PRANAYAMA & THE BREATH MODULE
INTRODUCTION

KUMBHAKA CAUTION

UJJAYI

NADI SHODANA

KAPALABHATI

TEACHING FORMAL PRANAYAMA. IN-DEPTH COVERAGE OF UJJAYI, NADI SHODANA AND KAPALABHATI.

The ancient masters specifically developed the practice of pranayama to balance the emotions, clarify mental processes, and ultimately to integrate them into one effectively functioning whole.

– Gary Kraftsow, Yoga for Wellness

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QUESTIONS ANSWERED HERE

• What are the fundamental benefits of pranayama?
• According to B.K.S. Iyengar, how does pranayama begin and end?
• Why is patience required for safe and effective pranayama practice?
• What is a fundamental caution against teaching pranayama?
• When practicing kumbhaka, what is important for safe practice?
• What is the meaning of the Sanksrit word, Ujjayi?
• While the sound of Ujjayi breath serves a purpose, it is not the essence of the practice. What aspect of the breath is Ujjayi designed to affect?
• What other benefits of Ujjayi?
• Provide instructions for teaching Ujjayi.
• What are the contraindications for Nadi Shodana?
• What is the primary purpose / benefit of Nadi Shodana?
• What does “Nadi Shodana” mean and how does this meaning relate to a further description of this practice?
• What is the corpus callosum?
• What is the result of increased activity across the corpus callosum?
• Describe instructions for hand placement, practice, and a variation of Nadi Shodana.
• What is the meaning of the Sanksrit word, Kapalabhati?
• What are the contraindications for Kapalabhati?
• Describe the purpose and benefits of Kapalabhati.
• Provide instructions for teaching Kapalabhati.
There are multiple angles from which to examine the topic of pranayama and breathing.

While all are relevant and related, awareness of the distinctions will assist you in organizing your own study and in choosing teachings for different situations.

We offer expert teachings in each of these areas.

This Course covers topics related to teaching particular pranayama techniques. See other Courses for additional topics.
Pranayama is said to balance the emotions and to bring mental clarity.

According to B.K.S. Iyengar, pranayama begins with an exhalation and ends with an inhalation.

Progress in pranayama is a relatively slow and non-linear process, requiring patience.

Many experts advise that, with beginners, only breath practices are safe. Formal pranayama practices are generally not recommended for beginners.

Particularly important is to avoid practicing kumbhaka without knowledge and application of bandhas.

See other Courses in Pranayama & The Breath for Cautions, Breathing Fundamentals, Basic Breath Practices and more.
Always keep your practice within comfortable limits. Remember that the breath should be tamed slowly. Stay with a particular breath, or an aspect of the breath, for a good long while. Get to know your breath intimately so that you live with it moment to moment. Be willing, though, at times, to experiment, to go out on a limb and take a risk. Remember, too, that change in the breath comes slowly. As Westerners, we’re committed to the idea of a linear kind of progress as if our practice should move inexorably in a straight line from point A to point B. That probably won’t happen as you travel through the country of the Self—at least that hasn’t been my experience over the last eighteen or so years. Things go smoothly for awhile, then come to a dead stop, start up all over again, then go straight downhill, all with no apparent logical explanation.

– Richard Rosen, The Yoga of Breath

BREATHE OUT TO BEGIN, INHALE TO END

All stages of all pranayama begin with exhalation and end with inhalation. First, you must breathe out whatever tidal air remains in the lungs, then start pranayama. Do not end it with exhalation, as this strains the heart, but take a normal inhalation at the end of each stage of pranayama. Do not use force.

– B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on Prânâyâma
Teach breath retention only if qualified, and only to experienced students.

- Spontaneous pauses may be part of an evolution of practice. Pranayama practices incorporating kumbhaka, however, are known to be powerful while also presenting serious risk.

- Holding the breath is only recommended for experienced students with qualified teachers.

- Most recommend kumbhaka only with awareness of bandhas.

