

Zen Harmonica: Learning Mindfulness in the Key of Life

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Ask the Therapist

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"I play the harmonica. The only way I can play is if I get my car going really fast and stick it out the window." ~Stephen Wright

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." ~Mahatma Gandhi

David Harp is the Rosetta Stone of the harmonica. He has taught over a million people how to play, and holds the world's record for teaching the most people to play at one time (2,569). How does he do it?

Mindfulness. Because that's what he's *really* interested in...

If you're like me you probably have at least one, if not two cheap harmonicas lying in the bottom of your closet or in the back of a drawer someplace. When you see them you take them out of the box, lick your lips, wail unskillfully until you're out of breath, tuck it back in the box, and then forget about it for another four years.

I've licked my lips long enough. Wailed unskillfully long enough. It was time to do something about it.

According to my astrology chart I'm in my Saturn return. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but it has something to do with making good on the missed opportunities the first time around. It takes Saturn 29 ½ years to orbit the sun and these are the biggest times of upheaval in our lives. This is my second return (God willing I will have three) but this time around I am making damn sure I don't make the mistakes of the first time. This is

the time when you basically get a “do-over” in your life. Back then I deferred many things to go to grad school, then deferred them further to advance my career and raise a family. I’m now going back to reclaim those experiences. This isn’t a bucket list; it is more of a champagne-glass list. These are the experiences that I always suspected would fulfill me. Learning to play the harmonica was niggling me for nearly 30 years.

I don’t know what is on your champagne-glass list, but it may be time to start thinking about doing what you’ve always wanted to do, and learn how to do it. Gandhi had the right idea. Here is what I got from pushing to learn something I always wanted to do.

First, when you go out to learn — find a teacher with passion.

David Harp (great name for the man who has taught the world to play the harmonica, yes?) is a truly unique person. Not only are his lectures filled with the latest findings in neuroscience, meditative practices, music theory, the history of the harmonica, and mindfulness, they are also a cause for pure inspiration. David has used the harmonica to help breathing patterns in adults with problems such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder, Alzheimer’s, terminally ill children, people in the armed forces, and hospice services. For him the harmonica isn’t a peripheral musical curiosity, nor even a way of making great blues or rock music. It is a portal into self-actualization and, no pun intended, a tool for living in harmony with yourself and others.

His joyful energy and exuberance filled the class with enthusiasm. We wanted to learn everything from him we could, and we were not alone. He has also taught harmonica to the good people at such diverse organizations as the FBI and Ben and Jerry’s, Merck and Kraft. He is a corporate speaker and, of course, consummate entertainer. He also practices what he preaches. I attended an open session he had for anyone interested in leaning to play. I was expecting him to just give them a demonstration and maybe show a film. No. Instead he brought in a crate of harmonicas and gave everyone who came a free one. He distributed more than 50. David is a man who

really believes in what he does. Of the hundreds of professors I have had over the years there are only about a dozen I could say have that kind of passion.

To demonstrate techniques he introduced us to the classic harmonica players as well as the likes of J. Geils, Bob Dylan, and Stevie Wonder. Listening to him lose himself was a source of direct inspiration. Watching his mind and body instantaneously transport into a nondualistic way of being was as good as sitting at the feet of any worthy guru, yoga master, or Bodhisattva. The difference is that he communicated that space with the music made possible by his concentrated breathing. It wasn't the solemn resonance evoked by Om, but rather the transportive delight shared through a boogie-woogie riff in C.

The mindfulness base of this weeklong course was the essence of the experience. For Harp, the harmonica is really about breathing and concentration – the core elements in mindfulness. David has trademarked what he calls the HarMantra™, a beautiful 4-note riff that does, indeed, create a mindful, meditative space. In fact, we did a deep breathing exercise that took it down to 4 breaths a minute with the Harmantra™. For those of you unfamiliar with what breathing 4 breaths a minute is like, all I can say is that there isn't another thing you could possibly think about. You aren't in the moment—you *are* the moment.

Secondly, surround yourself with other learners who want what you want at the level you want it. When you decide what it is you are going to learn, and you have found the right teacher, the students you will be with are the next most important ingredient. They become your mirrors of progress.

So who were my fellow classmates? Who takes one of their precious vacations and takes something that sounds so frivolous as an immersion course in learning to play the harmonica mindfully? The class was made up of a warm, intelligent, thoughtful group of folks invested in opening themselves to a new experience — people from different parts of the country and even those from other cultures. The harmonica is the perfect vehicle for promoting unity, togetherness and collective spirit.

What became very obvious was that in learning how to navigate the ten holes of the harmonica, you also had to do this in harmony with others, and with intentional synchrony, since everyone *must* breathe in and breathe out simultaneously to sound right. In true bandleader style, David would keep us true to the tempo while illustrating the in-out breathing patterns that allowed us to improvise blues and rock music right away. His proprietary teaching system gave us the basics very quickly, and each day we would build upon the learned patterns of the day before. By the end of the week we all got more than we bargained for—much more. But it wasn't just executing the breathing patterns and notes that brought us together as a group. We did yoga together—with our harmonicas. Downward Dog in the key of G using the Harmantra, The Tree, and the pigeon, in F#.

