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## THE BREATH

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# THE BREATH AND THE BANDHAS IN ANUSARA YOGA

Asana and pranayama are two distinct practices of yoga sharing a common thread – the breath.

Why the breath? The quality of our breath – its depth, pattern and texture – directly reflects the quality of our mind; when the mind is relaxed, open, transparent (i.e. uncluttered by thought) and one-pointed, the breath is likewise relaxed and free; in such moments we are very near to the Self. By the same token, the whirlwind of thought associated with outward concerns is an obstacle that renders the mind – and the experience of the Self – opaque. In such moments the breath likewise reflects that tension and distraction.

Just as the tone of the mind profoundly influences the quality of our breath, we can also transform the quality of our mind by changing the quality of our breathing. Nevertheless, we have to work *within* the parameters of our current breathing capacity; else we risk defeating ourselves by our own ambition. Through pranayama we can gradually expand our capacity for the breath and refine the quality of our breathing, but we cannot force it to change. Forcing the breath into a preconceived pattern currently beyond our reach is an imposition that is more typical of the ego. This misses the point and simply adds tension and distraction to our practice, taking us further from the experience of yoga rather than closer to it.

Freedom of the breath grants the openness and clarity of mind that awakens us to the experience of the Self. The practices of asana and pranayama bring us progressively toward this experience. The practice of pranayama relies upon the elements of asana (posture) for its full effectiveness. There are likewise elements of pranayama present in an asana practice – yet the two practices cannot necessarily be collapsed into one. Although they share the same *ultimate* goal and a common means, their more *immediate* goals and purposes are different enough in principle to make them divergent in their execution. Asana and pranayama practice both seek to realize the fullness of the breath, to release tensions and obstacles that limit the breath. Yet each practice seeks to do so by means that are *appropriate* to the body's activities in the practice.

**Asana** practice brings freedom to the breath by **moving** the body with the breath to release limiting tensions and provide support for full and unrestricted breathing. **Pranayama** makes use of this increased freedom of the breath; but by contrast, pranayama refines our Self-awareness by **stilling** the prana (the energy or life force behind the breath), using practices that focus *entirely* on the breath, bringing depth and regularity to the breath *apart from* any significant physical movement. In other words, asana practice *moves* the prana with the body as a precondition for stilling it; pranayama coaxes the prana into profound stillness.

The essential practice for generating *prana*, the power of the breath, is the practice of the *Ujjayi* breath, while the bandhas are meant to contain, clarify and direct this energy, bringing it to a place of stillness within. Because the practices of asana and pranayama work with the prana differently, the practice of the *Ujjayi* breath and use of the bandhas is different in each, and has different immediate effects.

# The Ujjayi Breath

Ujjayi itself literally means “victoriously uprising” or “victory from expansion,” which refers to the expansion and movement upward of the energy of the breath – the *prana* – through the core of the body. Though the Ujjayi breath has these qualities of ascension and expansion, the effect of the breath is powerfully internalizing in a way that brings steadiness and tranquility.

The effect of Ujjayi breathing is to *internalize* our awareness – because it draws our attention to the power *behind* the breath that moves breath and asana as one – the *prana*. The *quality* of the Ujjayi breath as the focus of our attention likewise a gauge of the quality of our attitude and action in the asana as well. If we are struggling with the posture and trying to impose something that doesn’t yet fit, the breath tells us so; if we are disengaged, going through the motions and not fully present, the breath tells us so; if we are calm, centered and in the heart, relishing the pose, the breath will move with the calm power of the sea and the pose will seem to throb, even shine with the force of the *prana* behind it.

Ujjayi breathing has two distinctive characteristics:

1. The action or use of the throat to produce the **Ujjayi ‘sound’**
2. The effort to maintain **evenness of flow** of breath from beginning to end of each breath – both on the inhalation and exhalation, breathing through the nose.

The **Ujjayi sound** is made by toning the throat and epiglottis – the vocal diaphragm – as if you were whispering the sound of ‘haaaa’ in the throat – a breathy sound like the one made when you fog a mirror with your breath.

The **point** of making the sound is not really the sound itself. To produce the sound, you must open the vocal diaphragm, creating a ‘doming’ effect at the back of the throat (much like when you yawn), even while you narrow the passageway for the breath as you produce the sound. This brings the breath to the back of the throat and activates the diaphragm, particularly at the back body in the area covered by the Kidney Loop corresponding to the diaphragm.

- For comparison, take a breath in through your nose, so that you hear the breath moving through your nostrils. Notice how the action of breathing is more in the chest, and there’s a feeling of ‘pulling’ the breath in.
- Now, take an Ujjayi breath, bringing the sound into the back of your throat with the sound of ‘haaaa’ as you breathe in. This quiets the movement of your breath through within your nostrils so there is spaciousness and silence – no pulling or ‘sniffing.’ See how the action of breathing is much more in the diaphragm, with more of a feeling of expanding and *being* filled with the breath rather than ‘pulling’ at it. This even, expansive quality of breathing with the diaphragm is the essence of what is practiced through the Ujjayi sound. You can make the sound subtler and subtler, so there is no feeling of strain in the breath, while maintaining this quality.

The purpose of the Ujjayi sound itself is to attune your awareness to each breath, putting you in immediate touch with its quality and texture while breathing more deeply. Producing the Ujjayi sound does introduce some resistance, but only to encourage the diaphragm to work more efficiently. With this, you develop your ability to breathe smoothly and continuously, progressively opening each part of your torso to the breath with a smooth transition, so there is no ‘jerkiness’ or irregularity to the breath.

## THE UJJAYI BREATH IN ASANA PRACTICE

Asana practice brings us to discover the core strength of the body; this core strength provides not only the needed support for our physical life and health, but is the avenue for the power of meditation. Yet its strength lies in its softness and openness to the breath, just as the softness at the core of a great tree allows for the powerful movement of sap within a tree, from its roots to its highest branches. The dynamic relies upon the muscular strength and stability of the outer body for the organic softness and freedom of the inner body. The asanas are all the more powerful for this, while yet expressing a joyful ease, and are steady and comfortable in the way that Patanjali intended when he described asana as having these qualities.

The principles of Anusara Yoga outlined in this book bring us to this place of strength, comfort and ease, and do so by opening our core with the support of right Attitude, Action and Alignment. And the more we open our core in and through the asana, the more freely, effortlessly and easily we breathe, encouraging deeper states of awareness. This core is the root of both asana and breath; and the tension with which we struggle in the outer body and breath is quite often (if not always) a symptom of tension at the core. Our treatment of the psoas earlier in this book offered a practical contemplation of this truth. To refine and deepen our experience of asana and of the breath, attention must be given to softening and releasing our core with the help of the principles, granting freedom to the breath, and then to the breath itself.

Our work with the principles – particularly the Loops – leads directly to the opening of the core, and we have treated the relevance of the Loops to the freedom of the diaphragm and overall depth of the breath, particularly in relation to the psoas. With this foundation, we can breathe with greater fullness and awareness in the asanas and apply the classic techniques of the bandhas with a greater sense of integration, ease and purpose.

### HOW TO COORDINATE THE BREATH WITH MOVEMENT IN ASANA

In the asanas, generally it is best to breathe through the nose on the inhalation and exhalation when possible, and with a gentle Ujjayi sound. Breathing through the nose warms and filters the air before it reaches the lungs. Moreover, it affords greater control over the breath, encouraging the diaphragm to work more fully and efficiently on the inhalation, and allows one to engage the breath on the exhalation, using its prana to move more deeply into the asanas with greater power.

The breath is like a river; when constrained by a dam it builds strength and can then be released with focused power to turn turbines, generating electricity. The prana, too, when enclosed within the body by the bandhas can be sent out with focused power by means of the Ujjayi breath, like sending the breath through turbines, generating greater energy that flows in spiraling lines of prana throughout the body in a pose.

In **pranayama**, the exhalation is a process, not of forcing the breath out, but rather of progressive relaxation, extended and refined while directing the prana through the central core of the body by means of the Ujjayi breath. The practice facilitates the inner movement of prana, for the sake of slowing and steadying it, and bringing about extended periods – known as *Kumbhak* – in which the prana stills and the breath is retained while the body too is kept still.

In **asana**, the energy of the exhalation is more **actively directed** throughout the body to facilitate movement, bringing about greater power in and extension through the muscles, as well as greater expression of the heart – in the form of *prana* – in the pose. Extended periods of *Kumbhak* or breath retention are never really a goal in asana, since it is contrary to the work of the body.

## PRINCIPLES OF THE BREATH

The **inhalation** creates an inner lift and expansion within the body as the power of the breath, the prana, is collected inward. The inhalation generally corresponds to the engagement of **Muscular Energy**, and, as we shall see, is closely related to and relies upon the expansion at the core brought about through the **Inner Spiral**.

The **exhalation** drives the extension of the body with the breath as the prana expands and shines outward, even beyond the body. Thus the exhalation generally corresponds to **Organic Energy**, is related to the **Outer Spiral**, and accompanies actions in which you go more deeply into a pose with extension.

### **In general:**

- Opening, expanding, and vertical movements (movements directed upward, away from gravity) encourage and are supported by an inhalation (lifting into backbends would be included in this category)
- Closing, folding, retracting, and horizontal movements (movements outward that run parallel to the floor, such as folding into a forward bend, or going into most standing poses and twists) naturally move with an exhalation

### **Beginning and ending a pose:**

- exhale as you go into a posture
- inhale as you come out of a posture

### **While you're in a pose:**

- Inhale to lift (overcoming collapse in a pose) and prepare to go further, softening the inner body as you engage the muscles of the outer body
- Exhale to extend or go more deeply into the pose

### **While moving in Vinyasa (a linked series of poses such as the Sun Salutation):**

- Inhale as the body opens (eg. Raising your arms overhead)
- Exhale as your body closes or extends (eg. Folding forward in a forward bend, or while going into a posture)

# THE BANDHAS

## WHAT ARE THE BANDHAS?

The asanas become especially powerful when practiced with the Ujjayi breath. Yet the Ujjayi breath is not just a sound we make, nor is it an end in itself. The sound and power of Ujjayi is the result of the combined effect of the bandhas. More properly speaking, breathing with the application of the bandhas is Ujjayi pranayama, and the sound of the breath is a measure of the quality of our practice – both of the asana and of the bandhas. The end result is a more integrated, focused, centered and expressive pose that shines with the light of the heart.

