

The Benefits of Ujjayi Pranayama

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You need to breathe. Especially if you have any aches or pains, any injuries or illnesses, if your mind is racing much of the time or your anxiety and stress level is high – you need to do more breathing. Specifically, you need to do more yoga breathing. Ujjayi Pranayama is taught at the beginning of every Svaroopa® yoga class because it is the most important of yoga's breathing practices. If you compare equal amounts of time in the poses to doing the breathing practice, you get more benefit from Ujjayi Pranayama (ood-jaw-yee praa-naa-yaa-ma)..

The key is to gently narrow the inside of your throat, which exaggerates the sound of your breath so you can hear it. As you slow down your breath and smooth out the flow, the sound becomes consistent and steady while becoming quieter and quieter. The quiet sound of your breath is still audible inside, with the sound waves traveling from the inside of your throat to your inner ears directly, through the interior spaces in your body. This helps to draw your attention inward, while it soothes and calms your mind and nervous system. You can even be making the Ujjayi sound now, as you read.

The most important element of Ujjayi Pranayama is the sound, which is why it is often called the “sounding breath.” It is also called the “full yoga breath” by the styles of yoga that emphasize the complete filling and emptying of your lungs. Other styles of yoga practice emphasize a loud Ujjayi sound, accompanying continuous movement in vigorous athletic yoga poses. In Svaroopa yoga, we emphasize the slowing and quieting of the breath as described in the Vijnana Bhairava, one of the most important of the Kashmir Shaivite texts.

The varying names and approaches seem very different in the beginning, but they come together in the stages that develop naturally when you do it regularly. As you slow your breath and listen to the sound, it becomes quieter and draws your attention inward. It also becomes easier, smoother and more spacious. Very naturally, your lungs begin to fill slowly fuller, and empty slowly emptier, without you having to force or monitor the process at all. Instead of imposing your idea of a full breath on your body, you discover the organic and natural expansiveness of your breath in a graceful and scientific way. Each additional minute of practice is worth more than the preceding minute; minute #20 gives you more benefits than minute #19. You may even find that 20 minutes is just an appetizer, like the famous “one potato chip.”

By doing 20 minutes per day, you get the aerobic benefits of exercise, without having to tighten your spine. In aerobics, you pump your breath and heart rate faster. However, the value of aerobics is not found in the 20 minutes of sustaining your target rate, but in the efficiency of your heart and lungs during

the rest of the day. Aerobic exercisers have a slower heart and breathing rate during the other 23½ hours per day, which means that the heart and lungs don't have to work so hard to supply the cells with blood and oxygen. This is one indicator of health, vitality and youth.

With Ujjayi Pranayama, you slow your breath down for 20 minutes. Amazingly, your heart-lung efficiency is improved in the same way as aerobic exercisers; your natural breath and heart rate are slower during the rest of the day. You should not do Ujjayi Pranayama all day long – only for the 20 minutes, but then your heart and lungs don't have to work as hard to feed your body the whole rest of the day.

Furthermore, from yoga's perspective, the length of your life is determined by the number of breaths you take. This means when you breathe faster during exercise, you are spending your breaths and running down your life span. When you use a slow breathing practice to accomplish the same heart-lung efficiency, you also lengthen your life span. Plus you won't have to do poses to recover from the spinal tension you were creating.

The slow pace of your Ujjayi breath allows time for your cells to absorb the oxygen you are inhaling, improving the efficiency of your cellular respiration further. This improves your metabolism, which affects the way your body handles nutrients from your food. At the same time, each exhalation empties out more toxins and waste product than all other forms of excretion combined, which yoga describes as “purification”— a way of making your body less dense. Simultaneously your mind and emotions are cleared of the density. Most importantly, this purification or lightening up gives you access to the innermost dimensions of your own existence.

The word Ujjayi doesn't mean breath; it doesn't mean sound; it doesn't mean ocean; it doesn't mean full breath. The true meaning of the word Ujjayi is “toward (ut-) victory (jayi).” The sound of the breath is named “toward victory.” This means that the sound moves you toward victory: victory over health problems, victory over erratic or crazy mind, and victory over death. How does the sound of your breath give you victory over death? It lights the pathway inward to the discovery of your own eternal essence, the divinity of your own being.

The reason this breathing practice is named for the sound is because the sound is the most powerful and significant element of the practice. In Foundations of Svaroop Yoga, we have students lie on the floor in a well-propped Shavasana, and have another person making the breathing sound for them to listen to. I love hearing the descriptions afterward as students rave about the power and beauty of the sound, and how deeply it affected them – somehow even more deeply because they didn't have to be working to produce it themselves.

Pranayama doesn't mean breath or breathing practice. It means you are moving prana, best described as "aliveness" or "life force." The flowers in a vase have a lot of prana when they are first picked, but very little prana in a few days – they are less alive. The level of prana flowing through your body is what determines your body's health, vitality and youth. While you are listening to the sound of Ujjayi Pranayama, you are simultaneously oxygenating your cells and you are filling your reservoir of prana.

A body with high levels of prana will not become sick. Any illness will be improved by increasing your reserves of prana. Whether your immune system is overactive, with auto-immune disorders or allergies, or it is underactive and you come down with everything, having more prana will cure you. If you have low prana, everything that comes along feels like a threat, so you will live with high anxiety levels. Prana cures this, too. Ujjayi Pranayama quiets your mind and gives you an inner base of surety that makes everything easier to handle. If you need healing for any condition, do Ujjayi Pranayama for 20 minutes twice a day – that totals 40 minutes daily. Think of it like bookends on your day – 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening.

We teach Ujjayi Pranayama for 5-6 minutes at the beginning of every class, but it is merely an introduction to the full practice of 20 minutes per day. Unfortunately, we cannot take you through the full 20 minutes in every class, so we teach you the key elements so you can take it home with you.

Sometimes you dive so deeply inside during the Shavasana and Guided Awareness that you don't hear the Ujjayi instructions at all. When this happens, you need this profound inner immersion more than you need the yoga breathing. This is because you are carrying around shrama, accumulated fatigue, which makes you need the deep rest that this inner absorption provides – a rest that is deeper and more refreshing than sleep. This is usually where newer students begin, or it happens when you have been going through a tough time in your life. Your regular classes and at-home practice will clear this shrama within a few days or a few weeks, so you can develop your breathing practice more consciously and more fully.

I like to think of Ujjayi Pranayama as "slow-motion breathing." When I watch football on television, one of my favorite parts is the slo-mo replays. Even a bunch of huge players crashing down in a big pileup is so graceful in slow motion! Similarly, when you slow your breath down and begin exploring your own breath, you will begin to discover the subtleties hidden within it. Beyond that, your breath will show you subtleties hidden within your own being. You come to know the magic and mystery of your breath, and much more.