

## MULA BANDHA AND FLOAT BACKS

### PART 1

#### The Three Bandha



The word Bandha can be defined variously as "lock", "blockage" and "doorway".

**Mula Bandha** is the lower lock, meaning "root" or "earth". There are a few definitions that I like regarding MB, so I wanted to start by sharing some of those.

#### *Wikipedia*

Mūla Bandha is the principal, key and primary Bandha of the Yogic traditions. Mūla Bandha is endemic to all safe, grounded workings of body-mind disciplines. This Bandha in and of itself conditions the Muladhara Chakra, simultaneously keening, rooting and engaging the systemic plethora of processes that constitute body-mind and with diligence resolving them in discipline and accord. Mūla Bandha should be held as a restraint only after Kumbhaka, which in this instance is where the breath is expressed in its entirety and held outside the body. Iyengar (1976: p. 435) likens the functionality of the Bandha and especially Mūla Bandha to "safety-valves which should be kept shut during the practice of Kumbhaka".

#### *Satyananda*

Traditional Yogic texts speak of the three Granthi called the Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra Granthi. These represent psychic blocks and mental problems that prevent an individual 'soaring' into the realms of meditation. These blocks or knots have to be removed if one wants to know the experience of higher awareness. They can be removed either permanently or temporarily. Bandha are particularly effective in breaking open or removing those blocks, at least for a short period of time and this temporary removal helps to eliminate these blocks permanently. In Yogic language, these Granthi prevent the flow of prana into the main Pranic passage of the body – the Sushumna Nadi. When they are released, Prana immediately begins to flow through this Nadi, which leads to increased receptivity of the mind and in turn higher experiences.

#### *Krishnamacharya*

Mula Bandha is not something you do, it is a blockage that gets removed.

In the first case Mr. Iyengar is linking MB specifically to Pranayama practice, rather than to Asana practice. I find this curious. In the second and third case, we see that MB is linked to the psychological experience and to meditation rather than to a physical technique. In each case I think they are pointing in the right direction. One concept is the lock, the second concept is the question: what is the key to unlocking?

As I see it there are a few stages of development for MB.

Physical – lower abdominal strength and support, particularly for the lower back.

Energetic - awareness and encouragement of energy moving upward.

Relational - loving acceptance of your body/self as it is.

Psychological - you are not in control, the mind is subservient to the heart.

Spiritual - you do not have to do MB as it is ever-present.

If you only try to engage MB from a physiological viewpoint (firming the perineal area for men, the cervical area for women) it is likely you will get stuck on either the first or second stage. This is not wrong, just limited. When MB and bodily control is promoted as something you "have to do", it indicates the very lack of awareness that Yoga is trying to point you away from. That is, the more you promote "doing" MB, the less true it is. e.g. a lack of loving awareness and acceptance of the body, rather than a full loving acceptance of your "being"ness.

The classical (historical) definition of MB, as I understand it, goes something like this: The practice of Mula Bandha directly causes the awakening of the 3 1/2 coils of the serpent Kundalini, initially dormant at the Muladhara Chakra, which unravels its knots (3 and 1/2 coils representing the three Granthi and one last twist representing sublimation that lies beyond the three representations of the Guna), piercing the tailbone, up the golden thread of the Sushumna Nadi to the Manipura Chakra. If this occurs during an Asana class then I am surprised!

Yet when I ask any Yoga (Asana) teacher if they have had this experience, mostly I get a lot of confused mumbling. If there are almost no Asana teachers who have had this experience, why do so many these days like to talk about it? It is a contradiction, and although understandable because we are naturally curious, it is not ideal because of the misinformation this promotes. i.e. students become misdirected into believing the accomplishment of MB, physically at least, will automatically lead to some distant spiritual place. Or that MB is only something physical.

Instead, if we can express MB as bodily awareness that has care and love as its "root", then the path becomes clearer. It is not about your ability, rather it is about your relationship to your body.

**Uddiyana Bandha** is the middle lock, and means "to fly upwards".

UB is usually a little easier to learn than applying MB on its own. For example, breathe everything out, hold your breath/Bandha at the end of the exhalation, therefore lifting the diaphragm/abdomen, and apply Nauli Kriya or belly churning... Release and breathe in.



There are four reasons I promote the use of UB:

1. Warming the deepest layer of the abdomen prior to Asana practice.
2. Clearing the bowels.
3. Awareness of energy, a good Pranayama pre-practice.
4. Therapeutic release in between certain back bends.

You should not practice UB 7 days per week. Men can practice it 6 days per week. Women should only practice it 4-5 days per week, and take 2-3 days off each time around menstruation and ovulation.