The inner actions most specifically associated with the practice of hatha yoga in the original texts such as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika are the bandhas, which were clearly regarded as central to the practice of asana and pranayama. In terms of the spiritual evolution that the tantrikas intended to initiate through the raising of the kundalini energy, the practices of asana and pranayama are rather empty and pointless without the bandhas taking place at the core, and far more attention was given to the specifics of the bandhas and associated mudras than to the asanas themselves. And so we miss much in our practice of yoga by ignoring them.

The word *bandha* literally translates as ‘lock’ or closure; but by this we don’t mean a closure that stops or excludes anything in a negative sense, in the way that we would lock a door. Rather, the ‘lock’ in question is a farming term. These ‘locks’ were used in irrigation ditches to direct the flow of water to the different parts of the field at will.

On a very practical and basic level, the bandhas have very concrete physiological benefits to the body by redirecting the normal course of nature in a very significant sense. Hatha yoga is concerned not just with the tone of the outer body – the muscles, integrity of the joints, etc. – but also with the tone of the inner, visceral body – the digestive organs and all of the internal organs that maintain our life and health. We know that, particularly with age, these organs begin to ‘drop’ from gravity, with various unhappy effects, including decreased circulation and health. The physical actions of the bandhas work to maintain the lift and tone of our internal organs, ‘massaging’ them in the asanas and pranayama, keeping them healthy. The bandhas give us a way of doing the practices from the inside out, working from a deeper level.

In a more esoteric but no less real sense, the bandhas in yoga are actions in the body that direct the power of the breath or prana in service of asana or pranayama, in a way that consolidates our inner focus, and directs the power of our awareness or consciousness toward deeper states of Self-awareness. The bandhas are the bridge that allows us to move from practice on a merely physical level to practice as inner energy work.

One thing worth noting from the **analogy of the farmer’s irrigation ‘locks’** is that a lock merely **directs** – or redirects – the flow of water; it **does not actively move** or cause the movement of the water. In the same way, in yoga, the bandhas are inner actions that *direct* the subtle power of the breath or prana – which at its most refined the yogis regarded as the kundalini or flow of grace – but are *not* actions that in any sense initiate or *move* the flow of prana. We start on the wrong foot if we regard the bandhas as something that we *do to make* something – a spiritual experience or breakthrough – *happen*. Rather, the bandhas are actions by which we *participate in* and *refine* our experience of the natural flow of the breath – and by that unfolding of the breath in the body through yogic practice, our spiritual awareness is refined and uplifted, taking us into states of meditation.

The bandhas are specific actions described in the texts of yoga; when set in the context of the principles of Anusara Yoga – of Muscular and Organic Energy, the Loops and Spirals – it is easy to see that the bandhas naturally arise from the application of these principles, and can be practiced in Anusara Yoga in a way that is fully integrated with the actions of the body as a whole.

The *risk* in practicing the bandhas as *isolated* or specific actions is that they remain just that – isolated from the rest of the body, and worse, treated as things you ‘do’ to make things ‘happen,’ rather than means of moving more deeply with the flow. The bandhas, like the principles, organize and integrate the alignment and action of the body as an organic whole, transforming our experience throughout the body. Thus the keynote of the bandhas,

like the principles, is integration. If you are practicing yoga according to the principles and actions outlined by Anusara Yoga, you are already effectively practicing the bandhas. The benefit of studying and understanding the bandhas is even greater when you consciously practice them to further refine and uplift your yoga.

There are many contemporary descriptions of the benefits of the bandhas; Godfrey Devereux gives one concise description in his book, *Hatha Yoga: Breath by Breath*:

The bandhas provide the integrating structural and energetic dynamic of yoga practice...They internalize our energy, our awareness and the effect of our practice; they unify the body structurally and energetically; they unify the body and mind; and they clarify, challenge, develop and eventually release the breath. But most important of all, the bandhas generate the momentum and energy that allows us to confront and burn up our imposed limitations. They do this by containing, transforming and redirecting our energy and attention.<sup>21</sup>

This is an apt description of the effects of the Loops and Spirals of Anusara Yoga as well, since they are so closely related to the inner actions of the bandhas. The principles of Anusara are really expressions of the prana, directed through the body through the actions of the Loops and Spirals for the same purposes that Mr. Devereux describes. In our treatment here, we will look both at the original descriptions of the bandhas in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* as well as how they might be practiced in the context of the Anusara principles.

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<sup>21</sup> Hatha Yoga: Breath by Breath, Godfrey Devereux; Harper Collins Publishers. P. 59



# The Hatha Yoga Pradipika

And so we will look at the bandhas as presented in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika at first, and then look beyond their original presentation to understand them in a way that is relevant to our practice and purposes.

## UDDIYANA BANDHA<sup>22</sup>

Uddiyana is so called by the Yogis, because by its practice the Prana Vayu flies (flows) in the Susumna. 54.

Uddiyana is so called, because the great bird, Prana, tied to it, flies without being fatigued. 55.

The belly above the navel is pressed backwards towards the spine. This Uddiyana Bandha is like a lion for the elephant of death. 56.

The portions above and below the navel should be drawn backwards towards the spine. By practicing this for six months one can undoubtedly conquer death. 58.

Of all the Bandhas, Uddiyana is the best; for by binding it firmly liberation comes spontaneously. 59.

## MULA BANDHA

Pressing Yoni (perineum) with the heel, contract up the anus. By drawing the Apana thus, Mula Bandha is made. 60.

The Apana, naturally inclining downward, is made to go up by force. This Mula Bandha is spoken of by Yogis as done by contracting the anus. 61.

Pressing the heel well against the anus, draw up the air by force, again and again till it (air) goes up. 62.

Prana, Apana, Nada and Bindu uniting into one in this way, give success in Yoga, undoubtedly. 63.

Going up, the Apana enters the zone of fire, i.e., the stomach. The flame of fire struck by the air is thereby lengthened. 65.

In the center of the body is the seat of fire, like heated gold. There is a long thin flame in this fire. It is gastric fire. These, fire and Apana, go to the naturally hot Prana, which, becoming inflamed thereby, causes burning sensation in the body. 66.

The Kundalini, which has been sleeping all this time, becomes well heated by this means and awakens well. It becomes straight like a serpent, struck dead with a stick. 67.

It enters the Brahma Nadi, just as a serpent enters its hole. Therefore, the Yogi should always practice this Mula Bandha. 68.

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<sup>22</sup> These quotes from the Hatha Yoga Pradipika come from the edition translated by Pancham Sinh, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi 1992, p. 37-40

## JALANDHARA BANDHA

Contract the throat and press the chin firmly against the chest. This is called Jalandhara Bandha, which destroys old age and death. 69.

It stops the opening (hole) of the group of the Nadis, through which the juice from the sky (from the Soma or Chandra in the brain) falls down. It is, therefore, called the Jalandhara Bandha -the destroyer of a host of diseases of the throat. 70.

In Jalandhara Bandha, the indications of a perfect contraction of throat are, that the nectar does not fall into the fire (the Surya situated in the navel), and the air is not disturbed. 71.

The two Nadis should be stopped firmly by contracting the throat. This is called the middle circuit or center (Madhya Chakra) 72.

## An Anusara Exploration of The Bandhas

### UDDIYANA BANDHA

Uddiyana Bandha is given special importance among the bandhas, though the treatment of it is brief. *Uddiyana* means ‘flying upward.’ This bandha involves movement of the muscles of the stomach and especially the muscles of the diaphragm. While performing it, the pit of the abdomen at the center of the solar plexus is drawn in and up (as well as a toning and lift taking place at the lower abdominals). Through the action of the bandha the prana is drawn up into the heart, creating an inner energetic lift that supports the body structurally as well as energetically.

The simple description given of Uddiyana Bandha in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* as one of the ten *mudras* is as follows: “The belly above the navel is pressed backwards towards the spine (56)... The portions above and below the navel should be drawn backwards towards the spine. (58)” It’s worth noting that although Uddiyana Bandha is often taught – particularly as a cleansing technique – at the end of an exhalation, no mention of this is given here in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

This description, as with all of the bandhas, leaves much to be interpreted and explained on many levels.

Uddiyana Bandha is not an action *of* the abdomen, but an inner action that exerts its effect *on* the abdomen, so that the (lower) abdomen draws in and up – paradoxically enhancing, rather than contradicting, the action of the diaphragm as you inhale.

*Uddiyana* means ‘flying upward.’ Through the action of the bandha the prana is drawn up into the heart, creating an inner energetic lift that supports the body structurally as well as energetically. The practical physiological effect of this bandha is to provide muscular support for the sacrum and lumbar spine while toning and neutralizing the psoas muscle. The simultaneous downward anchoring at the sacrum [Pelvic Loop] and lift at the back ribs [Kidney Loop] with the inhalation creates a ‘negative pressure’ in the thoracic cavity that actually encourages the diaphragm to work more efficiently, because the lungs themselves are anchored as they are stretched and opened by the action of the chest and diaphragm.



Without this anchoring, it's easy to become a 'chest-breather,' using the front chest for the breath while using the diaphragm only minimally; by the same token, if there is no expansion at the back body from the action of the diaphragm, it is just as easy to become a 'belly-breather,' not using the full capacity of the diaphragm or chest. Uddiyana Bandha is an *inner* action, *aligned* by the Loops (primarily Pelvic and Kidney Loops, but balanced by the Thigh and Shoulder Loops) and *initiated* by the breath, which makes full use of the diaphragm while bringing the breath fully into the chest as well.

Uddiyana Bandha is intimately connected with the breath, via the actions of the diaphragm and chest. Inwardly this creates a 'negative pressure' – a feeling of 'suction' – in the thoracic cavity. For example, take your arms up overhead while inhaling fully; you'll feel a very natural drawing in and up of the lower abdomen (below the navel) that draws the abdominals back toward the spine with a kind of 'suction' as the rib cage expands with the breath.

