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- To grasp the core of the practice of tantric *hatha yoga*, we turn to a seminal teaching of the classic text, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (Chapter 1.56):
  - “Asanas, the variations of *kumbhaka*, practices called *mudra* and concentration on the inner sound (*nada*) comprise the sequence of *hatha yoga*.”
- In other words, the practice of tantric *hatha yoga* is essentially a progression through four practices:
  - *asana*
  - *kumbhaka*
  - *mudra*
  - *nada*
- *Asana* (posture) has a very specific purpose, from the view of the ancient tradition, the intent of *asana* is to reduce the obstructions to energy flow throughout the *nadi* system.
  - imbalances in diet, lifestyle, thoughts and emotions create blockages in the nadis, as a result, *prana* flows less efficiently; the more stress, emotional challenges and imbalances in your life, the more your pranic flow is impaired
  - *asana* practice, coupled with conscious breathing, breaks down energetic blocks in the channels
  - this enlivens the subtle body and improves the function of your physiological systems as well as cognitive function (mind/intellect)
  - in short, the primary reason you feel better after an *asana* practice is because your energy is flowing more efficiently after class than it was before class



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- on the other hand, if you don't feel better after a specific practice, it may be because the practice did not positively affect your specific pranic needs and address your imbalances
- the point is: *asana* is fundamentally a practice that promotes a more balanced and efficient flow of energy
- *Kumbhaka* refers to breath retention (after either or both inhale and exhale). It should be pointed out that, according to the tradition, breath retention requires the practice of *bandha* (energetic locks).
- The central aim of *kumbhaka/bandha* is to increase and contain pranic flow:
  - *asana* is preliminary to *bandha* because, as stated earlier, it reduces energetic blocks
  - signs that you have progressed in clearing your pranic channels include: the body becomes more stable, an overall feeling of lightness, a clear and tranquil mind, more patience and speech becomes "sweet"—your voice is clear and pleasant to the ear
  - now, you are prepared to contain and build more vital force; this is precisely when the next step of practice—*kumbhaka*—should commence
  - increased access to vital force enables you to either move that energy inward for self-transformation (and spiritual awakening) or outward into the world as creativity and capacity
- *Mudra* has several definitions, including "seal," "gesture" and "attitude." The word *mudra* combines two words: "*mu*" meaning "delight" and "*dra*" meaning "to move toward."



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- thus, *mudra* literally means “to move toward delight”
- The intention of *mudra* is to direct, guide or place energy in a precise location and/or to embody a sublime attitude or theme.
- Of the three techniques described thus far, *mudra* is the most refined, allowing you to most profoundly impact your subtle body.
  - there are five types of mudras that involve the following:
    1. pelvic floor, 2. facial muscles, 3. hand gestures, 4. postural mudras and 5. *bandha* mudras (a simultaneous application of *asana*, *bandha* and *kumbhaka*)
  - common to all five types is the concept of directing life force in order to more completely embody the highest states of consciousness
  - *mudra* allows you to access blocks as well as seats (*pitham*) of power that neither *asana* nor *bandha* can access
  - *bandha* mudras (e.g. *maha mudra*) are the final stage of the physical practices of *hatha* yoga
- The important thing to note is that this sequence of *hatha* denotes increasingly refined stages of working with *prana*.
- From the tantric perspective, *prana* is the primary vehicle for reaching the “state of yoga,” whereas from the classical yoga perspective, *chitta*—mind—is the main vehicle to reach it.
  - however, these concepts differ only in degree, since tantric practices incorporate both moon as well as sun, *prana* as well as *chitta*, but emphasize *prana*; traditional yoga oriented practice includes both, but emphasizes mastery of *chitta*