- "Like the formal Root and Upward Locks, outer retention (bahya kumbhaka) is a relatively advanced practice best learned under the guidance of an experienced teacher." (Richard Rosen)
Deep breathing has nothing to do with pranayama and may be practiced as an exercise for promoting health to any reasonable extent. Its beneficial effects depend chiefly upon the increased intake of oxygen and a somewhat greater influx of prana into the body. As it does not affect the pranic currents in the body, its practice is not attended by any risks...

Breathing alternately through the two nostrils begins at once to affect the pranic currents to a certain extent and tends to remove the congestion from the channels in which prana flows normally... This purification of the nadiis is a preparatory exercise and all those who intend to practice pranayama have to go through a long course extending over several months or years... This exercise is not attended with any risk and can be adopted with caution by those who live a well-regulated and clean life and are not given to excesses of any kind. But since the pranic currents are affected in the process, caution and moderation are necessary and it is advisable to work under the supervision of an expert.

Real pranayama begins when the breath is stopped for some time between inhalation and exhalation... The retention of breath, called technically kumbhaka, affects the flow of pranic currents in a very marked and fundamental manner... Pranayama has to be practiced for a long time, the period of kumbhaka being slowly increased over long periods of time...The important point to keep in mind is this. Not only is kumbhaka the essential element of real pranayama but it is also the source of danger in the practice of pranayama. The moment one starts retaining the breath—especially inside—in any abnormal manner, the danger begins and one can never know what it will lead to, unless there is a practical and competent teacher at hand to guide and correct the flow of these forces if necessary.

EXPERTS AGREE...

SWAMI RAMA

All aspirants are strictly advised not to practice the exercises of *kumbhaka* (retention of breath) without applying the *bandhas*. *Bandhas* are locks, and there are three of them: *jalandhara bandha* (chin lock), *uddiyana bandha* (abdominal lock) and *mula bandha* (root lock).

– Swami Rama, *Science of Breath*

B.K.S. IYENGAR

Knowledge of the *bandhas* is essential for the proper practice of *kumbhaka* (breath retention). They act as safety valves for distributing, regulating and absorbing energy, and prevent its dissipation. An electric motor burns out its voltage if allowed to rise too high. Similarly, when the lungs are full and the energy in them is not checked by the bandhas, they will be damaged, nerves will be frayed and the brain made unduly tense.

– B.K.S Iyengar, *Light on Prânâyâma:*

SRI SWAMI SATCHIDANANDA

One should be very careful about retention, however. It should be practiced properly under personal guidance, without going beyond what a teacher tells us. The *prana* is very powerful energy. We shouldn’t play with cobras without a proper cobra trainer nearby.

– Sri Swami Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*

SEE ALSO

- *Breathing Fundamentals*
- *General Practice Cautions*
- Specific cautions for each pranayama technique
OVERVIEW

• Ujjayi is the process of narrowing the passageway through which air is moving, allowing the breath to be drawn out and consciously controlled.

• The practice causes an "ocean wave" or "hissing" sound.

• Although this breath is done with the nostrils, it can be easier to learn with an open mouth.

Ujjayi pranayama, also referred to as "the victorious breath", provides the strength required to master every asana. The absorbed prana (energy) can also be used to facilitate body movement, allowing even Yogis with slight builds to seem able to defy gravity and glide through movements almost effortlessly. As the waves form the beach, so too does the breath form the Ashtanga Yoga practice. Your inner waves set the rhythm. The murmuring of your breath becomes the murmuring of your inner ocean while waves of inhalation flood your inner coast... Like a surfer who rides the waves of a real ocean, your inner surf carries you from asana to asana. Your breath directs each movement.

– ashtangayoga.info
UJJAYI PURPOSE & BENEFITS

Ujjayi is a technique with such powerful benefits that it should be accessible to everyone. It is an essential tool that you will find yourself using in every aspect of your life. People from my classes are always writing, calling, or coming up to me to comment on the effectiveness of the breathing method and how it has helped them to raise mindfulness, birth babies, diminish stress, and appreciate life more fully.

– Beryl Bender Birch, Power Yoga

The friction of the air passing through the lungs and throat generates internal body heat. It is similar to a massage for the internal organs; as the core becomes warm from the inside, the body becomes prepared for the asana practice.