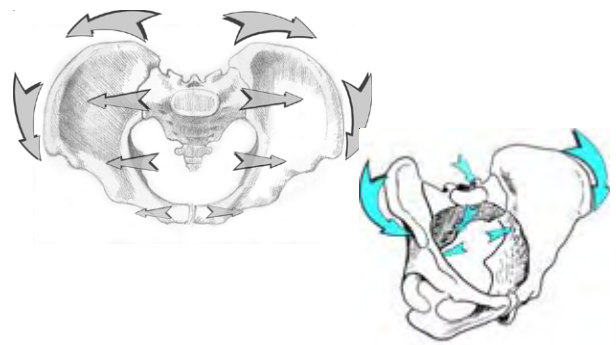
Truly speaking, the central abdominal muscles are not hardened or pressed back against the spine, because that would defeat the breath by limiting the downward movement of the diaphragm. Instead, the muscles engaged in Uddiyana Bandha are *behind and above* the abdomen. The abdominal wall and inner organs are drawn in and up, but this is a more passive response to the lengthening of the torso with the Loops. The abdominal muscles tone from the action, but are more participants than leaders in the action.

Uddiyana Bandha, particularly when initiated with the inhalation, can be set in the context of the following principles. Each principle is a necessary step in initiating Uddiyana Bandha.

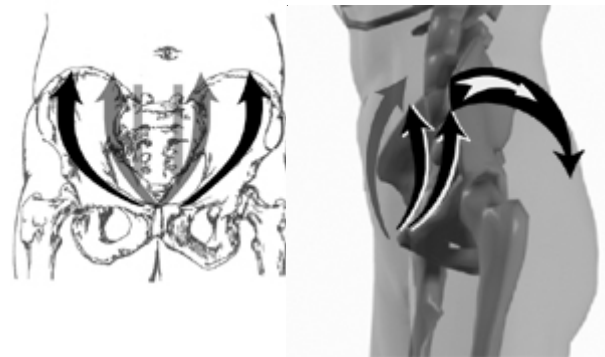
**Inner Spiral** – the *expansion* of the bowl of the pelvis brought about by the lateral expansion of the thighs (Thighs-Apart) with the Inner Spiral is really quite *crucial* for a full and deep *inhalation* and the arising of Uddiyana Bandha. The Inner Spiral opens a greater space in the Pelvis and pelvic floor, deepening the experience of the breath.

**Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop** – our **emphasis on the breath** here as the way of initiating Uddiyana Bandha subtly **alters our experience of the Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop**. As you inhale with the full use of your diaphragm, you expand first at your back body [Kidney Loop]. The tailbone 'scoops,' not simply as a muscular act of firming at the top of the buttocks and lengthening down from the waistline (though this does remain true as a way of actively initiating the Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop). The lift of the upper body with the breath initiates a lift in the bowl of the pelvis from a 'negative pressure' created by this upward draw of the breath.

This inner lift, which feels like a hollowing, a lengthening, a toning and even a stretch of the lower belly (below the navel) is *initiated* by the inhalation with the diaphragm. This lift feels like a subtle but tangible lift at the front of the sacrum that lengthens through the tailbone organically, rather than a muscular action at the back body that more actively lengthens it. The lift takes place behind the abdominal organs and around the inner rim of the pelvis, even lifting the front tips of the hip bones and opening them back, as we have already seen in describing the Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop.



With the **Inner Spiral**, the pelvis broadens from back to front, expanding the bowl of the pelvis as the sitbones move back and apart with the action of the thighs spiraling in and pressing back and apart.



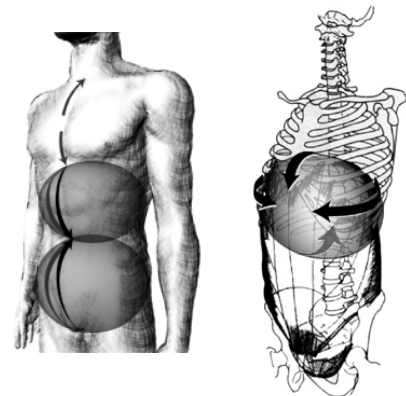
With the **Outer Spiral**, there is a lift at the inner rim of the pelvis, both at the front of the sacrum and to the inside of the hipbones, from the scooping of the tailbone. Along with the expansion of the pelvis from the Inner Spiral, this creates a 'negative pressure' in the pelvis, allowing the core to be drawn upward by the breath with the action of the Kidney Loop.

The difference is that in this description, the Pelvic Loop happens from the inside out. Rather than being initiated by the muscles around the sacrum and the lower (transverse) abdominals (which can be done too strongly, ‘jamming’ the sacrum and hardening the groins), the inner lift of Uddiyana Bandha is *initiated by the breath* and *supported* by the toning of the muscles of the lower belly and active ‘scooping’ of the tailbone that are distinctive of the Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop. These muscular actions are not incidental or secondary, however, because they *further* support the *greater* expansion of the breath with the Kidney and Shoulder Loop by providing a firm foundation in the lower body.

The lift created by Uddiyana Bandha, the ‘flying upward,’ is felt at the very visceral core of the body. Though the lower belly draws in, back toward the spine, and up, one doesn’t bring this action about by firming the abdominal muscles (Rectus Abdominus) and pressing in to create the lift. Uddiyana is a softer, deeper, and more powerful action that does not involve muscular hardening or tension in the abdominal or pelvic region, which nevertheless asks the support of the muscles of these regions, following the lines of the Loops.

**Kidney Loop** – As we’ve seen, with the breath comes the Kidney Loop. The opening created by this broadening and lift of the lower ribs creates a negative pressure in the torso that strongly encourages the full expansion of the diaphragm at the back body.

This is *not* to say that the Kidney Loop precedes the Pelvic Loop; what we’re saying here is that the breath or prana initiates the lift and extension of the inner body, and we actively participate by initiating the Loops with muscular actions to support this inner lift. In the active sense, the Pelvic Loop does precede the Kidney Loop, and supports the full expansion at the kidneys or ‘puffing’ of the kidneys that is distinctive of the Kidney Loop.



Along with this expansion at the *back* body with the action of the diaphragm, there’s a corresponding toning of the Solar Plexus at the *front* body that keeps the breath centered right at the core. This action at the Solar Plexus anchors the base of the sternum so that the chest can open fully to the breath with the Shoulder Loop.

**Shoulder Loop** – the lift and expansion created by the Kidney Loop has to be completed by the Shoulder Loop, or else one ends up rounded forward in the upper back, with the breath ‘stuck’ at the midchest. The Pelvic and Kidney Loop provide the foundation for the Shoulder Loop; the actions of the Shoulder Loop open and expand the top chest, continuing the inner lift so that the breath expands in the body from back (diaphragm) to front (Sternum / collarbones), lengthening and releasing any tension in the neck. The **natural result** is **Jalandhara Bandha**, to complement and contain this lift and expansion from Uddiyana Bandha.

Particularly because of the actions of the Kidney and Shoulder Loop, it’s easier to see that the muscles being activated are **in the chest and behind the abdominals**, the muscles involved in a full and deep inhalation; the abdominal muscles are not acting to create the bandha, but are being acted upon by this lift. The abdominals certainly do tone, and even engage in poses that require it, such as arm balances like Bakasana; but this engagement *follows* upon Uddiyana Bandha as it creates this inner space and lift, *rather* than being the *cause* of the bandha. The abdominals shouldn’t initiate a positive pressure in the abdomen that hardens or grabs against the spine.

To summarize, the *feeling* of Uddiyana Bandha is that the abdominal cavity, from the lower belly to the lower edges of the ribs, is drawn upward to feel long, hollow and open. From the outside, Uddiyana Bandha looks as if the lower abdomen is being firmed, drawn in and up.

**In terms of the actions of Anusara Yoga**, Uddiyana Bandha encompasses the Pelvic and Kidney Loops, and is actively supported by

1. Firming the lower abdomen (involving the transverse abdominals), drawing in and up to support the lengthening of the tailbone in the **Pelvic Loop** – all of which provides lift and support to the lumbar spine.
2. ‘Puffing’ the Kidneys – i.e. breathing into and expanding the diaphragm at the back body – with the **Kidney Loop**, which is supported by the toning and lift of the lower abdominals with the **Pelvic Loop**, as well as the toning and downward draw of the Solar Plexus with the Kidney Loop. In other words, the base of the sternum and the pubic bone are ‘drawn’ toward the navel with the actions of the abdominals and diaphragm (without distorting the natural curve of the lumbar spine).



### THE EXHALATION IN ASANA AND PRANAYAMA

The subtle art of Uddiyana bandha becomes most evident with the **exhalation**. For upon exhaling, if we simply release the bandha, the belly collapses downward and the upper body deflates. The breath does go out; but the feeling is dull, deflated and even unpleasant. When exhaling, the diaphragm presses upward to expel the breath, and should continue to be supported by the abdominal region with Uddiyana bandha so that the breath goes out in a gradual, comfortable flow without any feeling of collapse, as the rib cage gradually relaxes upon the firm upward press of the diaphragm.

If you ‘hold’ the bandha too firmly, you feel a gripping that limits the breath and makes you feel hard and anxious or constricted inside; if you ‘let go’ of the bandha too quickly, you feel deflated. The feeling of a balanced exhalation is that the upper body seems to relax and drape upon the firmness of the core – the firmness at the center of the diaphragm – like a cloth floating down and draping upon a pillar. Ultimately the pillar – the firmness of the diaphragm – releases and relaxes too for the next inhalation.



In this description, from the **outside** it looks and feels as if you are exhaling from top to bottom – releasing the breath from the top chest, to midchest, to diaphragm and belly. But internally, the exhalation initiates from the action of the diaphragm pressing upward, and the upper body relaxes downward upon that action. This action keeps the energy of the Prana (inhalation) and Apana (exhalation) merged in the heart,<sup>23</sup> rather than allowing the feeling of the exhalation to drop back down into the pelvis with a feeling of heaviness and collapse. As Uddiyana is maintained through the exhalation, this also supports the organic extension through the core of the body with the action of the Loops, since Uddiyana bandha is at the heart of the Pelvic and Kidney Loops.

Uddiyana bandha is the key bandha, for it triggers the other two bandhas spontaneously. It creates the length and breadth of the torso necessary for full and complete breathing, and powerfully moves the prana.

<sup>23</sup> A more complete explanation of Prana and Apana will be given in the section on Mulabandha.

## ISOLATED PRACTICES OF UDDIYANA BANDHA:

Classically Uddiyana Bandha is first taught in a standing position. This is a stronger practice that overlooks maintaining the natural upright posture of the spine with its natural curves in order to more clearly experience the actions of the bandha itself.

The point of presenting these practices here is to give a distinct, strong and focused experience of the feeling of Uddiyana bandha, as well as an introduction to the way in which you find it taught in yogic texts. The applications here are abstracted from how the bandha is practiced in asana, but they do give a good experience of how the bandha comes into play in pranayama.

