

HarmonicaYoga™ — Or, Zen and the Art of Blues Harp Blowing

By David Harp

Yoga can take many forms, and Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, in Lenox, MA, delights in offering a wide variety of classic and modern practices. One of their more seemingly untraditional meditation workshops is presented by cognitive scientist/author/corporate speaker David Harp, whose motto might well be “If it’s fun, people will keep doing it.” For the past 20 years, David has been honing and refining an unusual and entertaining method of mindfulness training, as he’ll describe below.

Harmonica Meditation? It may be funny, but it’s no joke...Some might consider the Blues Harmonica — AKA the “Mississippi Saxophone,” the “Mouth Organ,” or the “Blues Harp” — as a strange vehicle with which to explore and transcend that mysterious and often mutinous entity known as the human mind.

However, even the most traditional of yogis would probably agree that Yoga-Sutras 1.33 through 1.39 seem to recommend a nearly unlimited menu of potential objects for meditation, including “whatever you choose” (*yatha abhimata*). Yoga positions or mantras, tantric sex or alternate nostril breathing — it’s not *what* you choose to focus on which brings the reward of a “stable and tranquil mind” — it’s how *diligently* you work at maintaining that focus. And the harmonica, by its very nature, makes it really easy to keep one’s mental attention focused on the process of breathing — which of course is the mainstay of so many meditative techniques. We’ll start by considering how harmonica meditation works. But it isn’t just about the harmonica itself — the very nature of the blues, rock, folk, or jazz band provides a perfect laboratory for interpersonal mindfulness practice, as will be explained below.

The Ins and Outs of Harmonica...The harmonica was invented in Germany in 1817. It developed into its current “standard” ten hole form by the late 1830’s. And although it was not intended as a mindfulness training device, the harmonica was designed in a way that makes it perfect for that purpose.



Each of the ten little holes of the harmonica contains two thin brass “reeds.” Each of these reeds, when the inhaled or exhaled breath moves through its hole, vibrates to produce a particular tone, so a standard harmonica can produce 20 different musical notes: ten on the in breath, and ten on the out breath. Although lots of musical instruments can do that much, or more — the piano has 88 notes — the harmonica is unique for two reasons. It’s the only musical instrument that can produce sound on the in breath. And its notes are arranged so that it is simply impossible to play notes that don’t sound right when played together.

Randomly plunk down your hand on a piano, or strum a guitar without regard to precise finger placement, and you’ll produce what musicians call a “discordant” sound — notes that sound bad when played simultaneously. Cover as many holes of your harmonica as you like with your lips, breathe either in or out, and you’ve got a rich, delightful, “chord” — those notes that were meant to be played *en masse!*

Breathe Right, Sound Great...It barely matters which or how many of the harmonica holes are covered by the lips. Only full mental attention on the rhythm and pattern of inhaled and exhaled breath is important. Play a steady “in – in – out – out” rhythm, and you’ve got the sound of train wheels rolling down the track. Play a long in followed by a short out, a short in, and a few beats of silence” “innnnnn – out – in – rest...” and you’re playing a simple but melodious Chicago style blues “riff!” Should your attention go off the breath for even a fraction of a second — you can instantly hear that you are no longer playing your train or your Chicago blues, and are thus reminded to return your full focus to your breath. Thus the harmonica becomes an aide to mindfulness!



Since the harmonica is the world’s greatest instrument for playing while walking (or jogging), it’s also a perfect way to practice Vipassana-style walking/breathing meditation, with a specified number of steps during each inhale and each exhale.

Why Breathing Matters...It’s tempting to say that breathing is important because without it, you’re dead. True, but too obvious to mention. Also obvious is the emphasis of many meditative traditions on breath focus. But what lies beneath? The real connection of breathing to mindfulness is a bit more complex, and based on mechanisms in the brain that go back hundreds of millions of years. It’s worth a moment of explanation — since to understand the profound effect of breathing meditations on brain function is to understand why the breath has been so heavily emphasized in mindfulness practice for the last few thousand years.

