

Mula Bandha: The Roots of the Ashtanga asana practice.

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Here's a scenario. Imagine you are moving some furniture around your bedroom. You decide that you would like to move your chest of draws across the room. You and a friend decide that you can carry it if you do it together. You create a space to move the chest in to and then bend down to pick up the cabinet. You get a good hand hold and then prepare to lift. What happens next? At the very moment you take the strain and start to lift the chest of draws you momentarily hold your breath, contract your perineum and pelvic floor and lift. This contraction and lift of the area between the genitals and the anus, which also involves the contraction of the deep abdominal muscles below the navel, is Mula Bandha and we unconsciously contract it every time we lift a heavy weight.

Mula Bandha is an essential part of the Hatha yoga tradition and is fundamental to the correct performance of pranayama. Pranayama, Patanjali tells us, is where the mind "becomes fit for concentration", and only then, says the great yogic sage, is meditation possible. (Patanjali's Yoga Sutras II, 53). Additionally, if we practice Mula Bandha correctly the contraction at the base (mula) of our bodies will, according to the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, allow the apana vayu, the downward force of energy within our bodies, change direction and move upwards to unite with the prana vayu. When these two vayus (vital breaths) meet we will achieve success in yoga. (HYP III, 60-68).

The second point outlined above may be a little esoteric for some people's tastes but, since all three main Hatha yoga texts from antiquity – Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Siva Samhita and the Gheranda Samhita – mention it we can be sure that it is vitally important.

Few yoga teachers teach Mula Bandha. In many cases this is due to their own misunderstanding of the practice and in some cases to their own inability to actually master the skill themselves. Within the Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga yoga tradition of my own practice Mula Bandha, in combination with Uddiyana Bandha (the abdominal lock) and Ujjayi (victorious) breathing, is performed throughout the entire asana (posture) series. Without Mula Bandha there is no depth to asana practice. The bandhas give you the lift and strength while actually doing each asana and, in the case of the Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga system, gives the student the tools to undertake the sun salutations and also the jump back/jump forward sequence performed between each seated asana. In class many students are so obsessed with stretching as hard as they can in each asana, that they lose contact with the breath and often hurt themselves by overstretching. Performance of the bandhas is difficult and if this becomes the main focus of your practice you have to, by necessity, approach each asana more slowly, with more deliberation and more subtlety. The practice is more grounded and balanced and less energy is spent worrying about how the actual appearance of asana.

If you are going to an Ashtanga class and not being offered guidance on how to perform Mula and Uddiyana Bandha as well as Ujjayi breathing you are being poorly taught and will always struggle to become competent at the practice. Find another teacher; preferably one authorised or certified by Pattabhi Jois and the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. Currently there is a huge demand for Ashtanga classes and to meet

that need many well-meaning students are now starting to teach, sometimes with no training or sometimes after attending some form of perfunctory training course. Many of these new teachers simply do not have the depth of personal practice to teach, and no two week or 200 hour teacher training course will give them personal experience of feeling the bandhas, let alone the ability to teach them. If you want to know if your Ashtanga teacher has any bandha control watch them perform the first sun salutation or the seated jump back sequence. If they glide effortlessly between each transition and don't land on the floor with a huge thud you know they are on the right path.

Mula Bandha is essential for the correct performance of the sun salutations that start the Ashtanga series, the jump backs between each seated asana and is a key component in the standing asanas. By performing asana with Mula Bandha we are learning how to perform this lock for prolonged periods of time and also testing the strength of, and our ability to maintain, the bandhas in a variety of physical positions; bending forwards, twisting, back bending sitting and standing. Prolonged practice of bandha control takes the mind away from the external performance of each asana and turns our minds inwards to focus on the internal, deeper practice. This develops concentration (dharana) and also removes us from the near obsession some students have to compare their asana with everyone else's in the class. The practice then takes us inwards and allows us to focus on our own internal experience of each asana; the basis for learning. Put plainly, without the bandhas and the Ujjayi breathing there is no yoga, you are just attending a stretching class.

The three main Hatha yoga treatises – Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Siva Samhita and the Gheranda Samhita – all praise Mula Bandha and describe it as drawing up on the anus. This is only a general description of the practice however. With refinement over time a student will get the real feeling of Mula Bandha and be able to isolate and lift only certain parts of the pelvic floor. This skill takes a long time to perfect but if you start practicing now, the results will come sooner rather than later for, as Patanjali tells us: “the goal is near for those who are intense in practice” Yoga Sutras I, 21.

Now let us look at the actual performance of Mula Bandha.

Mula Bandha practice.

1. Lie on your back on the floor, bend your knees and bring the soles of your feet to rest on the floor either side of your hips. Breathe slowly and deeply and feel the air inflate your abdomen when you inhale and the navel fall towards the floor as the abdomen descends as you exhale.
2. Take a long inhale and a long exhale and relax your butt cheeks and feel the contact between your body and the ground.
3. Take another long inhale and exhale as deeply as you can. At the end of the exhale hold your breath for a split second and contract your pelvic floor muscles. Imagine you are urinating and you want to stop mid-flow. You should feel your genitals and your anus move up into your body. Inhale. You should feel that the deep abdominal muscles between the top of your genital and below your navel contract and move in and up slightly.
4. Inhale deeply and slowly, feeling that, due to the contraction of the abdominals, the breath now moves into the rib cage. You should feel that the intercostals

muscles between each rib stretch and expand and that the ribs move outwards and upwards.

5. Exhale from the ribs as deeply and slowly as possible. Both the inhale and the exhale should be controlled and smooth. Learning to control the movement of the breath is one of the biggest challenges in yoga generally and is especially important when performing the Ashtanga asana series.
6. When the exhale finishes pause, contract the pelvic floor again, and inhale and exhale slowly, trying to keep the contraction all of the time. Repeat step 6 five times.
7. After five long inhales and exhales holding the bandha, exhale, release the pelvic floor and inhale and exhale with no bandha feeling the abdomen expand and contract.
8. After the exhale, pause, contract the pelvic floor and try to keep the contraction for five breaths, tightening it after each exhale.
9. Release and breathe normally. Feel the difference in the quality of the breath and in how your body moves as you inhale and exhale.

Good luck and happy practicing. Remember that the application of the Bandhas is subtle and takes many years to master. Don't be discouraged if you can't find it exactly the first time you try the exercise. Persevere and it will develop. The more energy and focus you put into this area of your practice the deeper and more meditative your practice will become. The increased focus on your antara sadhana (internal practice) as opposed to the bahya sadhana (external practice) takes much of the striving and aggression out of your time on the mat and will allow you to have a safer, more pleasurable time at each yoga class you attend and leave you feeling revitalised and refreshed after each session.

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