### **A simple practice, following the natural course of the breath:**

- Stand with your feet slightly wider than hip distance apart, your knees bent and your hands on your knees.
- Round your back, rounding your shoulders forward so that you can support the weight of your upper body through your arms – with your hands on your knees – so that your abdomen is free to move.
- Inhale deeply, breathing into your ribs at your back body so that your back rounds and your belly (particularly at the Solar Plexus) draws in from the suction created by the expansion of your chest. To feel this action especially strongly, at the top of your inhalation, close your throat – tipping your head forward – and expand your ribs even more, as if inhaling. Feel the strong inward and upward pull at the center of your diaphragm.
- As you exhale, release your throat and lift your head slightly to open your windpipe; firm your abdominals to maintain the lift at the center of the diaphragm that you just created with the inhalation. Your navel presses back toward your spine; but more than that, you firm at the center of your solar plexus, pressing in and up at the center of your diaphragm as you steadily relax your rib cage to exhale your breath.
- This action of Uddiyana Bandha on the exhalation firmly supports the natural action of the diaphragm with the exhalation, as the diaphragm presses upward to expel the breath. This is the final stage of Uddiyana Bandha, which keeps the breath (the prana) centered in the heart, rather than dropping the belly and collapsing the chest.
- In order to inhale once again, Uddiyana Bandha must be gently released (without collapsing the inner firmness and lift you have created) so that the diaphragm is free to draw downward and expand to initiate the inhalation. The belly will be drawn in and up in Uddiyana Bandha once again as the breath fully expands.

The above method follows the way Uddiyana Bandha is practiced in pranayama, with Uddiyana Bandha performed while retaining the breath inside in Kumbhaka. Classically the following method is practiced for doing Uddiyana Bandha on its own:

### **The classic practice of Uddiyana Bandha:**

- Following the outlines of the practice given above, Uddiyana Bandha is performed at the end of the exhalation, after pushing out the breath with the diaphragm and abdominal muscles, while still keeping the ribs somewhat lifted and expanded.
- After exhaling completely, close your throat so that no breath comes in, yet work your chest as if inhaling. This sucks the diaphragm and solar plexus in and up very strongly, and the navel is pulled upward – and the muscles of the stomach are passive in this action. The more relaxed the muscles are, the better the bandha.

- Classically one retains this action without inhaling for some time – and this is a very strenuous practice, which demands that you remain very relaxed inside even while performing this hard work.
- When you feel the urge to inhale, gradually relax these actions of the chest and abdomen, and breathe in smoothly and in a relaxed way. Don't inhale before bringing the muscles of your abdomen and chest to their original state. The proper duration for the bandha is the time for which it can be retained comfortably but firmly after exhalation and without inhaling. Inhalation should not be immediate after releasing the bandha, and the inhalation should be done in a controlled way, without gasping.

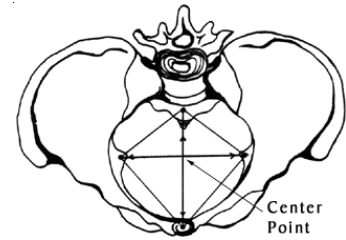
Since this is a strenuous practice, it shouldn't be practiced by those suffering from stomach ailments, heart troubles, circulatory problems or hernia.

### **The Physical Effects of these particular practices of Uddiyana Bandha:**

The diaphragm is strongly worked and exercised in these practices of the bandha, which promotes more efficient breathing. Also, the organs in the stomach are worked by the negative pressure in the abdominal cavity in this bandha, improving the circulation to these organs through a 'squeeze and soak' action similar to what takes place in twisting. This improves the efficiency of the abdominal organs and also improves the secretion of the digestive juices, and so improves digestion. The heart is also massaged and worked.

## MULABANDHA

Mulabandha or the ‘Root Lock’ derives its name from ‘mul’ which means ‘root’ or ‘base. This ‘base’ is center point at the base of the pelvis, at the perineum, which is halfway between the root of the sexual organ and the anus. The bandha also relates to the Muladhara Chakra, where the entrance to the Sushumna nadi lies. The bandhas – particularly Mulabandha – are meant to direct the energy of the mind and breath – the prana – into this subtle inner passage to initiate the inner journey of meditation.



The simple description given in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* is as follows:

“Pressing the Yoni (perineum) with the heel, contract up the anus. By drawing the Apana thus, Mula Bandha is made. The Apana, naturally inclining downward, is made to go up by force. This Mula Bandha is spoken of by Yogis as done by contracting the anus. Pressing the heel well against the anus, draw up the air by force, again and again till it (air) goes up. The Kundalini, which has been sleeping all this time, becomes well heated by this means and awakens well. It becomes straight like a serpent, struck dead with a stick. It enters the Brahma Nadi, just as a serpent enters its hole. Therefore, the Yogi should always practice this Mula Bandha.”

As with the previous bandha, this takes some explaining. The bandha has less to do with the contraction of the anus, which is a closure that helps to tone the perineum and redirect the energy of the breath, than with the energy of the breath itself. Mulabandha is an inner lift that is in truth initiated from above, with the help of Uddiyana Bandha and supported by the actions of the Loops.

As we saw with Uddiyana Bandha, the inhalation creates an inner lift through the ‘negative pressure’ created in the abdomen. This inner lift is felt in the upper body as the heart/chest expands with the inhalation; along with this, you can also feel an upward pulse at the perineum, at the base and center point of the pelvis.

When you feel this inner pulse and lift, it’s very natural to support it by firming and toning the muscles of the perineum. This action is very different from merely tightening the perineum or anus as if to ‘push’ the perineum upward. The point is to **support and direct** the energy of the inner lift or upward course of the *Prana*, not letting it fall back with an inner collapse from the downward course of the *Apana*.

Again, it is the breath that naturally initiates the bandhas, and the bandhas are brought into play to support the breath and provide a container for its power.

**In terms of the actions of Anusara Yoga**, Mulabandha encompasses the balanced actions of the Inner and Outer Spirals. The action that creates this firming at the perineum is the ‘scooping’ of the tailbone with the **Outer Spiral**, in combination with the actions of the **Inner Spiral** that open the pelvic floor by taking the sitbones back and apart.

- **Inner Spiral**: as the sitbones move back, the pubic bone is drawn toward the tailbone and the hipbones wrap forward, broadening the lower back at the sacrum while tipping the top of the sacrum forward.



With the **Inner Spiral**, the pelvis broadens from back to front, expanding the bowl of the pelvis. This happens as the sitbones move back and apart from the action of the thighs spiraling in and pressing back and apart.



– **Outer Spiral:** as the tailbone draws down (with the help of the lift at the back body created by Uddiyana Bandha on the inhalation), the muscles of the lower abdomen (in the bowl of the pelvis below the navel) tone and lift along the inner rim of the pelvic bones. The *effect* of this is a toning and lifting at the center of the pelvic floor.

By this firming through the whole rim of the bowl of the pelvis, the center is drawn energetically upward – with an actual toning and lift of the muscles that can be lightly held at the core – in the way that the wick of a burning candle draws wax upward through the wick at the center, by the burning of the flame. The pelvis itself is the vessel for this flame.

As with Uddiyana Bandha, one can actively support the inner lift created by the breath – in this case by actively toning the perineum and even contracting and lifting at the anus. But these actions are **supportive** of rather than the cause of the inner lift, which really comes with the action of Uddiyana Bandha.

Any aggressive over-tightening of the muscles in an attempt to ‘do’ the bandhas will be reflected in a gripping or limitation imposed on the breath; you feel a downward pull from the tightening this causes in the pelvis and abdomen. But if the actions described in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika accompany and support the inner lift brought about by the breath, these bandhas will even further expand and support the breath, focusing and intensifying its energy.



With the **Outer Spiral**, there is a lift at the inner rim of the pelvis, both at the front of the sacrum and to the inside of the hipbones, from the scooping of the tailbone. Along with the expansion of the pelvis from the Inner Spiral, this creates a ‘negative pressure’ in the pelvis, allowing the core to be drawn upward by the breath with the action of Uddiyana Bandha / the Kidney Loop

## THE PRACTICE OF MULABANDHA

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Natha Yogi and poet saint, Jnaneshwar Maharaj gave a more detailed description of the classic practice of Mulabandha:

Now listen. I will tell you about the perfection of the yogic posture. You should fix the calves against the thighs,

And cross the soles of the feet firmly at the base of the spine, where the muladhara chakra is,

So that the right one is below, pressing against the perineum, and the left one is resting on it freely

There are four inches between the anus and the generative organ. Leaving a space of one-and-a-half inches on each side,

Press the heel into the remaining space of one inch, keeping the body well balanced on it. Now raise the buttocks very slightly and take hold of the two ankles.

Then, O Arjuna, the whole body will be supported on the top of the heel.

Know that this is what is called the *Mulabandha* posture, otherwise known as *Vajrasana*.

In this way you establish the proper position, close the lower passages of the body, and restrain the breath within the body.

*The Jnaneshwari, (VI 192-200)*

As in this description, Mulabandha is most often practiced in a seated posture appropriate to meditation or pranayama. The posture that Jnaneshwar describes here has come to be known in our time as Siddhasana, the perfected pose.<sup>24</sup> Here, as in the original description in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the heel is used against the perineum really to support the feeling of Mulabandha, but is not itself the cause of Mulabandha; that's something that happens inside. In both cases, the point is to draw up the *prana* within until it 'moves upward.'

When presented in these terms, the action and purpose of Mulabandha seems somewhat remote and esoteric to the modern practitioner, especially since most elaborations on it tend to overemphasize the action of the anus. This description can lead to a rather one-sided and stressful application, as well as an interesting variety of facial expressions when practiced. Our approach to the bandha here, which focuses on the overall physiological actions and effects (particularly in asana, in the context of Anusara principles), as well as upon the inner experience of the breath in pranayama, hopefully serves to make much more sense of the practice as well as making it a more integrated action related to the other bandhas.

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<sup>24</sup> A close reading of hatha yoga scriptures will reveal a certain lack of consistency in the application of names to yoga postures relative to how they are named today – and the inconsistency remains among contemporary schools.

