



# FILISKO'S HARMONICA BREATHING GUIDE - 1

NOTES TO PROMOTE RELAXED AND CONTROLLED BREATHING - 1/5/20 - 2/22/26

Obviously, playing correct notes are important, but knowing how and when to breathe is an unobvious, hidden foundational layer of skillful playing. The Filisko Method will make you more aware of your breathing and show you how to have active control of it. Undisciplined breathing can have a negative effect on your musicality. An in-depth study of players like DeFord Bailey, Sonny Terry, Sonny Boy Williamson #1, and Little Walter will show that their playing was so great, in part, due to their breath control. Normal breathing is uni-directional but the harmonica demands bi-directional breathing. *See the bi-directional breathing awareness under "The 3 Foundations" learning guide.*

## The FOUR BREATHING TECHNIQUES of the Filisko Method

The **Exhale Push** [EP] is quickly deflating all the air out of your lungs without the harp in your mouth. Having your lungs empty is your new starting point. Deflating your lungs before playing is not at all intuitive, but essential for controlled blues playing. Done correctly, it won't be heard.

The **Nose Push** [NP] is deflating (pushing) air silently out the nose while simultaneously playing an exhale note, split, or chord. Try not to draw attention to that exhaling sound. This technique allows longer inhaling, legato phrases. This is the most challenging of the four breathing techniques. Songs such as "Mississippi Groovin" initially call for the **Nose Dump** [ND], which is releasing 100% of your air out of your nose. The [ND] may be the best way to ease into learning the more complicated [NP.]

The **Inhale Pull** [IP] is inflating the lungs as quickly and silently as possible before playing, exactly as done before singing or playing a traditional wind or brass instrument. This is the easiest of the breathing techniques and the opposite of the Exhale Push, and less common in blues playing, as most blues is inhaling.

The **Nose Pull** [Pull] is inflating the lungs through the nose while simultaneously playing an inhaling note, split, or chord. This should be done without drawing attention to that inhaling sound. This is the opposite of the Nose Push and is much less common in blues.

## PERPETUAL BREATHING

**Perpetual** breathing is the skill of getting air in and releasing air out, mainly through use of the Nose Push and sometimes the Nose Pull, without ever interfering with the flow of the music. This is the highest level of bi-directional breathing awareness. Songs that call for **Perpetual** breathing are the "Train Imitation," "DeFord's Dream," and the "1-Chord Shuffle." You should never pause your playing to catch a breath. This level of awareness and control of breathing makes it a "hidden layer" of ones playing, much the same way the roots of a tree or foundation of a tall building function. You don't see it but you know that it is extremely important.

## FILISKO'S HARMONICA BREATHING GUIDE - 2

NOTES TO PROMOTE RELAXED AND CONTROLLED BREATHING - 1/5/20 - 2/21/26

### ASPHYXIATION REFLEX

Deflating the lungs is not natural or intuitive and your body will sabotage your attempts to deflate by engaging the *Asphyxiation Reflex*. Inflating the lungs is easy. The problem is total deflation and controlling the air flows return. The *Asphyxiation Reflex* is your hidden enemy and reveals itself by causing involuntary nose breathing, and quick, unintentional inhale gasps immediately before playing, and a general inability to deflate.

### BREATHING RANGES (Please see page #3)

- Middle Range / **Relaxed (R)** (*resting - 1/2 full*)
- Upper Range is from your middle **Relaxed (R)** range up to your **Full (F)** range
- Lower Range is from your middle **Relaxed (R)** range down to your **Empty (E)** range
- Full / Total Range is everything between **Empty (E)** range and **Full (F)** range

Your default is to only play in your upper range. The *Asphyxiation Reflex* restricts easy access to your lower range, but once you can do it, you will have access to your entire range. The closer you get to **Full** or **Empty**, the more over engaged your muscles will be, resulting in a feeling of distress; the amount of distress you feel is equal to the work that those muscles are doing. Distress engages the *asphyxiation reflex* and that causes involuntary nose breathing and gasping. This nose breathing happens when the body senses potential asphyxiation or interference with normal breathing. To help minimize these effects, practice with good posture, dropping the right arm when the right hand is not being skillfully used. Practicing a *Perpetual* arrangement of “The Train” helps too.

### BREATHING EXERCISES for the Filisko Method

Here are some exercises to familiarize yourself with your lower range of breathing and put you on a path to overcome your *Asphyxiation Reflex*. Start by inflating with a deep breath to **Full**, and then slowly let the air out until you are deflated down to **Empty**. You just went from your upper range to your lower range. (This is MUCH easier than going from your lower to upper range.)

**#1 ~ Backwards Breathing** is the most powerful breathing exercises. Use the [EP], then VERY SLOWLY allow air back in until you are at the **Relaxed**, half-full place. Repeat again and again. Breathe ONLY from your lower **Empty** range to middle **Relaxed** range. Do this as often as you can each day, initially without the harp. Breathing in your lower range does not use the diaphragm but rather core muscles that are responsible for squeezing out the remaining air. As you slowly relax these core muscles the air will flow back in to your middle **Relaxed** range. (*see page 3*)

**#2 ~** Start with *Backwards Breathing* and when you are at your middle **Relaxed** range, continue to inhale smoothly and evenly through your entire range, keeping the air flow even and consistent until you are **Full**. Sustain this inhale as long as possible. Use the [EP] and repeat. Note when inflating to your middle **Relaxed** range, your diaphragm muscle engages to fill your lungs to **Full**.

**#3 ~** Play **#1** and then eventually **#2** while sustaining a chord on the harmonica. Next, try it with a sustaining throat tremolo or chordal effect. Don't inhale through your nose! If you suspect you are, you can hold your nose closed with your free hand or a nose clip. Control your ability to open and close off your nose breathing. Do this exercise with a metronome. Nose breathing can be practiced with “The Train.” Check out the songs “Inhale Blues” or “I.O.U. Blues.”

# FILISKO'S HARMONICA BREATHING GUIDE - 3

VISUAL REPRESENTATION of BREATHING - 2013 - 2/20/26

AIR  
CHART

DISTRESS  
CHART

