

DOYOGA NEWSLETTER

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Prana or the breath of exhalation goes out and the breath of inhalation enters in in a curvilinear form. They do so of their own accord.

The great goddess (the *pranasakti* or energy of the breath) stretches or extends upward.

Both transcendent and immanent, she is the most excellent place of pilgrimage. Vijnanabhairava, V. 154



Alvaneu Switzerland: A View from the Workshop May 2008

The Song of Prana — Ujjayi Breath

By Doug Keller

The Ujjayi breath is the mainstay of pranayama practice and is fundamental to asana practice as well. It is simple to teach, but is rarely explored in its finer qualities and textures.

The Ujjayi or ‘victoriously uprising’ breath might be described as a ‘whispering breath,’ as if you were silently whispering the sound of ‘h’ or ‘hhhhhaaaaaah’ as you breathe. This sound is practiced both on the inhalation and exhalation, and ideally the breath moves through the nose as the sound is made in the throat.

Usually the *cause* of this sound is described as a toning or closing of the glottis, a set of muscles in the upper part of the throat below the nasal pharynx. The slight resistance which this toning creates is meant to smooth out the breath, encouraging a constant, steady flow from the beginning to the end of each breath. Moreover, this resistance — *especially* when the breath moves through the nose rather

than the mouth — makes the breath more diaphragmatic.

To feel this diaphragmatic quality, try this experiment: first open your mouth, and take a big breath in and out; notice how much you are using your chest or rib cage to move the breath. Now close your mouth and breathe through your nose with a relaxed Ujjayi sound: do you find yourself using your diaphragm *more* than before?

Go on to experiment with breathing through your nose both with and without the Ujjayi sound. It’s likely that you’ll be using your diaphragm more deeply when practicing a soft, slow and relaxed Ujjayi sound.

The ‘Ujjayi sound’ is often given simple descriptions that are meant to make it accessible. It’s sometimes described as a ‘Darth Vader’ breath — which is always good for getting a laugh from students (though you have to wonder whether they’re a little puzzled by the connotations). What’s more, students are often

encouraged to make the sound loud enough to be heard, especially during strenuous asana sessions.

But while these descriptions have the virtue of simplicity, is this really the essence of the Ujjayi breath? Might we actually be working *against* ourselves when breathing in this way — particularly when the emphasis is upon closing the glottis to make the sound?

The muscles at the top of the throat, which include the glottis as well as the back of the tongue, are called ‘constrictors,’ and they have a purpose. When you swallow, you’ll feel your larynx (which is visible as the ‘Adam’s apple’) move upward as the constrictors close your windpipe, allowing you to swallow. These muscles literally preventing you from inhaling your food.

The constrictors are also at work when you sing higher and higher notes — raising the larynx to raise the pitch of the notes — and also tighten when we are

tense or nervous. In both cases, we can hear the tension as the voice becomes thin and strained.

The constrictors are actually **contrary** to the acts of breathing and speaking. Just because we use them as we reach for the high notes *doesn't* mean they're *meant* to be used. The difference between an amateur singer and a trained professional is that a professional singer gets a fuller sound and protects her voice by *not* using them. Constant tension in these muscles increases stress, and makes chest-breathers of us all. That would hardly seem to be yogic breathing, any more than it would produce beautiful singing.

What then are we meant to be doing with the Ujjayi breath?

If there are constrictors, then there must be anti-constrictors, which would prevent this kind of strain. Notice what direction the Adam's apple moves when you yawn: it moves downward, opening the windpipe to a deeper, fuller (and more diaphragmatic) breath. The muscles engaged by a yawn are 'anti-constrictors' which release any tension at the top of the throat, and fully open the throat to the breath. This is the secret of singers and speakers with full, resonant voices, and it is the secret of the Ujjayi breath.

Pranayama, you see, *is* like singing. The actions associated with the breath in pranayama — and with the Ujjayi breath in particular — are the same as those which open up the voice to singing. Thus it shouldn't be strange or surprising that hatha yoga texts such as the Gheranda Samhita say that one of the signs of a good and productive pranayama practice is a more beautiful and pleasing voice.

