

## THE THREE BANDHAS

by Swami Buddhananda

The word *bandha*, may be defined in several ways: 'binding, tying a bond, tie, chain, fetter, to catch, hold captive, arrest, imprison, fix, fasten, hold back, restrain, stop, shut, close, redirect, check, obstruct, clot and lock.' Bandha may also be defined analogously and is likened to the 'damning of a river', 'building a bridge' or 'building over the sea'. This can be interpreted as meaning that a bandha is a vehicle to traverse the ocean of *samsara*, worldly existence, and to reach the other shore of enlightenment.

The true meaning of bandha is essentially paradoxical, for it is said that by locking or contracting certain muscles on the physical level a subtle process of 'unlocking' goes on simultaneously on physical, mental and pranic levels and within the psychic and causal bodies. Contracting or squeezing of muscles groups form three main groups: perineal muscles, abdominal muscles and cervical muscles. Contraction of these specific muscles affects the nervous, circulatory, respiratory, endocrine and energy systems.

1. **Moola bandha:** perineal contraction, stimulates both the sensory-motor and autonomic nervous system in the pelvic region, this pelvic stimulation activates the parasympathetic fibres emerging from the pelvic spinal cord. Parasympathetic fibres emerge from the cervical (neck) and sacral (pelvic) areas only, while sympathetic fibres emerge from the thoracic (upper back) and lumbar (lower back) areas.
2. **Uddiyana bandha:** abdominal contraction, compress the digestive organs, adrenal glands, kidneys, and most important the solar plexus. Uddiyana bandha tones the sympathetic nervous system, encouraging it to work more efficiently. It also enables us to gain control over the sympathetic nervous system so that it does not function in inappropriate situations, thus avoiding the effects of stress and anxiety.
3. **Jalandhara bandha:** throat compression, stretches the neck, pulling the spinal cord and thus the brain. This bandha has subtle effects on the pituitary and pineal glands while the forward flexion of the chin affects the thyroid, parathyroid and thymus gland. At the same time stimulates the parasympathetic spinal area in the medulla oblongata regulating heart rate, respiration and blood pressure.

(source: [Moola Bandha](#): The Master Key by Swami Buddhananda)

## BANDHAS

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Traditional yogic texts speak of the three granthis called the *brahma*, *Vishnu* and *rudra* granthis. 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. Bandhas 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 granthis prevent the flow of prana into the main pranic passage of the body – *sushumna*. When they are released, prana immediately begins to flow through *sushumna nadi*, which leads to increased receptivity of the mind and in turn higher experiences.

These granthis are located in the following parts of the body:

Brahma granthi – pelvis (mooladhara chakra)  
 Vishnu granthi – heart (anahata chakra)  
 Rudra granthi – centre of head (ajna chakra)

Remember, these so-called knots are in the psychic body, not in the physical body, but physical manipulations such as bandhas can unlock them. Each level of manifestation has repercussions on other levels. It is not realistic to rigidly separate the physical body, pranic body and the mind body. They are all interrelated and really part of a whole. They are only divided or categorized for convenience of explanation.

Therefore, the physical body influences the mind and the pranic body. The pranic body influences the mind and physical body. And the mind influences the pranic and physical body. If you doubt this then you should read the book entitled *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, where scientific evidence is given. Better still you should practice yoga, develop sensitivity and find out from your own experience.

Bandhas, like all other yogic practices, act on and influence different levels of individual being. They have profound effects on the physical, pranic and mental levels.

The word *bandha* means ‘to hold, ‘tighten’ or ‘lock’, and this exactly describes the physical action necessary to perform these practices. Specific parts of the body are gently yet powerfully contracted and tightened. This has vast repercussions. First of all various parts of the physical body are controlled. Organs, muscles, nerves and physical processes within the body are massaged, stimulated and brought under the will of the practitioner. The physical contraction or lock in turn has an extensive influence on the psychic body (pranic body). The flow of prana that continuously streams through our subtle body is redirected and even stopped. This has direct influences on the mind. The whole body and mind is tranquillized and made receptive to higher states of awareness. Such is the power of bandhas when they are perfected.