– Lisa Mitchell, MindBodyGreen, 8 Reasons Why We Use Ujjayi Breath

It is said that Yogis can melt snow by using Ujjayi breathing. You might feel heat when first applying this technique. As your practice advances the energy will become more subtle. A quiet but steady force will develop deep inside you with which you will be able to master virtually impossible physical challenges with ease. Superficially, the muscles carry the Yogi through the air. However it is the breath which provides the necessary prana (energy).

– ashtangayoga.info, Ujjayi Pranayama – The Victorious Breath
LESS ABOUT THE SOUND; MORE ABOUT CONSISTENCY IN THE BREATH

The real essence of ujjayi is not so much the sound that we are making (for ujjayi can be done without any sound) but in the type and quality of the breath that we are making. What we are really after is consistency in the breath: evenness and rhythm. If you look at how people breathe during the course of the day, you will notice a profound lack of evenness; the breath is fast one moment and slow the next, deep here and shallow there... The most basic key to good health and happiness, as the yogis see it, is an evenness in the prana and life-force...

The most effective thing we can do is stabilize our breathing as often as we can and for as long as possible. The way we establish this pattern is practicing ujjayi breathing for the entire length of our practice. In this way, we create awareness of our breath and our prana and consciously attempt to smooth and stabilize our energetic patterns. It is actually the most essential aspect of the yoga practice, regardless of which postures or style or system we work with, for breath and prana are our most essential functions.

– Randall O’Leary, YogiTimes, Ujjayi Breathing

• Ujjayi is often used as the primary breathing practice during asana in Ashtanga, Power, Vinyasa & other styles of yoga.

• This pranayama may be maintained throughout much of practice and, according to B.K.S. Iyengar, is "the only pranayama which can be done at all times of the day and night." Other experts, however, do not recommend Ujjayi be practiced in all cases.

• The sound of Ujjayi is often used as the focal point of concentration for directing and controlling the mind.

• Because Ujjayi has to be created over and over again, a lack of focus on breath can indicate the mind has wandered.

• The sound can make it easier to identify when the breath has become erratic. This can give the student awareness and an opportunity to reduce effort, release tension, re-focus on the breath or whatever practice helps to effectively regain steadiness.
UJJAYI: SANSKRIT

Ujjayi means 'to win,' 'to conquer,' 'to acquire by conquest,' 'to be victorious.' The name is partly suggested, it seems, by the way the aspirant swells her chest out like a proud conqueror, in order to maximize the capacity of her lungs. Hidden in this word is the little prefix ud, which means 'up,' in the sense of superiority in place, rank, or power. This also suggest that ujjayi is a superior or powerful technique for liberation, a tool by which the yogis can conquer the forces of ignorance and bondage.

– Richard Rosen, The Yoga of Breath

The prefix “ud” means upwards or expanding. It also conveys the sense of preeminence and power. “Jaya” means conquest or success, and, from another point of view, restraint

– Light on Prãnãyãma

Jaya means victory. Ujjayi means victorious or conquering. It is so called because the technique allows us to become victorious in pranayama. Pranayama means extension or stretching of prana, and this is exactly what Ujjayi does.

– Pranayama The Breath of Yoga

Some say the name of Victory or Victorious is because the practice helps the mind to rise victoriously above its usually restless nature.
Ujjayi breathing is only pranayama in a preparatory sense... Pranayama is formal sitting practice involving a variety of counted kumbhakas... so Ujjayi during one's asana practice is not a replacement for formal sitting kumbhaka practice but preparation for it. Ujjayi without kumbhaka cannot by itself bring about the balance of ida and pingala, which is obtained through nadi shodhana pranayama, nor can it bring about the complete cessation of fluctuations of prana, which is obtained through extensive breath retentions.

– Gregor Maehle, Pranayama The Breath of Yoga
UJJAYI INSTRUCTIONS

When introducing the practice to beginners, you may wish to first teach the practice using an open mouth.