How do we bring this into our practice of Ujjayi? Here are some qualities of the basic 'shape' the throat, and then we'll talk about how to practice them:

- The larynx is dropped and held forward; the back of the tongue and the entire width of the anti-constrictor muscles at the root of the tongue are held forward, making the lower throat appear full and open.
- The length of the tongue is broadly 'U'-shaped, such as when producing the vowel sound 'ah' as in 'far' — though the tip of the tongue remains relaxed and lightly touching the back of the teeth.
- The uvula hangs low, the soft palate is relaxed, and the 'pillars' of the fauces — at either side of the uvula — billow outward.

How do we find these qualities? Start with a yawn. When you yawn while

touching your Adam's apple, you'll feel the correct action of the anti-constrictors. Then practice a 'yawn' without the yawn: it's a kind of yogic 'stretch' for the throat in which you draw the Adam's apple down and then release it back up. Do it with the breath (already you're likely to hear an Ujjayi sound deep in the throat), but with your mouth closed. You might even lightly tie a bowtie right at your Adam's apple and use that as a guide as you practice drawing the bowtie downward.

Some students may find that their Adam's apple begins to disappear into their throat as they draw it downward. If it does, practice drawing it down slowly until you feel the point where it begins to draw back; hold it at that point, and don't take it further. The throat should have the broad, open-throated quality of a yawn, where the throat and back of the tongue are held forward rather than contracting back. You might even focus on the 'Neelakantha' quality of the 'blue-throated' Lord Shiva, where the sound resonates in the blue area of his throat.

Keep the tip of your tongue lightly touching between your front teeth; if the tongue pulls away from the teeth as you 'yawn,' place the tip of your tongue between your teeth, so that you can better feel when the tongue wants to pull back — and keep it passive. At the same time, the back of your tongue will



Hybrid Yoga To Blend or Not to Blend?

A very good piece by Nora Isaacs, the editor of *Yoga Journal* called 'Yoga or Something Like It' explores contemporary (New York) versions of 'hybrid' yoga that represent attempts by teachers to remain viable in a competitive market by offering versions of yoga that blend in better with contemporary tastes, or offer a novel mix of elements that tempt newcomers especially to try it out. It is of course a meditation on exactly what yoga is — or should be — in today's culture. "Accessibility seems to be the rallying cry for hybrid classes, many of which are

meant to counter the intimidation, seriousness, and dogmatism of traditional classes. "These fusion classes are really good in terms of bringing such a traditional practice into modern-day life," says Jorge Manahan, a 29-year-old multimedia designer from Brooklyn... On the other coast, a new Los Angeles studio called YAZ features hip-hop yoga, where Sun Salutations are done to the music of Destiny's Child. "We're still practicing yoga, but we have to modernize it," says YAZ owner Kimberley Fowler. "We don't live in India, and you need to bring it to the society that it's supposed to be benefiting."

According to the owners of Sonic Yoga, the music provides a focal point for New Yorkers who can't slow down enough to sit quietly. "In New York, there is a lot of

broaden to participate in opening the throat to the breath.

When you practice this, you can direct the sound or 'feeling' of the Ujjayi breath to the bottom of your voice box, silently whispering the sound of a satisfied 'Aaaaaahhhhh.' In the case of the Ujjayi breath, there's no need to draw the larynx down too strongly — just find the 'sweet spot' where the throat opens to the breath and produces a soft ocean-like sound.

Compare this to the feeling of an Ujjayi breath when the top of the throat is toned at the glottis (as if you were whispering the sound 'Eeeeeee'). In making these comparisons, it's likely you'll find that in the 'Darth Vader' style of Ujjayi the breath feels more narrow and pushed. You're more likely to feel the effort in your chest, and perhaps even pressure in your heart. It is the kind of breath associated with doing hard things, like pushing open a heavy door.