### **Bandas: Moola Bandha**

#### **Definition**

The Sanskrit word moola means ‘root’ and the word bandha means ‘lock’. Here the word moola means various things, it refers to the mooladhara chakra, the seat of the kundalini and it also refers to the root of the spine or the trunk of the body, the perineum. In English, moola bandha can be translated by the cumbersome name ‘the perineum contraction lock’.

#### **Scriptural references**

This is an important yoga-tantra practice and is widely mentioned in the scriptures. One of the fullest descriptions is given in the hatha yoga pradiipika chapter 4: “Press the heels against the perineum and contract firmly. Draw the apana upwards. This is known as moola bandha.” Here, the word apana refers to the function of the body, at all levels, gross and subtle, which expels energy and waste material from the body. In the context of pranayama, apana refers to exhalation. “The downward action of apana should be directed upwards by contraction of the perineum.”

“Moola bandha brings about the union of prana and apana, and nada and bindu. This will bestow perfection in yoga. Of this there is no doubt.” Here, prana refers to the specific functions of the body which supply energy into the body to maintain the upkeep. This prana is contained

in food, air that is breathed, as well as subtle prana in the environment. In the context of pranayama, prana refers to inhalation.

Balance of prana and apana implies that there is equilibrium between the incoming and outgoing energies of the body. In the case of pranayama, balance of inhalation and exhalation signifies the retention of breath (kumbhaka).

### **Place of contraction**

The area to be contracted is the physical trigger point of the mooladhara chakra. This has a slightly different location in men and women.

For males: in the perineum, between the anus and the sexual organ.

For females: at the cervix, where the vagina and the uterus meet.

Moola bandha is often done incorrectly by contraction of the anus. Try to find the exact location that we have described and apply the contraction at that point during moola bandha.

### **Sitting position**

The best asanas for moola bandha are siddhasana for men and siddha yoni asana for women. While sitting in either of these asanas, one heel applies firm pressure in the region of the mooladhara chakra, which improves the physical contraction.

### **Bandhas: Uddiyana bandha**

#### **Definition**

The Sanskrit word uddiyana means 'to raise up' or to fly upwards. This practice is so called because the physical lock applied to the body causes the diaphragm to rise towards the chest. Another reason for the name is that it helps direct prana into the sushumna nadi so that it flows upwards to sahasrara. Sushumna nadi is the subtle pranic pathway within the spine which passes through the main psychic centers (chakras). The awakening of these centers implies a progressive expansion of awareness, until the cosmic awareness (sahasrara) is attained. This is why uddiyana bandha is useful for helping to expand awareness. For this purpose, it is systematically combined with specific pranayama practices.

#### **Scriptural references**

Uddiyana bandha is mentioned in a large number of scriptures. These include the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the Gherand Samhita and the Baraha, Yoga Sikha, Yoga Kundalini, Dhyana Bindu, Yoga Tattva and Chudamani Upanishads. We don't mean to give all of the quotations from these texts for they are very similar. We will merely give a few examples. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika gives the most detail: "That lock which causes the prana to fly up the shushumna is called uddiyana by all yogis." (3:55)

"The practice to be described causes the bird (of prana) to fly upwards after taking a period of rest." (3:56) In other words, the latent prana is directed into the shushumna.

"Drawing the abdomen backwards and upwards in the navel region is called uddiyana. It is the lion which challenges the elephant of death." (3:57) That is, the practice helps to transcend normal states of awareness so that one gains insight into the nature of existence and mortality and the purpose of life.

