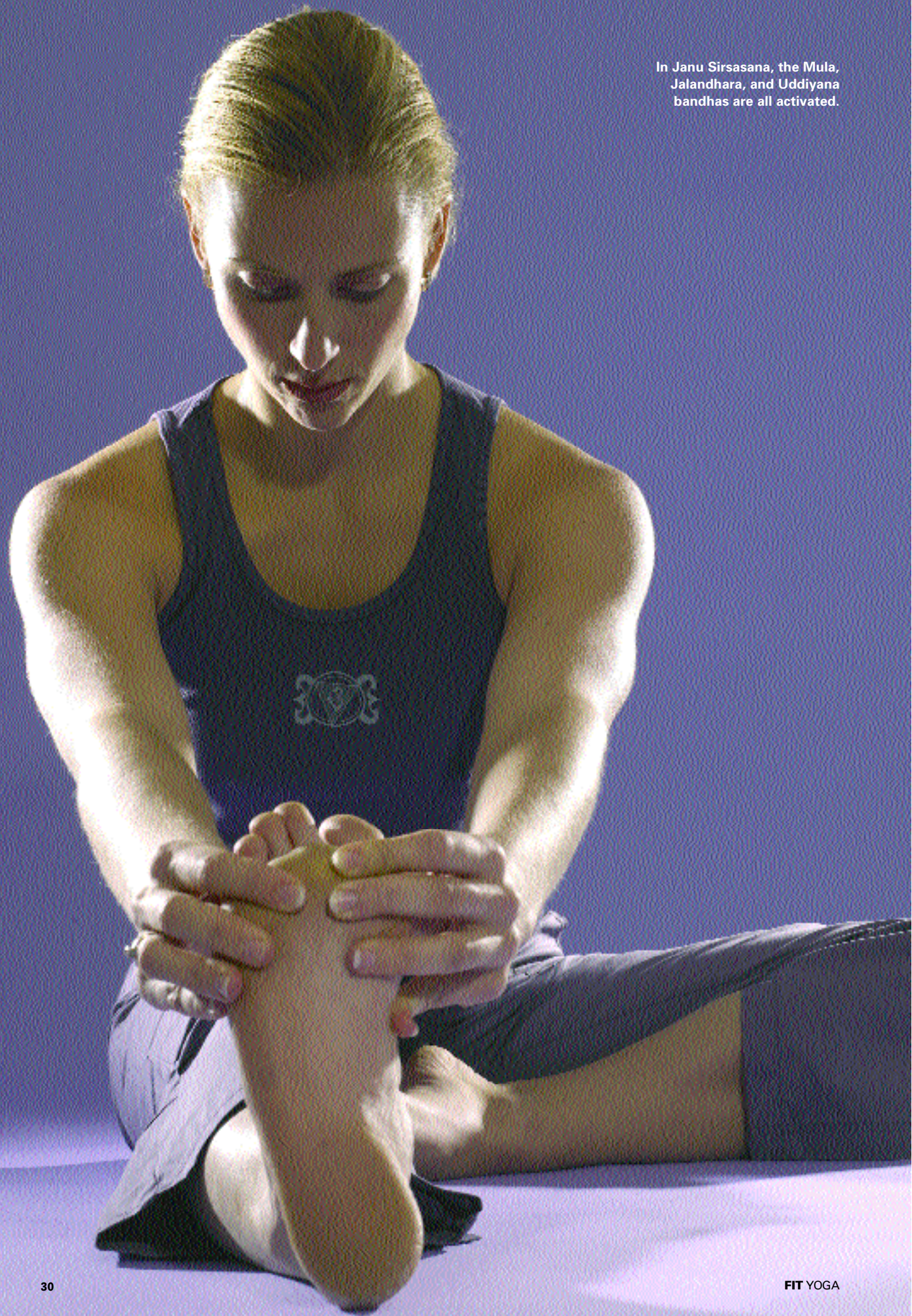


In Janu Sirsasana, the Mula, Jalandhara, and Uddiyana bandhas are all activated.



# Meet the Bandhas



Conserving energy is a good cause...especially when it's the energy in your own body

By Matthew Solan

A drippy faucet can quickly add up to gallons of lost water. A drafty window can silently sabotage your power bill. Your hatha yoga practice can suffer the same fate. At times, it too can unknowingly “leak” and lose precious resources.

