

Ujjayi

Commonly translated as “victorious breath” (from the Sanskrit root “ujji – ‘to conquer’), this simple breathing practice is said to help us rise above the restless nature of the mind. It is sometimes also referred to as the ‘psychic breath’ as it leads to experiencing the subtle states of mind and generates a meditative state.

When practising ujjayi there is a slight narrowing and constriction of the throat at the glottis, the space between the vocal cords. With this narrowing, the vocal cords partially close, producing a gentle sound that resembles ocean waves on a shore (or if the volume and intensity is turned up, it’s rather more like Darth Vader!).

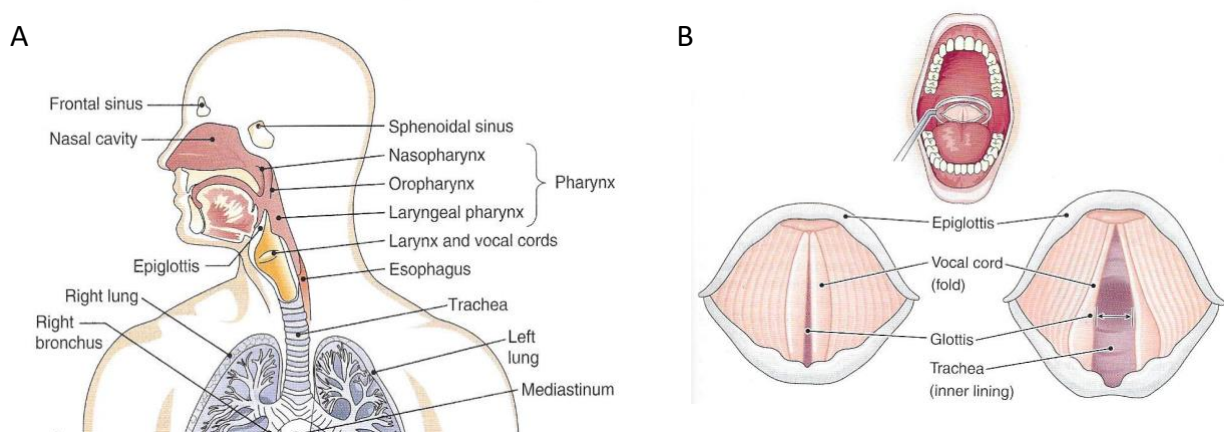


Image ref: Memmler's Structure & Function of the Human Body, Cohen & Taylor

Image A: Respiratory tract showing the location of the larynx and vocal cords

Image B: The vocal cords with the glottis in a closed position (left) and open (right).

You might begin to feel the gentle and natural blossoming of ujjayi in the Subtle Breath Awareness practice, as you guide your attention towards the movement of the breath in the throat. The sound of the breath should be smooth and unbroken, and inaudible to the person on the mat next to you.

“This is not about creating a rough sounding breath but rather one that is smooth as finest silk” Judith Hanson Lasater

Ujjayi breath:

- Focusses attention
- Draws the senses inwards, freeing us from external distractions
- Soothes the nervous system and calms the mind
- Can also be heating, and helpful in maintaining strong postures.
- Helps to focus rhythm and awareness in flowing styles of yoga such as Ashtanga or Vinyasa Flow, by synchronising movement with the breath.
- Used as a starting point for more complex breathing / pranayama practices, it can also be combined with other techniques. (We’ll explore this more throughout the course).

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- Donna Farhi suggests that with awareness and intention, the breath can be guided to explore the whole body.
 - The sound of the ujjayi breath makes it easier to identify when the breath has become strained or erratic. This helps us to make observations and guides us towards greater balance and refinement of our practice; Is my practice smooth and steady? Am I bringing too much force into this posture? Do I need to ease back a little to return to steadiness? Do I need to refocus?

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika (HYP), a 15th century text on hatha yoga refers to the ujjayi breath (Chapter 2, verses 51-53) :

“Closing the mouth, inhale with control and concentration through ida and pingala, so that the breath is felt from the throat to the heart and produces a sonorous sound”

The HYP tells us that this technique removes phlegm from the throat and stimulates the digestive fire, removes dropsy (swelling / fluid retention) and disorders of the physical and subtle energetic body. It can be done “while moving, standing, sitting or walking”

Technique:

The following is a simple way to discovering ujjayi:

Come to a comfortable seated or lying posture. Be aware of your steady foundations and alignment.

Relax the face, throat and shoulders. Feel this wave of relaxation sweep through the body. Allow the body to be receptive.

Eyes may be closed or open.

Become aware of your breath and settle into its natural rhythm. Once you feel connected to the breath....

Open your mouth and breathe as if trying to fog up a mirror or pair of glasses. This invites a gentle restriction in the throat and creates the beginnings of the ujjayi sound.

Notice the sound and gentle sensation in the throat for a few rounds.

Begin to practice this sound on the inhale as well as the exhale.

On your next round, breathe out through the mouth once again, and part way through the breath slowly close the mouth.

You are now creating the ujjayi sound with a closed mouth, both on the exhale and the inhale.

Maintain your focus on the sound and sensation of the breath at the throat.

Continue for 5 or 6 rounds, building the number of rounds gradually as you become more familiar with the practice.

Return to your natural flowing breath.

Consideration & Cautions:

It's important to have established steady, basic breathing before moving on to ujjayi breath. Donna Farhi tells us "when you have established a felt sense of your breathing and you are allowing it to move freely, you are ready to move to the next stage of mastery – guiding the breath".

The breath should never feel strained, and you should never feel 'hungry' for breath. If so, pause and return to your natural breath.

"Breath is received as a divine gift and should not be drawn in forcefully" BKS Iyengar

If you have a habitual tendency to hold your breath, then avoid ujjayi as this may create more tension. Instead focus on exploring and gently unfurling your natural flowing breath.

And if you hold a great deal of tension in the jaw or face, be mindful that your ujjayi is subtle and gentle. The contraction at the throat should be gentle. If you notice an increase in tension in the jaw or face, then return to the subtle breath awareness practice.