#### **Position**

The best position in which to do uddiyana bandha is any meditational asana such as padmasana, siddhasana or siddha yoni asana. The important thing is that the knees rest firmly on the ground

so that the final lock can be maintained correctly. This is also the position necessary for practicing kriya yoga. If you cannot sit in any of these positions then you can sit in vajrasana. But if this is the case, then we advise you to regularly practice leg loosening exercises so that you can eventually sit in any meditational asana. This is important for kriya yoga.

### **Preparatory practice**

An excellent preparatory practice for developing uddiyana bandha is agnisar kriya. If you can do agnisar kriya without the slightest difficulty then you should have no difficulty doing uddiyana bandha.

### **Technique**

Sit in any meditational asana with the knees flat on the ground.

Place the palms of the hands flat on the knees;

This is important to allow the arms to supply support in the final pose.

Close the eyes.

Relax the whole body. Then try to take a false inhalation. That is, expand the chest as though you are breathing in, but without actually allowing air to enter the lungs.

This false inhalation will automatically raise the diaphragm and enable the abdomen to become concave in shape, being raised inwards and upwards.

Note: there is no need to contract the abdominal muscles; in fact they should remain passive at this stage.

In this position the palms are pressed firmly against the knees and the arms straightened.

This is the final position.

Stay in the final pose for a comfortable length of time while holding the breath out.

Then slowly relax the chest; that is release the false inhalation; this will automatically allow the abdomen to reassume its normal shape.

Then release jalandhara bandha and bend the arms.

Inhale slowly.

This is 1 round.

Repeat the process when the breathing has returned to normal. Don't strain under any circumstances.

### **Points to remember during the practice:**

- Try initially to empty the lungs as much as possible by accentuated contraction of the abdominal muscles and the chest.
- Make sure you apply jalandhara bandha before doing the final postures of uddiyana. It is jalandhara that prevents air entering the lungs during the false inhalation.
- It is the false inhalation that gives the final contraction of the abdomen. The abdominal muscles should remain passive. Many people contract the abdominal muscles in the final position – this is wrong.
- Don't allow air to enter the lungs when you make the false inhalation.
- When you release the final pose, firstly relax the chest then release jalandhara bandha and finally breathe in. This order is important to prevent injury to the lungs.

### **Benefits**

The benefits are almost the same as for jalandhara bandha. The entire abdomen is squeezed like a sponge. This pushes out all the stagnant blood. All the inner organs are revitalized. It can help

to alleviate or prevent a large number of abdominal ailments including indigestion, constipation, diabetes, colitis and so forth if they are not too serious or chronic.

The adrenal glands are regularized thereby giving energy to a lethargic person and relaxation to an anxious or overwrought person. The solar plexus is also normalized.

This centre is sometimes called the abdominal brain and it is the center of energy in the whole body. This center directs the correct flow of energy to all the different organs, whether abdominal, respiratory or whatever. Uddiyana bandha normalizes this center and thereby helps to regulate the energy level in the whole body.

In the final position the air in the lungs is pressurized by the upward movement of the diaphragm and the false inhalation. This helps to open out the alveoli in the lungs and improves lung efficiency. At the same time the heart is given a good massage, which improves its functional efficiency.

Uddiyana bandha also has many subtle influences on the pranic body. The navel is the area of the manipura chakra, which is the center of prana in the body. Physical stimulation of this area has repercussions on the more subtle flows of prana and its distribution throughout the body. Uddiyana also redirects prana into the shushumna nadi. This helps to expand awareness and induces meditation.

### **Bandhas: Jalandhara Bandha (THROAT LOCK)**

The Sanskrit word *jalan* means 'net'. The word *dhara* means 'stream', 'mass of flowing fluid'. This leaves the meaning of the word jalandhara open to various interpretations. The most likely is that it means 'net' or 'cluster of nadis' or 'pathways'. Therefore, jalandhara is the practice or physical lock that controls the net or network of nadis in the neck. These nadis can be either blood vessels, nerves or pranic passages. The 'fluid' or stream can cover all these different levels of subtlety, for jalandhara bandha will influence all of them.

