

## Qāsab

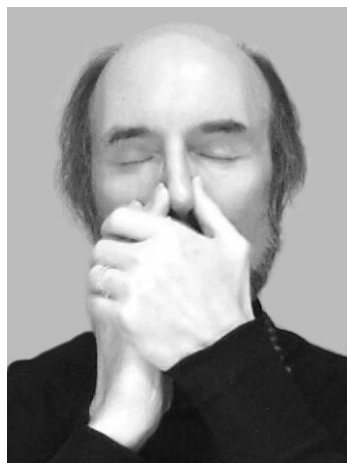
Qāsab (or Qāsb) قاسب is one of the basic breath practices done in the Chishti lineage. The word means “tubes” or “channels,” referring to the channels of breath or life force in the body. This practice involves alternate-nostril breathing and retaining the breath, similar to the yoga *prāṇāyāma* called *nāḍī shodhana* (“cleansing the channels”) but with some important differences, e.g., the hand position for controlling the nostrils is different, and Qāsab uses no “locks” (*bhandas*).

Practices involving retaining the breath, such as Qāsab & Shāghal, energize the subtle-energy system. It is unwise to energize a system that is unstable or unclear, so be sure to do the preparatory practices of breath purification before doing this practice. Qāsab is recommended at the start of one’s day, after the Purification Breaths, and before practices of wazifa, zikr, or meditation.

If you are new to this practice, you should first locate the subtle-energy channels. Sit up straight, and place a finger on your anterior fontanel (the place where you had a soft spot in your skull when you were an infant) and a finger of the other hand on your perineum. Feel the connection between them; this will lead you to an awareness of the “central channel” (*sushumṇā* in yoga) and it sits slightly *in front of the spine*, not inside it. From there you can feel the two side channels, termed *idā* and *piṅgala* in yoga. The side-channels meet in the belly center.

Next, determine how long to inhale, hold, and exhale. You will be inhaling for a certain number of “counts,” holding the breath for *twice* that time, and exhaling for the time it took you to inhale. Discover the value of “counts” by indrawing the deepest breath you can take, holding the breath *by keeping your chest expanded* (not by closing the glottis), and timing it: “Counts” is half the time you can hold your breath *without straining*. Alternatively, use the second-hand of a clock; a ratio of 10 second in, twenty seconds hold, and ten seconds exhale is good for most people.

To do the practice, begin by sitting with the spine straight, the head “floating” on the neck, squarely over the shoulders. Lift the sternum and drop the shoulders back before raising the hands for the mudra. You may be standing or sitting, and Pīr-o-Murshid Ināyat Khan recommends it be done standing, especially if one can stand in nature.



The classical Sufi mudra for controlling the nostrils, as taught by Pīr Vilāyat, is this:

1. Place the thumb of your right hand in or just above the hollow between the collarbones, and the middle finger of the right hand on the right nostril.
2. Place the thumb of your left hand on your left nostril, and curl the fingers of your left hand in a relaxed way around the back of the right hand.

The nostrils are controlled by the left thumb and right middle finger, and the breath retained by keeping the chest at expansion, not by closing the throat.

There are two different approaches to this practice, one from classical yoga (e.g., Vedanta) and the other coming into Indian Sufism via classical Tantra (e.g., Kashmir Sha'ivism or the *Shri Vidyā* lineages). They differ in the direction taken by the breath in the channels on the inhalation and their orientation toward transcendence or embodiment. The Sufi approach will be described below.

To do the practice:

Exhale fully through both nostrils.

Inhale through the left nostril for the number of “counts” you have chosen, drawing light and life-force *down* from the crown to the belly center.

At the end of the inhale, close the nostrils with the thumb and middle finger, keeping the chest expanded. Curl or pull your tongue back and lay it along the roof of the mouth. Hold the breath for twice the value of “counts,” thinking the word *HU*. Know, and hold in your mind, that you are absorbing life force from the universe as you are doing so.

Exhale through the right nostril, concentrating and compressing the energy in the belly center, for the “counts” you have chosen.