When Uddiyana Bandha is combined with strengthening the abdomen (core strength work, leg raises, twists and sit-ups) the two together alleviate a great range of lower back difficulties. This in turn leads to greater ease with many postures, better breathing, and better awareness of the subtle aspects of the three Bandha. For an accurate guide to accomplishing Uddiyana Bandha, Nauli Kriya and for different core strength exercises, please see the second DVD Support Techniques in the DVD set "Vinyasa Unlocked".

UB automatically involves all three Bandha, and can be rightly called Maha Bandha, or great lock. This aspect of holding, or sealing the three Bandha, at the throat, the diaphragm and the pelvic floor is just the start however - this Bandha introduces the physical and internal aspects of all three Bandha. Your exploration should not end there, however. With diligent practice (Asana, Pranayama, Inter-Personal and Meditation) you should become increasingly aware of the energetic, relational, psychological and spiritual aspects.

Esoterically the full Uddiyana Bandha involves cracking open your chest, and revealing your beating heart. It means to admit your vulnerability, your fears and your shame. Akin to Hanuman opening his chest, in the latter case, he has resolved his personal difficulties, his shame and fear, and has sacrificed his personal needs for the divinity of Sita and Ram. I hope the metaphor is clear.



**Jalandhara Bandha** is the upper lock, and means "net in the stream".

We can apply this action in three ways:

- holding the breath at the end of the inhalation, Antara Kumbhaka.
- holding the breath at the end of the exhalation, Bahya Kumbhaka.
- During Kevala Kumbhaka, a meditation practice.

For the first two Kumbhaka you squeeze with a swallowing/holding action around the glottis in the throat, while minimizing any other neck and throat tension. The first Kumbhaka is like a pot or balloon full of water, the second Kumbhaka is like an empty pot or balloon. These

first Kumbhaka should be held gently rather than forcefully else the balloon will feel like it's going to burst.

Kevala Kumbhaka is the king of Kumbhaka, and means "one alone". This meditation practice involves observing the breath without control or restriction. Through steady, constant awareness the breath becomes still, it becomes absent. During Kevala the timeless and spacious quality of emptiness is revealed. In the absence of breath, mind, personality and ego, effortlessness arises. Through effortlessness we start to experience unconditional love.

JB, esoterically, is said to lead to the net in the stream, or catching fish. Only your kind thoughts, your loving thoughts start to have relevance. All other activities of the mind and body start to become tasteless and irrelevant. The profitable is caught, the profitless is released. For accurate practice and guidance with the three Bandha please consult with an experienced teacher, this article is not intended as a "how to" guide for any of them.

## **PART 2**

### **The Three Granthi**



Awareness of both the physical and psychological impact of the three Bandha can then lead to greater awareness of the three Granthi. Granthi means "knot" or "contraction".

#### **Brahma Granthi**

- Muladhara and Svadisthana Chakra
- Body, food, survival, sexuality, sensuality

#### **Vishnu Granthi**

- Manipura and Anahata Chakra
- Money, work, family, relationships, love

#### **Rudra Granthi**

- Vishuddha and Ajna Chakra
- Ego, mind, dreams, awareness, divinity

The lower knot, Brahma Granthi reveals how you relate to your body. This Granthi is associated with the Kapha Dosha. Contractions on this level can involve: an unhealthy relationship to the body; an overly forceful or controlling Asana practice; physical laziness, including poor diet, non-vegetarian; dysmorphia; eating disorders or being overly controlling or judgmental with food and diet (orthorexia); sexual misconduct, sexualising others; disconnection from your own sexuality.

The middle knot, Vishnu Granthi reveals how you relate to others. This Granthi is associated with the Pitta Dosha. Contractions on this level can involve: issues relating to money, whether miserly or poverty consciousness; boredom, ambivalence or obsession towards work; poor relational skills; lack of expression of love and affection; disconnection from feeling.

The upper knot, Rudra Granthi reveals how you relate to God. This Granthi is associated with the Vata Dosha. Contractions on this level can involve: issues relating to your Divine nature, your relationship to God; intellect without heart; dreams that are either consistently disturbing or non-existent; inability to be still on each level: body, feeling and mind; difficulty maintaining awareness, observation and witnessing.

## **Dreams**

Another aspect of the Bandha that I like to share, lies within our dreams. There are three states of consciousness we experience every day; waking, dreaming and deep sleep. Waking relates to the manifest world, the gross, and the material. Dreaming relates to the manifesting world, the subtle, and feeling-awareness. Deep sleep relates to the un-manifest, the spiritual, and the causal-consciousness.

In our dreams we can process both conscious and unconscious unfulfilled waking patterns. We can also experience alternate states of consciousness on the subtle level. There are various dreams-states we can invite and encourage (just prior to falling asleep each night) for subtle body awakening.

The first will tend to be fight/flight dreams. A common theme with these dreams is experiencing the dream-self as being pursued in some manner. There are a few options that can occur here. If you stay conscious in the fight/flight dream you can begin to experience weightlessness, either running into the air, sometimes falling off a cliff, or later on, actual flying. Rarely, but also a good sign, you can turn to face your pursuer, and actively embrace the energy you are being pursued with.

