

The Bandhas, Prana and Apana

What Are the Bandhas?

The asanas become especially powerful when practiced with the Ujjayi breath. Yet the Ujjayi breath is not just a sound we make, nor is it an end in itself. The sound and power of Ujjayi is the result of the combined effect of the bandhas. More properly speaking, breathing with the application of the bandhas is Ujjayi pranayama, and the sound of the breath is a measure of the quality of our practice – both of the asana and of the bandhas. The end result is a more integrated, focused, centered and expressive pose that shines with the light of the heart.

The inner actions most specifically associated with the practice of hatha yoga¹ in the original texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika are the bandhas, which were clearly regarded as central to the practice of asana and pranayama. In terms of the spiritual evolution that the Tantrikas intended to initiate through the raising of the kundalini energy, the practices of asana and pranayama are rather empty and pointless without the bandhas taking place at the core, and far more attention was given to the specifics of the bandhas and associated mudras than to the asanas themselves. And so we miss much in our practice of yoga by ignoring them.

The word *bandha* literally translates as ‘lock’ or closure; but by this we don’t mean a closure that stops or excludes anything in a negative sense, in the way that we would lock a door. Rather, the ‘lock’ in question is a farming term. These ‘locks’ were used in irrigation ditches to direct the flow of water to the different parts of the field at will.

On a very practical and basic level, the bandhas have very concrete physiological benefits to the body by redirecting the normal course of nature in a very significant sense. Hatha yoga is concerned not just with the tone of the outer body – the muscles, integrity of the joints, etc. – but also with the tone of the inner, visceral body – the digestive organs and all of the internal organs that maintain our life and health. We know that, particularly with age, these organs begin to ‘drop’ from gravity, with various unhappy effects, including decreased circulation and health. The physical actions of the bandhas work to maintain the lift and tone of our internal organs, ‘massaging’ them in the asanas and pranayama, keeping them healthy. The bandhas give us a way of doing the practices from the inside out, working from a deeper level.

In a more esoteric but no less real sense, the bandhas in yoga are actions in the body that direct the power of the breath or prana in service of asana or pranayama, in a way that consolidates our inner focus, and directs the power of our awareness or consciousness toward deeper states of Self-awareness. The bandhas are the bridge that allows us to move from practice on a merely physical level to practice as inner energy work.

There are the three major bandhas that, when practiced together, direct the prana into the *sushumna nadi*, the central channel of the body, where it moves upward toward the crown of the head. This centers the movement of the breath along the central core of the body, strengthening the mind and giving greater power to overcome wandering thoughts.

Common descriptions of the bandhas can seem pretty esoteric; yet on a very practical level the bandhas give a significant support and lift to the body – particularly the upward extension of the spine – that provides greater ease in your practice, and more room for the breath to move. The lift, support and centering that comes about through the action of the bandhas can be understood in terms of the flow of *prana* and *apana*.

One thing worth noting from the analogy of the farmer's irrigation 'locks' is that a lock merely *directs* – or redirects – the flow of water; it *does not actively move or cause* the movement of the water. In the same way, in yoga, the bandhas are inner actions that direct the subtle power of the breath or prana – which at its most refined the yogis regarded as the kundalini or flow of grace – but are not actions that in any sense initiate or move the flow of prana. We start on the wrong foot if we regard the bandhas as something that we do to make something – a spiritual experience or breakthrough – happen. Rather, the bandhas are actions by which we participate in and refine our experience of the natural flow of the breath – and by that unfolding of the breath in the body through yogic practice, our spiritual awareness is refined and uplifted, taking us into states of meditation. Prana

Prana as a general term refers to the life force that flows through all things.

“The senses of perception and the organs of action are all able to function because of *prana*. Just as the spokes of a chariot wheel are fixed to the hub, so the body, the senses, the mind, and the intellect all depend on *prana*. The *prana* separates into different aspects, which fulfill different functions in the body, so that the body may work in an orderly manner. To carry out its various tasks, this *prana* pervades the individual body in five forms: *prana*, *apana*, *samana*, *vyana*, and *udana*. But it is still all one *prana*.¹

Of the five primary pranas in the body, two pranas – **prana vayu** and **apana vayu** – are regarded as most important. A 'vayu' is a 'wind' or force, and these two forces or energies are opposed yet complementary. We practice the **bandhas** in order to bring these two energies into balance, both to enhance the health and functioning of the body, and to bring the mind into a state of stillness.