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- In short, *tantra* emphasizes the concept: “change your energy, change your perception.”
  - while it is true that energy follows thought, it is also true that thought follows energy
  - e.g. your thoughts, feelings and quality of being all reflect your pranic landscape—if your heart center has less than a full and vibrant reservoir of vital force, it will likely manifest as feelings of insecurity, aloneness, lack of self-worth and lack of contentment
  - additionally, *tantra* focuses on transforming energy rather than mind, in part, because energy (e.g. your breath) is more accessible than your mind
- The first three steps in the sequence (*asanas*, *kumbhaka* and *mudra*) relate to *surya* or the solar stage of practice.
- *Nada* comprises the final step in the sequence of *hatha*.
  - *nada* is a technical term, referring to the inaudible sound of Creation, referred to in the yoga tradition, as *pranava* or the sound of *Om*
  - *nada* (vibration or silent sound) is sometimes referred to as the monad, the indivisible, ever-expanding Absolute, the basis for all of creation, the un-manifest becoming manifest
- Thus, the fourth and final stage of practice is complete absorption into Source—where seeker and sought become one.
- As outlined by the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, this is the culmination of practice—the revelation of essential Being or presence.
- The steps to reaching this ultimate stage are entirely dependent upon mastering *prana*.





## Bandhas: Building Vital Force

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- The next step in the mastery of vital force (after *asana*) is *bandha*.
- *Bandha* is commonly defined as “lock.” However, the closest word in English is “bond,” which can refer to either a bond (as in that which creates a powerful connection to something or someone) or “bond” as in bondage (a form of restraint, confinement).
- Both meanings help to contextualize the practice of *bandha*:
  - as a means to deepen your connection to life force
  - as a means to create a wall or boundary and therefore, build a reservoir of energy
  - as a way to both untie psycho-physiological patterns as well as create restraint so as to establish greater stability
- Bandhas are psycho-physiological techniques, utilizing both the mind and the body.
- On the physical level, the general orientation is toward contracting and/or lifting musculature while applying mind/awareness in order to heighten the overall effect of gathering and collecting *prana*.
- In general, the more you emphasize the physical aspect of *bandha*, the more its effects are physical. Conversely, bandhas can be practiced by emphasizing a purely mental approach, where the effect becomes primarily subtle—energetic and mental.
- There are three major bandhas and a fourth (the fourth combines all three). Ideally, they are developed in the following order:
  - *jalandhara bandha*
  - *uddiyana bandha*
  - *mula bandha*
  - *treta or maha bandha*

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- The most effective means to initially develop *bandha* is *asana*. Specific *asanas* help you access and intensify each one of the *bandhas*. Some examples:
  - *jalandhara*—*setubandhasana*, *dandasana*, *virabhadrasana I*
  - *uddiyana*—most forward bends, *uttanasana*, *chakravakasana*
  - *mula*—downward facing dog, chair pose, *vimalasana* (locust pose variation, where the legs are squeezed together)
  - *treta* or *maha*—downward facing dog, *tadaka mudra*
- As you apply *bandha*, it is helpful to relate to your body as a vessel of energy. From this standpoint, *bandha* addresses four distinct pathologies when it comes to your vessel:
  - leaky: your vessel is constantly losing life force, escaping through all of the “holes” in the body (sense organs, eliminative organs as well as mind)
  - dirty: the energy within the vessel is not necessarily pure, not necessarily sattvic; by linking the practices of *bandha*, energy cultivation and awareness, life force can be purified and thereby uplift you on all levels
  - displaced: according to *tantra*, unconsciousness leads to energy either stagnating or predominating in areas whose effect is less than optimal
  - dormant: *bandha* helps you awaken life force and thereby expand consciousness, as well as help to make you more vital, potent, and clear



## Jalandhara Bandha

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- Sometimes referred to as the chin-lock, *jala* means “to catch, net, gather or collect.”
- Its area of focus is the upper chest, building energy around the heart and throat centers.
- The main action involves creating more space in the upper thoracic spine and lifting the collarbones, while displacing the skull back and lengthening the cervical spine.
- Once this has been mastered, with the collar bones still lifting, the next stage of *jalandhara bandha* consists of dropping the chin toward the breastbone.
- Thus, there are two ways to practice *jalandhara bandha*
  - stage 1: both the thoracic and cervical spine are aligned (chin does not drop); this is the preferable approach for those with a flattened cervical curve, neck stiffness or weakness
  - stage 2: with collarbones lifted, chin lowers toward chest—this is the more advanced approach, but is contraindicated for most students with neck issues
- The psycho-spiritual effect of this *bandha* leads to mastery of the mind/intellect, control of *prana* and all the pranic channels, heightened communication, immunity and one-pointed attention.
- Practice *jalandhara bandha* by moving into and/or deepening it during inhale, maintain or enliven it during inhale retention; it can be either maintained or released during exhale; as the practice is deepened/mastered, it is maintained during hold after exhale.