- Open mouth and exhale slowly.
- Softly whisper "hhhaaa."
- Notice that the sound is like listening to the ocean in a shell.
- "Feel the air swirl in the back of the throat." (David Swenson)
- Inhale through the nose, making the same sound on inhale.
- Repeat and then eventually, close mouth, continuing to make sound. David Swenson recommends closing mouth midway through exhale, letting air continue exiting through nose instead of mouth.
- Don’t sniff; rather, keep nostrils relaxed.
MORE ON UJJAYI

In this technique the valve is established by a partial contraction of the glottis. This contraction is used during inhale and exhale. The sound of the vibration at the throat can be so subtle as to be inaudible even to the practitioner or loud enough to be heard by others nearby. The heating effect is intensified as the sound at the throat becomes louder.

– Gary Kraftsow, Yoga for Transformation

As you breathe in, your body, lungs, brain, and consciousness should be receptive rather than active. Breath is received as a divine gift and should not be drawn in forcefully.

– B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on Pranayama

The sound is quite similar to that of a wave washing up on the shore and then washing back down again. Make sure that the sound is even, calming and gentle. If you strain, you will trigger the sympathetic nervous system and the method will not achieve its aim.

– Gregor Maehle, Pranayama The Breath of Yoga

It should emerge from the upper part of your throat and not from the upper or front part of your nose. Because of the resistance of air in your throat, you will find this sound automatically being created. Stretch your inhale and the exhale as much as you can without generating tension anywhere in your body, and let the sound of the breath be smooth and unbroken.

– yogawiz.com

It is helpful to gently smile while breathing to allow the air to swirl around the back of the throat before continuing its journey to the lungs. This swirling action is what creates the unique sound which has been described as wind in the trees, a distant ocean, a cobra snake or, for the less poetic, Darth Vader from Star Wars.

– David Swenson, Ashtanga Yoga
OVERVIEW

• Nadi Shodana is an excellent and safe pranayama choice for many levels of students.

• This practice opens both nostrils, stimulating both sides of the brain and balancing the activity of the brain’s hemispheres.

• While it serves to balance energy, Nadi Shodana can also be varied to focus on alertness or relaxation specifically. Some advanced texts refer to yogis who focus in particular on keeping the left nostril open (right brain dominant) for a generally more calm and insightful state.

NADI SHODANA

Nadi Shodana is also known as Anuloma Viloma.
NADI SHODANA

- Balances brain's hemispheres
- Invites a still, clear mind; brings mental clarity
- Relaxing
- Steadies energy
- "Can help calm you down" (Jennifer Nelson, Yoga Journal, Balance Builders)

PURPOSE & BENEFITS

The most powerful method of balancing ida and pingala is Nadi Shodhana, alternate-nostril breathing. (Literally, the Sanskrit means “nadi cleansing.”) This practice is effective because the ida nadi is directly connected to the left nostril, and the pingala nadi to the right. A few rounds of this basic pranayama technique at the end of an asana practice are an excellent way to help restore equilibrium between the two nadis and to compensate for any imbalance you may have inadvertently caused during your practice.

– James Bailey, Yoga Journal, Discover the Ida and Pingala Nadis
The brain's right and left hemispheres are connected by the corpus callosum—a conduit or bridge between the sides.

- The left brain controls the right side of the body and the right brain controls the left.
- Typically we shift between left and right brain dominance throughout the day, approximately every 90 minutes. This correlates with one nostril breathing freely while the other is partially constricted.
- According to which half of the brain is dominant, a person's energy, state of mind and mood are impacted. In addition, hemispheric dominance is associated with particular types of activity such as logical thinking (left brain) or innovation (right brain).

Inter-hemispheric transfer of information between the left and right brains is accomplished via increased activity across the corpus callosum, resulting in a shift from hemispheric dominance to synchronization and harmony in the brain.

- The corpus callosum can be strengthened to become more capable of transmitting information between hemispheres.
- Albert Einstein and the famed psychic healer Edgar Cayce were said to have unusually large corpous callosum.

