

Meet the Bandhas

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until your breathing returns to normal. Rosen suggests beginners take two to four regular breaths before repeating. Begin your practice with three rounds, and gradually, build up to 10 or more.

At first, your chin probably won't reach your sternum, or if it does, it won't feel comfortable. To help avoid overstretching your neck muscles, place a firmly rolled-up washcloth under your chin. This supports the chin and keeps you from rounding your neck. As your practice progresses, you can make the roll smaller and smaller until you can perform jalandhara bandha without it.

Caution: Don't perform jalandhara bandha if you suffer from high blood pressure or heart disease, unless you are under the supervision of an experienced pranayama teacher.

Uddiyana Bandha (Abdominal Lock)

Uddiyana bandha (pronounced *ooh-dee-AHN-ah BAHN-dah*) means "flying up" in Sanskrit. This abdominal lock lifts energy from the lower abdomen.

How to Practice: Stand with your knees bent, feet slightly wider than your hips, and your hands braced against your thighs. Lower the chin to nest in the notch between the collarbones, at the pit of the throat. Let your breath get slow and deep. Then, quickly exhale all the breath through your nose and take a "false" inhalation, expanding the ribcage as if you were inhaling so the abdominal muscles get sucked up towards the

thorax. This creates the lock without hardening the belly.

Hold your breath as you hold the abdominal lock for as long as is comfortable, or about five to 15 seconds. Keep the facial muscles soft and relaxed, and gaze towards your torso.

To release, soften the abdominal muscles and slowly inhale through the nose. Follow this

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with a few slow, deep breaths until your breathing returns to normal. Initially, you should practice only three rounds at a time, and then increase in increments of one or two until you've reached 10.

Caution: You shouldn't perform uddiyana bandha if you have high blood pressure, if you're pregnant, or suffer from heart disease, glaucoma, hernia, or ulcers. You should also practice only on an empty stomach. "Always perform uddiyana bandha after the exhalation and before the inhalation," says Rosen.

An Extra Lift

Rosen says the order in which you learn the bandhas depends on what yoga tradition you follow. Iyengar yoga, for example, dictates a conservative approach and suggests beginning with jalandhara bandha because it prevents the pressure in the chest from disturbing the organs of the head: the eyes,

inner ears, and brain, says Rosen.

And the amount of time you spend on each bandha before moving on to the next depends on the individual. "The bandhas are not something you should fly through," says Rosen. "You need a lot of practice. It's not something you can master in a few weeks." A good plan is to devote at least several months on each bandha, he adds.

Another way to practice the bandhas is with your asanas. As you activate the bandhas, you can improve your physical practice by bringing more "lift" into your poses. And since they also help to contain and move energy, bandhas can improve your strength and balance so you can hold poses with greater integrity.

"In asanas, the bandhas help create an upward surge of internal energy," says Shiva Rea, a Los Angeles-based vinyasa-flow yoga teacher. "This is especially true in standing poses, arm balances, seated forward bends, and back bends."

Take, for instance, Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulder Stand) and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose). When you go up into both poses, you activate jalandhara bandha as you bring your chin towards your rising chest. The lock not only helps to regulate prana to the heart and throat, but also keeps the energy of the pose from "overheating" your head, says Rea.

In a relatively simple pose like Tadasana (Mountain Pose), activating mula bandha can encourage you to lift more from the pelvic region, which supports your posture. In standing poses or squats, uddiyana bandha creates stability in the core and helps create extension in the spine.

Of all the bandhas, though,

mula bandha tends to see the most action in asana. “You practice mula bandha on a small level in almost every pose,” says Nicole Nichols, an advanced-certified Jivamukti yoga teacher with the Jivamukti Yoga Center in New York City. “Mula bandha provides ‘lightness’ to the poses and keeps prana flowing upward.

For example, when you hold Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II Pose) for 10 breaths, you have a tendency to feel heavy while sustaining the pose,” she says. “Engaging mula bandha can help create extra lift and support by bringing your concentration to your center.”

It’s also common to activate two bandhas at one time in poses, especially mula bandha and uddiyana bandha.

In Trikonasana (Triangle Pose), mula bandha helps ground your body, while uddiyana bandha encourages you to extend your spine and direct your breath upward, which allows the back-bend of the pose to occur in the upper back and not the lower ribs.

In an arm balance like Bakasana (Crow Pose), mula bandha helps get your feet off the ground, while uddiyana bandha allows your hips to reach higher so you can maintain the pose longer.

The bandhas may sound—and, at times, even feel—insignificant, but don’t underestimate their impact on your asana and pranayama practices. Just as you would pull out the wrench to stop that drippy faucet, when you apply the bandhas to stop any prana leaks, you’ll be amazed how much energy you can save. 🧘

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Your Stars

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Cancer (June 21 - July 22)

Have close relationships become too routine? Be aware of complaining or criticizing. If single, open your mind to future love by releasing negativity. Uncover your playful side by taking a fun class or joining a sports team. Visit art galleries or do crafts. Bake cookies. Take on the mindset of an optimistic child. “Bad stuff” dwindles and loses its grip as you ignore it. **Asanas of the season:** Focus on poses that are easy and fun. Take a break from challenge and stress!

Leo (July 23 - Aug. 22) Bring your yoga philosophy into your home. Be patient with family members. We all navigate though life differently, just as our yoga postures vary. If I lack flexibility, my Triangle won’t look like yours. Strive to be non-judgmental and non-interfering. The resulting harmony will astound you! Also, create a yoga-practice space at home for a spiritual oasis. **Asanas of the season:** Postures that are centered and still, such as Mountain or Child’s Pose.

Virgo (Aug. 23 - Sept. 22) Your theme for winter is enjoyment. Observe how you rob yourself of happiness—through negative thinking, constant worry, addiction to accomplishing tasks. Center your meditation on silly memories that make you laugh. Cultivate sacred joy! Make time each day for fun and spontaneity. Create art. Cook with unusual spices. Surround yourself with upbeat people. **Asanas of the season:** Invent your own playful poses: How about “Squirrel Pose” or “Lazy-Cat-Sleeping-on-the-Couch Posture”?

Libra (Sept. 23 - Oct. 22) You want perfection in your appearance

and possessions. Libras want the best body, the best clothes, the best hair. True security and confidence come from knowing you possess the power of the Universe within your soul! Acknowledge the many blessings of love in your life. Appreciate your intrinsic beauty that you can only enhance, not create. You’ll feel more comfortable in your skin and will also be surprised at how prosperous you feel! **Asanas of the season:** Simple postures like Child’s Pose and Savasana.

Scorpio (Oct. 23 - Nov. 21) Challenge yourself in your yoga practice. Focus your energy on blasting past limitations. As you experience yoga victories, you’ll be able to open other doors that seemed closed. Make improvements in relationships. Seek a new job, or ask for better circumstances in your present one. Overcome bad habits that compromise your health or fitness. Enjoy your personal power! **Asanas of the season:** Strong postures such as Cobra, Warrior, and Hero Pose.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22 - Dec. 21) Commit to a daily meditation practice. Don’t expect “spiritual fireworks.” Instead, humbly sit for five or 10 minutes, follow your breath, and attempt to still your thoughts. Ask your intuition for answers, and trust your hunches. Results will be gradual, but solid and powerful! Don’t give up on listening to your soul, even if it “gets boring.” **Asanas of the season:** Easy Pose, Savasana, or Mountain, with meditation. Challenge yourself by staying with one posture as you explore the depths of both the pose and your spirit! 🧘

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