



Original Article

The Role of Kriyas in Yoga Therapy

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Abstract

Kriyas, also known as Shatkarmas, represent a unique set of yogic purification practices aimed at cleansing the body and mind to prepare for higher stages of yoga. Originating from classical Hatha Yoga texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita, kriyas were traditionally used to eliminate toxins, regulate vital energy, and cultivate mental clarity. In the modern therapeutic context, kriyas play a crucial role in preventive and curative health care by addressing respiratory, digestive, metabolic, and psychosomatic disorders. This article explores the meaning, history, purpose, and therapeutic relevance of kriyas, emphasizing their transformative role in yoga therapy. Kriyas, or Shatkarmas, are ancient yogic purification techniques described in classical Hatha Yoga texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Gheranda Samhita. These practices—Neti, Dhauti, Nauli, Basti, Kapalabhati, and Trataka—cleanse different systems of the body and prepare practitioners for higher stages of yoga. Beyond their historical and spiritual importance, kriyas hold great relevance in modern yoga therapy for their preventive and therapeutic potential in physical, physiological, and psychological health. This paper explores the meaning, purpose, procedure, benefits, and precautions of kriyas while examining their therapeutic applications.

Keywords: Yoga Therapy, Kriyas, Shatkarmas, Hatha Yoga, Purification, Preventive Health, Psychosomatic Balance

Introduction

Yoga, as a holistic science of life, integrates physical well-being, mental balance, and spiritual growth. While asanas and pranayama are widely practiced worldwide, the cleansing techniques known as kriyas remain less understood yet deeply significant. The Sanskrit term kriya derives from kri, meaning “to act” or “to purify.” In yogic practice, kriyas are deliberate internal cleansing actions performed to purify the body’s systems and balance the flow of prana (vital energy).

The six classical kriyas, collectively called Shatkarmas, are:

- **Kapalabhati** (frontal brain cleansing through breath)
- **Trataka** (gazing for concentration and purification)
- **Neti** (nasal cleansing)
- **Dhauti** (digestive tract cleansing)
- **Nauli** (abdominal churning)
- **Basti** (yogic enema)

These techniques are not merely physical hygiene practices but are profound physiological and psychological processes that prepare the practitioner for deeper yogic practices such as pranayama, dhyana, and samadhi.

Historical Perspective

The history of kriyas can be traced back to classical yogic scriptures. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika (15th century CE) describes the kriyas as essential for eliminating phlegm, bile, and impurities that obstruct yogic progress. The Gheranda Samhita (17th century CE) elaborates on kriyas as shuddhi kriyas (purification techniques) and prescribes them as the first step before asanas and pranayama. The Hatha Ratnavali further affirms their role in balancing doshas (bodily humors) and maintaining health.

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Though Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (2nd century BCE) do not explicitly mention kriyas, the principle of shaucha (purity) as one of the niyamas laid the philosophical foundation for later development of these cleansing practices. Historically, kriyas were transmitted through guru-shishya traditions and preserved in ashrams and monastic communities. In modern times, pioneers such as Swami Sivananda, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and institutions like Kaivalyadhama and Bihar School of Yoga revived kriyas as both spiritual and therapeutic practices. Contemporary research has demonstrated their effectiveness in treating sinusitis, asthma, constipation, digestive ailments, stress, and psychosomatic disorders, thereby reinforcing their relevance in yoga therapy.

Role of Kriyas in Yoga Therapy

The application of kriyas in yoga therapy highlights their dual function: **preventive** and **curative**.

- **Preventive Role:** Kriyas remove toxins, clear excess mucus, regulate digestion, and strengthen immunity. They prevent the accumulation of impurities that could otherwise lead to chronic diseases.
- **Curative Role:** Kriyas are effective in managing specific conditions. For instance, jala neti is beneficial for sinusitis and allergic rhinitis, nauli aids in regulating abdominal organs and improving digestion, kapalabhati helps in reducing obesity and balancing the nervous system, and trataka supports mental clarity and concentration.

In yoga therapy, kriyas are carefully prescribed according to an individual's constitution, health condition, and therapeutic needs. Their cleansing effect creates a foundation upon which asanas, pranayama, and meditation can work more effectively.