**CAUTIONS**

- Contraindications: none noted.
- One of the safest pranayama practices to offer all levels of students but please see [Cautions](#) for more information about avoiding pranayama with raw beginners.
Traditionally, the thumb and ring finger are used to block nostrils. Instructions for this:

- Place the peace fingers of your right hand lightly onto your forehead. (Or, an alternate option is to take Vishnu Mudra with the right hand by bringing the peace fingers to the center of the palm.

- Let ring finger gently rest over left nostril and thumb over the right.

- The index and middle fingers rest between the eyebrows and pinky hooks over ring finger.

Some don’t teach the traditional hand placement and simply instruct students to block their nostrils.

The following instructions are for a simple common form of Nadi Shodhana. This version has no breath retention.

- Take a complete cycle of breath through both nostrils and empty the breath on the exhale.

- Gently block right nostril. Inhale through left.

- Gently block left. Exhale right. Inhale right.

- Gently block right. Exhale left. Inhale left.

- Continue, alternating nostrils with each exhalation.

- Breathe smoothly and steadily. Remain relaxed and calm. Practice up to 5 minutes.
There are many variations.

Here is one variation that Rod Stryker teaches on his *Meditations for Life* CD.

The added simplicity of this variation can be helpful with beginners or when there is little time.

- Inhale through both nostrils.
- At the top of the inhale, block one side. Exhale through the other.
- Inhale through both.
- Exhale through opposite side.
- Inhale through both.
- Continue.
ADDING AFFIRMATIONS

Affirmations can be an added component to breath practices. The following example is from Nischala Joy Devi.

**INHALE**

“The strength I feel inside me is enough to sustain me during any experience I have today.”

**EXHALE**

“The compassion from my heart will lead me to help anyone in need.”

*With such thoughts, what we’re doing is strengthening and bringing prana into our system, which helps us become strong and compassionate with others.*

– Nischala Joy Devi, Yoga Journal, *Balance Builders*
OVERVIEW

- While often referred to as pranayama, at other times Kapalabhati is more technically referred to as a cleansing practice.

- The translation is "Skull Shining" breath. While some refer to it as the "Breath of Fire," the Kundalini Breath of Fire is usually considered a different practice.

- Kapalabhati breathing is often taught at the beginning of class to bring warmth & energy and during asanas for connecting with the core.
KAPALABHATI: PURPOSE & BENEFITS

- Cleanses nasal passages
- Said to "cleanse the energy body" of excess stagnation
- Increases alertness
- Decreases lethargy
- Said to "purify" nerves
- Decreases carbon dioxide
- Tones abdominals
- May find breath to be smoother and/or longer afterward and mind to feel more spacious

While some sources cite the practice as "increasing oxygen absorption," in The Science of Yoga, William Broad asserts that most yogic breathing does not actually do this. We mention it here so that you can investigate the different perspectives if you wish.
KAPALABHATI: CONTRAINDICATIONS

- After eating
- Pregnancy
- Menstruation
- Heart conditions
- High blood pressure
- Eye or ear issues
- Herniated disc

See General Cautions for more information.
KAPALABHATI INSTRUCTIONS

- Take slow, deep and steady breaths through nostrils.
- Prepare by drawing abdomen in on exhalation for a few rounds.
- When moving into Kapalabhati breathing, let belly release as inhalation arises spontaneously.
- Continue by speeding up exhalations, accomplished by drawing abdomen in and continuing to let belly release with inhalation.
- Keep upper body and face relaxed.
- In contrast to a natural breath, the exhalation is active and the inhalation passive; simply receive the breath on inhalation.
- Practice up to a minute and then breathe normally before beginning another round; practice up to 3 rounds.
- Experienced practitioners may wish to move to single nostril version. Breathe only through right nostril for 2 to 3 rounds; then breathe only through left nostril for 2 to 3 rounds; complete by practicing Kapalabhati through both nostrils for 2 to 3 rounds.
Related to Kapalabhati is Bhastrrika, or Bellows Breath, which has similar purpose and benefits.

This technique is more advanced, however, and is more vigorous as it requires a forceful inhale and exhale.

See more [here](#).