

Pranayama

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Breathe for Balance

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The Practice of Channel Purification

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Imagine having a mind that is unwavering in its clarity, one that is ever alert in the moment yet has no trouble recalling the lessons of the past, a mind that goes where you direct it and stays where you put it. This is a well-controlled, calm, and focused mind—it is the same mind that meditates well. Meditation cultivates these qualities—but it also requires them. [More](#)

“There are two reasons the mind moves about,” the *Yogakundali Upanishad* tells us: “the breath and the *vasanas* (deep-seated mental/emotional habits).” Recognizing the profound connection between the nervous system and the respiratory system, the verse continues with a promise: “If one is controlled, then the other is also controlled.” And no one who has tried to work with their mind will doubt the wisdom of the next line: “Of these two, the breath should be controlled first.”

The breath is the external manifestation of vital energy, or *prana*. By controlling the breath we can learn to control prana, and because prana sets the mind in motion, by controlling the breath we control the mind. The pranayama practices of hatha yoga offer various techniques for developing control of the breath. Principal among them is *nadi shodhanam*, or channel purification, an exercise for unblocking and balancing the flow of vital energy.

Polarities

The two channels of the nose are a good example of the architectural dictum, “Form follows function.” Yoga texts, both ancient and modern, tell us that the two nostrils have different energy potentials—the left nostril gives the incoming air a negative charge as it enters the body while the right nostril gives it a positive charge.

These same polarities, or pairs of opposites, can be found at all levels of human functioning. Our moods “run hot or cold.” We may be “hot on the trail” of an idea or our thoughts may be “cold and calculating.” We even describe ourselves as hot- or cold-blooded. These polarities form the backdrop for our experience of the world. As one poet reminds us, “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

Differences in the energy of the two nostrils are beautifully symbolized in yoga literature when it speaks of the subtle energy channels in our bodies. Energy passing through the right nostril is said to travel in the “solar” channel, *pingala*. Energy passing through the left nostril is described as traveling along a lunar channel, *ida*. Sun and moon, male and female, active and receptive, rational and intuitive, contracting and relaxing, hot and cool, rigid and fluid—these and other pairs of opposites are captured in the archetypes of the two channels of breath.

The poles of experience may be as easy to describe as the nose on your face, but complexity, not simplicity, is the rule here. *Ida* and *pingala* are but two of more than 72,000 channels, called *nadis* in Sanskrit, that direct the flow of vital energy throughout body and mind. Depending on our thoughts, desires, actions, and habits, this energy manifests in myriad patterns within us.

Breathing practices have a direct effect on the flow of energy in the nadis. Through pranayama, energy can be aroused or calmed, used to produce heat or inner cooling, and directed to specific locations for the restoration of health and for longevity. As in so many other yoga practices, however, the initial focus of pranayama is purification—to cleanse the nadis of impurities that might otherwise disturb concentration and impede the natural movement of prana.

Nadi shodhanam, or channel purification, is the first formal pranayama practice given in yoga. It is a cleansing practice. It is also called alternate nostril breathing because it involves breathing through one nostril at a time. In addition to opening the flow of energy along the nadis, this practice is an excellent preparation for meditation. It calms, purifies, and strengthens the nervous system, and leads to establishing *sushumna* breathing, the condition in which the sensation of the breath flowing through the two nostrils is united into one central stream.

Guidelines for Practice

If possible, find a qualified teacher who can demonstrate channel purification. This will allow you to observe the pace and serenity of the breath before practicing on your own. When you do it yourself, you need to pay attention to all aspects of the technique, including the steadiness of your spine in the sitting posture, the quality of your diaphragmatic breathing, the skillful manipulation of the nostrils as the stream of breath is alternated from one nostril to the other, the degree that your attention is maintained during the practice, and the internal and external setting. This list may seem overwhelming, but the practice will soon be comfortable and nearly effortless if you give it your full attention.

It is best to do channel purification two or three times a day. The general guidelines for all yoga practices apply: practice on a light stomach, empty the bladder beforehand, and stay within your comfortable capacity. When channel purification forms part of a complete yoga practice session, it is done just after hatha postures and prior to meditation. If it is not followed immediately by meditation, you should allow some time, perhaps five minutes, to maintain and enjoy the tranquil state of mind it produces.

To fully integrate the benefits of channel purification, it is important to cultivate a yogic lifestyle—neither overindulgent nor too ascetic. The mind needs to be alert, not fatigued. Do not practice when you have a headache or fever, or when anxiety makes you restless and agitated. Those with a seizure disorder should not practice alternate nostril breathing at all. If you have any of these conditions, practice relaxation in *shavasana*, the corpse posture, to rest the mind.

