

Why practicing yoga with face masks is ok

By Ruth Meili, January 2022

Slowing down the breath is a main purpose in therapeutic yoga. We do this to ease the mind, to calm the heart rate, to strengthen the parasympathic nerve system.

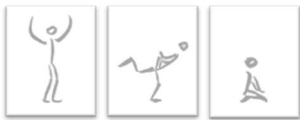
There are various techniques to do so. Pranayama, the discipline of yogic breath and energy works, provides a vast collection of breath calming tools: Nadi Shodana (closing nostrils alternately), Bhramari (humming) and Kumbhaka (breath hold) for instance. Ujjayi, the powerful narrowing-the-throat technique, might be the most common one: It can be applied when sitting in silence, but also in asana postures and – with a bit of practice – in daily life situations.

About two years ago now, **I discovered a new technique to calm the breath, which is easy to apply: Wearing a face mask.** Its effect is similar to ujjayi breath. In addition, it filters the air before entering the lungs (which the nose does too though).

Yet when I read posts from experienced yoga practitioners and exchange with fellow teachers and therapists, I often notice a massive resistance against wearing face masks. Certainly, I can understand it is not easy for people with health issues. They often suffer from serious breathing disorders like chronic hyperventilation. For them, wearing a mask means coping with the feeling of not getting enough oxygen. That's tough and I will come back to that below. But experienced yoga practitioners? We have trained for years to use our breath in order to stay calm in demanding situations and get more resilient. Now, here is the chance to apply it!

The main argument from yoga people against face masks is **fear of incremental toxication.** We do not want to re-inhale the energetic and material waste, which might get stuck in the mask if we wear one. I consider this as a minor issue. Even if we wear masks for a few hours a day, most of us have sufficient spare time, where we are free to practice yoga without masks in clean air areas like forests, gardens, private meditation spots and so forth. Especially for well-trained yogis, it really should be possible to train and teach breathing techniques while wearing a mask from time to time. In addition, if it comes to breath waste, there is a very egoistic element in refusing to wear a mask while practicing in a room with other people: If we shy away from dealing with our own energetic waste, why would we be fine with exposing others to it?

It is probably true that the **rate of carbon dioxide** in our inhale is higher when we wear a mask. In terms of training, this is an advantage though, not a disadvantage. It



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is the very chemical effect of slowing down our breath and thus the effect we literally aim for. The higher our bodies' tolerance for carbon dioxide is, the more its capacity for oxygen increases. Sports people use this causality when exercising in high altitude areas, people with anxiety issues get encouraged to breath into their hands or in paper bags when having a panic attack. Therefore, a face mask can be seen just as another tool to train with.

I agree that people who chronically hyperventilate are often struggling when wearing a mask. They tend to - even more - breath through their mouth instead of their nose. This is a problem, as it compromises breathing rule number one («shut your mouth»). Thus, we should find options to make breathing with masks as comfortable as possible. My approach here is that we consider masks as an indicator: If breathing through the nose while wearing a mask is challenging, we should slow down activities. Walk slower, find easier variations of asana and pause. This is important anyway. If we get out of breath, slowing down is always a good idea. So, again, wearing a face mask is not necessarily a disadvantage, but can be used as a prop: It makes it obvious, that we punch above our weights if we get out of breath and therefore can help us becoming more honest with ourselves.