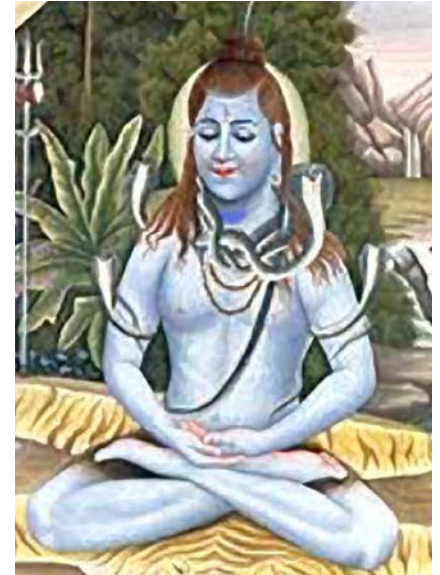
Unlike such a strained Ujjayi, the deep Ujjayi plumbs the depths of the breath and yet feels broad, open and even relaxed. The breath feels *less* forced and more diaphragmatic, even though

some effort is involved in drawing the larynx downward and holding it there as the breath moves in and out.

Awareness of the quality of your Ujjayi breath is the best way to remain sensitive to any unnecessary tension you might otherwise be unaware of in your practice in asana, pranayama and meditation. It helps you to negotiate the delicate balance between effort and ease — on the one hand alerting you to the moments when you are pushing a bit too hard, while on the other hand allowing you to feel the power of the Prana.

The Prana is the vehicle of grace in your practice, the energy behind your breath that helps you to move through obstacles in mind and body without forcing your way. Perhaps the legend of Shiva as 'Neelakantha' is suggestive of this quality of the Ujjayi breath — to remain open to the nectarian nature of the Prana, while holding the destructive forces of thought and emotion at bay.

Graceful yoga is an effortless effort, riding on the power of the breath without strain or violence to the body or mind. That's the victorious nature of the Ujjayi breath.



Shiva's mythic representation as 'blue-throated' represents his ability to hold the poison of the world in his throat without harm. The crescent of the moon provides coolness to overcome the heat of that poison. Perhaps a quality of Ujjayi is the ability to 'hold' that space of the breath without strain, holding destructive thoughts at bay.

stimulation all day," says Hanna. "Some students have a hard time letting go of distractions in class, and the music allows them to clear their head."

But across town at the Integral Yoga Institute, President Swami Ramananda gets a chuckle out of the idea that New Yorkers need loud music to clear their heads. "There are New Yorkers who crave that quieting down and come here every day to get it," he says. "My concern is that this could be a way of adapting yoga to our own conditioning, rather than using yoga to unlearn our conditioning."

Here's the question once again posed by 'something new' like yoga entering an already vibrant culture: should it be absorbed by the culture through making it relevant to the uppermost concerns of the mainstream? Or should it preserve its integrity as a much-needed corrective to cultural conditioning?

How big is the room for compromise and/or adjustment?

"As has happened with everything from Buddhism to classical dance, when a practice or teaching crosses a border, it interacts with the existing culture and inevitably evolves. "I am happy to see asana practice proliferate and get creative," says Integral Yoga's Swami Ramananda. "If someone finds physical benefits through practicing with music or strobe lights or in the water, that's fine with me. However, that approach leads to a limited benefit—and has a limited goal."

The modern world increasingly defines "yoga" as asana—a misperception that brings with it the risk of missing the deeper aims and meaning of the practice. "If you take that one limb of the eight and you focus on that, play with that, get creative with that, you are really practicing something out of context,"

says Ramananda. "It's important to retain a distinction between yoga in its classical sense and the practice of asana, which, in many people's minds, yoga is reduced to."

Indeed, the one thing all the hybrids I visited had in common was the physical poses. In each class we did some variation of a Sun Salutation, standing poses like Warrior, and backbends. But that's where the connection ended. I didn't find myself experiencing a sense of union, quieting my mind, or situated anywhere near the road to samadhi. These are high standards—ones not always met by the "traditional" yoga classes I've taken. But when I leave those classes, more often than not I feel that the work I've just done has created space in my body and mind that could allow some kind of transformation, however small, to occur...[But] without a context within which to practice the asanas, I can't make the connection between yoga's essence—finding the

stira (steadiness) and sukha (ease) in each pose—and what I'm doing.”

