

# Getting the Hang of Ujjayi Breathing

The first thing we do as we enter this world, this life, is to inhale... and our last act is to exhale. Breathing, however, is something most of us take for granted – that is, until we find ourselves in position where we're unable to breathe. Our bodies can go for weeks without food, a few days without water, but our lives will cease in a matter of minutes without air. Therefore, our breath is not only a metaphor for life energy, but is truly the primary element OF life. In yoga, this subtle element is known as "*prana*" (or life-force). While Prana is not the air itself, it is the subtle life-giving element extracted from the air – or that which causes you to breathe or gives rise to the breath.

Although we can't live for more than a few minutes without breathing, most people are unaware of the importance of breathing properly and only access a portion or fraction of their lung capacity throughout the day. Proper breathing allows the body to rid itself of all the noxious gaseous by-products, especially carbon dioxide. Furthermore, it nourishes the organs and muscles with oxygen as well as dispels fatigue and anxiety. It helps to sooth the nervous system; calms the mind; improves our concentration, and increases our ability to deal with stressful situations. When we're under stress, a common remedy is to take a deep breath which helps to supplying the brain with sufficient oxygen to deal with the situation. It is especially helping in calming our emotions and combating depression.

Furthermore, deep, rhythmic breathing helps to keep the two sides of the brain in balance. Besides controlling opposite sides of the body, the two halves of the brain deal with different aspects of our lives. For example, the right side of the brain is intuitive, calming, emotional, inner-directed, and subjective – while the left side of the brain is logical, aggressive, rational, outer-directed, and objective. However, by breathing properly, the two sides of the brain are better able to work together. Breathing is one of the few autonomic functions of the body that we may also control. Our breath is also an important link between our body, mind, and spirit –moving us from the physical realm, to the mental, to the spiritual.

Breathing is one of the most important tools for deepening our practice and increasing our flow of prana throughout our bodies. The most often used and referenced breath in yoga is called Ujjayi ("victorious") breathing. Ujjayi breathing is a type of Pranayama exercise (*prana meaning "life force" and anyama meaning "control" – so pranayama can be defined as a means mastering the life force that is within each of us.*) Practicing Ujjayi breathing (or Ujjayi "pranayama" in yogic terms) while we practice yoga, helps to:

- Increase our lung capacity and helps our lungs to absorb oxygen more completely and efficiently.
- Gives our minds a place to focus, increases our concentration, unifies the mind and body, and balances opposing energies.
- Helps the body relax deeply and safely into each pose.
- Stimulates circulation and metabolism.

The sound of Ujjayi is created by gently constricting the opening of the throat (located at the back of the throat) which creates some resistance to the passage of air. Gently pulling the breath toward the back of the throat on inhalation and gently pushing the breath out on exhalation (against this resistance), creates a soothing sound—something like the sound of ocean waves rolling in and out, a radiator hiss, snoring, "Darth Vader," or even a suba diver. The breathing itself is done through the nose on both the in-breath and out-breath. This filters and warms the air, and further allows you to regulate the breath, making it smooth and even to produce a calming and relaxing effect that ultimately draws you into meditation. *(Continued)*



To be specific, the Ujjayi sound is made by toning the throat and epiglottis - the vocal diaphragm - as if you were whispering the sound of 'haaaa' in the throat - a breathy sound like the one made when you fog a mirror or glass with your breath. Typically it is the inhalation that presents the greatest challenge in learning this breath. So begin by practicing on the exhalation.

### The Technique:

1. Inhale and exhale deeply through the mouth. On the exhales (through the mouth), begin to tone the back of the throat, slightly constricting the passage of air – whispering the sound of 'haaaaa' or 'urrrr' from the throat. It might help to imagine you are fogging up a pair of glasses or a mirror. After a few breaths through the mouth like this, close the mouth half way through the exhale and continue to make the sound with the lips closed. Repeat a few times.
2. Once you are comfortable with the exhale, begin to apply the same toning of the throat to the inhales (in and out through mouth). Then close the mouth and continue applying the same toning to the throat that you did when the mouth was open. (Again, think of fogging a mirror.) The breath will still make a noise coming in and out of the nose. This is the Ujjayi breath.

As you practice, be aware of the sound and quality of your breath. Some asanas require great effort, and you may begin to strain your breath. If you are straining your breath will become uneven which means you may be pushing yourself too hard. Using that feedback as a guide throughout your practice, can inform you that it may be time to back out of a pose and rest. If a particular posture becomes difficult to the point where ujjayi breathing is lost, ease out of the posture until a smooth ujjayi breathing pattern can be reestablished. The quality and texture of your breath should never be sacrificed to achieve a posture.

*(Another way to think about Ujjayi Breath is to visualize your throat as a garden hose, with the breath passing through like a trickle of water. If you put your thumb partially over the opening of the hose, you increase the power of the water that is coming through. This is the same thing you are doing with your throat during Ujjayi breathing. The air that comes in through your constricted throat is a powerful, directed breath that you can send into the parts of your body that need it during yoga.)*

### Principles of Ujjayi Breathing:

- It should be continuous, smooth, rhythmic, and seamless.
- Can be practiced reclining, in a sitting position, or also standing. Rather than 'taking' a breath, try to receiving it - and appreciate it fully, as if taking in the fine and delicate fragrance of a flower.
- Pay close attention at the beginning of each breath because we tend to move more quickly at the beginning. Slow the breath down.
- Keep the sound of both the exhalation and inhalation steady and even from beginning to end, and loud enough for you to hear – but not so loud that it causes tension or pressure in your throat. Notice the pause that occurs at the top of each inhalation and the bottom of each exhalation. Allow that pause to happen, and enjoy the quietness and emptiness of that moment of peace, of creation.

Ujjayi breathing can be challenging to learn; however, once you've mastered it, it will help bring a meditative quality to your practice. Be patient and be sure to practice (it'll pay off!)

### Precautions:

*If you feel dizzy or light-headed stop for a few minutes then resume. If it continues, try spending shorter amounts of time practicing this breath.*

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