



# Detoxification in Hatha Yoga and Ayurveda

By

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## Introduction

The Hatha Yoga Pradipika (HYP) is a unique text of the Nath yogis that enumerates some interesting methods for purifying the body. Swami Svatmarama, the chief disciple of Swami Goraknath authored it during the medieval period. Evidently, Matsyendranath, founder of the Nath (synonym for Shiva) cult along with Goraknath understood clearly the importance of mind-body purification as requisites for spiritual evolution and thus created a six-fold system (shat-karma) of detoxification. This popular yoga text is composed of four chapters. In brief, the first chapter deals with postural yoga (asana); chapter two deals with the six actions of purification (shatkarma and pranayama); chapter three describes the physical gestures and energy locks (mudras and bandhas), and chapter four discusses spiritual liberation (samadhi). The placement of the shat-karmas (purification practices) in the second chapter prior to the last chapter on samadhi (liberation) indicates the importance of having a clean bodily house to attain spiritual freedom. This article highlights the correlation the detoxifying actions described in chapter two of the HYP with those mentioned in the main Ayurvedic text, Charaka Samhita.

Interestingly, the HYP methods have much in common with those used in Ayurveda, yoga's sister science of self-healing. Similarly, Ayurvedic mastermind Charaka, devised a five-fold system (pancha karma) for purification of the doshas (vata, pitta & kapha) to

improve the mind-body relationship. The concept of detoxification, which boldly appears in both yoga and ayurvedic systems, demonstrates a long history of inter-connectedness between the two sciences. While yoga is mostly a science focused on expansion of awareness or consciousness beyond the illusions of the material world, Ayurveda has mostly been centered on healing of the physical body as it embraces the science of tri-dosha, which follows the biological forces of air fire and water.

### Causes of Toxicity

The Vedantic concept of maya holds to the idea that this world appears as an illusion that produces desires that perpetuate the cycles of birth and death (samsaras). The Buddha proclaimed that suffering is an inevitable part of life and is the direct result of samsara, which leaves us with the residues of samskaras (seed-habit tendencies). Samskaras can be of three types<sup>1</sup>, pure (sattva), active (rajas) and binding (tamasic). The later two are responsible for producing toxicity in the body as a result of poor eating habits and imbalanced daily and seasonal lifestyles. The most important consideration of Ayurveda with regards to detoxification is that healing occurs slowly as a life long process, because health and wellness are not merely focused on the physical body's anatomy and systemic functions, but includes increasing present moment consciousness of the mind, emotions and purification from the impulse patterns that are not in accord with natural evolution. The HYP lists the six main factors that create toxins in mind-body complex and thus create the need for purification. "Overeating (increases kapha), exertion (loss of ojas), talkativeness-gossip, adhering to rules (pitta), being in the company of common people (society) and unsteadiness (vata) are causes which destroy yoga." <sup>2</sup>

### Six Yogic Purification Actions

The HYP enumerates six purification practices that yogi's can implement into their sadhana for internal cleansing of the body and mind. Although it is important to note that these practices are quite austere and require training or some supervision by a trained yogi. These are *kapalabhati* (pranayama), *neti* (nasal cleansing), *dhouti* (stomach cleansing), *nauli* (abdominal undulations), *trataka* (eye and nerve purification), *basti* (enema). Each of these focuses on areas of the body where the doshas accumulate and creates obstacles for the expansion of consciousness. Kapalabhati pranayama is one of the best exercises for removing congestion and dullness from the sinuses and mind. Neti requires flushing the nose with water or other methods that include use of a cloth, milk or ghee. Neti is a powerful practice for improving respiration in general, but more importantly it helps the lungs expand to the fullest capacity, a key factor for enhancing meditation. Dhouti involves swallowing a long cloth that absorbs the kapha in the stomach or drinking large amounts of salt water to induce vomiting. These first four actions are mostly aids in reducing kapha from its sight in the stomach, lungs and upper respiratory tract. Nauli is also an important practice to release pitta from its sight in the small intestine and mid-abdomen in general. Trataka purifies the eyes of excess pitta, as the radiant glow of ghee induces the eyes to tear, flushing out the tear ducts, thereby cooling the eyes and brain where heat rises from excess fire in the gastro intestinal tract. Basti is a strong way to cleanse the rectum and lower colon of excess vata, where apana (downward prana) is commonly blocked. Three of Ayurveda's five (pancha karma) actions are the same as the yogic practices of nasal cleansing, enemas and stomach cleansing. *The key point to note is that yogic purification actions address crucial sites*

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<sup>1</sup> Gunas

<sup>2</sup> Hatha Yoga Pradipika I:15

*where the doshas accumulate.* Most importantly, both yoga and Ayurveda detoxification systems were designed with awareness of the two main physical areas with very subtle mystical sensitivity. These being the base of the spine where the nadis (subtle pranic channels) are linked and also at the top at the origin of the nose at the spiritual eye, both of these areas are controlled by apana vayu (descending prana) and udana vayu (ascending prana), the main forces responsible for controlling the mind and attainment of Samadhi (liberation).

### Physical Purification Leads to Spiritual Freedom

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” a reminder that the body is the real physical temple of God, although, for that consciousness to exist, the body must be clear of impurities of the doshas. The six-fold system of the HYP aligns perfectly with the ayurvedic intention of removing the obstacles of the doshas. Both yoga and Ayurveda recognize the importance of integral healing with such purifying practices, however Ayurveda provides more detailed wisdom on maintaining balance of the body according the seasons and various stages of life, along with diet and uses of herbal medicines that can bring much efficiency to anyone’s hatha yoga practice. The balance of yoga and Ayurveda is sure to bring success if practiced with regularity and according to ones doshas and karmic code.



Yogi, mystic, and practitioner of Ayurveda, Mas has become one of the most influential yoga and Ayurveda teachers in the world and offers unique certification training programs throughout the USA, Asia, and India. Mas enjoys teaching integral yoga classes, offering health and wellness lectures and giving workshops that embrace core Ayurvedic principles. His work is primarily influenced by the lineage-based traditions of India, with prominence to the teachings of Yogananda and Sivananda. In 2014 he appeared in the triumphant film “Awake, The Life Of Yogananda” and as an Ayurvedic practitioner, he maintains an active international counseling practice that includes yoga and Vedic astrology. He is the founder/director of Dancing Shiva Yoga Ayurveda, an international non-profit educational organization and center based in Southern California.