There's an extra layer to the problem hidden within Ms. Isaacs fine commentary — an identity crisis within yoga itself, which shows up in the back-and-forth between the physicality of asana practice and the spiritual essence of yoga. This spiritual aspect is something that it's hard to put your finger on — suggested by Ms. Isaacs' reference to her feeling of a 'space in my body and mind that could allow some kind of transformation, however small, to occur.' She adds that often 'traditional' classes with the spirituality acknowledged nevertheless seem to miss the point: "I can't make the connection between yoga's essence — finding the stira (steadiness) and sukha (ease) in each pose — and what I'm doing.”

This speaks directly to the identity crisis within yoga itself, and there are reasons for it. Look again at the original texts of Hatha Yoga — the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita and others. It is indeed a physical practice, and what are the benefits they cite? "Overcomes old age and death" is repeated over and over again, along with other very practical benefits such as improvement in digestion. Such references would actually be very effective PR for yoga that appeals to everyone who wants to stay young, attractive and healthy, if the language were spiffed up just a bit, though they might seem appalling to those who are convinced of the 'spirituality' of the practice.

You see, hatha yoga from the start was indeed physical. It **was** exercise, especially as popularized by Krishnamacharya and his students — particularly Masters Iyengar and Jois. As they introduced hatha yoga to the West, their routines were indeed regimens of exercise (in some cases clearly inspired by other exercise routines, such as from the British wrestling teams), accompanied by

talk of the spiritual purposes based on classical yoga teachings drawn from Patanjali. Hatha yoga as we know it **is** exercise, and we can all feel a little less guilty for doing it as a physical practice for physical benefits; we don't *have* to justify doing it by sprinkling a layer of spiritual talk and sutras to make it OK.

Is hatha yoga **more** than just that physical practice? Certainly. But here you enter the realm of pranayama and meditation as practiced quite *differently* from the classical style of Patanjali. For real insight into this, read Sir John Woodroffe's [Serpent Power](#), which unequivocally equates the spirituality of hatha yoga with pranayama, not asana — though asana has its place. As a distinctly spiritual practice with spiritual purposes in the tantric tradition, **hatha yoga is pranayama**, not asana — as pranayama is specifically understood by that evolving tradition having to do with the spiritually transformative power of the Prana.

Efforts made by styles of yoga these days to apply the spiritual power and significance of hatha yoga to **asana** practice, especially when neglecting pranayama and replacing it with spiritual talk and lectures, is a significant departure from the real tradition, and one that has yet to be justified. Asana definitely has its place in yoga as a spiritual practice, but as a precursor for the real work, not a replacement.

Indeed, the role of pranayama and the larger historical context for hatha yoga is **not** the context within which this issue is being discussed here. Here we're talking about hatha yoga as asana practice — the form we know and love. Indeed, Ms. Isaacs cites the need to set a context for the practice *of asana* in order to make the connection between practice and spirituality — while implicitly assuming that the context set by Patanjali in her reference to *stira* and *sukha*, is the appropriate one.

Here's the problem: accepting a 'classical' context (i.e. Patanjali's interpretation of yoga as meditation, within which asana is described as *stira* and *sukha*) as the basis for evaluating what forms of yoga might really 'count' as yoga is like judging the teachings of the New Testament of the Bible by the standards of the Old Testament; it misses the fact that there is something new and important going on. A lot of valuable stuff gets missed, misinterpreted, misapprehended, or misunderstood. As it arose in the tantric period long **after** Patanjali, Hatha Yoga did not reject the eightfold path of Patanjali to which Ms. Isaacs refers, but certainly **re-envisioned** it, taking into account the fact that we need to take care of ourselves much better physically if we are to aspire to the heights of stillness and meditation.

The hatha yogis themselves did indeed get too hung up on 'conquering old age and death,' and thus there are limits to how far we might want to follow them in particular. But *beyond* the teachings of the hatha yogis themselves, the tantric tradition itself also subtly re-envisioned the power and purpose of meditation and pranayama. It did not entirely reject the older interest in samadhi, but at the same time transformed the description and road to the experience of stillness into something much more dynamic — a stilling at the center of movement which is not a 'stopping' of all movement. It speaks much more directly to the 'space for transformation' Ms. Isaacs finds so essential and yet so elusive.