The exhalation is moved by an energy known as apana. The **apana vayu** is a force for expelling from the body, usually taking the form of a downward contracting movement. Its home is the pelvic floor, so the impulse to exhale originates from a point at the center of the pelvic floor.

The inhalation is moved by the energy of **prana vayu** in the opposite direction. Although the inhalation draws the breath down into the body, the energy of the

1 *Play of Consciousness*, Swami Muktananda p. 31

inhalation is at the same time experienced as rising within and spreading like the opening of a lotus flower. The home of prana is in the heart at the center of the chest, where the blossoming quality of the prana is most felt; the prana rises from the pelvic floor toward the heart in yogic breathing.

Pranayama brings together the apana and the prana and balances the two energies by retaining the effect of one even while the other is in motion. The movement of apana is outward and is grounding. The apana vayu puts down roots through the foundation of the body, such as through the sitting bones. The movement of prana, on the other hand, is inward and upward, bringing a lift, opening and expansion. In pranayama we preserve the grounding quality of the apana even while inhaling, and preserve the lifted, expansive quality of the prana while exhaling.

The three main **bandhas** aid in this process in the following ways:²

- **Mulabandha** contains the downward flow of *apana* so that it can be equalized with the upward-flowing movement of the *prana*. When the two are brought into equilibrium while in meditation, one can steady the mind in a state of thoughtlessness.
- **Uddiyana bandha** purifies the *prana* and the *nadis* – the subtle passages through which the *prana* moves – and strengthens the gastric fire, which further promotes clarity and strength of mind, our ability to hold it from wandering. Uddiyana bandha reverses the course of the apana vayu, strongly drawing it upwards, so that *prana* and *apana* can be held steady and merge in the heart.
- **Jalandhara bandha** contains the upward-flowing movement of the *prana* – balancing the action of *mula bandha* to contain the *apana*. It is also said to seal off the downward movement of ‘nectar’ (often thought to be the hormonal secretions of the pineal gland which regulate the process of maturing and aging) from the *sahasrara* or crown of the head, thus preserving youth and vitality.

Once understood, the bandhas can be consciously engaged and practiced; but they arise naturally with the breath when the body is properly aligned. Thus I’d like to approach them first, not as something to ‘do,’ but as an experience of the breath to be explored and, once experienced, their action can be enhanced by conscious participation.

2 See *Play of Consciousness* by Swami Muktananda, p. 101-102
DOUG KELLER 2007

Mulabandha

Mula means ‘root.’ The root of the body is in the basin of the pelvis, both physically – in the form of the tailbone and sacrum, buttressed like the keystone of an archway by the hipbones – and energetically, in the form of the muscles of the pelvic floor (‘pelvic diaphragm’) that cradle the plexus of energy known as the Muladhara Chakra. It is from the base of the pelvis that one creates an energetic lift that rises up through the physical spine and the subtle passage of the sushumna nadi.

The movement called *Mulabandha* (Root Lock) comes as you draw muscular energy through the perineal muscles toward a center point. The bones of the pelvis serve as the foundation and vessel. The vessel has to be firmly anchored by grounding downward through the rim of the perineum – the pubic bone, the tailbone and the inner surfaces of the sitting bones. The pelvis must settle on its foundation like an urn to contain the energy of the breath.

With the initiation of the inbreath, the inner movement of Mulabandha at the center point is in the opposite direction — a lifting that is a drawing-up, almost as if the muscles were drawn up by a lift or suction that takes place above the center point. This lift will come from Uddiyana bandha. The Mulabandha itself is not so much just a tightening or clenching of muscles – though it is often described as a tightening inward and upward of the anal sphincters – but a subtler action than that; a firming of the muscles of the pelvic floor as the foundation for bringing about an inner lift. For this to take place, the foundation must first be set.

Adjusting your Legs and Hips to Open the Pelvic Floor

While sitting, take your right thigh in your hands, close to the hip, and manually turn the muscles of the inner thigh inward – toward the centerline of the body. Lean slightly to the left and forward as you do this, and move your right sitting bone back and out while tipping your sacrum – just below your waistline – forward so that your lower back moves more deeply into your body. Do the same with your left thigh.