There is another explanation of the meaning. There are sixteen specific centers in the body called *adharas*. This word means 'base' or 'substratum'. They refer to chakras which are located in the following sixteen regions of the body: toes, ankles, knees, thighs, perineum, coccyx, navel, heart, neck, tonsils, tongue, nose, eyebrow center, eyes, back of the head and crown of the head. In various practices one's awareness is rotated through these centers. Prana flows through these regions within the pranic body. Therefore, jalandhara bandha can also be defined as the practice that locks the pranic network in the neck. This prevents flow of prana between the centers and directs prana into sushumna nadi.

### **Scriptural references**

There are numerous scriptural references to jalandhara bandha. The following are a selected few from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

"Contract the throat and firmly press the chin against the chest. This is called jalandhara bandha and helps to prevent old age and death." (3:70)

"It blocks all the nadis in the neck, checks the fall of amrit (divine fluid) which drops from the heavens. It should be done to cure throat ailments." (3:71)

“The contraction of the throat during jalandhara bandha prevents the amrit falling into the digestive fire. In this way prana is conserved (that is, the prana is controlled and directed only into the sushumna; flow of prana in the other nadis ceases).” (3:72)

“This contraction of the throat also immobilizes the flow of prana in the ida and pingala nadis (associated with the flow of breath in the left and right nostrils). Again this blocks the flow of prana to the sixteen adharas and directs it into the sushumna.” (3:73)

### **Kumbhaka**

The breath is to be retained during jalandhara bandha. The retention can either be antar kumbhaka (inner retention) or bahir kumbhaka (outer retention) or both, depending on the practice and integration with other techniques. That is, one can either breathe in deeply, fully inflating the lungs and then do jaladhara bandha, or one can exhale deeply then do jalandhara bandha. Both methods have their use in association with other practices.

We have already emphasized that the duration of kumbhaka should not be more than is comfortable. This also applies to jalandhara bandha. Don't strain under any circumstances. Increase the duration of breath retention over a period of weeks and months. If you have been regularly practicing nadi shodhana in the way that we have suggested, then you will find no difficulty doing jalandhara bandha for a reasonable period of time.

### **Position**

Jalandhara bandha can be done in a large number of different positions. The best positions are padmasana, siddhasana or siddha yoni asana. In kriya yoga it will be necessary to practice jalandhara bandha while sitting in siddhasana or siddha yoni asana. At this stage however, you can practice in any pose that you find comfortable. This includes ardha padmasana, swastikasana and vajrasana. It is essential that the knees touch the ground, therefore sukhasana is not suitable. Jalandhara bandha can also be done in the standing position but this is not so commonly used.

Your aim should be to eventually master jalandhara bandha while doing either padmasana, siddhasana, or siddha yoni asana.

### **Technique**

Take a comfortable sitting pose.

Make sure the knees are firmly in contact with the ground.

Place the palms of your hands on the knees.

Close the eyes.

Relax the whole body.

Inhale deeply.

Retain the breath inside the lungs.

Then bend the head forwards and press the chin tightly against the chest, in particular against the sternum.

Straighten your arms so that they are locked; that is, you have to gently but firmly push your elbows towards each other as though you are trying to bend your arms inwards instead of outwards.

Your hands should remain on the knees.

This action will tend to intensify the pressure applied in the region of the neck.

Simultaneously, hunch your shoulders upwards and forwards – this will help to ensure that the straight arms are firmly locked.

Stay in the final position for as long as you can comfortably hold your breath.

Then relax the shoulders.

Bend the arms outwards and release the lock.

Slowly raise your head.

Then exhale.

This is 1 round.

Breathe normally.

When your breathing rate returns to normal you can repeat another round.

Note: This practice can also be done with the breath exhaled immediately before doing the bandha. That is, it can be done with the breath retained externally.

### **Awareness**

Maintain awareness on the region of the throat and on mental counting of the duration of breath control.