Halfway through the week-long intensive to learn how to play the harmonica I noticed something. I was smiling constantly; I had actually learned to do a series of rock and roll riffs, and the rhyming blues, "Bad To The Bone" style. Pure joy. My classmates celebrated my achievements—I celebrated theirs.

The third thing is to work in the class to push yourself. Take an excursion out of your comfort zone.

Thursday night; our big jam session. We played in various duos and practiced putting the patterns we'd learned during the week together — showing off all that we had learned. Word had spread throughout the large yoga center the course was held in. We were having so much fun in this course that people started coming by to hear the jam session. It was during this time I had my first of two peak experiences.

I jammed with a partner I'd met in the class, an MBA banking professional who used the class as a launch to her yearlong sabbatical. This wouldn't be someone you thought would have a passion to learn to play the harmonica, but hey, who am I to talk? Few psychologists would be identified with that desire as well. With studio-quality equipment we wailed away on our harmonicas, swapping riffs with each other. To be in that kind of harmony with another person playing music was something I'd

not had in my life. David, as maestro, kept us in tempo with the background music, and for all the world it felt like we were seriously improvising the blues harmonica. We be jammin'! The spontaneous applause following our improvisation confirmed that, indeed, we had. Limiting beliefs had been shattered, and what had been a passing thought and desire earlier in the week became actualized. None of us plan on touring with the Rolling Stones next week, but the smiles will speak for themselves. Here is a little impromptu sample of our class in [action](#).

On the last night of class he was teaching us how to bend-blow a high note, a difficult feat even for accomplished harmonica musicians, but there were several in the class who implored him to give us a shot at learning it. These funky high-pitched bends are one of the things that make the harmonica so vibrant. The tongue placement and the directional focus of the air stream are tricky. Over time you want to be able to alternate from a regular note to this bend with cultivated precision. But for us the idea was to just see if you could find the sound and make it happen a few times, even though blow-bending is one of the most difficult tasks to master with the harmonica. Within the secret desire to play the blues harmonica was my deep drive to be able to do one of those screeching blow-bends. My college days were spent listening to J. Geils and I wanted to – at least once in my life – hit one of those amazing notes. David warned us it was not likely that many of us could achieve a blow-bend sound, but he would teach us and give us something to work toward with our take-home practice CDs. If we couldn't do it? Then our sense of loss or failure would be just another thought to dissipate with our HarMantra™.

Whenever our class had to learn something new it was like herding a group of cats. We'd all start flittering around trying to get the right sound. Imagine an orchestra tuning up before a performance. Now imagine if the orchestra players really didn't know exactly how to play the instrument. Well, that was what we sounded like preparing for the blow-bend.

David's musical acumen and attunement to sound was apparent throughout the course. He could tell exactly who and what was

wrong in our group of 19 people — who had started on the wrong note (and which wrong note) and who had picked up the wrong harmonica. As we all started the blow-bend exercise somehow, within a very few minutes, I hit the note. David immediately stopped the class and pointed me out.

“Dan’s got it—do it again.”

My tongue fumbled for the space, but to my deep amazement and satisfaction I was able to repeat the note, then again and again. The class let out a spontaneous round of applause. I stood and took my bow.

As a kid I took endless years of speech lessons. When I finally got the sound right I could hear it – the teacher didn’t have to tell me. The blow-bend melted decades and brought me back to those moments when my S’s stopped sounding like “eshes.” Few things have felt so good: A sense of achievement from having learned something; a personal challenge met head-on, and a sense of accomplishment attained by pushing past a perceived limitation. Ultimately this is what you will want in learning something new.

All this from simply breathing in – then out — with mindfulness.

The formula for doing things on your champagne-glass list is simple: Find a teacher with passion, like-minded students who will encourage and challenge you, and be willing to push yourself out of your comfort zone.

I learned during this week that this course, perhaps more than anything else helped me gain a dual sense of self-acceptance while striving: acknowledging my limitations and current state, while desiring to acquire more skill toward mastery. Just like tennis or racquetball or skiing, or yoga, or meditating, you can take some lessons and get good enough to start, and then devote the rest of your life to learning more and getting better.

Here is my encouragement: This year pick one thing that you haven’t allowed yourself to do, and do it. Don’t wait for a Saturn return to nudge you. Learn something, do something, that you have always wanted to do. Do it because deep down inside you

know it will make you whole.

It might not feel like it is a spiritual quest, but when you are engaged in learning at this level it almost certainly is. How can I be so sure? The clue about what really motivates us in life came from the great harmonica duo, John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, the Blues Brothers, Jake and Elwood. Whenever they were asked what they were doing they had one simple reply:

“We’re on a mission from God.”

[David Harp](#) teaches Zen and the Art of HarmonicaYoga™ twice a year at [Kripalu](#) in Lenox, Massachusetts, and does a variety of other events at venues around the nation and the world.