

Balancing Active and Receptive Energies: The Practice of Nadi Shodanam

Pranayama

Kevin Hoffman

Today, and every day, you will breathe 15,000-25,000 times. If you pay attention to your breath, you will notice that one nostril always flows more freely than the other. Sometimes this imbalance is subtle, but at other times it is immediately apparent.

Everyone is affected by this shifting imbalance, even though most people are unaware of it. For example, we've all experienced periods when it feels like we're pushing a loaded wheelbarrow up a stairway. Even simple tasks seem hard, and minor obstacles become insurmountable. Yet at other times, sometimes even later the same day, things flow effortlessly, like a raft on a gentle stream. Yogic studies suggest that these patterns follow a natural cycle and are affected by which nostril is flowing more freely, and when. A pranayama exercise called *nadi shodhanam* may help you learn to take advantage of this cycle to harness your own energy flow and avoid some of the rapids.

Nostril Dominance

The nostril through which air passes more freely at any given time is called the active (or dominant) nostril, because the air passing through it dominates the volume of air that is inhaled and exhaled with each breath. The nostril that is partially closed is the passive nostril.

By most accounts, the dominant nostril alternates every 90 to 120 minutes in a healthy individual. Most people find that nostril dominance changes throughout the day, seemingly for no reason, although some underlying patterns can be observed. According to written accounts, both ancient and modern, there are several competing mechanisms working internally to regulate nostril dominance. An in-depth discussion of these mechanisms is beyond the scope of this column, but a brief outline of the underlying principles will make the practice of nadi shodhanam more meaningful and, perhaps, more fruitful.

Our Internal Economy

At any given time, several factors compete to produce your nasal air flow pattern. But it's more like a committee than a competition—a balancing of the various demands made upon the physical, pranic, and mental vehicles. To maintain its temperature, your body must respond to the natural cycles of light and heat in the external environment, especially the day/night cycle and seasonal changes. The body must also direct energy to digestion after you've eaten, to major muscle groups during physical activity, or to the

brain when you're absorbed in mental tasks, and each of these activities affects which nostril dominates. The relative health of the body is another determining factor. To these factors, add a generous sprinkling of conscious and unconscious anxieties, joys, sorrows, stresses, and needs, and you have a glimpse of the elegant energy dance that constantly goes on within you.

According to yogic literature, each nostril affects the mind and body differently when it is dominant. Right nostril dominance activates, warms, and intensifies the activity of the body and mind. Hence, right nostril dominance is preferred for eating, conducting business, or working hard physically. The influence of the left nostril is cooling and receptive. Left nostril dominance is preferable for listening, studying, resting, and renewing the body and mind. Although most people are oblivious to these cycles, those who understand the breathing cycle do not eat unless their right nostril is open, indicating a readiness to digest food.

I urge you not to believe one word of this without doing your own experiments. Eat a large meal with your left nostril open and notice how the food tastes, how you feel after eating, and how the rest of the day goes. Then another day, eat a large meal with your right nostril open and notice the result. Try studying when your right nostril is open, and again when your left nostril is open. Compare your experiences. Welcome to the world of subtle energy!

The Nadis

One way of experiencing the difference between breathing through the left and right nostrils is to practice nadi shodhanam. This technique involves changing the flow of air from one nostril to another, deliberately and rhythmically. Doing this practice will increase your sensitivity to the flow of breath through your nostrils and will help you restore balance in nostril alternation.

Nadi shodhanam purifies the *nadis*—subtle energy vessels, or channels, that interpenetrate the physical body. *Nadi shodhanam* means "channel purification." It is also called alternate nostril breathing. The nadis are not physical, by our current academic definition, but have been compared to the meridians described in acupuncture and *shiatsu*. According to the yogis, there are 72,000 nadis, originating just below the navel and coursing throughout the body, although only three bear directly on our topic—*ida*, *pingala*, and *sushumna*.

These three principal nadis run the length of the spine. The *ida nadi* terminates in the left nostril, and is active when the left nostril is dominant. The *pingala nadi* is active when the right nostril is dominant and terminates there. The *sushumna nadi* runs up the center of the spine and terminates at the base of the skull. The *sushumna nadi* is active only when both nostrils are flowing freely.

