

CALM YOUR BREATH

Many years ago, while driving my six-year-old nephew to school, I heard his sweet voice pipe up from the back seat, "Aunty Becs, if God made us, then who made God?" My nephew is now an adult, and over these many years I have watched such an open, sensitive, and inquiring soul become stressed out, trying to live up to the values of material and social success.

Aware minds question the material definition of success. They question traditions and social norms. Although they know that a truly successful life is not reflected on the obvious, external level, even then, in order to keep up with the demands of life, they experience stress of the mind and body.

The deepest question from a six-year-old, "Where did I and all the world come from?" is the question that brilliant minds through all times and in all cultures seek to answer. This question indicates that a pure, uncomplicated mind sees deeper than what the eyes see, experiences deeper than the accumulation of actions, and knows more than what has been taught.

A six-year-old sees the unseen. They 'feel' the unspoken space of the happenings around them. And yet, as the child enters adolescence and then adulthood, his mind is helplessly on its outward march to reach the landmarks of material and social success. In the struggle to be recognized as 'someone', trust in his original, subtle vision is overshadowed.

Unable to find satisfying answers to existential questions, the mind spins its wheels and struggles with an inability to unwind from the stress in one's life. An uneasy, ungrounded feeling arises in the body, and it becomes difficult to rest and relax.

Master the Pran

It is not always easy to be settled when one first sits to meditate. Thoughts drag the attention to the daily, mundane details, to a list of shoulds and shouldn'ts, to a personality analysis. The mind is fertile with ways to entertain a sense of problem and disturbance. The nervous system influences the mind, and so a disordered nervous system gives rise to a whirling mind. This unstable mind is vulnerable to entertaining worry, fear, jealousy, anger, a sense of smallness and insecurity, etc.

Pran is a Sanskrit word referring to the all-permeating, vital energy that sustains every aspect of creation, from the blink of your eye to the force that holds the planets in their orbits. *Pran* governs the bodily functions and the functioning mind. The higher consciousness governs the *pran*. So, by regular

pranayam (conscious breathing practices) we can master the *pran* in order to positively channel the nervous system. Grounding and calming the nervous system through *pranayam* practices establishes the master consciousness.

The body's vagus nerve has two branches. One is the sympathetic nervous system, which signals the fight or flight response. The other is the parasympathetic nervous system, which signals the rest and relax response. Calming breathing techniques trigger the rest and relax response to dominate and counter the nervous system's stress response. The ability to de-stress lies in our hands; we only need to learn how to master it.

Channelling the Breath in the Sushumna Channel

According to Vedic science, our subtle nervous system is made up of thousands of channels of energy. The two predominant channels are *Ida Nadi* (the left cooling channel) and *Pingala Nadi* (the right warming channel), representing the duality of human experience. Lying dormant is one significant and extremely fine channel, the *Sushumna Nadi*, running from the crown of our head, through our spinal cord, to the perineum.

Sushumna is the union of two Sanskrit words, *sukh* – meaning happiness and *man* – meaning mind. The *Ujjai* breath channels the *pran* to flow in the *sushumna nadi*, to create a calming, soothing, peaceful effect in the mind and body.

The Ujjai Breath

The *Ujjai* breathing technique, acting directly on the vagus nerve, is the key to relieving mental and physical stress. In *Ujjai* breath, the inhalation and exhalation are both done through the nose. *Ujjai* breath is often called the ocean breath. By finely channeling the breath over the back of the throat, the gentle resistance of the passage of air creates a 'rushing' sound—like the sound of ocean waves rolling in and out.

To practice *Ujjai* breath:

1. Bring your awareness to the breath.
2. Imagine a fine channel, from the crown of your head to the base of your spine.
3. As you inhale, expand your lower belly and draw the breath downwards from the crown of your head, as if you are scraping the breath down the back of your throat.
4. Listen to the ocean sound of your breath.

5. On the exhalation, as you gently drawn your belly in, create a gentle resistance in your throat as you channel the breath upwards. By gently engaging your pelvic core in this way, the breath is channelled through the *sushumna nadi*, to reach the crown of your head on the full exhalation.
6. Listen to the ocean sound of your breath.
7. While listening, keep the mind tracing the line of the *sushumna* channel, drawing your breath downward on the inhalation and upward on the exhalation.

By listening to the calming sound of *Ujjai* you will evolve your natural rhythm. Your breath will become longer, slower, calmer and more deliberate. Deep abdominal breathing in *Ujjai* breath for ten minutes will make you feel grounded and will release stress.

Reduce Your Breath

If you would like to intensify the practice, after five to ten minutes of *Ujjai* breath, start to gradually reduce the intake of oxygen on the inhalation.

1. Once you feel calm and grounded, let your breath be very light and refined, as if below your nostrils a feather can remain without even a flutter.
2. Then make your inhalation slightly shorter than your exhalation. The inhalation becomes a wisp of a breath.
3. You will notice a natural pause between the inhalation and the exhalation. Just be conscious of it.
4. Then slightly accentuate the ocean sound on the exhalation, and be conscious of the channelling of your exhalation as the belly is drawn in.

The mind feels a little uncomfortable with taking less oxygen at first, but stay with it by leaning into the resistance created by the slow exhalation in *Ujjai* breath. The relaxing effect will release your mind from anxiety. Once the mind has adjusted, you will observe that the *pranic* breath is more potent by more effectively utilising the oxygen in the cells. When the duration of inhalation is lessened and exhalation is extended, it has such a relaxing effect on the mind and a positive effect on our well-being.

Breathing with Awareness throughout the Day

Become conscious of your breath at times other than in meditation. Especially notice when you are rushing or under pressure. Observe, has your breathing become erratic? Did you switch from nose to mouth breathing? Are you taking quick gasps while doing certain activities? Is your exhalation

shorter than your inhalation? Becoming aware of the breath during pressured times helps to positively channel the *praanic* breath.

Be conscious!

1. Firstly, always try to breathe through your nose. Even while doing strenuous exercise, only exert to that level where you can still breathe through your nose. Recent research shows increased athletic performance from nose breathing.
2. And secondly, do *Ujjai* breath when you feel rushed, anxious, or wound up. While working, while waiting, even while rushing, channel your shallow, erratic breath to hear the gentle and calming sound of your ocean breath.