## THE PRACTICE OF MULABANDHA

**In Asanas:** As we attend to the actions of the Inner Spiral and Outer Spiral as the context for Mulabandha, two things come about that are of immediate benefit in the pose:

1. Toning of the muscles in the pelvic region that lift and support the lumbar spine, helping the upward extension of the spine, while toning and lengthening the psoas muscle and reducing tension in the lower back muscles and quadratus.
2. The subtler inner lift or ‘wicking’ action – the gentle upward pull at the perineum – produced especially with the breathing action connected with Uddiyana Bandha is supported by the ‘scooping’ action of the tailbone with the Outer Spiral.

**In Pranayama:** In some seated poses, when the emphasis is on the breath, the heel is used to emphasize the toning of the muscles of the perineum. This toning or firming of the muscles – whether the heel is used or not – *follows after* the inner lift, suction or ‘wicking action’ produced by the inhalation with Uddiyana Bandha, and *supports* the process of inhalation and retention. Generally Mulabandha must be softened and ultimately released in the process of exhalation and initiation of the next inhalation.

### The Physical Effects of Mulabandha:

The practice of Mulabandha tones and strengthens the muscles of the pelvic region and especially the perineum as well as increasing circulation. When practiced in the context of the Anusara principles, the actions associated with it are also beneficial to supporting, toning and strengthening the lower back as well as supporting greater mobility and opening in the hips.

### Example: Baddhakonasana

While sitting in Baddhakonasana, place your hands behind you to support an upright posture. Increase the Inner Spiral of your thighs: lift your knees slightly so that you can tip your sacrum in more deeply, increasing the inward curve of your lower back and drawing your sitbones back and apart as your inner thighs at the groins spiral inward. Keeping your heart lifted with the support of your arms behind you (Shoulder Loop), inhale into your back body at the diaphragm, and let the breath continue to expand at your chest. Feel how this naturally draws your lower belly in and up while encouraging your tailbone to lengthen downward – and feel the subtle upward pull at the center of the perineum. Support this by more actively drawing your lower belly in and up while ‘scooping’ your tailbone, and feel the firming this brings in the perineum as the pubic bone and tailbone are drawn toward each other by the combined actions of Inner Spiral and Outer Spiral. Notice that this is *not* the same as firming or gripping your buttock muscles. Also notice that the actions of the Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop encourage your hips to open and your spine to take root and lengthen upward as you lift and open your heart.



Another example – the classic exercise of Mahamudra – is given following our treatment of Jalandhara Bandha.

### Precautions:

If the bandha is done too aggressively, it can adversely affect the digestive system. It is not beneficial to persons suffering from hernia, piles or problems related to constipation.

## **Prana and Apana:**

Treatments of the bandhas generally mention the movement of the Prana and Apana Vayus, as does the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. These are the two energies ('Vayu' means 'wind' or 'force') of the breath. The energy of the inhalation is the Prana Vayu, which is the upward-moving energy or inner 'lift' of the inhalation that in its fullest expression is felt in the heart. The energy of the exhalation is the Apana Vayu, which is a downward moving force that in its fullest expression (as in a hard exhalation) is felt as the heaviness and contraction of the muscles in the pelvis.

Ordinarily we swing between the two poles of prana and apana, inhalation an exhalation, rising and falling with the breath. In yoga it's understood that this dissipates the energy and spiritual potential of the breath, rather than consolidating and focusing it. If we are to find our center, the still point of meditation, these two energies must be made to merge in the center, rather than allowing them to move in opposite directions. Thus in pranayama we both encourage and contain the upward movement of the prana with the inhalation, and limit the downward movement of the apana with the exhalation, so the experience of the breath remains centered and 'merged' within the heart. As we find that steady center in the space between the breaths and maintain it, the yoga tradition goes so far as to say that the breath begins to move along a subtler, more central inner passageway known as the Sushumna, taking us into deeper states of meditation.

As an initial and more accessible experience, we can understand it in this way: with each movement of the breath – whether inhalation or exhalation – we always maintain an element of its opposite. With the lift of the inhalation, we maintain the sense of grounding that we feel with the exhalation; with the outward and downward movement of the exhalation, we maintain the sense of firmness, lift and lightness that we feel with the exhalation. In this way, instead of moving or vacillating between two entirely opposite experiences, we remain centered by experiencing the essence of both throughout the process.

Yet as we enter more deeply into this experience, more does take place: we do experience the breath as moving more deeply within, and may even feel gentle inner movement or swaying with the breath as the merging of prana and apana moves the energy of the breath along subtler channels. Because this energy increases the gastric fire, as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika describes it, inner heat may even be felt.

“Going up, the Apana enters the zone of fire, i.e., the stomach. The flame of fire struck by the air is thereby lengthened.

In the center of the body is the seat of fire, like heated gold. There is a long thin flame in this fire. It is gastric fire. These, fire and Apana, go to the naturally hot Prana, which, becoming inflamed thereby, causes burning sensation in the body.

The Kundalini, which has been sleeping all this time, becomes well heated by this means and awakens well. It becomes straight like a serpent, struck dead with a stick.

It enters the Brahma Nadi (the central passage or Sushumna), just as a serpent enters its hole.”

This last action is brought about particularly by the upward direction of energy at the center through Mulabandha. Through this process, one begins to enter the cave of the heart in meditation. The details of this process of the Kundalini are more appropriate to another work besides the treatment of Anusara principles here, so they are taken up in my book, The Heart of the Yogi.

# JALANDHARA BANDHA

It is not entirely clear why this bandha is known as Jalandhara Bandha. It's possible that the Rishi (or sage) Jalandhar may have been the first to describe and define this action, and so it came to be named after him.

In terms of the meaning of the word Jalandhara itself, "Jal" means "Net", which in this case might refer to the net of Nadis (energy channels); the word "Dhar" means to stop or to hold the flow of the fluid (Amrit), flowing through the nadis. This fits the description of the effects of the bandha given in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika.

The simple description given in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika is as follows:

"Contract the throat and press the chin firmly against the chest. This is called Jalandhara Bandha, which destroys old age and death. It stops the opening (hole) of the group of the Nadis, through which the juice from the sky (from the Soma or Chandra in the brain) falls down. It is, therefore, called the Jalandhara Bandha -the destroyer of a host of diseases of the throat."

**Jalandhara Bandha** is an action of the neck in relation to the chest and shoulder girdle; in a pranayama practice it is often referred to as the 'chin lock,' in which the chin is brought toward the chest as the chest is lifted toward the chin. Rather than closing the throat or windpipe, this actually brings about a greater opening to the breath through an adjustment that takes place in the back of the throat.

This opening results from the meshing of the Head and Shoulder Loops, which creates a lift at the Focal Point at the root of the palate. This is felt as a 'doming' at the back of the throat (much like what happens when you yawn). The Ujjayi sound is really produced by the redirection of the breath along the back of the throat that results from this inward lift at the root of the palate.<sup>25</sup>



## THE PRACTICE OF JALANDHARA BANDHA

**In Asana:** the clearest example of this traditional 'chin lock' in an asana is the alignment of the neck and shoulders in Shoulderstand. In the Shoulderstand, the chin is not meant to press entirely into the chest, particularly because this strains the back of the neck by overstretching it. Rather, the neck, head, shoulders and chest are aligned in the pose to open the throat in a particular way that directs circulation and the breath with an overall calming and internalizing effect upon circulation and the nervous system.<sup>26</sup>

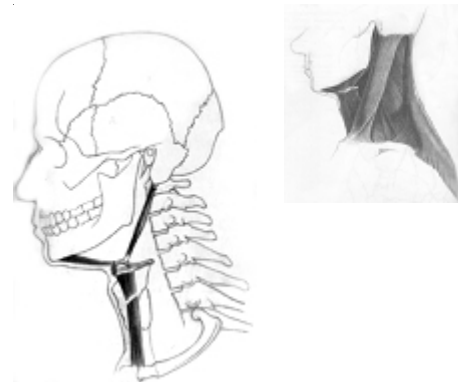
In most hatha yoga poses, however, the neck is not bent in this way. More often the neck is extended, sometimes the head is taken back as in a backbend, and in some poses the neck twists as the head turns. Yet Jalandhara Bandha is still present through the actions of the Head and Shoulder Loops. The similarity lies in the way the throat is toned to create the same 'doming' effect at the back of the throat to produce the Ujjayi breath as we extend upward through the spine. This action assists in making the breath more diaphragmatic.



<sup>25</sup> This point becomes a **Focal Point** for balanced extension in inversions in which the head or upper body are weight bearing.

<sup>26</sup> In Shoulderstand and in practice of Jalandhara Bandha in pranayama, the forward bow of the head, by putting pressure on the vagus nerves in the throat, ostensibly enables one to better control and calm the sympathetic nervous system. By this, yogis have been known to control not just their breathing to the point of stopping it for long periods, but their heartbeat and other involuntary physical functions as well, to an extraordinary degree.

On a subtle level, this bandha keeps our energy and awareness in the practice more centered in the heart. The opposite of Jalandhara Bandha lies in our tendency to shorten and tense at the back of the neck when making an effort; in those moments, our breath and awareness go up into the head, over-stimulating the mind. Whether we regard the description of the effects of this in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika metaphorically or in terms of subtler inner processes, our youth and inner sweetness get ‘burnt up’ by this overstimulation and expenditure of mental energy.



**In Pranayama:** Jalandhara Bandha is a natural and almost unavoidable complement to the inner lift that takes place with a full inhalation. Through the muscles connected to the top of the sternum, to the hyoid bone at the top of the throat, and at the base of the head, there is an intimate connection between the lift and expansion of the chest with the inhalation, a softening and ‘opening’ of the throat, and an upward release and extension at the back of the neck. These three elements are the results of a good combination of Head and Shoulder Loops, and are key elements of Jalandhara Bandha which lead to the ‘doming’ at the root of the palate that allows for full expression of the breath, as well as the containment of its energy.

Overemphasis on the ‘chin-lock’ – particularly without a good balance of Shoulder and Head Loop – can lead to pulling the chin in, which only flattens the cervical curve of the neck, pulls and tightens the muscles at the back of the neck, and chokes or constricts the windpipe. The point of Jalandhara Bandha is not to close off the windpipe; rather it is

1. the completion of a full inhalation,
2. the ‘seal’ that allows for comfortable and easeful retention of the breath, and also is
3. a means for calming the body and mind through the pressure it places on the vagus or carotid nerve and carotid arteries in the throat.

Jalandhara Bandha is to be used during inhalation and retention, and released gently during exhalation to avoid tension as well as to allow the breath or prana to move upward through the Sushumna.