Do this sequence of breaths three times. At the end of the final exhale and without a break: Inhale through the right nostril (drawing the energy through the right channel), holding the energy in the belly center, and exhaling through the left nostril, concentrating and compressing the energy in the belly center.

Do this three times. At the end of that sequence and without a break, inhale through both nostrils on the count you have chosen, drawing light & life-force down through all three channels to the belly center. Close the nostrils, hold the breath for twice the value of “counts.” Exhale through both nostrils for the count you have chosen, concentrating & compressing the energy in the belly center.

Do this three times, then relax and let the practice “settle” for a few moments before going on to the next thing.

Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan gives the standard Qāsab as *ten* breaths of each kind, i.e., 10 left-right, 10 right-left, and 10 breaths through both nostrils. More/longer counts are better but do not ever strain. Take months stabilizing your capacity before attempting longer counts, a little at a time. In all cases, do as your guide advises. Advanced students can increase the number of repetitions to 20 of each breath.

Here is a simple map of the practice:

1:	inhale left, x counts	hold the breath 2x counts	3x
2:	inhale right x counts	hold the breath 2x counts	3x
3:	inhale both nostrils, x counts	hold the breath 2x counts	3x

This is the basic sequence. There are other patterns, each having a slightly different effect. Your guide will prescribe them as appropriate.

Points to keep in mind:

- It is best to do this practice on an empty stomach, but don't be really hungry.
- It is sometimes better not to do it if you are ill. If you are in a "bad head-space," exhale the energy through the nostrils as black smoke instead of concentrating it in the belly.
- It is best not do this practice in full sun, unless it be in the early morning. Qāsab can generate a lot of internal heat (called *tapas* in yoga) and doing it in full sun can leave you feeling weak or debilitated.
- Inhale and exhale with as little noise in the breath as possible. The inhale and exhale should be unhurried, especially the exhale; the exhale is as important as the holding of the breath.
- Still the mind as much as you can, before and during this practice. Stray thoughts will interfere, and a chaotic/uncontrolled condition of mind or obsessive thoughts combined with emotion can be amplified by this practice. You can think "Hu" as you hold your breath, and hold in your mind that you are absorbing life force from the universal field.
- Do not swallow while holding the breath. If saliva accumulates, swallow it at the bottom of your exhale.
- In Sufi breathing practice, there is generally no pause or hold at the bottom of the exhale as is sometimes done in yoga. This is very important for those living "in the world."
- If your nasal passages are unclear, clear them before doing Qāsab. You can clear the passage on one side by lying on the opposite side, bending the arm of that side back so that the hand is adjacent the shoulder blade and there is a significant crink in the shoulder joint, and then rest the head on the arm for a few minutes. The shoulder joint "reflexes" to the sinus/nasal passage on the opposite side and stimulation in the joint will help open the passage. The yogis use a "neti pot" to irrigate the nasal passage and wash out

accumulations of gunk; a dedicated yoga practitioner can show you how to use it.

### **Instructions from Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan on Qāsab**

The normal *Qāsab* is ten breaths of each kind, but to begin with, it is better that three of each kind be given — to a strong and healthy person, perhaps five — and then increased in due time to ten of each kind. One must not increase the practice of *Qāsab* to more than twenty breaths of each kind, and that only in case of need for a certain psychical experience.

—**Sangitha I**, *Riyāzat*: “The Proportion”

*Qāsab* can be practiced standing, lying, and sitting cross-legged. Standing *Qāsab* is done in the open air in warm weather, and on the bank of a river, or on the seashore. And while doing this standing *Qāsab*, one may draw breath from the sun, in other words, inhale sun currents. And care must be taken that one does not expose one’s eyes to the currents of the sun. There are certain practices to be done with the sun, but they must not be prescribed to the murids, because there is always a chance that a murid will abuse them, and the result will be serious for his eyes. The sitting practice of *Qāsab* may be done in the house; and in case of tiredness and illness one can do *Qāsab* lying. But I do not prefer practices being done lying. There are many who are too tired to do the exercise sitting, only in that case lying down is allowed.

