

# Moving into deep practice with the Feldenkrais Method

John Tarr, B.M. & M.M. Music Performance,  
Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner

When I was first introduced to the Feldenkrais Method (FM), I instinctively knew that it held great promise for enhancing my own and others' musical performance abilities. During the ensuing years, I studied the Feldenkrais Method to become a practitioner and started a private practice. Additionally, I wrote and recorded the "Dynamic Musician Series: Dynamic Stability & Breath, Vols. 1 & 2", taught workshops for and worked privately with many musicians. Parallel to my work as an FM practitioner, I kept performing (albeit at a reduced level) and teaching trombone in my own studio and in music schools. These past years have been vastly rewarding and rich in learning, but I've always had this nagging feeling that I have not been fully able to communicate and convey the benefits of the Feldenkrais Method to fellow musicians and students. Because I have taken up practicing seriously again, with the intention of preparing for playing in ensembles and solo recitals, I am afforded the opportunity to put my own ideas to the test, and to look deeper for the benefits I have been touting over the years.

Confronted with the task of preparing a solo program, I realized that my years of sparse practicing had taken their toll on my endurance and more dauntingly, on my ability to learn new material. I also realized that my practice habits, formed while in music school and as a working freelancer, were too inefficient to get me to the level I'm striving for. These sobering realizations led me to ask myself, "What then can I use from my knowledge of the Feldenkrais Method to accelerate my learning?" I challenged myself to put my money where my mouth is and start learning.

The Feldenkrais Method is familiar to many musicians as a method that can help with improving posture, preventing pain from misuse; moreover, one that can even give relief from chronic pain and injuries resulting from the many hours of practicing and from performance stress. Some musicians have even found improvement in their ease of playing thus utilizing the Feldenkrais Method to enhance music making in addition to using it to alleviate the ills associated with it. Nonetheless, this latter group is still quite small. Furthermore, I have talked with like minded (trained as FM practitioners) musician colleagues, successful performers and teachers, who also feel as I do that communicating the benefits (other than those of posture and injury) of the Feldenkrais Method to their peers can be very challenging. Again the question: "Does the Feldenkrais Method have any relevance for the performing musician beyond physical wellness?"

Back to my own quest. Upon realizing that my own practice habits were at best insufficient, I began to look for help the literature about practicing. Finding two seminal books, "The Talent Code"<sup>1</sup> and "The Musician's Way",<sup>2</sup> I began reading about something called "Deep Practice". Discovering Deep Practice (DP) was somewhat of an epiphany for me in that it showed me how I could remedy my previous errors and perform at higher levels. Moreover, while reading about deep practice, I realized that the principles of DP are very similar to those of the Feldenkrais Method. The Feldenkrais Method's creator, Dr. Moshé

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code* (Arrow Books, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Klickstein, *The Musician's Way* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Feldenkrais wrote an article entitled, “Learning to Learn”,<sup>3</sup> in which he listed guidelines for deriving the greatest benefit from what he called “Awareness Through Movement Lessons.” These guidelines (I will not elucidate them here because it would increase the length of this article considerably) are very similar to the ideas on doing deep practice and this was the missing link! I’d been using deep practice all these years, just not with my trombone in my hands. Having committed myself to learning and using DP for my own benefit, I discovered that I could draw from my years of working as an FM teacher to enhance my musical abilities.

## **Moving into deep practice**

With the Feldenkrais Method, the qualities of deep practice can be learned, experienced and practiced with or without the instrument or voice. I call this, “moving into deep practice”. Taking DP into movement this way has two distinct benefits: 1. You can learn to feel and recognize DP at a more profound level than just when learning or using it only in the practice room and: 2. you get the benefits of doing FM Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons, which lead to better posture and ease while playing or singing. In addition, the practice of ATM can bring about clearer thinking, heightened creativity, overall wellbeing and greater bodily awareness. ATM lessons commonly take place in a group, but can also be practiced alone at home, in the studio, or even before or after a rehearsal or performance.

## **Six principles of deep practice**

Because I’m not sure how many of my musical colleagues are familiar with deep practice, I’ll give a brief description of it. This description is also a very condensed version of “Learning to Learn”.

