

## BANDHAS - PART I

Bandhas are Hatha Yoga practices that help direct the movement of prana. The word *bandha* means lock, closure, or containment. It is interesting that the bandhas are described as locks because containing or locking prana in one area actually encourages the prana to move into another area. A better analogy would be that of a valve which restrains the flow of water. Bandhas can also be thought of as pranayamas. Though we tend to think of pranayama as a breathing technique, the term can be applied to any restraint or control (yama) of prana.

Three key bandhas are discussed in the yogic texts: Mula Bandha, Uddiyana Bandha, and Jalandhara Bandha. Though the bandhas can be performed individually, each one helps create the other two. The bandhas not only direct prana but also help direct the movement of kundalini. Through the correct application of the bandhas, the path for kundalini is opened in a centered, unobstructed way. All of the outer-body, musculo-skeletal work performed in asana practice provides a framework for utilizing the bandhas.

### MULA BANDHA

This month we will discuss Mula Bandha. *Mula*, as we explained in last month's lesson, means *root*, like Muladhara Chakra. Thus Mula Bandha means *root lock*. One of the oldest texts on Hatha Yoga, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, describes Mula Bandha as a technique to make the apana vayu (the descending pranic current) move upward. Why, you might ask, would one want to make the descending current ascend? This is done to assist in the process of directing the prana to vitalize and awaken the upper chakras or centers of consciousness. When this occurs, one begins to transcend the negative or limiting samskaras of one's body and mind.

When prana enters the body, it flows down through the cerebral spinal axis and is modified by the chakras. Through this process the prana is differentiated into five primary vayus or *airs*. These airs correspond to the five lower chakras. Vayu literally means *wind* and is derived from the Sanskrit root *va*, meaning to blow. Vayus are sometimes translated as *vital airs*. However, in this program we will use the word *currents* to refer to the vayus, and we will relate them to the chakras with which they are linked.



Apana vayu is the *current* that relates to the Muladhara Chakra, the chakra at the base of the spine. In Kriya Yoga we call it the Saturn Chakra. It regulates the structure, pattern, and form of our physiology and psychology. Apana is symbolically, and to a large extent literally, the grounding energy of the physical world. Like a tree, the higher we grow, the deeper our roots must be. In order to maximize the benefit of practicing Mula Bandha, the first thing we need to do is cultivate apana vayu.

Yama, niyama, asana, and pranayama form the foundation upon which yoga practice is built. Before real progress can be made through the utilization of the upper limbs of yoga, we need to develop a strong and healthy foundation in our physical, emotional, and intellectual lives. Yama and niyama establish the mental and emotional balance which nourishes and supports our relationships and our interactions with life. Asana and pranayama develop the physiological and pranic balance which is needed to consciously control prana. In the same way that we create a balanced foundation in our lives through the observances of yama and niyama, a pranic foundation is developed in Hatha Yoga through the control of the apana vayu.

### **Asana and Apana Vayu**

Stress, visceral gripping, shallow breathing, scattered and unfocused mental activity—all of these can inhibit the movement of apana vayu. Thus, developing joint stability of the outer body is encouraged in Hatha Yoga to produce the necessary support which allows the visceral body to release its gripping. Everything done in asana practice to create joint stability, especially femur grounding in the hips, helps to cultivate the flow of apana vayu.

The development of inner body or visceral softness also develops apana vayu. Releasing the throat and tongue, together with full breathing (particularly exhalations and belly breathing), cultivates the descending current. When there is a softness of the inner body, the breath can penetrate into the lower body, even all the way down to the pelvic floor. (The pelvic floor is the bowl-like series of muscles that line the bottom of the torso. See page 32 of *Green's Anatomy* .)

Once the inner body experiences this release and there is a softness all the way down to the pelvic floor and the perineum, you can begin to work effectively with apana vayu and the subtle contraction of Mula Bandha.

