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In Search of Mula Bandha

The word 'bandha' is usually translated as "lock," though, like most Sanskrit words, it has many nuanced meanings. It comes from the root 'bandha', which means to bind, to fix, or to stop.

Four bandha are mentioned in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Gheranda Samhita, two classical yoga texts: Mula Bandha is generally practiced in conjunction with asana (yoga poses), while Jalandhara Bandha (Chin Lock) and Uddiyana Bandha (Upward Abdominal Lock) are more often associated with pranayama, yoga's breathing practices.

The bandhas are specific positions of the body and manipulations of the organs designed to prevent the flow of energy from escaping the body. In other words, the bandha are mechanisms by which an accomplished yogi can direct the flow of *prana*, the universal life-force energy (also referred to as "the Breath of Life"), that animates and unites all of us.

The bandhas are not just physical movements; they are so much more than that. They serve as a gateway into the mental, psycho-emotional, and subtle energy planes. In any given session, it's easy to get caught up in the physical practice, with all its calorie-burning, bum-firming benefits, and totally forget that the physical component of yoga is just part of the preparation for enlightenment.

Mula Bandha does help us engage our core muscles and power up our poses. But that's not the half of it. You start with the physical movement, which in the case of Mula Bandha is a toning and lifting of the pelvic floor. It sounds simple enough, but it is taught in countless ways. Do any of these descriptions sound familiar to you?

- Lift and tone the perineum
- Draw up the cervix and vaginal walls
- Contract your muscles as if you were stopping and starting the flow of urine
- Draw the coccyx toward the pubic bone

If several of them sound familiar, you may be wondering which one is correct and also perhaps why this action so hard to describe? The answer is that Mula Bandha is both a subtle movement and one that involves a complex anatomical structure that's not easy to isolate. There's a whole sling of musculature

that extends from the tailbone to the pubic bone and supports the internal organs. What you're trying to do is lift that sling.

Unless you're an anatomist or a fully realised yogi, chances are that you've never even heard of most of the muscles that make up the 'sling' that is referred to here. These muscles are a complex group, comprising the deep and superficial transverse perineal muscles, the bulbocavernosus, the ischiocavernosus, the sphincter urethrae membranaceae, the pubococcygeus, and the levator ani. Forming a diamond shape at the base of your pelvis, they are bordered by the pubic bone in the front, the coccyx in the back, and the sitting bones on the sides.

Unfortunately, instructions in the ancient texts are vague at best; the Hatha Yoga Pradipika instructs the student to contract the muscles of the perineum/cervix and hold for as long as possible, and then release. The Gheranda Samhita recommends a more encompassing contraction of 'below-the-belt' muscles. Once upon a time, when yoga was taught one-on-one and a guru could guide and encourage a disciple to find Mula Bandha for him- or herself, it wasn't a problem that the texts offered only a rough outline. But now that we're divorced from the guru-to-student dynamic, even the most seasoned teachers do little more than recommend a dose of patience and a willingness to experiment with all of the different instructions you hear until you eventually discover Mula Bandha for yourself. There are times when I've told a class to contract anything they can find down there just to give them something to do. Hopefully, they'll do their own investigation and get it on a deeper level.

To help his students find it, Richard Freeman, a world-renowned Ashtanga Yoga teacher, offers this hint: "If you exhale very fully and smoothly, you'll notice that the end of exhalation creates a natural toning in the pelvic floor muscles that allows you to get the last of the breath out. This is the point where Mula Bandha is set. It's really complex but really simple. Once you get it, it's like, Aha!

So, once you "get it," how will the bandha change your practice? In the Ashtanga tradition, Mula Bandha is so critical to the correct performance of asana that K. Pattabhi Jois, the leader of the tradition, instructed his students to keep Mula Bandha engaged throughout every practice, keeping in mind that this should be your intention (not necessarily an achievable goal).

Mula Bandha is what helps Ashtanga practitioners find the balance they need to tackle arm balances and inversions, and the strength and control they need for difficult tasks, such as jumping through and jumping back. But the list of the physical benefits to a yoga practice is nearly endless. It's grounding, so students feel much more stable. They won't lose balance. Correct movement of limbs becomes more natural. When they do a backbend, they'll be less likely to compress the spine. They'll find more space under the belly, which is very convenient for twists.

By practicing Mula Bandha, you gain a real sense of the central axis of the body. You learn to move from the lower belly, feeling the pelvic floor and letting it participate in aligning the body. It will help you

integrate the movements of the body and give you the sense that you are composed of radiance...One becomes "juicier", more intuitive, more sensitive, and more able to express feeling with the entire body through every movement.

Iyengar teachers lead students into Mula Bandha with simple instructions that emphasize its practical application within each pose. The beauty of the Iyengar system is that it gives form through direction that's easy to digest. When we sit at the beginning of class, we are told to sit exactly on the center of the sit bones and to make sure that the space you're sitting on is even on both sides, that the pelvic floor should not be descending, that the pubic bone should be running perpendicular to the floor, and that the outer hips should be sucked in. As we're inhaling to get ready for invocation, the great Gurus will often say that the sides of the navel should lift. The effect of these directions creates Mula Bandha.

Engaging Mula Bandha creates a foundation. Without it, yoga has only physical benefits- not mental or spiritual ones. Mula Bandha is an integral part of the yoga practice. The practice of asana can be very external, but when you add Mula Bandha, you are drawn toward your own source, your own core. It is the path inward. Let's not forget that the inward path is really the point of yoga. Yoga is not something you 'DO', it's something you 'FEEL!

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