1. **Slow down** – Musicians utilizing deep practicing slow down to the point where they can play smoothly, accurately and with ease before beginning gradually to increase the tempo towards what is desired or required for performance.
2. **Learn to feel it** – Musicians need to learn to tune their ears *and* their bodies so that they hear and feel when a note or phrase is wrong, out of tune or, on a more sophisticated level, doesn’t fit into the desired musical expression. They also must learn to feel when they are straining, which creates unnecessary stress for their bodies. This is also a form of disharmony.
3. **Break it down** - Deep practice means breaking a piece, phrase or run into the smallest doable parts, rehearsing them, and then putting them back together into larger sections.
4. **Imagine ahead** - Whether playing from memory or reading from a score, those who use deep practice are always projecting their minds and bodies ahead of where they are actually playing at the moment. Imagining ahead is common when sight reading but using it while performing familiar material is key to staying in the present moment and focused.
5. **Make mistakes** - If somebody were to watch you while you were practicing, they would probably wonder why you were making so many mistakes. Mistakes are what guide us to improve.
6. **Always try for growth** - Whether repeating a phrase to play it faster or memorizing a piece, each repetition should be easier, more musical and more satisfying than

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<sup>3</sup> Moshé Feldenkrais, *Learning to Learn* (Feldenkrais Resources, 1980)

the previous one. There is no such thing as mindless repetition when using deep practice. Furthermore, in order to know if you are heading in the right direction, you need to have an idea of how you want to sound and what you're striving for. Setting goals for each practice session as well as having mid- and long-term goals will help guide you in this respect.

To illustrate the connection between ATM and deep practice, here's a short and simple ATM lesson that you can do right now while sitting on a chair. I'll break the lesson down into steps that correlate with the above-mentioned principles. Normally, you might not want to apply all the principles during one lesson (and they often overlap) but I'll include them here for demonstration purposes. Do all of the movements slowly and attentively. If you feel fatigue or strain, stop and rest for a moment and then return to the movement, doing less. If any of the movements cause pain, you should consult your physician before continuing. [You can do the lesson according to the instructions here here or download an audio version here: <<http://dynamicmusician.typepad.com/dmsweblog/>>]

Start by sitting on a chair with a level seat that is not too soft. Sit so that your back and buttocks are not touching the back of the chair and have both of your feet resting fully on the floor. Rest your hands on your thighs, palms down if that's comfortable. If not, rotate your hands into a comfortable position. Take a moment to notice how it feels to sit like this, notice your neck, shoulders and back, as well as your breathing.

Imagine that you want to look to your left, and begin to slowly turn your head to look leftward and then come back to the middle. Repeat this gently and notice how far you can turn easily. After repeating this several times, come back to the middle and pause for a moment. Notice whether you feel any differences in your neck, shoulders and back. Now do the same thing looking to the right. You may find that one side is easier or turns farther than the other and this is normal. Let it be that way, simply noticing the differences. After several repetitions come back to the middle position and rest.

1. **Slow down** while moving.

Turn to the left again, doing so very slowly. Repeat the movement several times and notice how smooth it feels. Are there places where the movement is less smooth? By going slowly and feeling while moving, you begin to practice the second quality.

2. **Learn to feel it** while moving.

If you felt that there was a spot along the way that could have been smoother, go to that place and move over it even more slowly, noticing your breath as you move. Do you inhale, exhale or is there a moment when you hold your breath?

Sense other parts of your body such as your shoulders, back and abdomen to feel if there are similar sensations you might have felt in your neck contributing to the lack of smoothness. Can you lessen or increase the muscle tone as needed in various places in your body to smooth out the turning movement?

Rest for a moment and then repeat the same process to the right.

Stop and rest.

3. **Break it down** into smaller parts.

You may have noticed that there are different components of turning to look to the side or even a bit behind you (depending on the way you are turning, and your flexibility). You can turn only your head at your neck, you can include your shoulders and chest, and, if necessary you can turn your pelvis as well. Begin to reduce the amount of movement and break it down into those three basic stages. Turn just your head, keeping your shoulders still, and relaxed. Choose the direction that interests you (right or left) or alternate. Turn your head only as far as you can do so smoothly and easily.

After exploring this, stop and rest.

