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Therapeutic Role of Śaṭkarma in alleviating Digestive Disorders According to Hatha Yoga and Gheraṇḍa Samhita.

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ABSTRACT

Digestive ailments such as hyperacidity, constipation, indigestion, bloating, sluggish digestion, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) have become increasingly common due to sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy eating habits, and stress. Classical Haṭha Yoga texts describe Śaṭkarma (six purification techniques) as essential cleansing practices for maintaining digestive health and preparing the body for higher yogic practices. The Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā and Gheraṇḍa Samhitā particularly emphasize that purification of the gastrointestinal tract improves digestion, balances the doṣas, enhances digestive fire (Jatharagni), and prevents disease. This article explores the therapeutic role of Śaṭkarma in digestive disorders with references from the classical texts.

Keywords: Jatharagni, Ama, Doshas, Dhauti, Basti, Nauli, Constipation, Boating, Peristalsis, Gheranda Samhitha, Hathayoga.

Introduction

Shatkarma

In yogic philosophy, health begins with internal purification. According to Haṭha Yoga, toxins (Āma), excess mucus, improper digestion, and disturbances in the body's internal balance obstruct the flow of Prāṇa and become the root cause of many diseases. Therefore, before practising advanced techniques like Prāṇāyāma and Dhyāna, yogis are advised to purify the body through Śaṭkarma.

मेद-श्लेष्माधिकः पूर्वं षट्-कर्माणि समाचरेत् ।

अन्यस्तु नाचरेत्तानि दोषाणां समभावतः ॥HYP:2.21 ॥

Through the shatkarmas, harmonization of ida and pingala the two main flows of prana, is established, resulting in physical and mental purity and balance. The shatkarmas also balance vata, wind, pitta, bile, and kapha, mucus, the three disorders created in the body. According to ayurveda and hatha yoga, any imbalance in these three disorders gives rise to disease. The shatkarmas are also utilized before pranayama and other higher practices of yoga so that the body becomes free from disease and does not create any obstacles on the spiritual path. These powerful practices should never be undertaken just by reading about them in a book or by learning from inexperienced people. According to the tradition, a person has the right to teach others only after being instructed by the guru.

एवंविधे मठे स्थित्वा सर्वचिन्ताविवर्जितः ।

गुरुपदिष्टमार्गेण योगमेव समभ्यसेत् ॥HYP:1.14॥

It is essential that these instructions are given personally, including the knowledge of when and how the practices are to be done, according to the needs of the individual. The six cleansing techniques are: Dhauti, Basti, Neti, Trāṭaka, Nauli (Laulikī), Kapālabhāti. Among these, Dhauti, Basti, Nauli, and Kapālabhāti have the greatest therapeutic importance for digestive disorders.

Śaṭkarma According to Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā:

The Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā describes the six purification methods.

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धौतिर्बस्तिस्तथा नेतिस्त्राटकं नौलिकं तथा।

कपालभातिश्चैतानि षट्कर्माणि प्रचक्षते॥HYP:2.22॥

Meaning:

"Dhauti, Basti, Neti, Trāṭaka, Nauli, and Kapālabhāti are known as the six cleansing practices". These practices remove impurities and prepare the practitioner for higher stages of yoga.

Śaṭkarma According to Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā

The Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā places great emphasis on bodily purification. It states that purification is the first step among the seven limbs of Ghaṭastha Yoga.

शोधनं दृढता चैव स्थैर्यं धैर्यं च लाघवम्।

प्रत्यक्षं निर्लिप्तता चैव घटस्य सप्त साधनम्॥G.S: 1.9॥

The text explains that purification (Śodhana) is the foundation of physical health and yogic success.

Therapeutic Role of each Śaṭkarma in alleviating Digestive Disorders

1. Dhauti:

Dhauti is one of the six cleansing practices (Śaṭkarma) of Hatha Yoga. It helps purify the digestive tract, removes toxins, improves digestion, and prepares the body for higher yogic practices. Gheraṇḍa Saṁhitā classifies Dhauti into four main types:

अन्तर्धौतिर्दन्तधौतिर्द्वौतिर्मूलशोधनम्

धौतिं चतुर्विधां कृत्वा घटं कुर्वन्ति निर्मलम् ॥ G.S: 1.13॥

^I. **Antar Dhauti:** Cleansing the internal digestive tract.

Subtypes: Vatasara Dhauti: Swallowing air and expelling it through the rectum.

वातसारं परं गोप्यं देह निर्मलकारकम् ।

सर्व रोगक्षयकरं देहानलविवर्द्धकम् ॥ G.S: 1.16॥

a. **Vatsara** is a very secret technique for purifying the body. It destroys all diseases and activates the gastric fire, which helps to digest food.

b. **Varisara Dhauti (Shankhaprakshalana):** Drinking warm saline water and passing it through the intestines with specific yogic movements.