When you practice asana and pranayama, you incorporate energy, or prana, into your body. Yet, in order to use that energy well, you need to contain it. So how can you keep that valuable prana from escaping? You don't need to call a plumber or a carpenter, just learn the bandhas.

Bandha (pronounced *BAHN-dah*) means “to lock” or “to bind” in Sanskrit. The bandhas, once activated,

actually serve two roles: They not only lock certain parts of the body so energy can't escape, they help move that internal energy upward, where it can provide the most benefits.

There are three main bandhas: mula bandha, uddiyana bandha, and jalandhara bandha. Mula bandha incorporates the lower spine and pelvis area; uddiyana bandha, the abdominal region; and jalandhara bandha, the throat. When you engage mula bandha or jalandhara bandha, you close off the lower or upper part of the body, respectively. When you activate uddiyana bandha, you create an upward movement of energy from the abdominal area. Although bandhas are used primarily to contain energy from pranayama, they also help during asana practice to tone and energize the body and organs and to provide extra support in various poses.

## Take a Breath

You may find this odd, but if your practice involves just asana, you're not really doing hatha yoga—at least not in the traditional sense. Explore the roots of hatha yoga, and you'll find that it revolves primarily around

pranayama, says Richard Rosen, author of *The Yoga of Breath: A Step-by-Step Guide to Pranayama* (Shambhala, 2002). "In traditional yoga, asanas are the physical foundation of the breathing practice," he says. "Asanas were developed to strengthen and prepare the body for pranayama."

Any serious yogi who strives for a well-rounded practice needs to include pranayama in his or her routine, says Rosen. "It's pranayama that, according to hatha tradition, quiets the overactive brain, then rouses our 'sleeping' spiritual powers."

Pranayama, though, is more than just sitting and being mindful of your breath. A qualified instructor can teach you how to properly and safely perform pranayama. But before you take in your first full inhalation, you need to learn how to execute the bandhas. "They are the foundation for pranayama," says Rosen.

Here's another way to look at the bandhas: Think of the body as an unbaked pot—just a mold of soft clay. If you pour water (energy) into the pot, the clay dissolves. Asanas, however, help to "bake" the pot so it becomes firm and strong—and the pot can now hold the "water." The bandhas then work to block any openings of the pot from where water can seep: from the top (jalandhara bandha), the middle (uddiyana bandha), and the bottom (mula bandha).

Traditionally, the bandhas are practiced selectively during certain aspects of asana and pranayama, and sometimes in combinations with each other. Activated the proper way at the proper time, bandhas can harness the energy you've generated and help it flow upward through the body.

Sometimes, the sensation can be prominent as you contract certain muscles, while other times, it

can be a subtle energetic sensation. Here's a closer look at the bandhas and how to perform them:

## Mula Bandha (Root Lock):

Mula bandha (pronounced *MOO-lah BAHN-dah*) involves engaging the perineum, a group of muscles that extends the entire length of the pelvic floor. In order to locate the perineum, press a finger into the space between the anus and genitals. Better yet, sit for a few minutes with a tennis ball placed in this area to get a good sensation of where the perineum lies.

