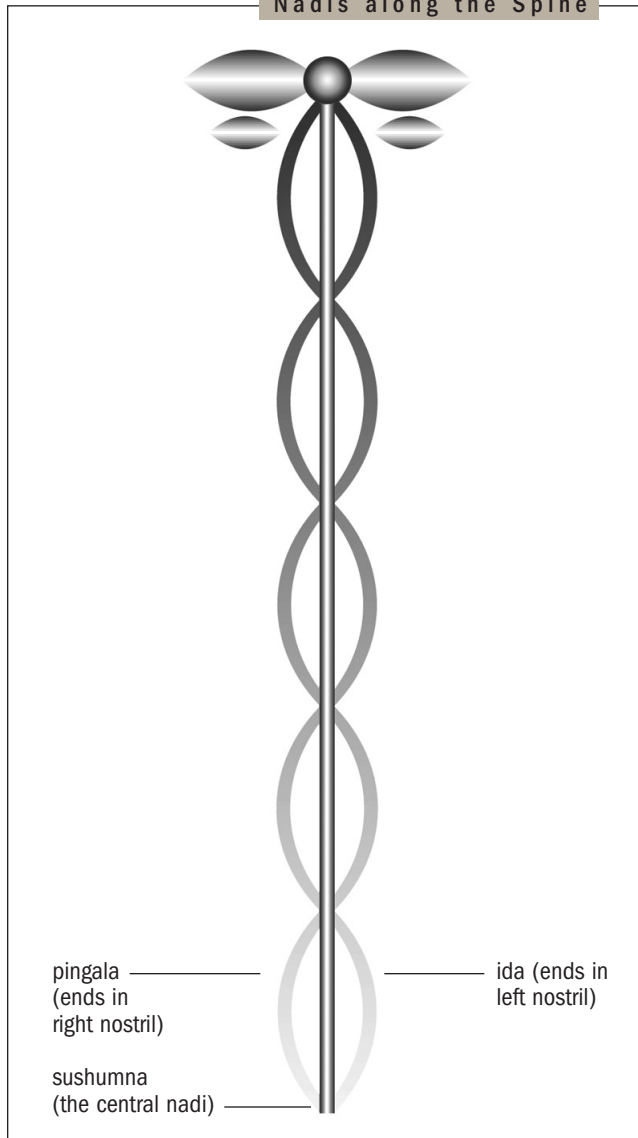


Caduceus



Nadis along the Spine



Nadi Shodhanam

The pranayama practice called *nadi shodhanam*, or channel purification, is a cleansing exercise that both unblocks and balances the flow of vital energy by alternately passing the breath through one nostril and then the other (giving rise to the other common English name for nadi shodhanam: “alternate nostril breathing”). The practice calms the nervous system and is frequently used just prior to meditation.

In the practice of yoga the nostrils are not merely passive entranceways for air, they are gateways to the vast system of energy within. Nadi shodhanam brings our attention to these gates and slowly develops sensitivity to the sensations that accompany the breath as it flows in each nostril. And once we have developed awareness of these sensations, the flow of breath in the nostrils becomes an internal reference that provides new and helpful information about our inner functioning.

The word *nadi* means “river,” or “channel”; the nadis are flowing currents of energy. The system of nadis is composed of many thousands of major channels and related tributaries, branches, and intersections. Among them, three govern our overall functioning and determine the general tone of the entire system. They lie along the spinal column, two twining upward on either side, and one rising directly upward in the center. The channel ending in the left nostril is called *ida*; *pingala* ends in the right nostril; and *sushumna* rises centrally along the spine to the base of the skull. This configuration can be seen not only in traditional yogic symbolism but also in the art of other ancient cultures. The ancient Greek image of the caduceus, for example, the symbol of medicine, is a case in point.

THE NASAL CYCLE

If you observe the breath in your nostrils at this moment, you will probably find that one nostril is flowing more freely than the other or that one nostril is almost completely blocked while the other carries most of the

airstream to and from the lungs. This means that one nostril is active and the other passive. (If you have difficulty determining which nostril is flowing more freely, hold a pocket mirror under your nose and breathe on it: the pattern of moisture formed on the mirror from the open nostril will be larger.)

This difference is the result of a natural alternation in nostril dominance that takes place throughout the day and night—in modern research it is called the “nasal cycle.” When the cycle is relatively regular, and the shifting results in a moderate rather than an extreme difference in nostril dominance, the cycle is balanced; when the cycle includes long periods of dominance on one side, or when one nostril seems almost entirely blocked, the cycle is imbalanced. Imbalances in the nasal cycle are associated with changes in mood, with agitation, and with problems in concentrating. When one nostril is entirely blocked it is more difficult to meditate.