### **Precautions**

Don't exhale or inhale, whatever the case may be until you have released the chin lock, arm lock and the head is raised. Slowly develop the length of breath retention over a period of time. This will allow your body mechanism to slowly adapt and accustom itself to the new duties. Don't strain under any circumstances.

### **Physiological viewpoint**

Jalandhara bandha compresses the carotid sinuses. These are bodies located on the carotid arteries in the neck, which are the main arteries supplying blood to the brain. These carotid bodies are called baroreceptors and help to regulate and match the heart rate and blood pressure with the respiratory system. These receptors feed messages to the brain through the sinus nerves, which in turn takes the necessary actions to balance the circulatory and respiratory system. The carotid bodies become compressed if the blood pressure rises. This sends a message to the brain which takes steps to prevent this high blood pressure. In jalandhara bandha, these receptors are artificially compressed. This tends to prevent a sudden rise in blood pressure which would be expected when the breath is held for some time. This increases the duration of breath retention and so increases the effectiveness of practices such as nadi shodana pranayama. These carotid sinuses were well known in ancient times, as were also the sinus nerves. In the Shiva Samhita it says: "Stop the flow of the vijnana nadis (sinus nerves) with the second fingers (that is press the side of your neck with your fingers). This gives siddhi (perfection) in the form of happiness and bliss." (55,56) We do not suggest you try this for you will more than likely become unconscious if you are not careful. This is caused by reducing or preventing the blood flow to the brain. But the implications of the above verses are obvious; if you gently press these carotid sinuses then you will become very relaxed and perhaps a little faint. This can be a help in various other yogic practices that lead to meditational experience.

These carotid sinuses are widely known in modern times. Many people have fainted by mere pressure of these bodies. Some people seem to be more sensitive than others; a slight pressure is enough to put some people on their back. It is also widely known in wrestling, boxing, etc. where through discreet pressure on the opponents neck, it is possible to almost instantly finish the match. This is regarded as foul play.

It is also interesting to note that these carotid sinuses can be pressed to prevent or counteract tachycardia (fast heartbeat beyond the normal limit) This is often used in medical circles. A gentle massage of the carotid sinuses slows down the heart rate and brings about a faster normalization. However this is not always the case. It depends on the ability to select exactly the right place for massage and to do it gently enough to prevent an increase in tension. That is, overpressuraization of the carotid bodies could easily bring into mobilization the emergency activities of the body to induce greater flow of blood to the brain. This will tend to increase the heartbeat again which is exactly the opposite to that which is required. So care must be taken. We have not discussed the carotid sinuses to encourage you to tamper with them. We have discussed them to show how jalandhara bandha acts directly on the physical body, and how one must be careful of overexertion during the practice.

### **Benefits**

Jalandhara bandha influences the individual at all levels: physical, psychic and mental. It controls the flow of prana in the body. This induces mental relaxation and can help to induce meditation. The pressuraization of the carotid sinuses also helps to bring mental balance by slowing down the heart. Furthermore, this encourages introversion – one tends to become oblivious to the outside world. The whole nervous system and brain become sedated. One tends to become more one-pointed. All this is a great help in meditational practices.

Jalandhara bandha allows one to hold the breath for longer periods of time. Normally decrease of oxygen and increase of carbon dioxide in the system lead to an increase of the heart rate and harder breathing to compensate. This is initiated through the carotid sinuses. The artificial pressure of these sinuses during jalandhara bandha prevents this tendency. Therefore, one is able to hold the breath for much longer periods. This also helps induce one-pointedness of mind for meditational practices.

This bandha closes the windpipe and compresses various organs in the throat. Notably it massages the thyroid gland which is located in the cavity of the throat. The whole body depends on this gland for perfect development and maintenance. Jalandhara bandha massages this gland and helps to render it efficient.

From: A Systematic Course in the Ancient Tantric Techniques of Yoga and Kriya by Swami Satyananda Saraswati