"People's yoga history certainly affect their experiences with hybrid forms...Sheri Radel, who has practiced for only six months, adds, "I can imagine the Sonic class being great for somebody with more advanced yoga training, though there is not much of a spiritual element involved. Overall, the whole idea of yoga being trendy does not really work for me; I think I'll stick with a more traditional approach—and get my cardio workout in the gym."

When a practice gets interpreted cross-culturally, the teachers transmitting the form have the subtly difficult task of preserving the essence of the practice. I had snickered a bit about Aqua Yoga beforehand, but after taking the class I felt its teacher, Barbara Kennedy, to be the most authentic of all the hybrid teachers I studied with, in terms of her genuine desire to cultivate awareness, breath, and a sense of abiding calm within her students. Other hybrids that retain the essence of the practice do exist: Manhattan's Elliott Goldberg has molded the original form of "Yogic Weight Lifting" from K. V. Iyer, who developed it in India in the 1920s, to introduce his own discipline. This more meditative form of weight lifting seeks self-liberation through the mindful movements of the joints against resistance."

Here's the \$10,000 question: as much as we value what is 'traditional,' what do we understand ourselves to *mean* by "traditional?" The clues to our own interpretations lie in the words we use such as "awareness, breath, and a sense of abiding calm," and "self-liberation through...mindful movements."

Our discussions of the pros and cons of contemporary and traditional forms of yoga remains elusive not only because we assume we know what these terms mean when we use them, but also because we *assume* that the school(s) of the various forms of yoga that we call 'traditional' — actually share our interest in those meanings. Did Patanjali *really* care about 'self-liberation through the mindful movements of the joints?' Was that part of his understanding of samadhi? When we speak of what yoga 'is' traditionally, we use his sutras as the standard for setting the goals of yoga, *and* we also *assume* that the meanings *we* give to 'abiding calm,' 'self-liberation' and 'mindful movement' are values and meanings that he would even recognize! No wonder our discussion of 'What makes it yoga?' is so elusive!

This is by no means a criticism or dismissal of Ms. Isaacs' article — to the contrary, its very clarity and honest introspection help immensely to bring to light the very issues with which we all struggle in finding a yoga that both satisfies our needs and desires — and entirely transforms our sense of our true needs, desires and highest good.

The standard by which most people evaluate what they're doing in her article is their sense of comfort or discomfort with what each style offers — but comfort and satisfaction, plus a vague sense of the 'spiritual essence' — is a shifting standard, especially as we evolve in our practice and understanding. How are we to judge for ourselves (especially when the ego gets subtly involved in the work of the intellect in discriminating between good and bad, helpful and unhelpful)?

"As is typical in a capitalist society, we are confronted with a choice—in this case, how we perceive and define our practice. But faced with this ever-growing array of forms, how do we choose? In my six years of practice, I've learned that recognizing classes that are right for me stems from how I feel—the space created in my body and mind, the free flow of prana, my breath moving my body rather than the other way around. Hybrids (and, these days, some asana classes) that don't connect with yoga philosophy in any way don't add enduring value to my practice, nor do they allow for the potential of that spacious feeling that brings me to my mat each day.

"A tendency to focus on other things during practice can inhibit the ability to experience the deeper goal, the essence of what yoga can be, which is a beautiful and powerful way to remove the conditioning in the mind," says Swami Ramananda.

Yoga is inherently designed to open the door to our inner Self and leave behind our

The heart is of the nature of pure consciousness. It is both inside and outside, and it is neither inside nor outside. In it is reflected everything which is in the universe and it is the treasure house of all wealth. Consciousness alone is the heart of all beings, not the piece of flesh which people call the heart!

The Yoga Vasistha

stubborn conditioning, ambition and judgment, self-consciousness and constriction. If a hybrid can lead me there, sign me up."