There are many ways to bring the nasal cycle into balance. For example, regulating sleep, food, sexual activity, and exercise patterns can help to stabilize the flow of breath. But in the long run the best way is a regular and balanced yoga routine, including nadi shodhanam (which is said to balance both irregularity and extreme swinging in the cycle).

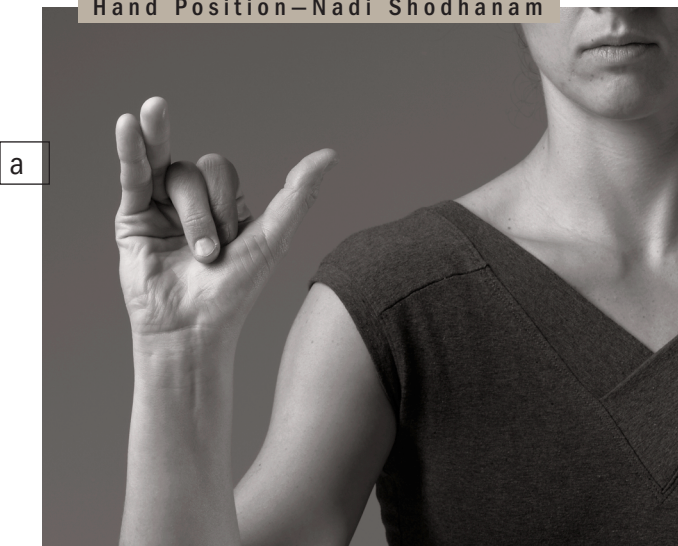
As the nasal cycle returns to balance, nadi shodhanam also works to cleanse and strengthen the system of nadis, and this leads to deeper awareness. The breath becomes slower and more refined, and with experience a natural inwardness develops that is delightful and calming to the mind.

PRELIMINARIES

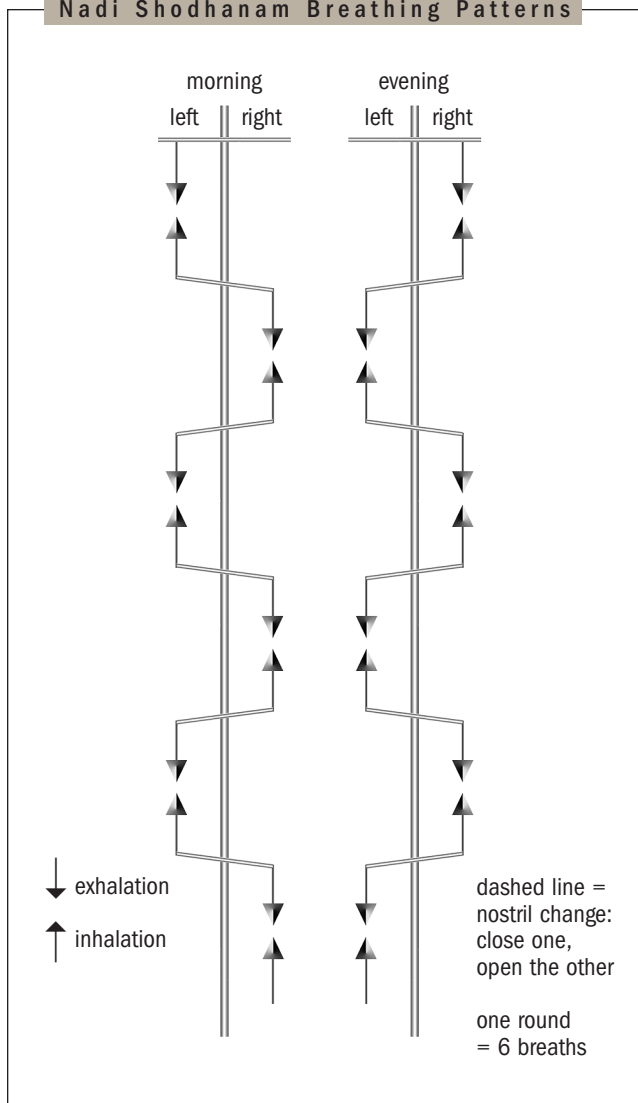
The techniques for practicing channel purification are quite specific.