More commonly fight/flight dreams turn into falling, or car crashes or various seemingly horrible possibilities for death. If the dream-self can begin to trust the dream process, then you can stay conscious throughout the fear and anxiety. You don't wake up before hitting the ground at the bottom of the cliff. You don't have to wake up before the end of the car-crash. You don't have to wake up before falling out of flying mode. You stay aware in the dream and you can actually experience the death of your dream-body.

Don't be afraid, learn to embrace and accept the dream event. I have experienced all of these things within my dreams, and the final feeling behind each one has ranged from relief, to joy, to bliss. I witness the death of my body and realise there is no pain in the dream-state. I awaken in the dream to the strange realisation that I am not my body. This "I" is not dead. Upon physically waking from the dream to the manifest world those positive feelings remain; joy and harmony with the reality of self. So I would like to finish by saying don't ignore your dreams. They are a particular aspect of unlocking the Bandha and waking up.

### PART 3

#### Jump Throughs and Float Backs.



Some points on what you will need (not necessarily in order of importance):

1. Upper body strength,
2. Core strength,
3. Some hip/leg flexibility,
4. Steady practice and discipline to achieve the first 3,
5. A lighter lower body compared to upper body (weight),
6. Certain body proportions are ideal, e.g. longer arms and shorter legs.

- Doing the Ashtanga Primary Series regularly should help you with upper body strength and hip flexibility. e.g. salutes and jumps for 1 and forward bends and Baddha Konasana for 3.

- You may need to do some extra homework to adequately develop core strength (2). e.g. leg raises and sit ups for both lower and upper abdominal strength.

- If you are overweight it may be an advantage to lose some weight, however, being overweight or underweight does not automatically indicate health. Losing weight may be good, but so might putting on weight and thus losing the ability to float back.

- If you are overweight consider a better vegetarian diet and more exercise to lose weight. If you are underweight consider eating more warming filling foods and gaining weight. This will affect your ability to do the jumps either way, but I stress your actual health is more important than the ability to do certain movements and postures. This includes psychological health not just physical.

- Your proportions need to be accepted, and thus the ease or ability with which you jump back needs to be accepted. Having short arms won't necessarily make the jumps impossible, but it will make them a lot harder. If you combine that with big legs or a big bum, then yes it is likely to be impossible, and no matter how much you diligently apply MB the jumps may remain ever-distant.

- Having said that, if you can't jump through or jump back this DOES NOT preclude you from being aware of Mula Bandha!

## **Mula Bandha**

What you will need (not necessarily in order of importance):

1. An open mind
2. An open heart
3. An open pelvis

- An open pelvis means a loving relationship to your body. Mula Bandha is not something you do, it is a blockage that gets removed. The blockage (the Brahma Granthi) causes contraction in a few possible areas: your relationship to your physical body, your relationship to your sexual body and your relationship to food.

*Mula Bandha is active when you no longer have any issues with your body, sex or food.*

This does not mean you have to abandon your body, sex and food. Just that you begin to exercise care in relationship to each of these aspects. No control, no goal, no neediness, no insecurity.

- An open mind means letting go of what you think, and allowing what is. If you can let go of the idea that MB is a correct technique, you can let go of the higher blockage in your mind - of right vs wrong.

- An open heart is loving each moment, moment by moment.

## **Mula Bandha and the Jumps**

1. Start by firming your lower belly, gently lifting the area of the pelvic floor throughout your Asana practice. Do not be forceful, allow the abdomen to move, do not clench the belly tightly. This lifting of the pelvic floor is vertical rather than horizontal - it is a gentle firming, and upwards.

During the vertical lifting, the buttocks and anus should remain relaxed. The lower belly can be allowed to move (subtly, slightly) rather than holding the abdomen rigidly. The horizontal contraction that many students do, and liken to MB is not ideal. The latter involves the fight/flight reaction of the parasympathetic nervous system, and is due to pushing the body too hard and causing the breath to contract. The horizontal contraction also causes the psoas to contract, which over time can eventually cause greater back pain, the very thing that we want to prevent.

