

# Ujjayi Breath in Yoga

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Yoga breathing exercises, called "*pranayama*" in Sanskrit, are an important part of developing a yoga practice. According to the Yoga Sutras, the ancient yoga text compiled by the sage Patanjali, pranayama is one of the classical Eight Limbs of Yoga. In addition to deepening your yoga practice, learning ways to calm and invigorate the body through breathing will greatly benefit your life off the mat.

Ujjayi Pranayama (ooh-JAH-ye prah-nah-YAH-mah) is one technique that helps calm the mind and warm the body. When practicing Ujjayi, you completely fill your lungs, while slightly contracting your throat, and breathe through your nose. This breathing technique is used throughout Ashtanga and Vinyasa yoga practices.

Its name comes from the Sanskrit word "ujjayi," which means "to conquer" or "to be victorious." Therefore, it is also often referred to as "Victorious Breath." Because of the sound it makes when performed correctly, this breath is also sometimes called "Ocean Breath" or "Hissing Breath." But, many yoga teachers simply refer to it as "Ujjayi Breath."

## Benefits of Ujjayi Breath

Maintaining a steady, rhythmic breath is the single most important part of your yoga practice. By controlling your breath, you calm your mind and bring awareness to the present moment. This awareness is the heart of yoga. In yoga, it is believed that by consciously practicing breath control exercises, you can bring positive changes to your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

Unlike other *pranayamas* that are practiced while seated or lying down, Ujjayi is performed throughout the practice in every pose. The steadiness, sound, and depth of the Ujjayi breath help to link your mind, body, and spirit to the present moment. This unification adds richness and depth to your practice.

Regularly practicing Ujjayi breath during your time on the mat can help you release pent-up emotions. The extra oxygen and deep exhalations invigorate and strengthen your physical practice.

Ujjayi is particularly beneficial for calming the mind. It is known to be beneficial for those suffering from stress, insomnia, and mental tension. With practice, you'll learn to guide your breath—so your breath can guide your practice.

## Cautions

When practicing Ujjayi Pranayama, be careful not to tighten your throat. Do not attempt any breathing exercise for the first time without the guidance of a qualified and knowledgeable teacher, particularly if you have a respiratory condition, such as *asthma* or *emphysema*. Stop the exercise if you become faint or dizzy. Always work within your own range of limits and abilities. If you have any medical concerns, talk with your doctor before practicing yoga.

## Instructions

Begin seated in a comfortable position, such as Easy Pose (*Sukhasana*). Relax your body and gently close your eyes. Let your mouth drop open slightly. Relax your jaw and your tongue.

Inhale and exhale deeply through your mouth. Feel the air of your inhalations passing through your windpipe.

On your exhalations, slightly contract the back of your throat, as you do when you whisper. Softly whisper the sound, "ahhh," as you exhale. Imagine your breath fogging up a window.

As you become comfortable with your exhalations, maintain the slight constriction of the throat on your inhalations, as well. You will notice your breath making an "ocean" sound, softly moving in and out, like ocean waves.

When you can comfortably control your throat during the inhalations and exhalations, gently close your mouth and begin ***breathing only through your nose***. Keep the same constriction in your throat as you did when your mouth was open. You will continue to hear the "ocean" sound as you breathe through your nose. Direct the breath to travel over your vocal cords, across the back of your throat. Keep your mouth closed, but your lips soft.

Concentrate on the sound of your breath; allow it to soothe your mind. It should be audible to you, but not so loud that someone standing several feet away can hear it.

Let your inhalations fill your lungs to their fullest expansion. Completely release the air during your exhalations.

Start by practicing Ujjayi for five minutes while you are seated. For deeper meditation, increase your time to 15 minutes. Gradually begin to link your breath with your movement. As you begin to practice yoga postures (*asanas*), inhale with Ujjayi as you expand and extend, then exhale with Ujjayi as you contract and fold forward. If you are practicing Ashtanga or Vinyasa Yoga, maintain the connection of Ujjayi breath and asanas throughout your practice.

Release your Ujjayi breath when your practice is complete and you are in Corpse Pose (*Savasana*).

## **Tips**

When practiced correctly, Ujjayi breath will both energize and relax the body, mind, and spirit. The breath should be steady, rhythmic, smooth, and full. The "ocean" sound should soothe your mind. Throughout your practice, keep the steadiness, length, and smoothness of your breath as much as you can.

Use your breath as a guidepost throughout your practice. First, notice the quality of your Ujjayi breath in a pose that is not overly strenuous (Warrior II or Downward-Facing Dog, for example). As you move deeper into your practice and into more difficult poses, your breath might become shallow or strained.

Bring your focus back to your breath and become aware of the quality of your Ujjayi breath. If your breathing is strained—no longer smooth, long, and steady—you may be pushing yourself too hard. This may set you up for injury, and it also takes your awareness out of the present moment and into a "thinking" mindset that is not yoga. Remember: The "goal" in yoga is not to achieve certain poses, but to bring *awareness* to whatever pose you are currently in. Just relax and let your breath flow, as if it were effortless.

Let your breath be your teacher. If it tells you to back off or ease up, do so. Learning to listen to your breath will help you to become calm, focused, and aware in the present moment, even if it is a difficult one.

## **Breathe Deep & Free**

Practicing pranayama can benefit the mind and body in many ways and on many levels, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Remember to take it slowly. Build on your experience as you develop your breath control. As you relax and breathe consciously, yet effortlessly, you will begin to free your mind.