



Practicing Pranayama Nadi Shodhana

Helen Craig • British Wheel of Yoga Teacher • October 2013

"The practice of pranayama removes the veil of ignorance covering the light of intelligence and makes the mind a fit instrument to embark on meditation for the vision of the soul."

Nadi Shodana

Nadi Shodhana is used to purify the nadis. Shodhana means 'to cleanse', and nadi means 'to flow', referring to the subtle channels carrying energy through the body.

Commonly known as 'Alternate Nostril Breathing', it is taught with or without breath retention. A more advanced form with a very strict ratio is known as 'Anuloma Viloma'. Nadi Shodana is occasionally known as the sun and moon breath because of its link with balancing ida and pingala nadis and therefore the sun and moon energies.

Nadi Shodana without retention is often taught in class, because it is one of the easiest forms of pranayama and can be carried out at home afterwards. However, even this technique should only be learnt once you are familiar with basic breathing practices.

As you settle into the rhythm of this technique, the breath begins to lengthen, because less air is coming in through only one nostril. It is also natural to adjust to breathing more gently to have a continuous and comfortable flow.

Purpose of the Practice

The texts say it is used to purify the psychic network. Iyengar says it is a useful technique for the beginner in pranayama to lengthen both inhalation and exhalation. He also emphasises, however, that this process should happen by continued practice over a long period of time, rather than by straining to achieve rapid results.

Benefits

- Improves tranquillity, concentration and mental clarity.
- Calms, balances and regulates energy on both the physical and subtle levels.
- Develops the refined sensitivity and awareness of the breath and internal energy dynamics needed for other practices.
- Equalises the flow of breath in Ida and Pingala which activates and balances them.
- Purifies the subtle energy channels cumulatively over time.
- Enhances sensitivity to which nostril is dominant. In time, this gives experience to help manage the energies more skilfully.

Contra-indications and precautions

- Blocked nose which cannot be cleared easily. Leave the practice for another day, as forced breathing may cause harm.
- If one nostril is strongly dominant it may be advisable to wait until another time of day when the breath activity is less intense.
- At the slightest sign of discomfort, reduce the duration of inhalation, exhalation and/or retention.
- Do not breathe through the mouth.
- Develop your practice only under the guidance of a competent teacher.

Suggestions to clear a blocked nose

- Lie on the side opposite to the blocked nostril for 3 – 5 minutes. This may clear the nose for long enough to practice.
- Take a short walk or walk briskly up and down stairs a few times.
- If you are familiar with jala neti or kapalbhati, either could be used.

Instructions



1. Adopt any comfortable seated position with the spine erect. Relax the whole body.
2. Have your free hand resting comfortably on the knee in chin or jnana mudra
3. With your right (or left) hand, take up a hand mudra shown below. Keep your hand relaxed and think of the thumb and little fingers as a bit like a pincer, alternating to close off one nostril at a time.



Nasika (nose) mudra

Fold down the fourth and little finger so that the forefinger and second finger are ready to rest gently on the centre of the forehead, at the eyebrow centre. This is the one in HYP and APMB.



Mrigi Mudra (Deer Seal)

Fold the forefinger and middle finger down into the palm, leaving the little fingers and thumb free to close off the nose.

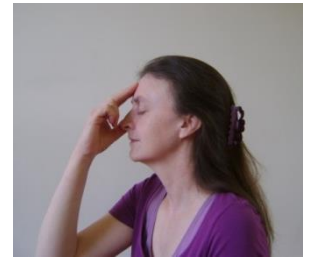
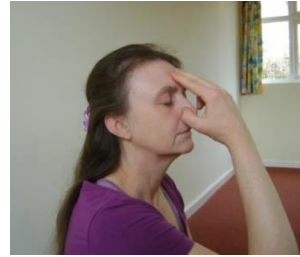
I feel more constricted this way, but some may prefer it.

4. Hold your thumb near the right nostril, and hold your ring and little finger, curled softly, near the left nostril.
5. When you are ready to begin, press the thumb lightly to close off the right nostril.
6. Inhale.
7. Close off the left nostril with your ring finger and lift the thumb to release the right nostril.
8. Exhale. Inhale.
9. Close off your right nostril with your thumb again and release the left nostril by lifting the last two fingers.
10. Exhale.

Steps 5 – 10 make up one round. Remember you are inhaling to the same side and exhaling

from the other side each time. It is usual to close the eyes during practice.

Accounts differ as to which nostril should be closed off first, but I have followed APMB.



Beginners may find that that holding one arm lifted becomes tiring. If so the elbow could be supported with the other hand. Remember to prevent the chest and breathing becoming restricted.

Development of practice

Asana Pranayama Mudra Banda recommends a gradual progression over time. It suggests practicing single nostril breathing on each side for about two weeks, until control of equal inhalation and exhalation is achieved, and then progressing on to alternate nostril breathing, but it is often taught straight away to students once they are experienced in basic breathing.

Over time the length of inhalation and exhalation is very gradually increased by counting. After that internal then external retention can be introduced. The ratios can be worked on over a period of months. If there is any discomfort the length and ratios should be reduced.

Finally for experienced and advanced students of nadi shodana, the bandhas may be added, but this may take years to achieve.

References:

1. P 30, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, BKS Iyengar, Thorsons, 1993

Bibliography:

Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha, 2002
The Complete Yoga Book, James Hewitt, Rider, 1990
Class Companion magazine, Issue 4, Sarah Beck & Len Walker, Deva Yoga, Merseyside
Balancing active and receptive energies, Kevin Hoffman, Yoga International magazine, 2002
ZoyaYoga website

Picture credit:

www.pxleyes.com for the sun and moon picture