

Developing your Kinaesthetic Sense

The Five Cardinal Lines of the Human Structure:

a Feldenkrais lesson

by Niall O’Riordan

Have you ever been told to relax when playing the flute? You may have been told this by a teacher or you may mentally tell yourself this. Take a moment to reflect. How helpful is this statement to you? Do you know how to do this? Does this process give you the results that you really seek?

I have certainly had these conversations with myself for many years, and it was my search for more freedom and ease in my flute playing that led me to the Feldenkrais method. These days, however, I think about the concept of being ‘relaxed’ in very different ways. First of all, I don’t think it is the most appropriate term to use. When we speak about playing in a relaxed way, what we really mean is eliminating unnecessary effort and acting in an efficient way. Playing the flute is a dynamic activity and therefore the term ‘relax’ can be somewhat misleading as it often refers to being passive rather than active. Playing the flute is a physical activity.

This particular Feldenkrais lesson provides us as flute players with some valuable ideas which we can apply directly to our flute playing afterwards, and thus self-regulate the amount of excess effort we use so that we become more efficient and potent in our action.

A Short Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement lesson: The Five Cardinal Lines

This lesson takes place entirely in your imagination. Read through each section and then take some time to explore the instructions. Some people may not be that comfortable lying still on the floor for extended periods; however, your comfort is essential, so rest whenever you need to during the lesson and during the rest period if you need to move your limbs please do. Although you will not be moving very much, taking regular rests is important to provide breaks in concentration and attention. Experiment with placing a folded towel under your head if you find that lying on the floor with arms and legs extended places strain on your neck.

First impressions

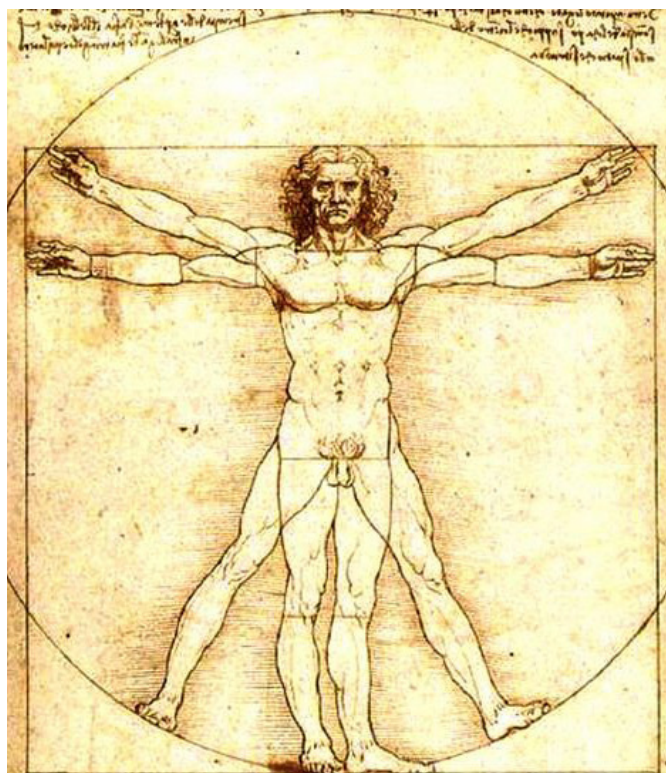
- Lie on the floor with your arms and legs long and notice how your body makes contact.
- Take some time to compare your right and left sides.
- Notice the area of contact your right shoulder makes with the floor, how does it compare with your left shoulder?
- How much of your upper back makes contact with the

floor? Notice the arch of your lower back and the space between it and the floor.

- Feel how your pelvis rests on the floor and compare the area of contact between your right and left side.
- Compare how your right and left legs make contact with the floor.
- Feel the contact of the back of your head resting on the floor.
- Take some time to observe your breathing noticing what parts of yourself move as you breathe.

Five lines of structure

The human body has five major lines of structure: firstly, the length of the spine from the tailbone to the head, then the two arms and two legs. Take a moment to be aware of this as you lie on the floor.