As you adjust your thighs by turning them inwards, a number of things happen, all of which serve to level and open the pelvic floor, setting it up for the lift of Mulabandha:

- Your sitting bones move back and apart, opening the pelvic floor.
- Your pubic bone descends, leveling the pelvic floor.
- Your hipbones wrap forward, expanding your lower back at the area of the sacrum, and your sacrum tips forward. The forward tip of the sacrum bolsters the inward curve of your lower back and strengthens the lumbar spine, making it less effortful to sit upright.

Creating the Inner Lift of Mulabandha

To feel the link between the inbreath and Mulabandha, first begin with an exhalation; exhale smoothly until the sound of the breath stops and you have a feeling of pressure in the lower abdomen just below the navel. Despite the extra effort to press the breath out, keep your heart lifted and open, staying soft and silent in your throat, neck and head, softening your inward gaze.

After a slight pause at the end of the exhalation, you feel a natural impulse to inhale. Begin your inhalation from a point in the core of your abdomen, about three inches below your navel and a couple of inches above the pelvic floor in front of the sacrum. It's as if the subtle initial pull that draws the breath down into the body begins here. Without losing the inward tilt of your sacrum, as you inhale feel how your tailbone begins to release downward toward the earth. Your lower abdominals tone and press gently against your sacrum, supporting it, and this action seems to 'pull' your inbreath all the way down to the base of your pelvis. This action, as we will see, is related to Uddiyana bandha, which is inseparably linked to Mulabandha.

Follow the downward grounding or drop of your tailbone from where the tailbone meets your sacrum; as your inbreath deepens, draw your tailbone forward toward the pubic bone just enough to create a toning of the muscles of the pelvic floor. Do this through a feeling of the tailbone being heavy and a kind of hollowness beginning just in front of the sacrum, drawing the breath in by its very emptiness; this will keep you from tipping your sacrum back (rounding and collapsing your lower back) from overworking your tailbone.

At the same time, you can further tone the muscles of your lower belly — just above the pubic bone — and draw them in and up to support the front of your sacrum, as well as support the deeper movement of the diaphragm at your back body. These transverse abdominals are different from the abdominal muscles above: they are postural muscles which provide support to the lower back without hardening the belly and limiting the breath. It is possible to do create this gentle tone while keeping the feeling of hollowness at the front of the sacrum. The action here is entirely different from hardening the rest of the abdominals to suck the belly in for the sake of appearances.

A subtle dance takes place here between the tilt of the sacrum and the actions initiated with the tailbone, in combination with the gentle toning of the transverse abdominals just above the pubic bone. As you first adjust to tilt your sacrum forward into the body, your pubic bone draws down and back toward the center, leveling and opening the pelvic floor. As you draw your tailbone down and forward toward the pubic bone — without losing the inward tilt of your sacrum — the muscles of your pelvic floor 'magnetize' the two bones, drawing them toward each other



To adjust your posture, lean to one side and hold your thigh with both hands. Turn the thigh inward (toward the midline of the body), drawing the inner thigh muscles back toward the sitbone. At the same time, slide your sitbone back away from the center of the pelvic floor (by leaning and arching your lower back inward. Spiralling the adductor muscles of the inner thigh inward will help this shift of the sitbones). This sets the foundation of the pelvic floor for mulabandha.

through actions in the muscles of the pelvic floor to create a toning and lift that can be felt as a squeeze of the muscles at the center of the perineum.

Yet as we've been suggesting, this 'magnetizing' of the tailbone and pubic bone toward each other is not by itself enough: it creates a toning of the perineum, but not necessarily a lift. The lift comes with a firming and lift of the abdominals just above the pubic bone — enough to support the action of the diaphragm, but not so much as to limit it. This is the essence of Uddiyana Bandha, which is a necessary counterpart to Mulabandha.

The **precise location** of the muscular action of Mulabandha differs significantly between men and women. In **men**, the toning and lift is in the space between the anus and the root of the genital organ, in the muscles just beneath the prostate (which is why the practice of Mulabandha can contribute to the health of the prostate). In **women**, it is higher, at the cervix or the opening of the womb. It is to the inside of the body, at an angle back toward the spine from the opening of the sexual organ.³The toning and lift of Mulabandha takes place at this deeper point inside, whereas in men it initiates closer to the surface at the perineum. Classically in sitting postures such as Siddhasana, the heel is placed at this point in the perineum to encourage Mulabandha; but for women, this is of less help.

