

Ashtanga Yoga – Breath, Bandha and Drishti

By Paul Fox

BREATH

The practice of Ashtanga Yoga requires a particular breathing technique known as Ujjayi.

Ujjayi means victorious breath and is a way of regulating the flow of breath in and out of the body. A typical breathing pattern involves inhalation, then a slight pause, and then an exhalation and another slight pause and so on. This can be described as a square pattern of breathing. In Ashtanga yoga emphasis is placed on a circular pattern of flowing breathing so that there is no holding of the breath at the end of the inhalation or exhalation. Instead there is a continuous flow of breath in and out of the body.

The regulation of the breath in Ujjayi is done by slightly constricting the glottis in the throat. By doing this the inhalation and the exhalation can more easily be made the same length. In normal breathing, the exhalation tends to be longer than the inhalation, but with ujjayi they are made the same length.

A regular and continuous flow of breath in and out of the body is considered to be vital to sustain the strong physical practice of Ashtanga Yoga. If the breath is held, then oxygen is no longer reaching the cells of the body and students will quickly tire. It is also considered beneficial to the flow of the practice and the free flow of subtle energy (or prana) in the body if the breath is continuous and unrestricted.

To master the technique of Ujjayi breathing practitioners should first try whispering or sighing. In order to do either of these activities it will be found that a sound is made in the throat by a slight constriction of the glottis. Now try to breathe in and out through the mouth, making the sound of a sighing breath. Progress to making a sighing sound as you inhale through the mouth and try to maintain the sighing sound as you exhale through the nose. After a while aim to breathe in and out through the nose, still making the sighing sound in the throat. To make sure that the breath is equal, students can silently count the length of their inhalation and use the same count for their exhalation. Once a steady rhythm is established, the counting does not need to continue.

Ujjayi breathing is also known as “the sound of the sea” breath, with the gentle sibilant sound in the throat being like the waves gently rolling in and out on the sea shore.

It is often helpful for students learning the above technique to do so with their eyes closed, as this helps them to direct awareness to the throat area. Once students are making a sound and are on the way to mastering the ujjayi breath, they should practice the breathing exercise for 10 or 25 breaths at a time. Most students will find that practicing ujjayi breath in this way, with the eyes closed, has a calming effect on the body and the mind. The rhythmic

sound of ujjayi draws the scattered and unsettled mind towards steadiness and concentration – a necessary condition for effective yoga practice.

Pattabhi Jois lists four pranayamas in his book, but it is only necessary to learn Ujjayi Pranayama to practice the Primary Series (Jois 1999).

Ujjayi Pranayama in Postures

The breathing mechanism in the body can be divided into three parts:-

- Abdominal breathing using the diaphragm to fill the base of the lungs
- Thoracic breathing using the rib cage to fill the main part of the lungs
- Clavicular breathing by lifting the collar bones to fill the uppermost parts of the lungs

Incorporating all the above elements into breathing is known as the “full yogic breath”. In some yoga systems, students are encouraged to allow the abdomen to swell outwards in the abdominal phase of the breath. This happens when the diaphragm, which is an upward dome shape, flattens downwards and pushes into the abdomen, forcing the tummy outwards. In Ashtanga Yoga, students are taught to hold the tummy in during ujjayi breathing. The main focus for the breath is therefore thoracic and clavicular, rather than abdominal (although the abdomen is still working). The reason for this is to do with core strength in the body, which is covered in the following section.

Bandha

The most important force affecting the human body is gravity. Over time the downward force of gravity can have a detrimental effect on the body, particularly posture. To counter the effects of gravity, it is important to strengthen core muscles, particularly the abdominals and the iliopsoas, so that the body is supported from within. This enables muscles nearer the surface of the body to operate more effectively and efficiently.

Ashtanga yoga develops core strength through its emphasis on the importance of engaging “bandha”, which means “lock” or “seal”, during yoga practice.

In classical yoga there are three bandhas:-

Moola bandha – lifting the perineum or anus

Uddiyana bandha – drawing the abdomen strongly inwards and upwards with the breath expelled from the body

Jalandara bandha – taking the chin to the sternum to “seal” the throat

In Ashtanga Yoga some of these bandhas are modified for use during a flowing yoga practice.

Moola Bandha – (sometimes spelled as mula bandha) should be done fully. Students may not have any awareness or muscle tone in their pelvic floor so will have to develop their moola bandha over time. A good seated practice is

Ashwini Mudra, where students squeeze and draw the anus into the body on an inhalation and relax it on an exhalation. This will strengthen the pelvic floor. Later, students can practice contracting and relaxing the front (base of the genitals), middle (perineum) and back (anus) of the pelvic floor to develop awareness of each of the three muscle groups that exist there. Eventually, students should be able to lift the perineum only. This is moola bandha. When practiced correctly, this subtle lift does not lead to a hardening of the muscles in and around the pelvis. A lot of students will find themselves clenching their buttocks as they attempt to hold moola bandha, but this clenching should be discouraged as it restricts asana practice (especially back bending). Instead, students should slowly work towards gaining enough muscle tone and control in the pelvis that they can lift and hold the perineum almost effortlessly.

Uddiyana Bandha – done partially. Students learn to engage the abdominal muscles so that the tummy is drawn in but is not “hard” or rigid. It is still possible to breathe freely, but there is stillness below the navel. Uddiyana bandha and moola bandha are linked in the sense that lifting the perineum will often lead to an automatic drawing in of the abdomen. In the same way, drawing in the abdomen can lead to a natural lifting of the pelvic floor.