This Feldenkrais lesson is often called the ‘Da Vinci Scan’ after the famous image by Leonardo da Vinci (pictured)

Midline

- With your eyes closed sense the length of your spine. Beginning at your coccyx, at the very base of your spine, in your imagination, start following the length of your spine by feeling, sensing and imagining, gradually moving in the direction of your head. Do this a few times and rest.
- Next imagine two fingers on either side of the spine, one inside and the other outside, going up the spine together, vertebra by vertebra, from the bottom of the spine all the way up to where your spine connects into your head.
- You will notice that some areas of your spine will be easier to internally sense than others. Be curious about this and move from the areas that are clear in your internal sensory awareness to areas that are less clear.
- As you do this notice your breathing. Often when we engage in an activity that requires focused attention we hold our breath. Allow your breathing to be free and easy.
- Continue this four or five times taking regular rests in concentration and attention.
- When you do this what are you doing with the eyes? Do your eyes move in their sockets when you think of the lower part of the body, and do they move upwards when you think of the upper part of the body?
- Rest and observe any changes that may have taken place in how you are resting on the floor now compared to when you began.

Arms

- Think of the width of your shoulders. In your imagination connect a line from your spine down the length of your right arm to your fingers.
- Again move slowly from your midline, through your shoulders, upper arm, and elbow to the tip of your middle finger. Perceive how some areas of this line will feel clear to you and others perhaps not so clear.
- Notice what happens to your eyes when you scan the lengths of your right arm. Do they move to the right, too?
- REST your attention and compare how your right and left arms feel.
- Explore the same idea with your left arm.

Legs

- Again with eyes closed, internally sense where your right hip joint is. Then find your left hip joint. Compare which one is closer to the floor.
- Beginning at your right hip joint, follow through and connect a line through the length of your right leg to the right heel, then to the big right toe and back up again. Next time travel all the way through to the heel and connect the line to the small toe. Do this a number of times.
- Once again notice what your eyes do as you follow the length of your leg in your imagination. REST your



Niall teaching a Feldenkrais lesson

- attention and compare how your right and left legs feel.
- Explore the same idea with you left leg.

All Five Lines together

- Think of all five lines together. See if can you perceive them together as a whole (include your head at the top). Approach this idea lightly, being careful not to strain.
- Perhaps some lines are stronger in your internal awareness than others. Lightly explore this, bringing the areas that are not so clear into the larger picture.
- Rest often, and revisit this idea a few times.

Breath

- With the five cardinal lines in the background of your awareness, now notice your breathing.
- What movements do you perceive?
- Become aware of the point around an inch and a half below your belly button. Allow it to be the area where the breath starts expanding in all directions.
- Rest and observe how you rest on the floor now, compared to when you began. Has anything changed?

Transition into sitting and standing

- Remaining connected to your breathing and keeping as full a picture as possible of your five cardinal lines, very slowly bring one leg up at a time so that your knees bent and your feet are flat on the floor.
- Roll on to one side and bring yourself to standing, continuing to maintain the image of your five lines.
- Walk around and notice what, if anything, is different.

Using what you have learnt in your flute practice

After doing this lesson it can be very useful to go to your flute and explore your awareness of the five cardinal lines. Are there areas of these five lines that feel dull when you hold the flute? As in the lesson, you can trace each line as you hold the flute up to clarify it and to bring it fully into your sensory picture. Once you are satisfied with your level of awareness of these lines and of the whole, you can begin playing. As you play, continually check in with your picture of these lines in your sensory awareness; it is not easy. Notice how it feels. Some of you may notice a greater sense of ease as you play. How is your breathing? A little bit freer? It can also be useful to imagine the four lines of your limbs extending outwards from your trunk. I enjoy the feeling of space this gives me, particularly in my upper chest.

You may notice that using excess muscular effort numbs your ability to sense these lines clearly. The more you become familiar with the ideas of this lesson and the more you clarify these lines in your self image the more useful you will find this idea in your practice. I have noticed when playing difficult passagework my awareness of these five lines greatly decreases because of my habitual tendency to contract muscles in my shoulders legs and neck. I have also found this lesson a fantastic resource for undoing some of these unhelpful habits. It is a practical way to eliminate wasteful effort when we play. I hope you enjoy this exploration in your practice as much as I do!

Niall O'Riordan
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