- ▶ Sit erect. The posture of the spine during channel purification is crucial—if the practice is done with a bent spine, it can disrupt the nervous system and increase physical and mental tension. A well-known teacher in India described practicing nadi shodhanam with a rounded back as the equivalent of bombarding the spine with a hydraulic jackhammer!
- ▶ Breathe diaphragmatically and without pause. In the process of concentrating on manipulating the nostrils it is easy to lose touch with one’s own breathing. The breath should remain deep, smooth, relaxed, and diaphragmatic during the entire exercise. Gradually the length of the breath will increase.
- ▶ Close off the nostrils by lightly pressing the small flap of skin at either side of the nose. This is done with a special hand position, a *mudra*, in which the index and middle fingers of the hand are curled to touch the base of the thumb, opening a space between the thumb and ring finger for the nose. The thumb is used to close one nostril and the ring finger is used to close the other.
- ▶ And finally, during the practice of channel purification it is common to see students focusing so much on manipulating the nose that they bend the head forward. Or they may be applying too much pressure on the nostrils with the finger and thumb, thus bending the nose to the side. Remember that the nose should not be distorted during the practice nor the balanced alignment of the head and neck altered. Close the nostrils lightly.

Hand Position—Nadi Shodhanam



Nadi Shodhanam Breathing Patterns



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PATTERN FOR NADI SHODHANAM

There are a number of patterns for alternating the breath in the nostrils—some simple, and some complex. In the following method the flow is alternated with each full breath, and so it is easy to remember and monitor.

Yoga breathing exercises frequently begin with an exhalation. This is both symbolic and practical. Symbolically, it reminds us that we must prepare ourselves by emptying wastes and impurities. Practically, the exhalation is a cleansing breath and readies the lungs and nervous system for the inhalation, which is energizing.

The maxim “right at night” is an easy way to remember which side to begin on. At night, begin with an exhalation on the right side. In the morning, begin by exhaling through the left nostril. The midday practice pattern is determined by identifying which nostril is active (dominant) and which passive (non-dominant) at the time of practice, and exhaling on the passive side first.

THE TECHNIQUE

- ▶ Sit with your head, neck, and trunk erect so that your spine is balanced and steady and you can breathe freely. Gently close your eyes.
- ▶ Breathe diaphragmatically. Let each exhalation and inhalation be the same length—smooth, slow, and relaxed. Do not allow the breath to be forced or jerky. With practice, the length of the breath will increase.
- ▶ To begin the practice, close one nostril, then exhale and inhale smoothly and completely through the other. The inhalation and exhalation are of equal length and there is no sense of forcing the breath.
- ▶ Now alternate sides, completing one full breath on the opposite side.
- ▶ Continue alternating between the nostrils until you have completed a full round of the practice (3 breaths on each side, for a total of 6 breaths). Then lower your hand and breathe gently and smoothly through both nostrils. For a deeper practice, complete two more rounds. (Note: When practicing three rounds in one sitting, the second of the three rounds begins on the opposite nostril, and the pattern of alternation is therefore the reverse of rounds one and three.)
- ▶ Lower your hand and bring your attention to the breath flowing in the nostril that feels more open. Relax and attend to the sensation there for a number of breaths. Next, shift your attention to the breath in the more passive nostril. Keep your focus there for a longer time (you may find that the nostril opens). Again, simply attend to the flow of the breath.

- ▶ Finally, merge these two streams in your awareness, sensing the breath as if it is flowing from the base of the nose to the point between the eyebrows in one single, central stream. Let this focus become relaxed and one-pointed. Follow the breath, allowing your thoughts to come and go without disturbing your attention.

HINTS AND CAUTIONS

Nadi shodhanam is in many ways the most important of all pranayama practices. In the beginning it should be done twice a day—usually morning and evening. As part of a complete yoga practice session it is performed following postures and relaxation, and prior to meditation. Wait at least three hours after eating a meal before the practice, half an hour after liquids.

Do not practice channel purification if you are tired and cannot concentrate. Don't practice when you have a headache, when you are restless and agitated, or during periods of fever. Persons with a seizure disorder should not practice alternate nostril breathing. If noises in the head develop, discontinue the practice.

Developing a Pranayama Practice

Any of the techniques in this chapter might be the focus of practice, and a balanced pranayama routine can be developed that includes all of them. The nasal wash cleanses the upper respiratory tracts; the complete breath refreshes you when you are tired; agni sara is used to tone and strengthen the abdomen; kapalabhati works from the navel center upward, cleansing the lungs and invigorating energies; channel purification balances the entire system of energy, preparing it for relaxation and meditation, and leading to a calm and joyful state of mind.

Here is a
practice routine
that includes
all the breathing
techniques
presented in
this chapter.

A Practice Routine

- Daily nasal wash.
- Ten repetitions of agni sara.
- One set of eleven repetitions of kapalabhati.
- The complete breath at the outset of asana practice or in the late afternoon, following work.
- One round of channel purification (morning and evening).