वारिसारं परं गोप्यं देहनिर्मलकारकम् ।

साधयेत्तत्प्रयत्नेन देवदेहं प्रपद्यते ॥ G.S: 1.18॥

c. **Vahnisara (Agnisara) Dhauti:** Rapidly moving the abdomen in and out while holding the breath.

उदरामयजं त्वक्त्वा जठराग्निं विवर्द्धयेत् ।

एषा धौतिः परा गोप्या देवानामपि दुर्लभा ।

केवलं धौतिमात्रेण देवदेहं भवेद्ध्रुवम् ॥ G.S: 1.20॥

Agnisara kriya massages and tones all the abdominal organs. It promotes the correct secretion of di-gestive juices and assimilation of nutrients from food. Stomach worms can also be destroyed. It pre-vents and removes disorders such as constipation, indigestion, hyperacidity, hypoacidity, irritable bowel syndrome, pitta imbalance and flatulence. This practice balances the abdominal organs. It activates the nervous system, so performing this practice moderately will remove depression for some time.

d. **Bahishkrita Dhauti:** Advanced cleansing involving the lower intestine (rarely practiced today).

Benefits:

It is traditionally believed to cleanse the stomach and intestines, improve digestion and metabolism, relieve constipation and gas, and increase the digestive fire (Agni).

^{II}. **Danta Dhauti:** Cleaning the teeth and associated organs.

Subtypes:

Cleaning the teeth (Danta Mula)

दन्तमूलं पराधौतियोगिनां योग साधने ।

नित्यं कुर्यात्प्रभाते च दन्तरक्षाच योगवित् ।

दन्तमूलं धावनादिकार्येषु योगिनां मतम् ॥ G.S: 1.27॥

Rub or massage the roots of the teeth with the juice of the khadira plant or with clean earth until the impurities are removed. Yogis must adopt this method every morning to protect their teeth.

A. Cleaning the tongue (**Jihva Shodhana**)

अथातः सम्प्रवक्ष्यामि जिह्वाशोधन कारणम् ।

जरामरणरोगादीन्नाशयेद्दीर्घलम्बिका ॥ G.S: 1.28॥

cleaning the tongue, Lengthening of the tongue destroys old age, death and disease.

Benefits: Maintaining oral hygiene is essential for preventing dental diseases and keeping the mouth healthy. Good oral hygiene also improves taste perception, supports clear and healthy speech, and aids proper digestion by helping in the effective chewing of food.

^{III}. **Hrid Dhauti:** Purification of the upper digestive tract.

Subtypes:

➤ **Danda Dhauti:** Cleaning the esophagus using a soft banana stem or specially prepared tube (traditional method).

कफं पित्तं तथा क्लेदं रेचयेद्दूर्ध्ववर्त्मना ।

दण्डधौतिविधानेन हृद्रोगं नाशयेद् ध्रुवम् ॥ G.S: 1.37॥

Benefits: The inner walls of the food pipe are covered with kapha, pitta and mucus. When this matter accumulates, it can enter the larynx and affect the respiratory system, reducing the breathing capacity, and producing a wheezing sound while inhaling.

With danda dhauti, kapha, pitta and kleda, mucus, are expelled with rechaka kriya, exhalation.

➤ **Vamana Dhauti (Kunjal Kriya):** Drinking warm saline water and voluntarily vomiting it.

भोजनान्ते पिबेद्वारि चाकण्ठं पूरितं सुधीः ॥ G.S: 1.38॥

उर्ध्वा दृष्टिं क्षणं कृत्वा तज्जलं वमयेत्पुनः ।

नित्यमभ्यासयोगेन कफपित्तं निवारयेत् ॥ G.S: 1.39॥

Benefits of Vamana Dhauti

1. Kapha-doṣa śamana – Removes excess phlegm and mucus.
2. Pitta-doṣa śamana – Reduces excess bile and acidity.
3. Āmāśaya-śuddhi – Cleanses the stomach of impurities.
4. Improves digestion (Agni-dīpana) – Supports healthy digestive fire after purification.
5. Prevents indigestion (Ajīrṇa) – Helps relieve heaviness due to undigested food.
6. Reduces nausea and excessive mucus accumulation.

7. Purifies the upper digestive tract, preparing the practitioner for higher yogic practices.

Vastra Dhauti: Swallowing a long strip of clean cloth and then gently withdrawing it.

