

Viniyoga Vignette 2 Commentary on - Combining techniques in Prāṇāyāma



For those who read the Viniyoga Vignette post 2 on combining techniques in Prāṇāyāma from two days ago, I would add some observations around rationales on the choice and order of the techniques involved.

Step 1.

Śitalī Inhale with Ujjāyī Exhale

1.½. 1.0 for 8 breaths

Step 2.

Anuloma Ujjāyī

1.½. 1½.0 for 8 breaths

Step 3.

Pratiloma Ujjāyī

1½.0. 1½.0 for 8 breaths

Step 4.

Ujjāyī

½.0. ½.0 for 8 breaths

For example, starting with Śitalī could be useful for several reasons such as mid-afternoon being a time when there can be an energetic slump and the use of a open mouth inhale with the head raising to encourage volume, coupled with the Antar Kumbhaka, can offer a tonic for the system.

Step 1.

Śitalī Inhale with Ujjāyī Exhale

1.½. 1.0 for 8 breaths

Śitalī is also said to be calming in terms of placating hunger urges. Here one can hypothesise around the potential benefit of this effect, given that this time of the day can be a time when the body is looking for quick compensations for energy gaps commonly arising during this period of the day. Thus placating a desire for such as sugars and offering an alternative for enhancing the energy levels via the breath.

Śitalī:

While raising head,

Inhale through the tongue with the end extending out of the mouth.

After curling the tongue back with the mouth closed,

Lower the head on the Antar Kumbhaka.

Then throat (or nostril) Exhale.

It is interesting to note that for some, or for those new to this technique, an onset of yawning may accompany its practice, especially when practicing at this time of the day. Reasons for yawning are not clear, though suggestions include the bodies response to raised carbon dioxide levels or the bodies need to cool brain temperature.

I would also suggest that the technique impacts on the belly, more so than with other techniques, and this increased movement can stimulate a yawning response. On the question of the belly, this enhanced movement also appears to be useful in helping the area to relax or release tension, as well as being a useful post-digestive in reducing feelings of fullness.

From Śitalī we then progress onto Anuloma Ujjāyī, whereby we move from open mouthed inhale to both nostrils inhale using Ujjāyī. Added to this is alternate nostril exhale as a means to check the state of the airways. I was taught that in Prāṇāyāma it is a priority to start with checking the airflow in the exhale in each nostril before moving onto the same on the inhale, hence Anuloma Ujjāyī.

*Anuloma Ujjāyī:
Throat Inhale.
Alternate nostril Exhale.*

The technique is also a tool for lengthening the exhale in relation to the inhale. Whilst in relation to Śitalī, because of the increased impact around the belly, possibly arising from the raising of the head shifting the spinal influence to the abdominal region and slightly distending this area, it is not conducive to exhale longer than inhale. Hence the choice of ratio for Śitalī supports this tendency and is one where the inhale and exhale are equal, albeit with added Antar Kumbhaka.

It could also be noted here, that as the practice is a post-lunch mid-afternoon practice, we need to respect that the stomach is not as empty as, say in an early morning practice. Therefore the choice of ratio for the exhale here is one where the exhale is only lengthened by half in relation to the inhale, rather than being doubled as in other situations.

Thus from inhaling through the mouth and exhaling through both nostrils we have progressed to inhaling through both nostrils and exhaling through alternate nostrils. From here the Vinyāsa Krama takes us to the next step, that of adding nostril inhale to the practice. Here the technique chosen is Pratiloma Ujjāyī rather than say Nāḍī Śodhana. Why Pratiloma Ujjāyī at this point in this practice, rather than Nāḍī Śodhana, one may ask?

There can be several reasons supporting this choice. Common to both techniques is the introduction of inhale through each nostril. Equally, after the use of Anuloma Ujjāyī to lengthen the exhalation, both techniques can be used to focus on lengthening the inhalation. Here it should be noted that we are looking to bring the length of the inhale up to match that of the exhale. Hence the progression from stabilizing and matching inhale and exhale, towards lengthening the exhale, towards lengthening the inhale to match the exhale.

*Pratiloma Ujjāyī:
Throat Inhale.
Left nostril Exhale.
Left nostril Inhale,
Throat Exhale
Throat Inhale.
Right nostril Exhale.
Right nostril Inhale,
Throat Exhale*

So what can Pratiloma Ujjāyī offer that is supportive to this practice and its situation? For example we can consider that although it's a technique that focuses on stimulating the inhale, there is a compensatory aspect in that every other exhale is with Ujjāyī or both nostrils. This eases potential accumulative pressure from maintaining length and subtlety of the breath when narrowing both the inflow and outflow with such as Nāḍī Śodhana.

Thus within the context here as a post-digestive mid-afternoon practice where we may not have the same ease of access to the breath as in a morning practice. Plus we are going straight into this Prāṇāyāma practice without any Āsana as preparation for the body and the breath.

Another aspect to Pratiloma Ujjāyī that is of interest, is that it can be mused that the psychological impact is different to that of Nāḍī Śodhana, even when using the same ratios. Though in general terms it may be suggested that using an equal inhale and exhale can create a certain psychological outcome in facilitating a sense of internal stability, this feeling is more pronounced with Pratiloma Ujjāyī.

So comparing the two techniques, it appears to be something around the rhythm of Pratiloma Ujjāyī with its four breath cycle and unique centre to periphery and periphery to centre flow, in conjunction with its intermixture patterning of nostril and throat inhaling and exhaling, that facilitates its unique Lakṣana or characteristics.

The last comment I would offer is around the transition from the ascent process in the Vinyāsa Krama with Anuloma Ujjāyī, to the crown with Pratiloma Ujjāyī. It is a further choice, made because of the practice situation in terms of mixed group abilities, as well as time of day. Here, in the transition to bringing the inhale up to matching the exhale I dropped the Antar Kumbhaka or hold after the inhale.

Step 2.

Anuloma Ujjāyī

1.½. 1½. 0 for 8 breaths

Step 3.

Pratiloma Ujjāyī

1½. 0. 1½. 0 for 8 breaths

This is a strategy that can be used whereby there is a re-distribution rather than increase of the overall length of the breath. Here the increased length of the inhale is being drawn from the hold after the inhale, rather than being added to the overall breath length. This could create a possible strain for some, this would have a knock-on effect in terms of the psychological space that Pratiloma Ujjāyī can facilitate.

Plus, Pratiloma Ujjāyī is also a technique that favours an even or Samāna ratio. Thus if Antar Kumbhaka was to be used, then it would also need to be in conjunction with the Bāhya Kumbhaka in equal measure as part of the intention of the technique.

This particular Lakṣana or characteristic of Samāna or even ratio, is further reflected in the descent from the crown with the use of equal inhale and exhale, albeit with a reduced length, with Ujjāyī.

Step 4.

Ujjāyī

½. 0. ½. 0 for 8 breaths

I hope reader finds these practice notes helpful with an understanding of the richness that studying and practicing Prāṇāyāma can offer for our personal practice and, if teaching it consistently and progressively, for others.