



WEEK FIVE: Pranayama & Addiction

Pranayama is a highly effective self-regulation tool for radical self-care, detoxification and addiction recovery. The breath is intrinsically linked to our thoughts and emotions, connecting the biological rhythms of our *Ana Maya Kosha* with our *Prana Maya Kosha*, and the wisdom and intelligence of the whole - body, mind and spirit.

Biology of the Breath Cycle: Ultradian Rhythms and the Nasal Cycle

To further understand why exploring and using breathing techniques is effective in recovery, let's delve into the biology of the breath-cycle.

The nose contains nerves from both the parasympathetic and sympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system is responsible for the cycles that occur beyond our conscious control, like breathing, or blinking.

Parasympathetic Nervous System

- Responsible for our “relaxation” response, begins to slow the heart rate and calm the “monkey” mind

Sympathetic Nervous System

- Responsible for our “fight” or “flight” response

Each nostril is connected with the olfactory lobe, creating your sense of smell, which in turn influences the hypothalamus, whose primary function is to maintain homeostasis, aka balance or status-quo, body-wide.

The left nostril corresponds with the **right hemisphere of the brain**. In traditional yogic practices, the left nostril is associated with feminine energy: lunar, cooling, calming, and creative. It governs the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for relaxing the body and mind, lowering blood pressure, and appreciating poetry, music, and art.

The right nostril corresponds with the **left hemisphere of the brain** and alternately, is associated with masculine energy: solar, heating, logical, aggressive, concentration, focus, and mathematical problem solving. It governs the sympathetic nervous system and is beneficial before pursuing any physical activity.

Ultradian Rhythm

We have a physiological need to relax and breathe deeply at least every 2.5 hours throughout the day. A rhythmic alternation of nostril and cerebral dominance occurs every 24 hours. Approximately every 60-90 minutes one nostril is dominant, followed by a 20 minute period when both are open, and then a reversal of dominance. Verbal efficiency is greater when we breathe primarily through the right nostril, while spatial skills are better during left nostril dominance.

Hemisphere Integration

The 20-minute period when both nostrils are dominant is a time of integration between hemispheres. This is often the time when we want to daydream, fantasize, reflect or have a break from what we were doing, or process emotional material.

It is the time of reconciliation between mind and body, when we are more open to receive and pay attention to the messages from the body. It is the time when we are primed to receive intuitive impulses, inner guidance and connect to our spiritual selves. In an ideal world, this is where we would stop whatever we're doing and chill, while taking long, slow, deep breaths. For most folks, this is the time when we reach for either something to perk us up as we continue to do whatever it is we need to get done, like caffeine, sugar and nicotine or something to take the edge off, like alcohol. We rely on an external source to distract us from this vital time in our physiological condition. In a society that champions over-working and creates martyrs of those who put in 100 hour work-weeks, it's an act of rebellion to listen to what your body really needs, but it's also incredibly challenging to listen to our what our bodies actually need when we are primed for addiction.

The Doshas & Pranayama

Ayurveda encourages us to integrate healing practices that are unique to particular constitutions. When we're managing our own addictive behaviours or those of a client, it helps tremendously to be aware of how the patterns are manifesting within the constitution. As an example, if someone is prone to over or under-eating, lethargy and depression, this could signal an imbalance in the Kapha dosha. Habitual eating that replaces other activities, and in particular, eating while feeling anything but hungry, can indicate an addictive behaviour. To address this within the context of pranayama techniques, we would advise the client (or ourselves!) to engage in a breathing practice that ignites the digestive system, or the Pitta dosha, assisting the body to help in the removal of toxins and creating proper and appropriate sensations of hunger. Kapalabhati or Breath of Fire is an excellent practice for Kapha-imbalance, as is Bastrikah or Bellows Breath. It's important to note that you may discover that a combination of techniques is ideal in managing certain constitutions and imbalances, and that certain techniques are effective for more than one dosha.

Practices for Vata: Aggravation of vata dosha can manifest in feelings of fear, anxiety, loneliness, nervousness, un-groundedness, agitation and a sense of disassociation and over-activity of the sympathetic nervous system. Because the mind is made up of similar qualities of vata, air and ether, vata particularly affects our mental health. Physical sensations can affect the digestive system (constipation), joint pain and cold extremities.

- Nadi Sodhana and/or Anuloma Viloma (alternate nostril breathing) regulates and balances the hemispheres of the brain providing balance, grounding and soothing.
- Surya Bhedana (single nostril breathing) activates the heating qualities of the mind-body, inhaling through the right nostril and connecting with the left hemisphere of the brain.

Practices for Pitta: Out-of-balance pitta dosha can manifest in excess feelings of anger, jealousy, irritability, judgement, frustration and the desire for power over others. Physical manifestations can include excess heat in the body, sweating, acne, rashes and acid indigestion/"heart-burn".

- Chandra Bhedana (single nostril breathing) activates the cooling qualities of the mind-body, inhaling through the left nostril and connecting with the right hemisphere of the brain.
- Sitali (Sheetali) Breath lowers the fire energy in the body, cooling the system and activating the parasympathetic nervous system. Alternative: Sitkari (Sheetkari) Breath
- Abdominal Breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, relaxing the mind and slowing the heart rate.

Practices for Kapha: When Kapha is out-of-whack (y'know what I mean), it can manifest in

lethargy, exhaustion, depression, despondency, stubbornness, attachment to material items, greed and emotional possessiveness. Physical manifestations can include slow metabolism, indigestion, coughs and colds, disturbances in the respiratory system, sinuses, throat and chest.

- Bastrika (Bellow's Breath)
- Surya Bhedana (right nostril breathing)
- Kapalbhata (Breath of Fire) activates the pitta dosha, and the sympathetic nervous system.

Practices for Tri-Doshic: This unique constitution can manifest imbalance in all three doshas at a particular time, or any one or two of the three doshas at a particular time.

- Brahmari (Bee Breath)
- Nadi Sodhana - Anuloma Viloma
- Ujjayi