KAPALABHATI (Frontal Brain Cleansing through Breath)

Kapalabhati is a classical yogic purification technique that utilizes rhythmic, forceful exhalations and passive inhalations to cleanse the respiratory system and energize the body and mind. The Sanskrit term Kapalabhati is derived from Kapala, meaning "forehead" or "skull," and Bhati, meaning "to shine" or "illuminate," which together signify the "illumination of the frontal brain" or purification of the mind through breath. It is classified as one of the six shatkarmas in Hatha Yoga and is regarded as both a cleansing and energizing practice that prepares the practitioner for pranayama, meditation, and advanced yogic disciplines. Classical texts, including the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita, describe Kapalabhati as a method to remove stale air, expel toxins, and stimulate the mind, thus harmonizing physical, physiological, and subtle energies.

Kapalabhati



Purpose The primary purpose of Kapalabhati is to cleanse the lungs, nasal passages, and respiratory pathways while invigorating the nervous system and enhancing mental alertness. Physiologically, the forceful exhalations expel carbon dioxide and stale air, clear mucus and respiratory toxins, stimulate the diaphragm, and improve blood oxygenation. From a yogic perspective, Kapalabhati activates the flow of prana through the nadis, particularly the sushumna, ida, and pingala channels, thereby energizing the frontal lobes of the brain and promoting clarity, focus, and vitality.

Procedure The practice of Kapalabhati involves a series of rapid, forceful exhalations through the nostrils while allowing passive inhalation. The abdomen actively contracts during exhalation and relaxes during inhalation, creating a pumping action that massages the internal organs, improves circulation, and strengthens the diaphragm. The number of repetitions may vary depending on the practitioner's experience, and the practice is usually performed in the morning on an empty stomach to maximize benefits. Kapalabhati can also be combined with other cleansing techniques and pranayama practices as part of a comprehensive yoga therapy regimen.

Benefits The benefits of Kapalabhati are multifaceted. Physically, it strengthens the lungs and diaphragm, improves respiratory efficiency, enhances metabolic function, and promotes detoxification. Psychologically, it increases alertness, reduces mental fatigue, alleviates mild anxiety, and improves emotional balance. In yoga therapy, Kapalabhati is applied to support respiratory disorders such as asthma, sinusitis, and bronchitis, as well as to enhance concentration, cognitive function, and stress management.

Precautions are important for the safe practice of Kapalabhati. It should be avoided by individuals with high blood pressure, heart disease, hernia, or recent abdominal surgery. Beginners should practice under supervision, gradually increasing repetitions to prevent dizziness or discomfort. Kapalabhati exemplifies the yogic principle that the regulation and purification of breath not only support physical health but also illuminate the mind, preparing the practitioner for advanced meditative and spiritual practices.

TRATAKA (Gazing for Mental Purification and Concentration)

Trataka is a classical yogic purification technique that emphasizes focused, sustained gazing on a fixed point, such as a candle flame, a symbol, or a small object, without blinking for a period of time. The term Trataka is derived from Sanskrit, meaning "to gaze steadily" or "to look attentively." Unlike the other kriyas, which primarily focus on physical cleansing, Trataka is designed to

purify the mind and sensory organs, particularly the eyes, while simultaneously cultivating concentration (dharana) and mental steadiness. In Hatha Yoga, Trataka serves as a preparatory practice for meditation and higher states of mental control, and it is considered an essential technique for enhancing awareness and focus. Ancient yogic texts, including the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita, highlight Trataka as a method to remove mental distractions, sharpen the senses, and strengthen subtle energy channels.

Purpose The purpose of Trataka is both physiological and psychological. Physiologically, it exercises the muscles of the eyes, improves vision, reduces eye fatigue, and stimulates neural pathways related to visual processing. Psychologically, Trataka enhances concentration, develops mental clarity, and calms restlessness or agitation of the mind. In yogic theory, the practice directs prana toward the ajna chakra (third eye center), thereby promoting the flow of subtle energy and enhancing intuitive perception and awareness. By stabilizing the gaze and focusing the mind, Trataka reduces mental distractions, allowing the practitioner to enter deeper states of meditation with greater ease.

Jatru Trataka



Procedure The practice of Trataka involves choosing a suitable object of focus and sitting in a comfortable, steady posture, such as Sukhasana or Padmasana. The eyes are directed toward the object without blinking until tears may form naturally. After the initial gazing period, the eyes are closed, and the mental image of the object is visualized internally. This internal visualization strengthens concentration and deepens mental focus. The duration of practice can be gradually increased as the practitioner develops steadiness and endurance.

Benefits The benefits of Trataka are extensive. Physically, it strengthens the eyes, improves visual acuity, reduces strain, and enhances neurological coordination. Mentally, it increases concentration, sharpens memory, and cultivates calmness and emotional stability. Therapeutically, Trataka is applied in yoga therapy to relieve stress, anxiety, mild insomnia, and mental fatigue. It also serves as a preparatory practice for meditation and mindfulness, supporting overall psychosomatic balance and cognitive enhancement.