The one gold standard for evaluation — apart from the quite valid standard of 'how I feel' after the practice — is the connection made with yoga philosophy 'in a way that adds enduring value to one's practice.' Here's where we can all gain much greater clarity, by exploring the 'tradition' with both an open and discriminating mind. The 'tradition' of yoga is not just one view — it only *seems* so because we hold such vague assumptions about it. Rather it is rich with many views, leaving us free to explore, to be challenged by these perspectives, and to come to an evolving appreciation of what really works *for us* in 'opening the door to our inner Self.'

And as we learn more and evolve through the practices, our perception of the yoga 'tradition' will likewise change and shift, and we will grow in our appreciation of what yoga 'is' and has to offer.

Doug Keller

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Date	Location	Description	Contact
January 5	Washington D.C.	Yoga of the Emotions	Wwww.BoundlessYoga.com
January 18-20	Galveston Island Texas	Workshop	Wwww.TheYogaHaven.net
January 21	Annapolis Maryland	TT Workshop	Wwww.GoldenHeartYoga.com
January 25-27	New York City	Workshop	Wwww.PranaPowerYoga.com
February 15-17	Zurich Switzerland	Workshop	Wwww.Starfire-College.com
February 22-24	Hilton Head South Carolina	Workshop	Wwww.jivayogacenter.com
Feb 29 - March 2	Birmingham Alabama	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Lnequette@bellesouth.net
March 21-23	Portland Maine	Workshop & Therapy TT	Wwww.PortlandYoga.com
March 27	Wellesley Massachusetts	Workshop	Wwww.LaughingDogYoga.com
March 28-30	Boston Massachusetts	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.BackBayYoga.com
April 5	Washington DC	Workshop	Wwww.BoundlessYoga.com
April 18-20	Wichita Kansas	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.YogaCentral.info
April 25-27	Little Rock Arkansas	Workshop	Wwww.AngelFire.com/ar2/yogastudiooflr/
May 10-12	Zuich Switzerland	Workshop	Wwww.Starfire-College.com
May 16-18	Manchester New Hampshire	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.EarthHeartFarm.com
May 23-25	Fort Lauderdale Florida	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.RedPearlYoga.com
June 1	Reston Virginia	Workshop	Wwww.BelovedYoga.com
June 13-15	Grand Junction Colorado	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.YogaWest.org
June 19-22	Charleston South Carolina	Workshop & Therapy TT	Wwww.HolyCowYoga.com
June 25-29	Zurich Switzerland	Philosophy & Therapy TT	Wwww.AirYoga.com
July 24-27	Kansas City Kansas	Workshop	Wwww.TheYogaStudio.com
July 30-August 3	Honesdale Pennsylvania	Himalayan Inst. Mantra Retreat	Wwww.HimalayanInstitute.org
August 6-10	Maria Stein Ohio	Advanced Yoga as Therapy	Shultzlake@woh.rr.com
August 23-27	Munich Germany	Philosophy & Therapy TT	Wwww.AirYoga.com
Sept 19-21	Farifax Virginia	Workshop & Therapy TT	Wwww.SunAndMoonStudio.com
Sept 26-28	Oklahoma City Oklahoma	Workshop	Wwww.YogaOklahoma.com
October 3-5	Little Rock Arkansas	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.BareFootStudio.com
October 17-19	Chicago IL	Presenter: NAMA Conference	Wwww.Ayurveda-NAMA.org
October 10-12	Fort Walton Beach FL	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.DragonFlyYoga.com
October 24-26	Nova Scotia	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.YellowMeadowYoga.com
Oct 31-Nov 2	London UK	Advanced Yoga as Therapy	Wwww.TheLifeCentre.com
November 7-9	Seattle WA	Yoga as Therapy & Workshop	Wwww.TwoDogYoga.com
November 14-16	Greensboro North Carolina	Workshop	Wwww.TriadYoga.com
November 29-30	Columbia Maryland	Workshop	Wwww.ColumbiaYoga.com
December 5-7	Jackson Mississippi	Workshop	Wwww.ButterflyYoga.com
December 11-14	Ashville North Carolina	Yoga Therapy Teacher Training	Wwww.YourYoga.com

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Hatha Yoga with Doug Keller in 2008