### Physical Effects:

While the ability of yogis to control physiological functions with the practice of this bandha have been documented, the exact function and effects of the bandha have not been clearly isolated or defined. The physiological explanation of its function is more in the realm of conjecture. The following description and explanation comes from studies done in an ashram in Lonavala India:<sup>27</sup>

Jalandhara bandha affects the “Vidyan Nadi” which passes through the neck. It is the only blood vessel passing below the neck. It is divided into two parts, known as Carotid Arteries, which pass from both the sides of the neck to the brain. The area where the blood vessel is divided into two parts is known as the Carotid Sinus. The wall covering the Carotid Sinus is thin and can easily get affected by inner or outside pressure. The nerve passing from here to the brain is the Carotid Nerve. It goes high up into the skull and then down into the brain. Pressure exerted on this nerve is transmitted to the brain. This pressure is exerted through Jalandhara Bandha. The brain responds by lowering the blood pressure, and the heart rate is reduced. One explanation is that the position of the bandha lessens the blood supply to the carotid artery. The reduction in the blood supply to the brain slows down the body activities and the practitioner can observe the complete stillness of body and mind.

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<sup>27</sup> [www.yogapoint.com](http://www.yogapoint.com)

But it is said that to achieve this effect, the bandha has to be practiced for a number of years. After refining his practice, the yogi can achieve states of mind wherein he forgets the outside world and even loses awareness of his own body. Most of the functions of the body are stopped and the yogi can progress towards samadhi. Yet with even a little bit of study and practice of this bandha, the yogi can achieve a calm, quiet and pleasurable state of mind devoid of any thoughts.

As a practical matter in the practice of pranayama, there is always the possibility that blood pressure may increase while performing Kumbhaka or retention of the breath. The practice of Jalandhara Bandha before retention or Kumbhaka serves to control and reduce the blood pressure. Moreover, at the time of retention or Kumbhaka, the action of 'holding' the breath can lead to increased pressure of the inhaled air, and the pressurized air tries to find out an escape route, and can move into the Eustachian tubes of the inner ear, behind the ear drums. The position of the neck in Jalandhara Bandha stops this air from entering the inner ear, and the eardrums are protected.

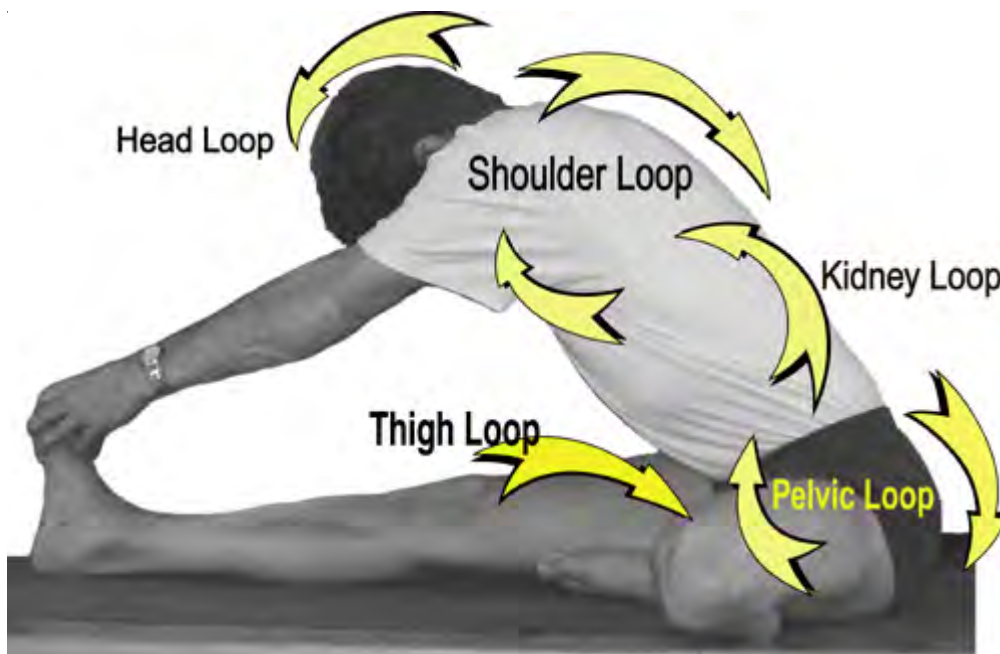
**Precaution:**

Although the bandha exerts a regulatory effect on blood pressure, people suffering high or low blood pressure should not work with this bandha in breathing practices without supervision, particularly because one may inadvertently increase inner pressure and tension through the practice, if it is not done well.

## BANDHAS IN THE ASANAS

To summarize our approach to the bandhas so far, attention first to the principles, then to the Ujjayi breath, and finally to the subtle inner qualities of lift, expansion and extension of the bandhas that naturally follow, puts you in touch with the action of the bandhas in the poses as *support* for both the pose and the breath. The exhalation in the poses, especially as it is the power behind organic extension, actually taps into the power of the breath and bandhas while directing the force of the prana.

## MAHAMUDRA



An example of the application of the principles and the bandhas in a pose is the classic work with the bandhas in the pose Mahamudra. This is a forward bend resembling Janu Sirsasana, but the goal in the pose is not to move deeper into the forward bend, but to use the posture as a context for practicing the bandhas with the breath. As such, it is a powerful practice for isolating and understanding these actions; then they can be applied in more flowing fashion in other poses.

**To do the pose:** sit in Dandasana and stretch your legs in front of you, bringing them together. Use your hands to increase the **inner spiral** of your thighs by turning the thigh muscles inward toward the midline, so that your inner thighs descend toward the floor. Draw your buttock muscles back with your hands, so that your sit bones more easily move back and apart. This will tip your sacrum inward, helping you to sit squarely on your sit bones with your lower back firm and upright.

Bend your left knee and draw it back, placing your left foot at the inside of your right thigh, with the heel as close to the pubic bone as possible. Minimize the movement of your sit bones as much as possible during this shift, and keep your knee opened out to the side, your thigh relaxing down to the ground as the hip opens. If your left thigh is up in the air because of tightness in the hip, place a support – such as a rolled blanket – under the thigh so that it can relax down into the support.

Turn your upper body to face toward your straight leg, and readjust your straight leg with an inner spiral (using your hands to turn the top of the thigh inward toward the midline) if necessary, so that the knee and toes point straight up toward the ceiling.

Reach forward to hold your left foot with both hands. If your back rounds or your left knee bends, place a belt across the sole of your foot and hold the ends of the belt. In this pose, both your left leg and your spine should be straight.



## PRINCIPLES:

**Inner Spiral:** Firm the muscles of your straight leg thigh; draw that energy up your leg on all sides (especially along the inner thigh) and spiral the top of your thigh inward, so the inner thigh – where the thigh meets the hip – turns down toward the floor, softening the groin muscles. The bent leg thigh should spiral inwards at the groin as well, though you may need to adjust it manually. The inner spiral of the thighs allows you to tip the sacrum forward, taking you into the forward bend without rounding or strain to your lower back.

**Outer Spiral / Pelvic Loop:** without rounding your lower back, lengthen downward through your tailbone and draw your lower belly inward and upward, providing a support and lift to your lumbar spine. Feel how this action tones the pelvic floor, creating a slight squeeze in the muscles of the perineum.

**Kidney Loop:** as your lower belly tones and lifts with the Pelvic Loop, inhale and bring the energy of the breath first to touch your back ribs at the area of the kidneys. Let the diaphragm expand here with the broad expansive feeling of the breath; and let your solar plexus – from the base of your breastbone to your navel – soften downward, making you soft and receptive to the breath at the front body while broad and firm at the back body.

**Shoulder Loop:** lift your shoulders away from your hips to level your collarbones and lengthen the sides of your torso. With your arms straight, firm the muscles of your arms and draw that energy from your fingertips up through your shoulders and into your heart; this action draws your shoulder blades flat on your back, as if they were magnetized by the expansiveness of your heart. As you firm the shoulder blades into your back, especially firm the lower tips of your shoulder blades into the body and toward each other, lifting your heart and lifting and broadening your top chest at the sternum. (see illustrated exercise for this on p. 39)

A strong and expansive Shoulder Loop is central to Maha Mudra; it supports the extension of your spine and creates space for the strong upward lift created by Uddiyana Bandha. As your shoulders draw back and your top chest lifts and expands, your collarbones will rotate back, allowing full freedom of the breath in your upper chest.

**Head Loop:** follow the energy of the Shoulder Loop from the top of your sternum to the base of your ears; let this line of energy draw the top of your throat – where your throat meets your jaw line – back and up, from ear to ear. Lengthen through the back of your neck, bringing a noble bow to your head, so that your chin descends to meet your sternum without compressing or hardening your throat. The more you lift and move back at the top of your throat while bowing from the nape of your neck, the more space you create for the inner doming of your palate – the vocal diaphragm. This is Jalandhara Bandha.

## INHALING WITH AND THROUGH THE BANDHAS



Jalandhara Bandha: Shoulder and Head Loop

Uddiyana Bandha: Kidney Loop

Mulabandha: Pelvic Loop

As you **inhale**, each Loop is helped by the vertical lift created in the body by the inhalation; by the same token, this lift also creates the kind of ‘negative pressure’ internally that inspires the bandhas, until their completion with Jalandhara Bandha. The end result is a corresponding ‘pressure drop’ in the head, so that the mind descends into the heart as the head cools.

Particularly at the top of the inhalation, support the lift created by the inhalation by firming at the base of the pelvis by toning the muscles of the perineum as you scoop your tailbone down and forward, and your lower belly in and up (Mulabandha). Firm at the center of the Solar Plexus to support the lift at the center of the diaphragm created by Uddiyana Bandha. Bow your head forward in Jalandhara Bandha, holding the ‘doming’ at the root of the palate and gently exerting pressure on the softness of the throat as you retain the breath.

As you **exhale**, gently release Jalandhara Bandha to allow the breath to go out freely and smoothly. But keep the gentle firmness at the center of the Solar Plexus as the center of the diaphragm presses upward to expel the breath, and your ribs relax smoothly downward without collapse. Keep the tone of the lower belly with Mulabandha, not letting the belly drop, though the firming and lift at the perineum can be gently and gradually released. At the end of the exhalation, the bandhas can be released to make space for the next inhalation.

Through these actions, maintaining the key elements of the prana or energy of the inhalation, keep the experience of the breath as centered in your heart, and imagine the exhalation moving upward through the core of the body, rather than feeling a collapse downward. The exhalation should be smooth, comfortable and relaxed, without any feeling of gripping or drop.