In addition to these general suggestions, there are three essential guidelines for practicing channel purification:

1. Sit with your head, neck, and trunk straight throughout the entire practice. If it is done with a bent spine, it can result in disruption of the nervous system and increased mental and physical tension. (Swami Sivananda went so far as to equate practicing with a curved spine to bombarding the spine with a hydraulic jackhammer.) Sit in any comfortable meditation posture, including sitting erect in a chair with a flat seat.
2. Breathe diaphragmatically with no pauses. It is easy to neglect the natural, diaphragmatic movement of the breath while concentrating on the manipulation of the nostrils. Don't let this happen. Keep the breath deep, smooth, and relaxed. With practice, the length of the breath will gradually increase.
3. Close off the nostrils lightly. It is common to see students focusing so intently on manipulating the nostrils that they bend the nose to the side by applying too much pressure on the nostrils with the finger and thumb. The nose should not be distorted nor should the balanced alignment of the head and neck be altered.

The nostril used to begin the practice is commonly determined by the time of day. The maxim "right at night" (and, therefore, left in the morning) is an easy way to remember. Begin your evening practice using the right nostril. In the morning, begin with the left. If you practice at midday, begin by exhaling through the nostril which is the least open (the passive nostril). If the nostrils are flowing equally (which is less common than you might expect) you may start on either side.

Yoga breathing exercises generally begin with an exhalation. This is both symbolic and practical. It reminds us that before we are ready to receive energy from the universe we must prepare ourselves by emptying the wastes and impurities in our minds and bodies—including egoism. Practically speaking, the exhalation is a cleansing breath; it readies the lungs and nervous system for the inhalation, which is the potent breath.

The Technique

There are a number of patterns for alternating the breath in the nostrils. For now, we'll stick to one of the best methods for getting started. Because this practice requires only a few minutes to complete, it is an excellent beginning technique; advancing students can expand it and incorporate longer variations.

- Sit with your head, neck, and trunk in a straight line. Take time to establish a sense of balance and stillness in your posture. Let your body relax.
- Become aware of your breathing, and allow your breath to become deep and smooth. Let it flow without pause. Feel the upper abdomen, sides, and lower back expand with inhalation and contract with exhalation. (There is also a very modest expansion of the chest wall, but diaphragmatic contraction and expansion predominates and should be clearly felt.)
- Focus on the breath touching the nostrils. Feel the warm touch of exhalation and the cool touch of inhalation. Establish a steady awareness of the flow of breath—try to minimize breaks in both your breathing and your awareness.

- Maintaining your posture and your diaphragmatic breathing, bring your right hand up to your nose. Arrange your right hand in *vishnu mudra*, a position in which the index and middle fingers are either curled to touch the base of the thumb or rested lightly on the area between the eyebrows. The thumb closes the right nostril, and the ring finger closes the left. Press lightly on the side of the nostril you are closing—just below the point where the bony part of the nose begins.

We'll begin with an evening practice. Take three breaths, out and in, through the right nostril; switch to the left nostril and take three breaths, out and in; then take three breaths out and in through both nostrils. These nine breaths complete one round of channel purification. Keep the breaths silent, smooth, and equal in length. Do not hold the breath. (If the nostrils are too congested for practice, you will want to learn how to do the nasal wash to clean them.) Reverse this pattern for morning practice—begin on the left side, then go to the right, and then breathe with both nostrils.

Now lower your hand and bring your attention to the breath flowing in the nostril that feels most 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 some time (you may find that the nostril opens as you concentrate). Simply attend to the flow of the breath. Finally, merge these two streams in your awareness, sensing the breath as if it is flowing in one central stream. It is as if the mind, breath, and energy become one. Let your focus on the breath become relaxed and one-pointed.

Of course, the mind often wanders, becomes identified with some other thought process, and loses its focus. Part of the challenge of pranayama is to learn to focus on the breath and allow thoughts to come and go without distracting you. Your focusing power will increase gradually with daily practice, and soon your attention will rest wherever it is placed.

Those who are experienced with the practice of channel purification have noted that it has two important effects on meditation: it turns the mind inward, and it seems to provide energy for focusing the mind. With repetition, the fingers do their work automatically, and nothing impedes the joy of concentration.

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Breathing Patterns

There are three principal patterns for alternating the breath in the nostrils, which are summarized below in the form of an evening practice. All begin with an exhalation through the right nostril, and finish with three resting breaths. This constitutes one round.

Pattern 1. Close the left nostril and exhale and inhale through the right. Then switch and exhale and inhale through the left nostril. Continue switching from side to side two more times and take three resting breaths through both nostrils.

Pattern 2. Exhale and inhale three times through the right nostril and then switch and exhale-inhale three times through the left nostril. Then take three resting breaths through both nostrils.

Pattern 3. This pattern entails switching sides between the exhalation and the inhalation, as follows: Exhale through the right nostril, switch and inhale through the left. Continue this pattern twice more for a total of three breaths. Then exhale left and inhale right for a total of three breaths before taking three resting breaths through both nostrils. If you are doing more than one round, start the next round on the opposite side.

No matter which of the three patterns you are using, let your awareness rest first in one nostril and then the other. *Nadi shodhanam* heightens your sensitivity to the sensation of the breath in the nostrils—the initial focus for meditation in many traditions. Use this opportunity to sensitize your awareness of the flow of breath. That awareness, in turn, opens into the subtle system of energy within.



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