In classical yoga, uddiyana bandha is a much more demanding and strong practice. Students stand in a wide squat with their arms straight and resting on the thighs. Air in the lungs is expelled quickly through the mouth and the abdomen drawn in towards the body and upwards. The rib cage is then lifted (in a kind of false inhalation) so that the abdomen goes into the body towards the spine even more strongly. At the same time, the head comes forward and the chin rests on the sternum (front of the chest). Uddiyana bandha is held for as long as the practitioner can comfortably hold the breath outside the body. When it becomes necessary to breathe in again, the tummy is relaxed and air taken back into the lungs.

Many Ashtanga Yoga practitioners will practice Uddiyana Bandha first thing in the morning before their Ashtanga practice because it works the core muscles and gives the digestive system a strong massage (and can therefore help to get faeces moving and guard against constipation). Uddiyana means “upward flying” and this practice also creates a feeling of energy and lightness in the body.

In the Primary Series, when students stand upright and perform moola bandha and a soft uddiyana bandha they will usually feel an immediate and positive effect on their posture and a connection with their core strength. Engaging these bandhas has the effect of slightly tilting the pelvis so that the tailbone tucks under and the lower back is lengthened.

Once application of the bandhas has been integrated into the Ashtanga Yoga practice, it also becomes a useful tool for students to use in the rest of their lives. It is possible to work on developing the bandhas any where and at any time, as no one can see what you are doing. This is particularly useful “homework” for those who may not have much awareness or strength in their

pelvic floor. Awareness of bandha also has a dramatic effect on how we present ourselves to the world. If you work bandha and have a more upright posture and open chest (or heart centre) then you will appear more confident and relaxed and people will treat you accordingly. This sets up a virtuous circle of better posture leading to higher self esteem and more rewarding relationships.

It is no coincidence that people who lack confidence or who have suffered physically, emotional or mental abuse tend to display a “closed” posture of hunched or rounded shoulders, weak abdominal muscles around the emotional centre at manipura chakra and little or no bandha.

There are some medical benefits associated with strong bandha, such as preventing prolapse of the vaginal wall and helping to cure or prevent haemorrhoids.

Jalandara Bandha – The chin lock is not done in the Ashtanga Yoga practice. Traditionally the head would be taken forward as far as possible and the chin taken to the sternum to close the throat and prevent any inhalation or exhalation. In Ashtanga Yoga, the constriction of the glottis necessary for the ujjayi breath is like a subtle jalandara bandha. On an energetic level, ujjayi has the same effect as a full jalandara bandha by sealing energy in the throat.

Correct use of the bandhas develops core strength and protects the body from injury during a strong asana practice. There is also an important effect on the “energetic body”. According to yoga theory there is a subtle energy body which corresponds closely with the physical body. Different forms of subtle energy, or prana, operate in the energetic body. The effect of the bandhas is to seal this subtle energy in the body. Moola bandha seals energy in the base of the pelvis and redirects it upwards. Moola bandha also activates mooladhara chakra, the base chakra which is said to contain latent spiritual energy. This is symbolised as a coiled snake and known as kundulini energy or kundulini shakti.

Uddiyana bandha corresponds with the digestive system and gastric fire in the physical body and with manipura chakra in the energetic body. Manipura chakra – located at the navel – is the storehouse for subtle energy, or prana, in the energetic body. This energy is stimulated by the practice of uddiyana bandha.

The effects of the bandhas is to re-direct the downward energy, apana, back up the spine so that it joins the upwards energy, prana, above the navel and forms a continuous rising stream of energy. On a physical level, the correct application of these bandhas sets up a dynamic interplay between the pelvic diaphragm and the thoracic diaphragm. As one moves down and the other moves up, further heat is generated in the body.

Drishti

One of the main purposes of yoga is to bring the mind under control so that it isn't constantly jumping from one thing to another. In every posture of the Primary Series there is a drishti, or looking place, so that the mind remains focused and concentrated. This ties in with the sixth of Patanjali's eighth limbs, Dharana, , which means concentration. A drishti encourages an inward looking attitude and discourages students from looking around the room or being distracted by non-yogic thoughts.

There are eight kinds of Drishtis. They are:-

- Nasagrai - the nose
- Broomadhya - between the eyebrows (third eye)
- Nabhi chakra - navel
- Angust Ma Dyai – thumbs
- Hastagrai – hands
- Parsva - looking far right or left
- Padhayoragrai – toes
- Urdhva or Antara – looking up

Incorporating drishtis into every posture is an advanced practice, so students usually master co-ordinated breath and movement (vinyasa) first and then gradually incorporate more bandha and drishti work into their practice.

The correct use of breath, bandha and drishti in an Ashtanga Yoga practice is said to unleash the power of the five elements (Scott 2000). The element of **EARTH** is activated by moola bandha, producing foundation, stability and strength. The element of **WATER** is found in the fluidity of flowing posture work, or vinyasa, and in the sweat produced by the practice. The element of **AIR** is linked to by the continuous and uninterrupted flow of ujjayi breath in and out of the body and the feeling of lightness created by the application of bandhas. The element of **FIRE** is found by connecting to the heat of the practice, particularly at manipura chakra and throughout the body when practitioners work in a warm room. The element of **ETHER** or space is found during all the postures as practitioners seek to open up the body and find new levels of stretch and flexibility.

Hatha yoga generally, and Ashtanga Yoga in particular, bring about transformation on a physical, emotional, mental and energetic level. When the above elements are incorporated into a correct Ashtanga practice, the process is like an alchemy, which leads to the changing of one thing into another (traditionally into gold!). The positive transformation of our bodies and minds by Ashtanga Yoga is seen as the fruit of the practice and a reward for working with dedication and discipline at this demanding system of asana practice.