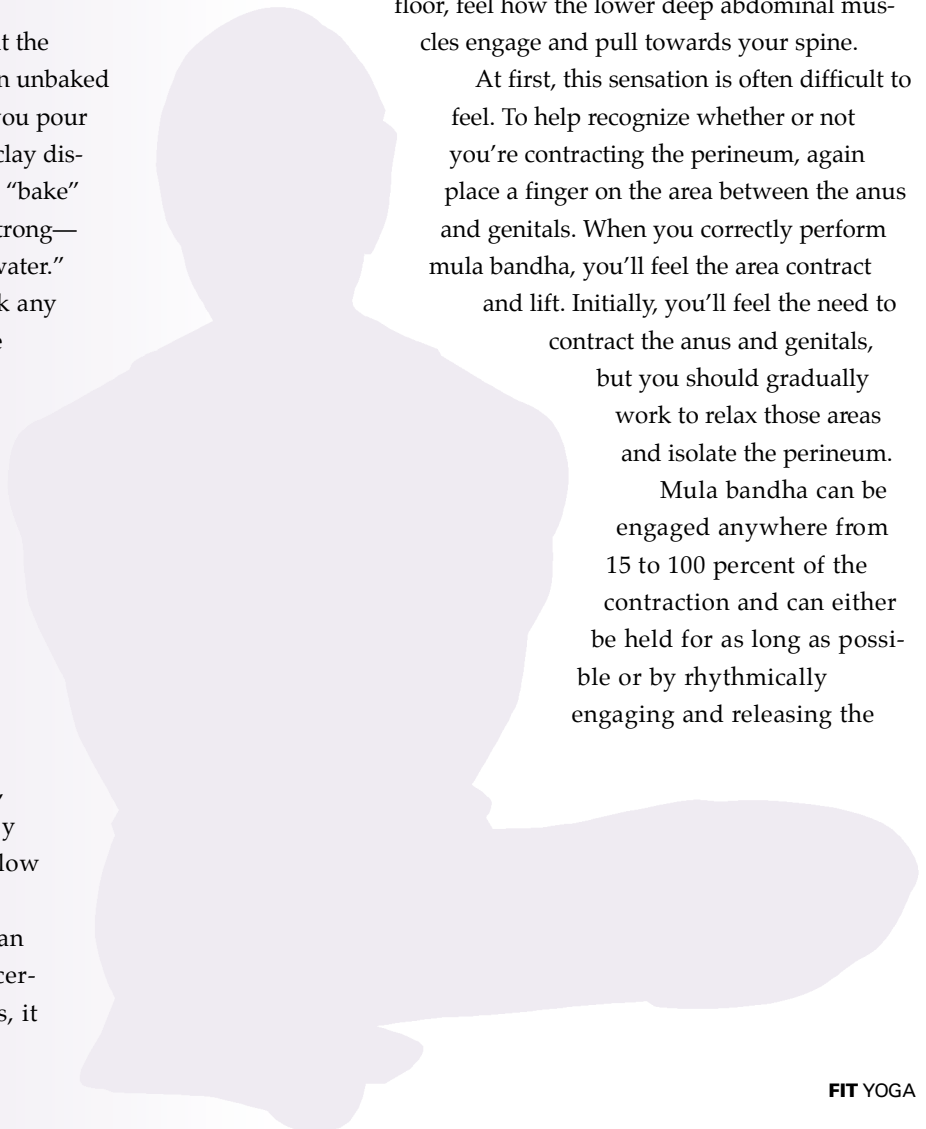
**How to Practice:** Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position or in a chair. On an exhalation, try to contract the muscles between your pubic bone and the tailbone, pulling up the perineum towards the abdomen. As you draw up your pelvic floor, feel how the lower deep abdominal muscles engage and pull towards your spine.

At first, this sensation is often difficult to feel. To help recognize whether or not you're contracting the perineum, again place a finger on the area between the anus and genitals. When you correctly perform mula bandha, you'll feel the area contract and lift. Initially, you'll feel the need to

contract the anus and genitals, but you should gradually work to relax those areas and isolate the perineum.

Mula bandha can be engaged anywhere from 15 to 100 percent of the contraction and can either be held for as long as possible or by rhythmically engaging and releasing the

Activated  
the proper way  
at the proper time,  
bandhas can harness the  
energy you've generated  
and help it flow upward  
through the body.



contraction with the breath.

**Caution:** Do not strain or hold your breath while performing mula bandha. And be careful not to harden the groin, belly, and throat. Another way to experience mula bandha is to work in an inversion like Viparita Karani (Legs Up the Wall Pose). Here, you can experience the lift of the perineum via gravity without actually contracting any muscles.

## Jalandhara Bandha

### (Throat Lock or Chin Lock)

Jalandhara bandha (pronounced *jal-ahn-DAHR-a BAHN-dah*) is commonly interpreted from Sanskrit to mean “chin lock” or “throat lock,” but these names are somewhat misleading, as they imply that jalandhara bandha is about the chin pressing on the sternum. But the correct way to perform jalandhara bandha is to lower your chin to a raised sternum.

**How to Practice:** Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position with your palms face-down on top of your knees. (If this is uncomfortable, sit in a chair.) Lift your sternum, lengthen the spine, and relax the shoulders. Close your eyes, and let your breath get slow and deep. Then, inhale slowly.

As your lungs become approximately two-thirds full to capacity, begin to drop your chin towards your chest, and then draw it in so the back of your neck stays long. Firm the shoulder blades against the back torso to help raise the sternum to meet your chin. Hold this position during the exhalation for about five to eight seconds.

To release, raise your chin and take several slow deep breaths

*Continued on page 88*