Precautions for Trataka include practicing in a well-lit, quiet environment to avoid eye strain. Individuals with severe eye disorders, infections, or vision problems should perform Trataka under guidance or modify the practice accordingly. The duration should be gradually increased to prevent discomfort or dizziness. Trataka exemplifies the yogic understanding that purification extends beyond the body to the mind and senses, integrating mental, emotional, and subtle energetic dimensions for holistic well-being.

Neti (Nasal Cleansing)

Neti is a classical yogic purification technique that focuses on cleansing the nasal passages and sinuses. The Sanskrit term Neti literally means “to cleanse” or “to purify,” and it occupies an important position among the six shatkarmas of Hatha Yoga. The practice of Neti is considered the first step toward internal purification, preparing the respiratory system for pranayama and higher meditative practices. Ancient yogic texts, such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Gheranda Samhita, emphasize the importance of keeping the nasal passages clear to ensure the unobstructed flow of prana, the vital life force, which is essential for both physical and mental well-being.

Jala Neti



Purpose The primary purpose of Neti is to remove accumulated impurities from the nasal cavity, including mucus, dust, pollen, and other environmental toxins. By doing so, it not only prevents respiratory disorders but also enhances the efficiency of breathing, thereby improving oxygenation of the body and clarity of mind. In yogic philosophy, nasal cleansing is closely linked

with mental purification, as any obstruction in the breath channels is believed to disturb the flow of prana and affect concentration and meditation.

Procedure Traditionally, Neti is performed in two ways: Jala Neti and Sutra Neti. Jala Neti involves the use of a small vessel called a Neti pot, filled with lukewarm water, often mixed with a pinch of salt to make it isotonic with body fluids. The practitioner gently pours water through one nostril, allowing it to flow out from the other, thus cleansing the nasal passage. Sutra Neti, on the other hand, uses a soft cotton thread or specially designed rubber catheter, which is inserted through the nostril and gently guided out of the mouth to clear blockages. Both methods require careful technique and are traditionally taught under the guidance of a qualified instructor to ensure safety and efficacy.

Benefits The benefits of Neti are multifaceted. Physiologically, it keeps the nasal passages and sinuses free from obstruction, reduces the risk of sinusitis and allergic reactions, and enhances the overall function of the respiratory system. Psychologically, it promotes mental alertness, reduces restlessness, and prepares the mind for meditation. By facilitating the free flow of prana through the nadis (subtle energy channels), Neti contributes to improved focus, clarity, and calmness.

However, certain precautions are essential when practicing Neti. The water used must be clean and at a comfortable, lukewarm temperature to avoid irritation or infection. Sutra Neti, in particular, should only be practiced under expert supervision due to its complexity. It is also recommended that individuals with severe nasal injuries or infections avoid these practices until fully recovered. When performed correctly, Neti exemplifies the yogic principle of purification as the foundation for physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual progress.

DHAUTI (Digestive Tract Cleansing)

Dhauti is a classical yogic purification technique aimed at cleansing the digestive tract, which is considered the core of physical health and vitality in yogic philosophy. The term Dhauti is derived from Sanskrit, meaning “to wash” or “to cleanse,” and it encompasses a variety of internal cleansing practices designed to remove accumulated toxins and undigested matter from the stomach, esophagus, and intestines. In Hatha Yoga, Dhauti is regarded as an essential preparatory practice, ensuring that the digestive system is purified before engaging in advanced asanas, pranayama, and meditation. Ancient texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita describe Dhauti as a key shuddhi kriya for maintaining the balance of doshas and preserving the digestive fire (Agni), which is central to overall health.

Vamana dhauti



Purpose The primary purpose of Dhauti is to purify the digestive system, thereby eliminating toxins (ama) that can interfere with metabolic processes and disrupt both physical and mental equilibrium. According to yogic philosophy, an impure digestive tract can lead to sluggishness, irritability, and decreased concentration, hindering the practice of pranayama and meditation. Dhauti, therefore, not only enhances physical well-being but also promotes mental clarity and prepares the practitioner for higher yogic states.

Procedure Dhauti is traditionally performed in several forms, including Vamana Dhauti, Vastra Dhauti, and Danda Dhauti. Vamana Dhauti involves drinking warm saline water and inducing controlled regurgitation to cleanse the stomach. Vastra Dhauti employs the swallowing of a long, thin cloth that is then gradually pulled out, thereby removing impurities from the digestive tract. Danda Dhauti and similar variations utilize gentle stimulation with fingers or sticks to cleanse specific areas of the stomach and intestines. Each method is designed to systematically remove toxins, strengthen abdominal muscles, and restore optimal function to the digestive organs. These practices were traditionally taught under the supervision of experienced instructors to ensure safety and effectiveness.

