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## What's the Deal with the Funny Breathing??

A few weeks back I had a new student in my class who had some yoga experience, but hadn't before practiced with our approach. At the end of class on asking if there were any questions he promptly asked 'what is the reason for making the funny sound when we breathe?'

He was talking about the Ujjayi breath, one of the fundamental principles that Sri T. Krishnamacharya promoted in asana (postures) practice, a principle that is quite commonly not observed in other approaches. It occurred to me, that a group class situation often doesn't allow the space for full explanation of the different principles, so here is the first of more articles to come on why, in our approach, we promote certain practices.

The 'sound' is a natural effect of the process of ujjayi: whereby a constriction in the throat narrows the passageway thus creating a sound as the air flows through, similar to that heard when holding a conch shell to the ear and hearing the ocean. To fully answer my students question, the question 'why practice Ujjayi breathing during asanas?' should first be answered.

This constriction works in the same way as a valve, enabling us to regulate and therefore lengthen the breath, giving much greater control than simple nostril breathing. Long, deep breathing has a very relaxing and calming effect on mind and body, increases oxygenation, aids digestion and decreases fatigue – to name only some of the benefits.

Lengthening the breath during asana practice will ensure that we are left feeling calm, relaxed and revitalised at the end of our practice. While not true meditation, this does lend a meditative quality to the practice. When movements are synchronised with and supported by the breath, they too will become slower ensuring greater control, safety and self awareness.

Now back to the sound, which plays a vital role during asana practice; firstly, it gives us something to focus on therefore automatically linking body and mind. If we are watching and

listening to our breath we can hardly be thinking about what to cook for dinner later - our attention is brought to the present.

The sound also indicates the presence or absence of steadiness and comfort (another hugely important principle in asana practice). If the breath remains long and deep with an even, smooth sound it's a sign that we are working within our own range of ability at that particular moment. Whenever the breath becomes short, raspy, difficult to control we know that we need to modify what we are doing, i.e. we are practicing outside of our current limits and maybe it's time to ease off a little, take a short break to restore the breath or perhaps, upon reflection, decide if the particular asana that interrupted the smooth flow of our breath requires more preparation with a simpler variation before attempting again.

I have been incorporating Ujjayi in my own asana practice for some years now and it has become a natural and integral part of my practice, so much so that I had difficulty recalling what it felt like not to practice in this manner. Before writing this article, I decided to attend a couple of classes where breath wasn't so much of a focus. The first class, while definitely promoting long deep breathing, didn't use ujjayi at all. I initially found it quite difficult to let go of my natural instinct to breathe with ujjayi but once I did the biggest thing I noted was that my breath, although still reasonably full, was not nearly as deep and didn't promote the same mental focus as with ujjayi. I was also aware that my movements didn't feel particularly supported by the breath which led me to be more concerned that I wouldn't aggravate a lower back injury than simply being present with the practice.

The next class did use ujjayi however the focus on using this technique to slow the breath just wasn't there. This class was physically active and moved at quite a fast pace which I must say was quite invigorating, however I found that there was no time to really experience each movement and posture, again concern re: the back issue became foremost in my mind.

I have to say at the end of both classes I felt pretty good, as in how you feel after having a workout but, and this for me defined the difference, I didn't feel mentally relaxed and definitely not in a state where I felt ready to sit for pranayama and meditation – for me, the culmination of my practice.

I've always found that my understanding deepens when it becomes experiential rather than theoretical, so if you haven't tried ujjayi in your asana practice before, next time you practice maybe you could try incorporating this understanding, step back, become the observer and see if you feel the difference. You just never know, you may discover a tool to help deepen your practice.