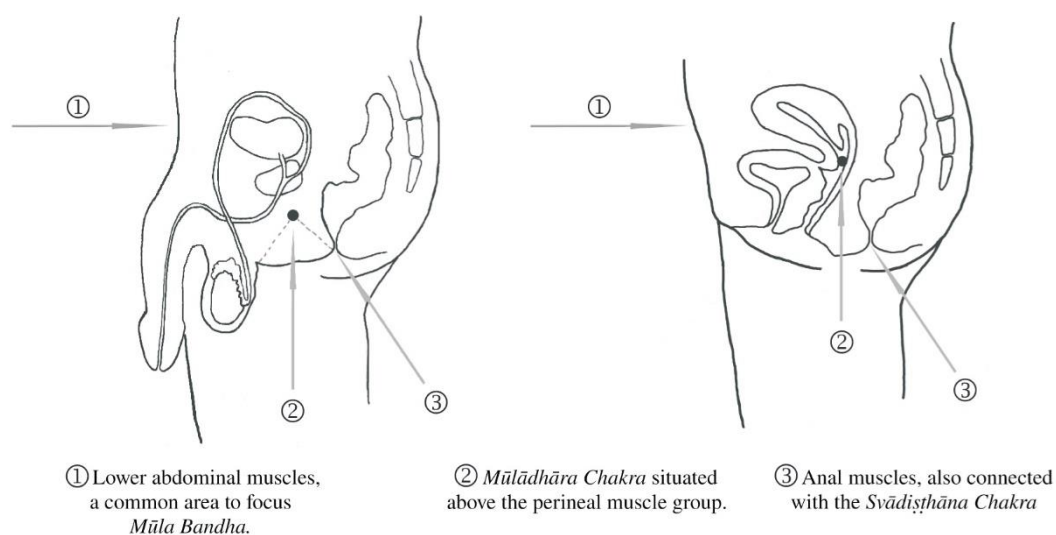
It is neither necessary nor ideal to consistently hold the breath during an Asana practice (and the jumps in particular) in order to experience MB. In fact holding the breath usually detracts from the appropriate awareness. Holding the breath every time you jump indicates too much force and a lack of awareness. In such a case it is much better to do less jumps (don't jump as high or as far) with more awareness and better breathing.

Having said that, during the physical learning process for better jump throughs and jump backs, it is often temporarily useful to hold the breath in order to explore better abdominal stability and control. Eventually it is of greater benefit (and I speak from direct experience here) to be able to jump and move with a flowing breath rather than a rigidly held breath.

In addition to the jumps, one of the most pertinent times to use the vertical lifting of MB is during back bending. As the pelvic floor engages upward, the tailbone and buttocks drop/release slightly, and the lower back is steady and free.

Over time your awareness of the pelvic floor, and practice of MB, should shift from gross bodily awareness to subtle energetic movements. Particularly in postures where you are sitting still MB can begin to feel like the "tentacles" of the pelvic floor rise up to a point and "snake" its way up the spine, and up the body.

*Mūla Bandha for Men and Women*



2. You can also experience MB as the rushing, tingling and flooding sensations that prickle the skin. This is like the tingling you get when you listen to music you love, or when you have a beautiful déjà vu moment. The energy and feeling (Prana) within the inhalation helps to guide and manifest this tingling. If you direct your inhalation with loving awareness this flooding tingling sensation represents Ananda (bliss) in the body.

Notice the times within your practice, the times during the day and the times of the month when you are tired or lacking in awareness. Gently encourage your energy to move "up" - so you can be more conscious and aware in each moment.

3. Accept what is. You do not need to do MB because it is already present.

In recent years, amongst the Ashtanga Yoga community at least, there seems to be increasing number of blogs and youtube videos regarding jump throughs and jumps backs. I think MB has been given too much physical importance because the jump throughs and float backs are quite difficult for most students. i.e. the assumption that only if you do Mula Bandha correctly will you then be able to do the jumps correctly.

From my experience as someone who can do the jumps well, I can say that this statement is false. Doing MB does not apply to my ability to do the jumps. The statement above is judgmental and demeaning to student who may not have the right body type, and indicates a definite lack of awareness (let alone kindness) in those who are teaching it.

For the same reason the "float back" has also been given more importance than it deserves. The floating lifts and jumps in Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga look amazing and graceful if you can do them, thus it is easy for the ego to attach to that as something significant. In terms of "Yoga" I will be bold enough to say that the jumps are largely irrelevant. They are meaningless in terms of any kind of significant self-awareness. Thus the jumps are meaningless in terms of Mula Bandha also.



I would say that based on the definitions above, that Mula Bandha = a truly loving relationship to your body. For this reason I can say for some students the realisation of Mula Bandha may be in letting go of the jump backs, and simply loving your body as it is. Then your serpent power at the base Chakra may truly awaken.

Opening the body, becoming stronger, becoming aware of your physicality in all its dimensions is a great thing. This awareness can certainly lead to greater self-awareness. However, consider your body with kindness rather than treating it as an object to be controlled and manipulated.

Love your body and it will love you back. Let go of doing Mula Bandha and you will "see" that it is already there. Practice the jumps, but let go of accomplishing them. Yoga is being, not doing. Yoga is loving the present moment unconditionally.

Om Shantih  
Matthew Sweeney

p.s. Feel free to share this article wherever you like, however, please respect the author and change none of the content.