

An Organic Approach to Breathing: Part 1

When flute players find out I'm a Feldenkrais Method teacher the conversation inevitably turns to questions about breathing. It is a hugely important aspect of flute technique. Many years ago when I immersed myself in yoga I thought I had all the answers to these questions, and in my naivety I declared solutions to many people. Nowadays I am much more able to appreciate the complexity of each individual's physical organisation and understand that it is a much more complicated matter than a few words can address. Now, I'm hesitant to give solutions, especially when I consider my own learning in this regard.

I see two very distinct approaches people apply to breathing on the flute. The first is reductionist, identifying several components of 'proper breathing' and then consciously applying these principles. While this works very well for some people, I also see major flaws in this approach. Firstly, imposing the textbook example about what should happen, can actually lead to extra effort and tension if not carefully applied. The big mistake here is that you cannot isolate one function without considering it as part of the whole. The second approach, and the one I adopt, is to approach breathing from a holistic prospective. What I mean by this is establishing an understanding that free and efficient breathing is reliant on the organisation of the whole structure, and not the separate individual components of breathing that we may read about. If the structure is organised efficiently in relation to gravity many of the components involved in inhalation happen naturally as a reflex.

Efficient breathing and the whole body

Let me give you a few examples to clarify this point. Let's say a person reads about how the floating ribs move backwards and the breath expands into the back as we inhale. It is true that in theory this is available. However, let's say this person habitually tilts their pelvis in such a way that in the area of the floating ribs, the extensor muscles at the back of the body are heavily contracted. It is unlikely that this person will be able to avail themselves of this possibility in the floating ribs. Unless this person understands what they are doing holistically, and they learn about and consider how the pelvis is organised and, in turn, how it affects the organisation of the spine and the carriage of the head, this information is of little value to them.

Another example of this is something I have personally experienced. When I was younger, the diaphragm was a hot

topic amongst flute teachers. An older professional friend of mine once commented to me that he remembers a distinct moment when the diaphragm and the word 'support' became buzzwords in the flute community, I'm not sure how true this is but I suspect he noticed some significant change. In my effort to breathe and support correctly I consciously did everything that was said at the time. This in fact led to me using an enormous amount of extra effort. The movement of the diaphragm is just one component in the breathing dance. Very often if we overly use one component of action it inhibits another. For me, this led me to having a tendency to hardly use any movement in my rib area, which eventually became stiff and inflexible. The repeated pushing forward of my abdomen caused my upper chest to sink and my lower back to contract more and more. One man's medicine can be another man's poison, and focusing on just one component can lead to many difficulties.

Correct flute playing posture

It is necessary for me to reiterate something that I've mentioned before in previous articles and something that I have alluded to already in this one. This is the antigravity role of the skeleton. Feldenkrais puts it beautifully in his book, *Awareness Through Movement*: 'breathing becomes easier and more rhythmical when the body is held erect without any conscious effort, that is, when its entire weight is supported

“The dependence of proper breathing on the correct holding of the pelvis was also recognised by the yogi long ago” (Moshe Feldenkrais, *Body and Mature Behaviour*)

by the skeletal structure.' I hear you say 'good posture'! Yes, you are right, but unfortunately posture is a very loaded word and means different things to different people. It is not as straightforward as it sounds. When the skeleton is balanced in relation to gravity, breathing becomes spontaneous, free and easy. Many of us are organised in such a way that the very large muscles of the trunk are engaged in holding the body erect, that is, they adopt the antigravity role of the skeleton. This action obstructs free breathing as the tension in these muscles inhibits



In the same way as the force of gravity travels through this stone arrangement, efficient posture is achieved when the force of gravity is optimally transmitted through the bones of the skeletal structure to the ground. When this occurs the breath becomes effortless, free and natural.

movement in the breathing apparatus. We must learn about our habitual postural tendencies and learn alternatives, and this is not the same as using muscular effort to stand straight in order to look aesthetically pleasing from the outside. Correct flute posture must first and foremost be functional.

There are two types of learning: one is a theoretical understanding of principals, and the second is sanctioned by experience and self-exploration. Dr Feldenkrais called this second type of learning organic learning. My hope is that series of articles on breathing will facilitate you so that you can explore how you use your whole self in playing the flute. If you have stuck with me thus far you will see that to drastically improve how you breathe in playing the flute it is not simple, nor will one approach suit all. Most importantly you cannot separate good breathing from efficient posture; however progress can be quick if you are willing to do some exploration. I hope you will join me as we explore these ideas in the September edition of PAN.

“Most of the muscles of the respiratory system are connected to the cervical and lumbar vertebra and breathing therefore affects the stability and posture of the spine, while conversely the position of the spine will affect quality and speed of breathing. Good breathing therefore also means good posture just as good posture means good breathing”

(Moshe Feldenkrais, *Awareness Through Movement*)





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