Overall, the action of Mulabandha is an inner toning that is supple and supports the breathing process; it is not a hardening or gripping that would otherwise tighten the groins. Notice the inner feeling that comes with the proper tone: you can feel an inner firmness at the core of the pelvis that supports the spine and makes it even easier to sit upright. At the place where the sacrum meets the tailbone, you can feel a kind of division of energy: your tailbone lengthens downward, grounding you with the actions of Mulabandha, while the front of your lumbar spine lengthens upward.

Above all, these actions feel natural and supportive rather than forced and constrictive when you first initiate the bandhas with the inhalation. The inner lifts and actions we describe here naturally take place with the actions of the natural course of the breath, and the muscular actions of the bandhas come in 'behind' them to firm and support this inner lift. You should still feel a measure of freedom and fluidity inside, an ability to stay a bit soft and to move and expand inwardly with the breath.

Connecting with the Inner Feeling of Mulabandha

What does the 'lift' of Mulabandha feel like? We are not clenching the muscles and pushing them upward; rather, the action feels like an 'updraft' of energy. The analogy of a burning candle might give us a sense of this kind of 'updraft' or 'wicking' action.

The bony vessel of the pelvis resembles the rim of hard wax of the candle that cradles the pool of liquid wax – the softness of the inner body and fluid potential

3 Moola Bandha: The Master Key, Swami Buddhananda, p. 81

of the pranic energy of the breath. As the flame burns, it draws the wax into the wick, where the fuel of the wax is transformed into fire. In the same way you can experience the energy of the prana in Mulabandha as liquid energy that is drawn to the center and upward, like wax both drawn upward by and transformed onto flames of Kundalini energy that rise upward through the sushumna, the central channel, toward the heart. Notice that the wick doesn't 'push' the wax upward; just as air feeds the flame, drawing the wax upward, so it is the action of the body drawing the breath in that feeds the flame of Mulabandha, concentrating and drawing the pranic energy up from the root.

Like a candle, the stability of the foundation is essential; tip the candle and the wax will drip out, depleting the flame. If the pelvis is not grounded and centered, the energy of the breath 'leaks' and is dissipated – it can't be gathered and transformed by Mulabandha. With good alignment, Mulabandha blazes with the inner flame of the prana.

Uddiyana Bandha

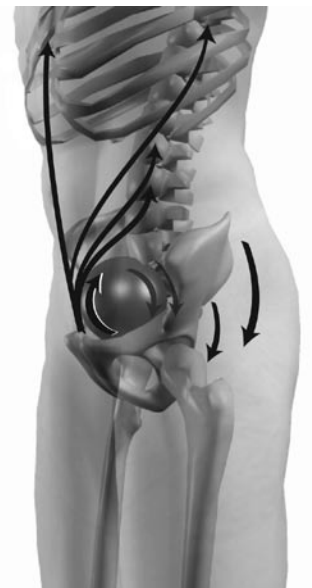
Inseparable from Mulabandha is a scooping or sucking action right above it called Uddiyana Bandha. This movement lifts the weight of the lower abdominal organs off the perineum as it draws them back and up against the front of the lumbar spine. This brings about the inner feeling of 'suction' that entices the upward draw of Mulabandha.

Uddiyana Bandha is given special importance among the bandhas. Uddiyana means 'flying upward.' The lift of Uddiyana bandha occurs about three inches below the navel and opens the floating ribs behind the kidneys, making space for movement of the full circumference of the diaphragm as well as making space for movement in the root. Paradoxically, Uddiyana bandha creates just enough toning and lift of the lower abdomen that it leaves the belly unrestricted by gravity and allows enough freedom for the belly to be a 'Kumbha' or 'pot' for retaining the breath. This freedom of the lower belly is what distinguishes Uddiyana bandha from just tightening the abdominal muscles.

The elements of Uddiyana bandha bear some explanation:

A simple description given of Uddiyana bandha is given in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, where it is presented as one of the ten mudras: "The belly above the navel is pressed backwards towards the spine (56)... The portions above and below the navel should be drawn backwards towards the spine. (58)" It's worth noting that although Uddiyana Bandha is often taught – particularly as a cleansing technique – at the end of an exhalation, no mention of this is given here in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika.

Because of its terse simplicity, this description, as with all of the bandhas, leaves much to be interpreted and explained on many levels.



The action of Uddiyana Bandha might be thought of as a rotating sphere of energy at the core of the pelvis, which simultaneously creates a downward anchoring of the diaphragm and an upward lift of the abdominals which allows maximum volume or space for the breath.