And now, about the rhythm of inhaling and exhaling in *Qāsab*. It must not be restricted also to four, or to five, or to six, or to seven; because the rhythm of breath must be taught with *Fikr*, but with *Qāsab* the Initiator must know to what degree the breath of a person can be held, can be drawn deep. And by calculating this rhythm, then he must give him the practice of the deepest breath; or if the Initiator can trust the murid to whom the practice is given, in that case he can trust the murid to take the deepest breath he can in *Qāsab*. I have always emphasized in teaching *Fikr* that in *Fikr* breathing must be natural. By the very fact that a person is practicing *Fikr*, that he is conscious of the breath, he will take it a little longer than naturally it is; and therefore *Fikr* need not be done with deep breathing. But *Qāsab* must be done with deep breathing. The breath of *Qāsab* need not be natural. The breath of *Qāsab* must be the deepest that one can, because it is the *Qāsab* that prepares one for still higher practices of breathing.

And now, about the concentration in *Qāsab*. It is better if one gives, in *Qāsab*, a different concentration to that of *Fikr*. In the *Fikr* there are earthly objects, including the image of Murshid. But in *Qāsab* heavenly objects may be concentrated upon, and these are the colors of the rainbow; that is, to begin with, one of those colors. And that is to develop insight into the ethereal spheres. But then objects such as the five-pointed star, the sun, the moon, the crescent, objects belonging to the Heavens may be given to be concentrated upon with the practice of *Qāsab*.

Very often a murid is not capable of doing Qāsab and at the same time concentrating on a certain object. In that case it is not necessary that a murid must hold before himself some object, because the very fact that one is practicing Qāsab makes it beneficial for him to develop insight, and all the psychic and occult powers, as well as inspiration. Very often a word, a sacred word, such as is used in Wazifas or in Fikr, can be practiced with Qāsab also. But even this is not necessary. Qāsab may be practiced without a word and without an object of concentration, and it can be beneficial. But by adding to it a sacred word or an object of concentration one has a greater benefit. But in case one is not capable of doing it, it is just as well to avoid both, keeping the practice of Qāsab pure.

Q. How long must it be, Qāsab, and how many times?

A. In the case of a beginner there should be three breaths taken in Qāsab.

Q. How deep to take the breath?

A. The depth of the breath of each person is different. Suppose I keep the breath by counting twenty-five or fifty, but if another person keeps his breath till he has counted till fifty, perhaps he will become suffocated.

—**Sangitha I, Riyāzat**

It is often difficult to keep the mind in condition during some breathing exercise. In the Purification Breaths it is not enough to keep the mind on the syllables Yā Shaffee, Yā Kaffee. At first the thought will bring strength and purity but the advancing *tālib* should ever bear in mind that this practice and all practices are means of uniting the souls to God. God is the Healer and the practice is His medicine which is used to heal and purify His vehicle, so he may occupy and use it.

In the same way, the practice of Qāsab can become more potent when faculties are unified. Concentration on the practice helps, but if difficulty occurs it is not wrong to do some self-examining. All conditions are reflected in the breath, and if any obstacles persist, one should consult the spiritual teacher. At the same time, proper meditation also helps, for any thought whatever has a harmful effect on a breathing practice. Activity of the mind greatly alters the rhythms. Therefore Qāsab is more related to concentration than to meditation, only it should be natural. So before all practices a meditation is of benefit, during which time by the suppression of thought, the breath takes on a natural rhythm, invigorating the body and healing the mind, which makes the practice of Qāsab easier.

The goal of all meditation is balance, and in balance the goal itself is to be found. In the progress toward that goal rhythm may appear to be more important than balance yet nothing should be done to force the breath in its depth, in its power, in its otherwise natural movements. Disease and crime are often the result of irregularities of the breath, so of all things, this order and balance should be preserved and it is best preserved through meditation.

Therefore it is not necessary to consciously strive to alter the breath rhythms, but the steady repetition of those spiritual exercises which have been given to one by the teacher helps more than anything else on the path toward God.