your pelvis, feeling the large bony area (the iliac crest) above your left hip joint. Use your touch to bring this area more into your sensory awareness.
- Slowly as you exhale begin to take this area of your pelvis in the direction of the left shoulder, shortening your left side. (The right side of your pelvis will remain on the floor.)
- Make this movement small and gentle, blending with your exhalation. As you take the left side of the pelvis up you will notice the right side of your waist and the ribs on your right side pressing a little bit more into the floor. Do this number of times, resting after each movement.
- Roll over and rest your back. Compare how your right and left sides are resting on the floor. Compare your experience of length through each side. Notice your breathing and compare the right side of your chest with the left side.

Breathing

Shortening the Left Side

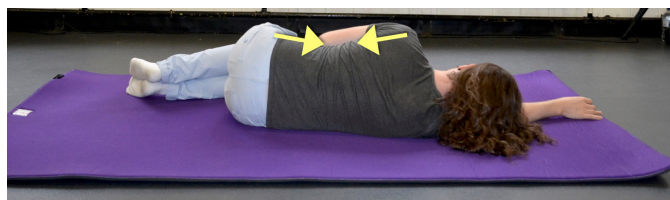


Fig. 6

- Come again to the same position on your right side.
- As you exhale, begin to take your left shoulder and the left side of your pelvis towards each other, shortening the whole left side.
- As you do this, pay attention to the ribs on the left side. You can imagine them coming closer together like an accordion as you move the shoulder and pelvis towards each other and apart again. Notice that as you take your pelvis and shoulder towards each other your right side will press a little bit more into the floor.
- Make this movement a number of times, resting between each one.
- Gently bring them towards each other and softly hold this position while you continue a few breath cycles. What happens with your contact with the floor?

- Roll over and rest on your back. Compare how your right and left sides are resting on the floor now. Make distinctions between how your breath is moving on each side of your torso, noticing any differences.

The Right Side

Repeat the whole sequence lying on your left side. Remember, how you direct your attention and awareness is key to the effectiveness of this lesson. When you have completed each step on this side come again to lie on your back, comparing your experiences. Revisit the prompts written in the section 'Movement of Your Breath: Some Deeper Observations' and notice any changes. Finally slowly come up to standing, take some time to walk around and sense yourself. Observe the movement of your breath and how your shoulders rest on your trunk. Do they feel freer?

With awareness, take your flute once again and investigates how this lesson may have affected your posture, how you breathe, your ability to shift weight from one foot to another and the overall comfort of your shoulders. Think about how you could integrate these changes and maintain this experience as you play.

For further exploration I highly recommend *Embodied Learning: Focus on Breathing Audio Set* by Elizabeth Beringer available at www.feldenkraisresources.com.

More from Niall at www.niallflute.com



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