After one or more rounds of the breath with this mudra, sit quietly to feel and enjoy the quality of both breath and mind.

# 7

## THE INNER ARCHITECTURE OF THE TEMPLE

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# THE HEART

You cannot see the Seer of seeing.

You cannot hear the Hearer of hearing.

You cannot think the Thinker of thinking.

You cannot understand the Understander of understanding.

He is your Self, which is in everything.

Yajnavalkya, Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 3.4.2<sup>28</sup>

Yoga has a purpose unlike other fields of learning and practice; we delve more deeply into our yoga not just for the sake of knowing more about yoga, but really for the sake of knowing the one who is *doing* the yoga – our own Self – all the more deeply and profoundly, and in a way unlike any other form of self-knowing. The subject matter of yoga is the **Self** (as it is called in the texts of yoga), not as an object of study to be described or explained, but as a pure, unmediated, lived experience.

Yogic scriptures describe the experience of this Self as the experience of our true heart, the *hridaya*. This heart is not a location in the body, and certainly not an organ, but an experience and unique self-awareness that arises through the devotional passion to know this divine heart, the effort to know and understand through yogic practice, and through grace, the Self-revelation of the Divine. **Anusara Yoga** is a ‘heart-centered’ yoga in the sense that it honors the centrality of that devotional passion to know our divine Self and source through our practice, as well as honoring, nourishing and expressing the divine qualities of our own heart through our practice as well as in our lives. The virtues and qualities that are the central themes of our yogic practice are expressions of who we are and of whom we more fully become the more we know and honor our own divine heart, our true Self.

This ‘Self’ is not the ego, but rather our **higher Self**, the quiet voice and presence within the heart that speaks to and guides us when we look beyond our own narrow interests. In yoga, the Self is not revealed or illumined by the mind or any intellectual process; nor is it enough simply to believe in it. The Self is known by its own shining-forth, Self-revealed in all that we do and are. This Self-revelation of the Divine comes in a moment of recognition that is a gift freely given. The moment when the scales fall from our eyes and we recognize inwardly the presence of the God within our hearts is **the** moment of Grace in its purest sense.

The mystic schools of each religious tradition in the world agree that this quest to know God through knowing our innermost self is the essence and key to the spiritual path. As St. Francis is said to have put it, “The One you are looking for is the one who is looking.” If you would know God as He is in Himself (or Herself) you must first know yourself as you most truly are, as revealed in the silence of your own heart. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart described this as a ‘breakthrough’ in which we pierce the hard outer shell of the ego to find the presence of God within: he said, “God is nowhere as much as He is in the soul... where the soul is, there God is, for the soul is in God. Where my soul is, there is God, and where God is, there my soul is also. And this is as true as God is God.”<sup>29</sup>

In yoga our highest intention is to that Self and to become fully anchored in that experience, always aware in every thought and action of the presence of God within. We taste the essential nature of the Self when our mind falls silent and we feel fully at peace, at ease, content yet brimming with quiet joy in the state of just *being*. In knowing the Self, we *are* that Self, in a pure state of Self-awareness.

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<sup>28</sup> The Yoga Tradition, Georg Feuerstein p. 127

<sup>29</sup> Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart’s Creation Spirituality in New Translation, Matthew Fox p. 388

The literature of yoga concerning the Self is vast and spans millennia of written and oral tradition. For an overview of yogic thought concerning the quest to know the Self in the various schools of philosophy culminating in Tantra and its practices relevant to hatha yoga, as well as an historical perspective on the development of hatha yoga as a spiritual discipline seeking the Self, please see my book, The Heart of the Yogi.

In this book I'd like to touch on the relevance of the vast science of the *prana* and its all-important practical role in this quest in hatha yoga. In this discussion we're inevitably led into a treatment of the *chakras*, a further science that is unique to the medieval schools of hatha yoga and remains current today. The yogic science of the *chakras* will be set in philosophical, historical and practical context in The Heart of the Yogi; at present here it is enough to put the inner work with the *chakras* in asana practice in the context of the Anusara principles. This will help establish an understanding of the deeper work that takes place through work with the asanas, and how the heart qualities embodied in the *chakras* are unfolded and expressed through asana.

# CHAKRAS AND THE PRANA VAYUS

## THE PRANA VAYUS

### THE MEANING OF PRANA AND PRANA VAYU

**Prana** is the Sanskrit word for the life force. The root *pra* means “first” and *na* means the “smallest (or most basic) unit of energy” – so *Prana* is the first or fundamental unit of energy. Everything living functions by virtue of Prana<sup>30</sup>; all activity and change – mental and emotional as well as physical – is a manifestation of the workings of Prana. Prana is the radiance of life itself. Within us, prana is the moving force behind sensation and activity, the fire of the metabolism, the carrier of thought, and the force of will. Prana dispels impurities from the body, maintains the health of the body, and its essential nature is lightness and joy.

A smooth and unobstructed flow of prana is needed if we are to concentrate; moreover, a healthy and natural flow of prana restrains the mind from taking interest in undesirable objects or unhealthy pursuits. If one’s prana is obstructed from flowing to any part of the body – whether physically (e.g. from an injury), or because of mental blocks, impressions or emotions – the health of that area of the body deteriorates, and can even lose its power of action. We often have an intuitive sense of where the prana is ‘stuck’ or diminished when looking at the appearance of someone with a particular health problem, even though the *cause* of the diminishment is not always as obvious.

Prana is lost to a certain extent with each exhalation; just as we take Prana in through the breath, we also breathe out what we are not able to assimilate or retain. The yogic practice of pranayama is designed to minimize the loss of prana through exhalation, so that prana can be increased in the body. Prana is also depleted in other ways through our activities and emotions; by excessive exercise, in times of strong emotion, and through excessive speech, the emission of semen, the process of childbirth, and the elimination of waste from the body.

Notice that the experience of spending our prana can in some cases be exhilarating. Yet after it is spent we feel exhausted and depleted, and take some time to recover. Yogic disciplines of moderation and self-control are meant to minimize the depletion of prana as well as to assimilate and store prana. A yogi’s experiences are heightened and enjoyable because he does not allow the experience to rob him of his prana; instead he spends his prana wisely, remaining alert and joyful.

As the Prana operates within the body to maintain life, it performs distinct functions and receives specific names according to the form and specific function that it performs. In each case this particular form of prana is called a ‘**vayu**,’ which is sometimes translated as ‘wind.’ The root ‘*va*’ means “that which flows” – and so a *vayu* is a vehicle for activities and experiences within the body, or a ‘force’ that moves in a specific way and in a specific area of the body that it governs. The practices of yoga – both asana and pranayama – are meant to optimize the functioning of these vayus as well as bring them under our control, so that their energies can be used to uplift oneself.

There are 49 prana vayus or types of vayu in the body; ten of these are directly responsible for mental and physical activities. Of these ten, **five** are of interest to the yogi for progressing in his practice; the others govern involuntary physiological functions (for example, belching and blinking, which are of lesser interest in yogic discipline, though they certainly have their role in the mundane affairs of the body).

Each of these five principle vayus govern specific areas of the body, and can be thought of as elemental forces in the body that are not just physical, but govern emotional qualities and mental powers that are fundamental to a healthy personality and sense of self. As we will see, an understanding of the *chakras* is incomplete without an understanding of the nature of the *prana vayus*, since the *chakras* are manifestations of the energy of the *prana vayus*.

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<sup>30</sup> Prana has two manifestations: it is both the universal life force, and when used in this sense is capitalized; it also functions on the level of the individual, and when used in this sense appears with a small ‘p.’

The **practice of yoga**, by working with the body and breath as well as the mind, empowers us on every level by **increasing the Prana in the form of these vayus**. Each *vayu* has a ‘**seat**,’ which means that there is a location or area in the body where its functioning is felt most strongly and clearly, and the *vayu* most strongly ‘**governs**’ the functioning of that area of the body, though the *vayu* is not necessarily limited to that location or to any specific organ. Each *vayu* is also related to a specific **element** and its qualities (physical as well as subtle), and it is for this reason that in the hatha yoga tradition, mastery of a particular *vayu* and the piercing or ‘opening’ of its corresponding *chakra* led to mastery or supernatural control over the corresponding element.

**1. Prana Vayu** – while ‘Prana’ is the general name of the life force, the ‘prana vayu’ is one of its specific functions. The prana vayu governs the region from the throat to the bottom of the heart, corresponding to the region of the **Shoulder Loop**. The ‘**seat**’ of the prana vayu is the heart, and the prana vayu ensures that the heart goes on beating. It is associated with the element of **air**, and has an upward motion associated with the **inhalation**. When you breathe in, you feel the ‘lift’ of the breath, which is the energy of the prana vayu in the upper body. Its movement is upward in the way the glass is filled with liquid – from the bottom to the top. The experience of the *prana vayu* is of being filled with energy (which is distinct from the mundane experience of the physical breath as a flow of air coming in through the nose or mouth and down to the lungs).

The prana vayu governs **assimilation** or taking into oneself – as in the process of inhalation, of swallowing, assimilation through digestion, as well as the processes of taking in sensory impressions and mentally assimilating information and experience. It works to maintain the proper temperature of the body relative to one’s environment, and sustains one’s vital organs, particularly the heart.

Though its seat is in the heart, the functioning of the prana vayu can be experienced in different parts of the body. It gathers at the navel and from there is distributed throughout the body; yet it can also be experienced strongly as it moves within the head in practices of pranayama and meditation. An effective way to focus on the prana vayu is to focus on the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose during breathing practices. Another focus is at the navel. By the same token, the strength of the prana vayu can be experienced throughout the body, right down to the toes.

The prana vayu is the energy of the **Anahata** chakra, the ‘heart’ chakra, which expresses that energy, summarized in the familiar phrase, ‘open-hearted.’

**2. Apana Vayu** – while the prana vayu is the moving force behind the inhalation, the apana vayu is the moving force behind the **exhalation**. The apana vayu is the aspect of the prana that governs the ability to eject or eliminate what is not needed to the system. Just as with the breath we exhale what is not needed after assimilating the inbreath, the apana vayu is the force behind the elimination of waste in general, working in the kidneys, colon, rectum, bladder and genitals. It is also the moving force in the process of reproduction – which essentially moves new life ‘out’ into the world – from insemination to childbirth.