## Uddiyana Bandha

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- “Udd” means “to lift,” to “go into flight.” *Uddiyana bandha* refers to the lift and compression of the entire abdominal area—musculature, organs and abdominal plexuses.
- The main action involves using exhalation to contract the abdomen and then, during the hold after exhale, lift the whole abdominal area, including organs and nerve plexuses, deepening the compression and lift.
- Of the three main bandhas, scriptures delineate *uddiyana* as being “supreme.”
  - it is the *bandha* that generates energy, as opposed to blocking or restraining energy
- According to *tantra*, the abdominal center is the seat of fire, both physical and psychic.
  - digestive fire (*jathara agni*—“stomach fire”) is the metabolic force which transforms food into energy
  - mental fire (*bhuta agni*—literally, the fire that digests the past or “ghosts”) is the subtle metabolic force which transforms the limitations of the mind—inertia, unconsciousness, attachments, i.e. your “ghosts”
- The practice sparks the most positive aspects of mind, stoking the qualities of self-esteem, self-worth, self-image, mental clarity and healing capacity.
- This *bandha* dissolves inertia and enlivens the forces that inspire and motivate you.
- Important note: *Uddiyana* can only truly be applied during suspension after exhale.



## Mula Bandha

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- *Mula* means “root” or “base.” *Mula bandha* is known as the root lock.
- This is the last of the three bandhas that should be mastered.
  - *jalandhara* is the starting point, enabling you to purify your mind
  - *uddiyana* comes second, whereby you generate energy
  - the last of the three to develop, *mula bandha*, transforms the unconscious while internalizing your mind and energy
- The action of *mula bandha* occurs naturally when exhalation is accompanied by gentle contraction and lift of the abdomen. This is the most effortless and effective way to initiate and develop the practice—link it to conscious exhalation.
- Depending on how it is practiced, *mula bandha* can either help increase *apana* (downward force) or transform *apana* into *samana* (fire of assimilation) and *udana* (ascending force). In other words, it can either develop embodiment and grounding or be applied for the purpose of raising consciousness and moving toward greater spiritual awareness.
  - when engaged during exhale only, *mula bandha* increases *apana*, thereby building stability and downward force—elimination
  - when engaged during inhale and the hold after inhale and exhale, it facilitates increased *samana* and *udana*
- Additional effects include: increases the energy of elimination (physical and mental), reduces biological impurities, encourages withdrawal of sensory awareness, strengthens orientation toward survival and attending to worldly matters.

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- *Mula bandha* (especially when applied during inhale and breath retentions) plays a vital role in practices which emphasize *kundalini* yoga, i.e. solar as well as fire practices.

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### Orientation to Solar Practice

- Clearly, the application of *bandha*, especially when accompanied by breath retention, is a tangible/physical approach to solar (*surya*) practice.
- At the same time, it is of immense value to be able to apply more subtle approaches to a solar practice.
- These can be done entirely with the mind, relying on any one or all of the following: breath control, visualization, *bhav*, *kriya* and even mental applications of the *bandhas*.
- Recall that there are two steps within the solar stage: awakening higher perception and expansion.
  - stage one: awakening of higher perception, which is primarily oriented toward increasing sensitivity, learning to access (see, feel or sense) *prana* as well as becoming more capable of concentrating it
  - stage two: expansion is the intensification of stage one; in this step, you heighten/deepen your relationship to pranic force as well as its reach and transformative qualities, all of which culminate in the final stage—“fire” practices
- Please note that this overall way of practicing, generally described as the “energetic” phase of practice, is not the equivalent of generating “hyperactivity” or “heat.”





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- you can do or teach a practice that deepens you or your students' connection to *prana* without having to produce a heating or stimulating effect or even doing a physical practice
- For the solar approach to be truly fruitful, it is vital to bring the qualities of the moon to the practice. In other words, remain steeped in the moon's qualities of calm, steadiness and awareness while connecting to, building and directing life force.
  - this will be the central thread for moving into more and more powerfully energetic and transformative practices
  - as solar practices become more intense, they are necessarily more provocative, therefore abiding in the "moon" while deepening into these practices (solar) becomes ever more critical