## Cultivating Mula Bandha

All the asana practice done to balance the rotation of the femurs and pelvis is designed to bring neutrality to the pelvic floor and the perineum. Eventually, when you have experienced what a neutral perineum feels like, this feeling or quality of the perineum can be used as a reference point to teach the legs and pelvis how to work in order to create and sustain this neutrality.

There are many variables that can affect the neutrality of the perineum. When the femurs are *internally* rotated, the sitting bones will lift, and this will tend to broaden the perineum. However, if the internal rotation is carried to an extreme, the perineum will feel as though it is stretching. In contrast, if the femurs are in *external* rotation, the sitting bones will drop and the perineum will tend to narrow. But if the external rotation is carried to an extreme, it will feel as though the perineum is narrowing and gripping. All of this needs to be understood because the actions of the legs and pelvis need to be balanced in order to keep the perineum in a passive and neutral state.

If the inner body is hard or the perineum is gripped or stretched, none of the bandhas can be performed accurately and the full scope of their benefits will not be experienced. Therefore the greater your articulation of asana becomes, the greater your potential for realizing the benefits of the bandhas.

The reason the perineum needs to be passive as you begin to learn Mula Bandha is because it will enable you to differentiate all of the various contractions that are possible in and around this entire area of your body. This is important not only for the proper articulation of Mula Bandha but to insure that you do not inadvertently over-contraction the anus or urethra. Sometimes in an effort to begin teaching Mula Bandha, one or both of these contractions may be employed to cultivate awareness in this part of the body. But they are not Mula Bandha; they are different techniques. The anal contraction is called Ashwini Mudra, and the urethral contraction is called Vajroli Mudra.

Once the perineum is experienced in its neutral state, you will become aware that it has four corners. The back corner can be felt at the coccyx, the front corner towards the pubic bone, and the left and right sides just inside the sitting bones. Some sources indicate that each of these points is associated with a particular nadi. The center of the perineum is associated with Sushumna nadi, while the left and right sides are associated with Ida and Pingala nadis. The nadis associated with the front and back are not relevant at this time.

When the perineum becomes passive or neutral, the pelvic floor can be felt responding to the breath like a diaphragm. In fact it can be felt moving in phase with the diaphragm muscles in the chest, which move in rhythm with the lungs. In other words, the pelvic floor, like the diaphragm, descends with each inhalation and ascends with each exhalation. Since the perineum is the outer surface of the pelvic floor, it also moves in phase. Even though the perineum and the pelvic floor are basically the inner and outer surfaces of the same thing, they can be experienced as separate. This requires a deep relaxation and softening of the viscera and a subtle awareness of the breath.

### **The Practice of Mula Bandha**

Once you feel the breath moving within the perineum, the practice of Mula Bandha is possible. When it is first practiced, Mula Bandha is performed only during the inhalation and is released with the exhalation. On the inhalation, Mula Bandha is performed by drawing the four corners of the perineum symmetrically towards the center. This action contains the downward movement of the pelvic floor and consequently lifts apana vayu.

You need to pay particular attention to the left and right sides of the perineum to ensure that they are both drawn symmetrically towards the center. When the four corners are drawn symmetrically into the center, if kundalini moves, it will flow through the Sushumna nadi. However if one side or the other is dominantly gripped, the prana will be drawn into either the Ida or Pingala nadi rather than the Sushumna.

Because of the subtle awareness that is required for Mula Bandha, in the beginning stages it is best practiced in savasana. Because savasana requires no outer-body muscular work, you can focus more easily on the subtle inner-body. Eventually, Mula Bandha can be performed in virtually any asana or pranayama where it is appropriate. The combination of the outer-body work of asana and the practice of Mula Bandha take on a mutually beneficial relationship. The outer-body work assists in the performance of Mula Bandha, while the subtle awareness we cultivate to perform Mula Bandha assists in educating the outer-body how to work towards stillness.

Uddiyana Bandha and Jalandhara Bandha will be discussed next month.