Nervous? It's Just Your Nervous System! Like it or not, it's long been a dog-eat-dog — or amoeba-eat-amoeba — world out there. And throughout the history of life on earth, all living creatures have needed a mechanism to escape danger. Over time, a particular section of what has now become the human brain and nervous system, called the “sympathetic nervous system, has developed to serve this function. When danger is perceived by the creature, an automatic reaction is triggered, called the “fight or flight response” (actually two related responses, as explained below). The brain is flooded with adrenaline and other chemicals. Blood rushes to the center of the body (so you don't bleed to death if a predator grabs a limb or tail), digestion stops (to increase the energy available for muscular action), and muscle tension increases — all to help the creature respond with action, by fleeing from the danger (the “flight” part of the response), or trying to fight it off (the “fight” part of the response).

The Emotion Equation™ The fight or flight response is a lifesaver...if you're a frog faced by a heron, a cave person faced by a sabre-toothed tiger, or a pedestrian facing a runaway cab that's jumping the curb in front of you. Unfortunately (in human beings, at least) *a thought alone* can trigger the fight or flight response. Imagine your least favorite politician, or picture your boss walking up to you with a pink slip in hand, and guess what? Your blood pressure goes up, your digestive ability goes down, and your neck and shoulders tighten. This can be called “The Emotion Equation™” — a thought which triggers a fight or flight response is then interpreted by the brain as an emotion. If the “flight” part of the response is triggered, the brain interprets this as “fear.” If the “fight” part is triggered, we say that we've become angry. We might put it this way:

Thought > Triggers Fight or Flight Response = Emotion of Anger or Fear

So the same body/brain process that would have saved an ancestor's life now often makes ours less pleasant —especially since many of us have repetitive thoughts that can trigger a fight or flight response dozens of times a day. No wonder many have high blood pressure, bad digestion, and pains in the neck!

From Fight or Flight to Relax and Release...Luckily for us, a different part of the brain and nervous system, called the “parasympathetic nervous system,” has the task of undoing the fight or flight response. When the heron has stalked off, when the sabre-tooth has gone in search of less wily prey, when you've leaped out of the mad taxi's path — you heave a great sigh, and gradually your blood pressure lowers, digestion re-starts, and muscles release their tension. The “relax and release” or “Stress Buster” response has kicked in.

In situations in which a painful thought has triggered, or begun to trigger, a fight or flight response, consciously triggering this “R n' R” response will short-circuit the fight or flight response almost instantly. And without a fight or flight response, the thought remains “just a thought” — and is not interpreted as anger or fear. That's the good news. The bad news is that many of us — serious yogis/yoginis and meditators excepted, of course — have not yet learned to trigger the “R n' R” response at will. And what's the easiest and probably the most effective way to trigger the R n' R response, understood by multiple meditative traditions for thousands of years? Why, intense mental focus on the breathing process. And that's why breathing matters!

From *Angst* and Anger to Art: Blow Your Blues Away...In harmonica meditation, we often practice bringing a painful thought into the mind — one that would normally produce the emotion of anger or fear — and then, as we feel the fight or flight response kicking in, consciously force ourselves to play, a train song, a blues, a folk tune. The re-focusing of mental attention from painful thought to intense focus on the breathing process through the harmonica triggers the R n' R response, short-circuiting the fight or flight response. Instead of anger or fear, an alert, relaxed, meditative state results. In fact, this may be how the blues began, as the African-Americans who took the harmonica to heart during and after the Civil War found that they could, simply by directing their breath with great focus through this lovely little instrument, could turn their *angst* and their anger into America's greatest art form: the blues!

Harmonica Dharana-Dhyana-Samadhi...Beyond the immediate emotional benefits of HarmonicaYoga™ practice, it also provides a powerful advaita (non-dualistic) practice. When we become more able to control the outrageous slings and arrows of thought and emotion — so that our fears and angers can no longer hijack our attempts at meditation — deeper levels of mindfulness become possible.