Now place the palms of your hands on your cheeks with your fingertips just below your eyes. Let your bent arms rest softly against your chest so that your elbows are pointing downward. Begin to turn your chest and shoulders, letting your head turn as well, but not more than your shoulders and chest do. The reason for having your arms like this is to isolate the movement of your upper body. Experiment with both directions, going slowly cultivating ease and grace.

Rest again, letting your arms rest comfortably.

With your hands on your thighs, begin to slide your right knee a bit forwards and then back to the starting point. Your thighs need to be separated but not too far apart so that they are nearly parallel. This movement turns your pelvis to the left and you will feel that your left hip moves a bit towards the back of the chair as your right knee moves forward. After several repetitions, turn your pelvis to the right and notice how that feels. Continue to look for ease and smoothness in all the movements.

Rest.

Now begin putting the three parts together. Start turning your head and notice when it feels like the right moment to let your chest and thereafter your pelvis follow. You may notice that turning in general has become easier or smoother. Play with the timing, turning your chest earlier or later; or start the turning with your pelvis instead of your head. Explore both directions as well.

Rest.

If you were leaning back on your chair while resting, sit in the starting position again.

4. Close your eyes and begin to **imagine ahead**.

Without actually doing the movement, imagine how it feels to turn. It may not be so easy to imagine all of the movements at once, so take little parts and imagine them separately. Notice what you imagine. Do you imagine the sensations? Do you see yourself turning? Or do you imagine what you would be seeing if your eyes were open and you were actually turning? Can you shift your focus to imagine something other than what comes easily? This may take some practice just as it does when imagining ahead while playing or singing. Take short rests if you like and imagine both directions.

Take a good rest.

5. Now begin to **make mistakes** on purpose.

Make “mistakes” while turning. For example, tense your abdomen, clench your jaw or hold your breath (all very gently, of course), in order to notice how they affect the movement. You can also experiment by looking one way with your head and turning your shoulders the opposite way.

Rest again.

6. If you have been moving slowly and gently, paying attention to how the movements feel, you’ve also been **trying for growth**.

Repeat the turning movement several times and focus on making the movements smoother and easier each time. It’s quite possible that you’ve already experienced an increase in ease and can turn even farther than when you started. If this is so, notice where the movement or movements feel easier. When you’re ready to rest, stop for a moment and notice if sitting has become more comfortable as well.

Rest in whatever position feels most comfortable for now. This concludes the lesson.

### **Conclusion and further study**

For those of you not familiar with the Feldenkrais Method, the above is a shortened version of an ATM lesson, of which there are many and which can take students through a very wide range of different types of movement. Some of the lessons can be very active, like rolling around on the floor and others more passive with movements of the eyes only for example. The main purpose of the ATM lesson is using movement as the means to greater awareness. You may be thinking that you could use this process with any movement practice and you certainly can. In fact I encourage it. However, one of the benefits of combining these concepts with Feldenkrais Method ATM lessons is that you also get the benefit that the lessons already provide *and* practice moving into deep practice. If you’d like to try more, you can download some free lessons from my podcast (including this lesson) and also purchase “The Dynamic Musician Series: Dynamic Stability & Breath, Vols. 1 & 2”. Another excellent option would be to attend a Feldenkrais ATM class in your area. If you are already familiar with the Feldenkrais Method you may have been taught to do the lessons in a similar way, which means you’ve already been practicing deep practice! If not you now are on your way to discovering a wonderful resource for enhancing and improving your musicianship.

Additional Resources:

- Feldenkrais, Moshé Dr., [Awareness Through Movement](#), Harper & Row, San Francisco 1977
- Tarr, John, [The Dynamic Musician Series: Dynamic Stability & Breath, Volumes 1 & 2](#), Self Published, 2004 & 2006

John Tarr resides in Basel, Switzerland. As a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner & Assistant Trainer, he's been a practicing Feldenkrais Teacher for over 15 years, holds a Master's Degree in Trombone Performance, and has been playing, performing, and teaching trombone for over 35 years. He teaches workshops for musicians in Europe and the US, and is the author of "The Dynamic Musician Series: Dynamic Stability and Breath. Vols. 1 & 2". His particular interest lies in utilizing somatic awareness to enhance musical performance. You can read more about his work at: <[www.dynamicmusician.com](http://www.dynamicmusician.com)> and the blog: <<http://dynamicmusician.typepad.com/dmsweblog/>>