Benefits of Nadi Shodhanam

Initially, the general effect of nadi shodhanam is similar to the effect of diaphragmatic breathing—it tends to calm, balance, and regulate energy on both the physical and the subtle levels. The elimination of wastes and the assimilation of energy is also increased during this practice. While practicing, you are breathing deeply and consciously, which in itself warms the body, strengthens the nerves, and leads to stability, tranquility, and clarity of mind. After you've been doing it for awhile, you will begin to notice which nostril is active, and will gradually begin to gain experience that teaches you to manage your energies more skillfully. And finally, nadi shodhanam cleans the nadis, allowing a more vital flow of energy. The impurities eliminated by this practice are more like cobwebs in a neglected flute than like plaque in clogged arteries. Consistent gentle practice yields results.

There are several variations of nadi shodhanam. The one discussed below is safe to practice, provided you observe a few basic guidelines. First, do not retain the breath, but breathe continually without pausing. Second, do not exert yourself by breathing rapidly or by breathing so slowly that you strain either the lungs or the heart.

Preparation

Practice at a time when you won't be disturbed. The practice will take between five and ten minutes. Always practice with an empty stomach, or at least two hours after eating. (If you are thinking that these are the same instructions given for other pranayama practices, hatha, and meditation, you're right!) Find a quiet, clean room, and make sure you have a supply of fresh air, even if it is just a window cracked open. It's best to practice two or three times each day.

Sit in a posture that keeps the head, neck, and torso upright and aligned, so that your ribs move freely and you can breathe diaphragmatically. Essentially this means sitting upright without resting your back; no reclining lounge chairs please! Sit at the front of a chair, or if you can do so comfortably, sit on the floor, cross-legged, in the easy pose (*sukhasana*).

Nadi shodhanam requires that you use your fingers to alternately close and open each nostril. Use the thumb of the right hand to close the right nostril and the ring finger of the same hand to close the left nostril. You can either fold the index and middle fingers or place their tips on the bridge of your nose, as you choose. When closing the nostrils, be sure to use the fleshy part of the finger, not the finger nail. Put the thumb or finger on the crease where the wide part of the side of the nose joins the bony portion. This will allow you to close the nostril with very slight pressure and without disrupting the flow of air in the other nostril.

Place your hands on your knees and breathe evenly. Take at least a minute to establish a baseline of even, diaphragmatic breathing.

How to Practice

1. Bring the right hand to the nose. Close the passive nostril at the end of an inhalation, and exhale through the active nostril.
2. Close the active nostril, and inhale through the passive nostril.
3. At the end of inhalation, close the passive nostril, and exhale through the active nostril.
4. At the end of exhalation, close the active nostril, open the passive nostril, and inhale through the passive nostril for a second time.
5. Close the passive nostril again at the end of the inhalation, open the active nostril, and exhale.
6. At the end of exhalation, close the active nostril, open the passive nostril, and inhale through the passive nostril for a third time.
7. Then, keeping the active nostril closed, exhale through the passive nostril.
8. Then, open the active nostril and inhale.
9. Close the active nostril at the end of the inhalation, open the passive nostril, and exhale.
10. At the end of exhalation through the passive nostril, close the passive nostril, open the active nostril, and inhale through the active nostril for the second time.
11. At the end of the inhalation, close the active nostril, open the passive, and exhale.
12. At the end of exhalation, close the passive nostril, open the active, and inhale through the active nostril for the third time.
13. Remove your hand, and breathe evenly through both nostrils.

This series constitutes one round of nadi shodhanam. This round should be followed by one to two minutes of even, diaphragmatic breathing, then two more rounds, for a total of three rounds of nadi shodhanam and four to five minutes of diaphragmatic breathing. You can do only one round, or even two rounds if you wish, but the customary method of practice is to do the exercise in balanced rounds of three.

Within each round, there is an equal number of repetitions of inhalations and exhalations through each nostril. This symmetry is necessary if the practice is to accomplish the twin goals of balancing and purifying the subtle energy channels.

There are many variations of alternate nostril breathing, and each has a particular purpose, although they all have the common theme of alternating the flow of breath between the two nostrils. The next issue will offer several of these variations and will

discuss some other dimensions of this technique, including potential problems. In the meantime, enjoy your practice.

Kevin Hoffman is a hatha yogi who has been practicing and teaching pranayama and cleansing practices/or nearly 20 years.