Benefits The benefits of Dhauti are extensive. Physiologically, it strengthens the digestive organs, improves peristalsis, enhances nutrient absorption, and balances the doshas. Regular practice prevents digestive disorders such as constipation, bloating, acidity, and indigestion. Psychologically, Dhauti cultivates discipline, self-control, and patience, while reducing mental lethargy and irritability. In the therapeutic context, Dhauti is particularly useful for managing gastrointestinal problems, supporting metabolic health, and preparing the body and mind for pranayama and meditation.

Precautions are critical for the safe practice of Dhauti. These techniques should only be performed under expert guidance, especially Vastra Dhauti and Vamana Dhauti, as improper practice may cause injury or discomfort. Individuals with ulcers, severe digestive disorders, or weak constitutions are advised to avoid or modify the practice. The use of clean, warm water and proper technique is essential to ensure safety and effectiveness. When executed correctly, Dhauti exemplifies the yogic principle that a purified digestive system is foundational to physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual growth.

NAULI (Abdominal Churning)

Nauli is a classical yogic purification practice that involves the rhythmic contraction and isolation of the abdominal muscles to massage and stimulate the internal organs. The term Nauli comes from Sanskrit, meaning “to churn” or “to whirl,” reflecting the distinctive rolling motion of the abdominal muscles during the practice. Within the Hatha Yoga tradition, Nauli is considered an advanced cleansing technique that strengthens the digestive system, balances internal energies, and prepares the body for

prolonged pranayama and meditation. Ancient yogic texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita emphasize Nauli as a vital method for enhancing digestive fire (Agni) and maintaining overall abdominal health.



Purpose The primary purpose of Nauli is to purify and invigorate the abdominal region, thereby stimulating the stomach, intestines, liver, pancreas, and kidneys. By performing this churning motion, the practitioner promotes the circulation of blood and prana throughout the abdominal organs, which enhances metabolic efficiency and assists in the elimination of toxins. In yogic theory, the abdominal region is closely associated with the manipura chakra, the center of energy and vitality; cleansing and strengthening this area through Nauli is therefore believed to influence both physical strength and mental focus.

Procedure Nauli is traditionally performed after mastering preparatory practices such as Uddiyana Bandha (abdominal lock). The practitioner first exhales completely and contracts the abdominal muscles to create a hollowing effect in the stomach. Through controlled isolation of the rectus, oblique, and transverse abdominal muscles, the practitioner generates a rolling or churning motion. This process may be performed in stages, starting with central Nauli (isolating the central muscles), followed by left and right Nauli (isolating lateral muscles), and finally combining all movements into a continuous abdominal roll. Each phase requires careful breathing, focus, and muscular control, and is traditionally taught under expert guidance to prevent injury.

Benefits The benefits of Nauli are manifold. Physiologically, it enhances digestion, strengthens abdominal and core muscles, improves peristaltic movements, and stimulates detoxification of the digestive organs. Psychologically, the practice fosters discipline, concentration, and body awareness, promoting steadiness of mind and emotional balance. In yoga therapy, Nauli is applied to manage digestive disorders such as constipation, bloating, and abdominal discomfort, as well as to support metabolic health and core strength.

Precautions are essential when practicing Nauli. It should be performed on an empty stomach, preferably in the morning, and only after mastering preparatory techniques such as Uddiyana Bandha. Individuals with hernia, high blood pressure, or recent abdominal surgery should avoid Nauli. Gradual practice under guidance ensures safety and maximizes therapeutic benefits. In essence, Nauli exemplifies the yogic understanding that the purification and strengthening of the abdominal region are foundational to both physical health and mental focus, forming a bridge toward higher yogic practices.

BASTI (Yogic Enema / Colon Cleansing)

Basti is a classical yogic purification practice aimed at cleansing and strengthening the colon, thereby regulating the lower digestive and excretory systems. The Sanskrit term Basti translates to “a container” or “enclosure,” referring to the practice of holding water or air in the colon to cleanse it. In Hatha Yoga, Basti is considered one of the six shatkarmas and is regarded as a vital technique for removing accumulated waste, balancing the doshas, and promoting proper functioning of the lower digestive tract. Ancient texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita highlight Basti as an indispensable practice for maintaining internal cleanliness and ensuring the smooth flow of prana throughout the body.