गुल्म ज्वरप्लीहकुष्ठकफपित्तं विनश्यति ।

आरोग्यं बलपुष्टिश्च भवेत्तस्य दिने दिने ॥ G.S: 1.41॥

Benefits: It removes excess mucus and acidity from the stomach, helps relieve indigestion, heartburn, and cleanses the stomach. It also supports overall digestive health and helps maintain proper digestion.

IV. **Moola Shodhana (Root Cleansing):** Cleansing the rectal region.

Method:

Traditionally performed by cleaning the anal passage with a turmeric root or the middle finger after lubrication. Modern hygienic adaptations are generally used instead.

वारयेत्कोष्ठकाठिन्यमामाजीर्ण निवारयेत् ।

कारणं कान्तिपुष्ट्योश्च दीपनं वह्निमण्डलम् ॥ G.S: 1.44॥

Benefits of Moola Shodhana maintains rectal hygiene. It can help relieve constipation, stimulates proper bowel evacuation, and supports colon health.

Therapeutic Benefits

Therapeutically, it helps remove excess mucus from the stomach, reduce hyperacidity, improve appetite, relieve indigestion, prevent gastritis, and enhance gastric motility. It may be useful in conditions such as acid reflux, gastritis, dyspepsia, nausea, and indigestion.

2. Basti

प्रमेहं च उदावर्त कूरवायु निवारयेत् ।

भवेत्स्वच्छन्ददेश्च कामदेवसमो भवेत् ॥ G.S: 1.47॥

The practice of Basti removes wind disorders, urinary and digestive problems, and makes the body beautiful like that of Kamadeva, the god of love. Basti cleanses the large intestine.

Benefits: Basti is described as a cleansing therapy for the large intestine and is believed to help with urinary and digestive problems and promote overall well-being. Its benefits include relieving constipation, eliminating intestinal waste, improving colon health, stimulating peristalsis, and reducing bloating. It is traditionally considered useful for chronic constipation, flatulence, constipation-predominant irritable bowel syndrome [IBS], and sluggish bowel movements.

3. Nauli (Lauliki)

अमन्दवेगेन तुन्दं भ्रामयेदुभपार्श्वयोः ।

सर्वरोगान्निहन्तीह देहानलविवर्द्धनम् ॥ G.S: 1.52॥

The abdomen should be rotated very swiftly from side to side. This lauliki (or) nauli destroys all types of diseases and activates the digestive fire.

Nauli massages abdominal organs. Its Mechanisms are stimulates digestive glands, Activates liver and pancreas, Strengthens abdominal muscles, Improves circulation to digestive organs and its benefits are enhances digestive fire

(Agni), Improves metabolism, Relieves constipation and reduces abdominal heaviness

4. Kapālabhāti: Although primarily a cleansing practice for the respiratory system, Kapālabhāti also strongly influences abdominal organs.

Benefits of Kapālabhāti increases intra-abdominal circulation, Improves digestion, Stimulates liver and pancreas, Reduces abdominal fat, Enhances metabolism and useful in slow digestion, Constipation, and Obesity-associated digestive disorders

5. Neti

Although mainly intended for cleansing the nasal passages, Neti indirectly supports digestive health by improving breathing, reducing stress, and balancing the autonomic nervous system, thereby benefiting gut function through the gut-brain axis.

6. Trāṭaka

Trāṭaka primarily improves concentration and mental calmness. By reducing stress and anxiety, it may indirectly help manage functional digestive disorders that are aggravated by psychological factors.

Yogic Management of Digestive Disorder

According to Haṭha Yoga cleanses the digestive tract, Removes accumulated toxins (Āma), Enhances Jatharāgni, Improves nutrient absorption, Balances Prāṇa and Apāna Vāyu, Increases circulation to abdominal organs, Regulates bowel movements, Reduces stress-related digestive disturbances

Modern Scientific Perspective Research suggests that appropriate yogic cleansing and abdominal practices may improve gastrointestinal motility, Stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, Reduce stress hormones, Enhance vagal tone, Improve bowel regularity, Support healthy gut function, Improve quality of life in functional digestive disorders.

Some traditional cleansing techniques (especially *Vastra Dhauti* and *Basti*) require expert supervision and are not suitable for everyone. They should not be practised without proper instruction or when medically contraindicated.

Conclusion

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā and the Gheraṇḍa Samhitā recognise *Śaṭkarma* as the foundation of health and yogic practice. Among the six cleansing techniques, *Dhauti, Basti, Nauli, and Kapālabhāti* have the most direct therapeutic role in digestive disorders by improving gastrointestinal function, enhancing digestive fire (Agni), promoting regular bowel movements, and reducing the accumulation of toxins. When practised under the guidance of a qualified teacher and with appropriate medical consideration, these traditional techniques can complement modern approaches to managing digestive disorders.

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