The healthy functioning of the apana vayu is as vital as that of the prana vayu. If waste is not eliminated from the body, there is no room for assimilation of fresh energy, and toxins build up. This slows the body down – and slows us down on the mental level as well. Without the healthy functioning of apana vayu, one lacks motivation and determination; one feels lazy, dull and even confused, indecisive and befuddled.

In a subtle but vital sense, the apana vayu has much to do with our power of decisiveness and self-determination, both of which turn upon our power of choice. Choice demands not only the affirmation of one possible good, but also the elimination or exclusion of other competing goods – choosing one good over another. Clarity in defining oneself demands decisiveness in eliminating what doesn’t work for us, what is not needed, or what conflicts with our highest goals. It’s not surprising that the apana vayu is associated with the element of **earth**, and is the energy of the **Muladhara** Chakra, which is concerned with having a strong, sure and reliable foundation, especially in fundamental matters of survival.



The seat of the apana vayu is in the core of the pelvis, and it governs the lower body, from the navel down through the legs, corresponding to the **Pelvic Loop** as well as the **grounding action** of the **Outer Spiral**. It's worth noting how our language reflects this awareness; a person whose decisiveness is rooted in real possibilities and clear intentions is said to be very 'grounded', or to have his 'feet on the ground.' The clearest expression of decisiveness and self-assertion, in fact, is to 'put your foot down.' This kind of language expresses the power of the apana vayu

The functioning of the apana vayu is enhanced by the rooting or grounding action of the legs and pelvis in hatha yoga asanas. Emphasis on the exhalation – expression of the apana vayu – works to enhance grounding, extension and clarity or strength of purpose in one's asana practice. In pranayama and meditation, clarity begins with a good exhalation, making room for fresh energy and focus.

3. **Samana Vayu** – this is the power of the metabolism or 'digestive fire,' which controls the functioning of the abdominal organs and glands. It governs the area between the bottom of the heart and the navel – centralized in the area of the solar plexus – and its seat is said to be in the navel. It corresponds to the area of the **Kidney Loop**, which works in close association with the Pelvic Loop. While the prana and apana vayus have to do with assimilation – or taking-in – and self-determination – or grounding – through choice, the Samana Vayu is concerned specifically with the **power of discrimination**.

In its work with food and digestion, this is the force that separates nutrients from toxins: when it is not functioning well, one may retain toxins, leading to shortness of breath and gastric disorders. In the case of the mind, the Apana Vayu is the power by which to separate out or discern good from bad, which allows us to assimilate information for the sake of making choices. When there is a disorder, one can be delusional or of unsound mind. For this reason, in the yoga tradition the power of digestion is very closely linked to the power of the mind – particularly regarding discrimination and judgment.

Samana vayu is associated with the element of **fire**. It is associated with the **Manipura** chakra, and when *imbalanced*, its fiery energy can be used to assert one's will or to dominate, especially through anger. In the yoga tradition, anger is the direct result of a combination of desire, delusion and lack of discrimination. When the energies and functioning of the vayus are brought into balance to support clarity of mind, the qualities of Samana Vayu take on the humble yet expansive self-awareness expressed by the Kidney Loop. The Kidney Loop supports in particular both efficient diaphragmatic breath and the healthy functioning of the organs of digestion.

4. **Udana Vayu** – while apana vayu is concerned with elimination or outward-moving Organic Energy in general, udana vayu is the specific force that expels air with the exhalation in a way that is particularly concerned with **speech and the production of sound**.

'Udana' is 'that which carries upward.'<sup>31</sup> It rules the region of the throat and head, and is seated specifically in the throat. Its function is expressive; it is the energetic flow that moves upward and out. When udana is imbalanced, speech is disjointed and one cannot speak or articulate ideas properly. Imbalances can also cause shortness of breath and other respiratory problems particularly associated with the throat, which can have their root in obstacles to self-expression, or emotional repression. Breaking or cracking in the voice, as well as inability to express musical pitch with the voice result from irregularities in the udana vayu.

The area ruled by udana vayu corresponds to the area of the **Head Loop** in conjunction with the action of the **Shoulder Loop**, so far as the Shoulder Loop creates an opening, lift and expansion at the back of the palate for the upward movement of udana vayu. This energy is particularly stimulated by **Jalandhara Bandha**, which creates this opening through the actions of the Head and Shoulder Loops – whether in asanas such as the Shoulder Stand, or in pranayama.

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<sup>31</sup> Udana vayu also governs vomiting, and imbalances in udana can produce nausea or the desire to vomit. Perhaps this association with udana explains the association in the mythology by which the deities produce their creation by a process that is both a speaking-forth and a vomiting – in words that share the root 'va'.

Udana vayu is related to the element of **ether** or space, and is activated during creative vocalization. Udana is focused at the fifth or throat chakra – the **Vishuddha** chakra, and this upward moving energy continues through the upper chakra, the Ajna chakra, to the Sahasrara, and is purified during this upward journey. The feeling of movements of energy in the head during pranayama and meditation are manifestations of the rarified movements of udana vayu. It is this udana which, when purified through yogic practice, brings the blissful experience of samadhi.

5. **Vyana Vayu** – this vayu pervades the *whole* body, and is a coordinating, connecting force. It has no specific seat, but rather coordinates all the powers such as sensory awareness, and runs through the whole network of the 72,000 nadis or passageways of prana in the body, connecting the functions of the nerves, veins, muscles and joints. Its function is cohesive and is associated with the element of **water**.

Vyana vayu is fundamental to making one feel and function as an integrated whole. Though it governs and coordinates all of the senses as well as the functioning of all muscles, both voluntary and involuntary, it is felt especially in the skin. Goosebumps and perspiration, and all of the various actions and reactions of the skin to the environment are manifestations of Vyana vayu. It functions at the “surface” or outer boundary of your energy body, much like surface tension on a drop of water, and is associated with a sense of boundaries through which we define ourselves and interact with our world.

Within oneself, Vyana vayu governs our internal sense of coordination and balance. When imbalanced, one feels uncoordinated and clumsy; coordination between mind and body suffers, and one’s own thoughts can be disjointed, fluctuating and rambling. Dysfunctions in Vyana vayu can also lessen our power of sensation.

Though Vyana vayu itself has no particular locus or seat, it is associated with the energy of the **Svadisthana** Chakra, located at the root of the genitals. In general, Vyana vayu is strengthened by the interplay of **Muscular and Organic Energy**, which coordinate and integrate mind and body through the actions of the asanas. More specifically, because of its association with the energy and concerns of the Svadisthana Chakra, the subtler energies involved are enhanced through **Mulabandha**, created in conjunction with the interaction of the **Inner and Outer Spirals** in the lower body.

The energy of the **Svadisthana Chakra** concerns your sense of self, and sense of boundaries between yourself and others as you express yourself creatively in relationships. A healthy sense of boundaries is fundamental to forming relationships, and work with this chakra concerns the formation of boundaries and sense of self, just as the surface tension on a drop of water – the ruling element of this chakra and of Vyana vayu – defines its shape.

Water is the basis of cellular life, but can only function to support life by the mechanism of cellular walls; the basis of interaction, even on a cellular level, is strong but permeable boundaries, which define individual cells. The same is true at other, subtler levels. Water is the element or medium of the emotions, which pass between and suffuse individuals like a subtle liquid permeating the walls of self. Emotionally as well as physically, one can be too open or too closed. Any organic system of relationships is healthy only when the walls are strong enough to allow discernment and choice, where choice and discrimination is a process of positive affirmation.

Weakness in the energy of this chakra – which can be due to disorders in Vyana vayu – leads to a weak sense of self, low self-esteem, problems in forming relationships, and even problems with the immune system, all of which concern interaction and exchange with our world through the medium of a strong and healthy set of boundaries – both physical and emotional. A lack of boundaries – as well as overly rigid boundaries – depletes and diminishes life. Thus these are the concerns of how we express ourselves and relate to others at the level of the Svadisthana Chakra, which is strongly influenced by the flow of Vyana Vayu.

## ASANA PRINCIPLES AND THE PRANA VAYUS

From this discussion of the vayus, we can begin to build a picture of how the principles and actions of the asanas can influence and enhance the energies of the vayus, bringing about greater health and integration on every level. Coordination of the breath with the principles, particularly focusing on the feeling and movement of the breath or prana in the area of the body concerned with the principle, enhances the prana vayu in that area and the qualities associated with that prana. The goal is the fully balanced, integrated and healthy functioning of the prana in the body as a whole, in all its aspects.

1. Prana Vayu: Shoulder Loop and Focal Point in the Heart
2. Apana Vayu: Pelvic Loop/Outer Spiral and Focal Point in the Pelvis
3. Samana Vayu: Kidney Loop – in conjunction with the Pelvic Loop
4. Udana Vayu: Head Loop – in conjunction with the Shoulder Loop
5. Vyana Vayu: Muscular and Organic Energy in general: Inner and Outer Spiral to create Mulabandha in particular

# THE CHAKRAS

As the discussion of the vayus suggests, the elemental energies of the prana vayus of the body express themselves in and through the energy of the chakras. A chakra is a plexus of pranic energy in the body that expresses our individual consciousness and energy in particular ways distinctive of our individuality. The emotional qualities associated with the chakras are really manifestations of the energetic qualities of the *prana vayus* as they function in the physical and subtle body; the ‘work’ with the *chakras* that is so current in popular literature is really an affair of working with the *prana* in its various forms, using forms and practices of pranayama in particular to unfold potentialities for spiritual evolution in the subtle body as well as clearing out impressions or *samskaras* impacted upon the subtle body by past experiences.

We are familiar with expressions such as a ‘gut feeling,’ an ‘open heart,’ ‘fire in the belly’ and so on, all of which are colloquial expressions of the energy of the chakras. Our expressions also reflect our recognition that these energies can be ‘open’ – expansive, expressive, inclusive – or ‘closed’ – tight, narrow, self-absorbed. Our maturity and evolution as individuals and as spiritual beings depends upon how much these energies are ‘opened’ as we progress through life, bringing us into higher levels of harmony with the generous, inclusive and expansive energy of the universe, the creative Shakti.

Each chakra has its own symbol, representative of its energy; it is also directly related to the energy of a specific element and prana of the body. Moreover, through practice we can see how the principles of Anusara Yoga applied in hatha yoga poses relate directly to working with the energy and ‘issues’ of each chakra, bringing us into emotional as well as physical harmony with the universe.