Purpose The primary purpose of Basti is to eliminate toxins (ama) and waste from the colon, which is believed in yogic theory to be a site of toxin accumulation that can affect both physical health and mental clarity. By purifying the lower digestive tract, Basti supports the function of the abdominal and pelvic organs, strengthens the abdominal muscles, and enhances energy circulation in the body. The practice also prepares the practitioner for advanced pranayama and meditation by stabilizing energy in the lower chakras, particularly the manipura and svadhisthana centers.

Procedure Traditionally, Basti is performed using water (Jala Basti) or through dry methods (Sthala Basti). In Jala Basti, a practitioner introduces warm, filtered water into the colon through a specially prepared tube, allowing it to remain briefly before elimination. This technique cleanses the colon and stimulates peristalsis. Dry Basti methods involve controlled muscular contractions and retention exercises to massage the intestines and improve bowel function. Both forms require careful technique and are traditionally taught under the supervision of a qualified yoga instructor to ensure safety and effectiveness.

Benefits The benefits of Basti are extensive. Physiologically, it improves bowel regularity, removes toxins, strengthens abdominal and pelvic muscles, and stimulates digestive efficiency. By cleansing the colon, it enhances absorption of nutrients and contributes to overall metabolic health. Psychologically, Basti fosters a sense of lightness, mental clarity, and emotional balance, as removal of accumulated waste reduces lethargy and irritability. In yoga therapy, Basti is particularly useful for managing constipation, colitis, bloating, and other digestive disorders, making it an effective preventive and curative practice.

Precautions are critical when practicing Basti. It should be performed under guidance, particularly Jala Basti, to avoid injury or infection. Individuals with severe gastrointestinal disorders, recent abdominal surgery, or weak constitutions should avoid intensive practices. The water used must be clean and at a safe, lukewarm temperature. By purifying the colon and restoring

digestive balance, Basti exemplifies the yogic principle that internal cleanliness forms the foundation of physical health, mental clarity, and spiritual readiness.

Conclusion: Integrating Kriyas into Yoga Therapy

The six classical kriyas—Neti, Dhauti, Nauli, Basti, Kapalabhati, and Trataka—are foundational practices in Hatha Yoga, collectively known as Shatkarmas. These purification techniques serve as preparatory steps, cleansing the body and mind to facilitate deeper yogic practices and promote holistic well-being.

Holistic Health Benefits

Each kriya targets specific physiological systems, contributing to comprehensive health benefits:

- **Neti:** Cleanses the nasal passages, enhancing respiratory function and preparing the body for pranayama practices.
- **Dhauti:** Purifies the digestive tract, improving digestion and detoxification processes.
- **Nauli:** Strengthens abdominal muscles and stimulates internal organs, promoting digestive health.
- **Basti:** Detoxifies the colon, aiding in the elimination of waste and balancing the body's internal environment.
- **Kapalabhati:** Energizes the mind and body, enhances oxygen supply to the brain, and improves mental clarity.
- **Trataka:** Develops concentration and mental focus, preparing the mind for meditation.

Therapeutic Applications

In contemporary yoga therapy, these kriyas are utilized to address various health conditions:

- **Respiratory Disorders:** Practices like Neti and Kapalabhati help clear nasal passages and improve lung function, beneficial for conditions such as asthma and sinusitis.
- **Digestive Issues:** Dhauti and Basti aid in cleansing the digestive system, alleviating constipation, and promoting overall digestive health.
- **Mental Health:** Trataka and Kapalabhati enhance mental focus and reduce stress, supporting emotional well-being.
- **Detoxification:** Nauli and Basti facilitate the removal of toxins from the body, supporting the immune system and overall vitality.

Precautions and Considerations

While kriyas offer numerous benefits, they should be practiced with caution:

- **Supervision:** Beginners should perform kriyas under the guidance of a qualified instructor to ensure correct technique and prevent injury.
- **Health Conditions:** Individuals with certain health conditions, such as high blood pressure or heart disease, should consult a healthcare professional before engaging in kriya practices.
- **Gradual Progression:** Start with basic techniques and gradually progress to more advanced practices as comfort and proficiency increase.

Conclusion

Incorporating the six classical kriyas into yoga therapy provides a holistic approach to health, addressing physical, mental, and energetic aspects of well-being. These practices not only purify the body but also cultivate a disciplined mind, preparing practitioners for deeper meditative states and spiritual growth. When practiced with awareness and proper guidance, kriyas can be powerful tools in enhancing overall health and achieving a balanced life.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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