Harmonica-*dharana* (“concentration, one pointedness”) leads us to harmonica-*dhyana* (“single flow of ideas in the meditative state”) and then (with diligent practice, zeal, and love for the instrument) to harmonica-*samadhi* (which athletes might call “playing in the zone,” and blues musicians might call “playing from the gut”). In this delightful state, only the music exists, and one can, for brief periods, overcome the obstacle of mind/memory, and even achieve, with luck and grace, an *advaita* (“non-dualistic”) awareness for a second or two. And fortunately, one doesn't have to be an experienced player to reach these states. As one participant, after playing for only a few hours, put it, “Sometimes it feels as though the harmonica is playing me!”

Once these techniques and states are practiced with harmonica, they become easier to achieve without it as well, and naturally the goal of the HarmonicaYoga™ process is to be able to use the mindfulness, and access meditative states, anywhere and anytime — even in the library or at church or in the boss's office, where harmonica playing might not be entirely appropriate!

Beyond the Individual: All Together Now...If the harmonica mindfulness process were just for individual use, it could be easily learned from a book or CD, or even from this little article. But the harmonica is also ideal for group meditation practice. It's easy to hear when the group's inhales and exhales are co-ordinated — all simultaneously inhaling and exhaling. And what psychologists call “entraining” (the group co-ordination of bodily processes) takes place, producing a powerful bonding effect, so that a harmonica *sangha* quickly results. But there's still more to a HarmonicaYoga™ workshop than that...

Interactive Mindfulness and the Blues, Rock, Folk, or Jazz Band



It's all very well to understand that harmonica can be used to practice the ability to short-circuit the fight or flight response. But beyond that, although there may be a few who live an entirely hermitic lifestyle, satisfied by our own company and the contemplation of the dharma —most of us who are interested in mindfulness are concerned with its implications for daily life. And daily life (hermits excepted) generally involves interaction with other people.

In the HarmonicaYoga™ Workshop, we don't "just" learn to use harmonica as a mindfulness tool. Participants also learn to play tin whistle and various percussion instruments, as well as (for those who

choose to try — it's optional) bass, rhythm, and lead guitar.

After learning to play simple Blues, Rock, Folk, Jazz and Celtic music, the whole group then begins to form a variety of smaller groups: duos, trios, quartets, and larger ensembles. Forming and playing in these individual bands — which change and morph from session to session — provides an ideal laboratory for studying, practicing, and honing interactive mindfulness skills. Some of these include group creativity, leadership style, ability to re-focus attention onto internal process at will, dealing with difficult persons or situations, and the ability to see whole as more than the sum of its parts – including one's own part. It's fun, challenging, and sounds great!

Harmonica Ananda: Bliss of the Blues Harp...As it was once said that "All roads lead to Rome," so it is clear that almost any vehicle — if properly used — can transport us through the lower levels of learning to control the brain's response to fear or anger, through the middle levels of concentration and meditation, to even, with diligent practice, the highest levels of non-dualistic awareness. Returning to Yoga-Sutra 1: 39 — "whatever you choose" (*yatha abhimata*) we see that the humble blues harmonica, and the format of the blues, rock, folk or jazz band, may be an entertaining, self-expressive, and effective choice — not as an end in itself, but as a means towards the greatest end that the human brain can aspire too: the cultivation of mindfulness in the context of this blooming and buzzing confusion known as life on Earth.



David Harp, M.A. is the author of more than 20 books, including *The Three Minute Meditator*, *MetaPhysical Fitness*, *Instant Blues Harmonica*, *Tinwhistle Today*, and *Instant Guitar*. His newest non-music books are *Mindfulness To Go: How to Meditate While You're On the Move*, and *Neural Path Therapy: How to Change Your Brain's Response to Anger, Fear, Pain, and Desire*.

David's teachers include Stephen Levine, Jack Kornfield, and Big Walter Horton. His list of corporate clients for whom he has done harmonica/mindfulness presentations range from Ben & Jerry's to the FBI.

He has taught approximately one million people to blow their blues away, and holds the undisputed World's Record for "Most People Taught to Play Harmonica at One Time" (currently 2,569 — but he "hopes to do a big one, soon").



"It's not about the harmonica. It's about the butterfly."