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## Importance of Yoga and its contribution to the world

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### Abstract

There are some misconceptions in regard to yoga prevalent especially among some sections in the west. Yoga is not magic or a feat of any kind, physical or mental. It is neither drill nor frill. Yoga is subjective science based on a sound philosophy and deep psychology. Its spiritual mental or physical important cannot be separated from each other. It is proposed to place before all seekers, the main principles that underlie the gospel of the Bhagavad-Gita in its aspect of practice or the Yoga of Meditation. Yogic asana are a cure and a prevention of many diseases, especially that of stomach or digestion. It is means by which the delicate balance of the bodily humors of Kaff, Vata, and Pita is maintained. Yoga is the simplest form of relaxation, thus the horror of psycho-somatic diseases does not loom large on those who practice yoga daily.

**Keywords:** Yoga, history, types, bandhas, benefits etc

### Introduction

Yoga is essentially a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science, which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. It is an art and science of healthy living. The word 'Yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. As per Yogic scriptures the practice of Yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, Man & Nature. According to modern scientists, everything in the universe is just a manifestation of the same quantum firmament. One who experiences this oneness of existence is said to be in yoga, and is termed as a yogi, having attained to a state of freedom referred to as mukti, nirvana or moksha. Thus the aim of Yoga is Self-realization, to overcome all kinds of sufferings leading to 'the state of liberation' (Moksha) or 'freedom' (Kaivalya). Living with freedom in all walks of life, health and harmony shall be the main objectives of Yoga practice. "Yoga" also refers to an inner science comprising of a variety of methods through which human beings can realize this union and achieve mastery over their destiny. Yoga, being widely considered as an 'immortal cultural outcome' of Indus Saraswati Valley civilization – dating back to 2700 B.C., has proved itself catering to both material and spiritual upliftment of humanity. Basic humane values are the very identity of Yoga Sadhana. According to Panini, the great Grammarian, the word Yoga is derived from two roots viz yujir and yuja—one referring to yoking (yujir yoga) and the other referring to mental concentration (yuj samadhi) and to sense control yoga standing for mental concentration is the theme of the entire Indian system dealing with yoga. It also implies the control of senses. Thus second derivation of the word yoga consists in Citta Vrithinirodha. i.e., the silencing of all activities in the mind's substance.

Vyasa too, in his commentary on Patanjali, takes reintegration (yoga) and identification (samadhi) as synonymous. Shri Gaddadhara, the teacher of logic (Nyara) says, Reintegration means "identification" (samadhi). The union (samyoga) of some part of one's being with anything. Whatever it may be, of which there is a desire to know the essential nature, even though it is beyond sensory perception through a mind brought under control by an effort to remove its instability is called "Conscious Identification". "Conscious Identification" is the state of full cognition. This means that in this state the object of contemplation is actually witnessed and the mind is fixed upon it. This is characterized by the silencing of all thought except that of the object contemplated upon. According to vedanta, yoga means supreme realization. Yoga is the reunion of the living self with the supreme self.

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According to the treatises on yoga, supreme realization is considered as the aim of all yogic practices. But the means of this realization as well as all intermediary stages are also taken to be included in the term yoga. Yoga is thus defined, "The silencing of the mental activities which lead to the complete realization of the intrinsic nature of the supreme person is called Yoga".

According to the Puranas that particular inclination of the mind which is accompanied by an active desire to know the self and which leads to union with supreme is called Yoga. The limits of the physical body can never be transgressed without knowing and mastering the sensory impulses which govern the process of living. The most vital impulses delude us the most, thus safely protecting vital functions from dangerous interferences. That is why the vital instincts and rhythms can only be acted upon and mastered through a very expert technique. It is this technique which is called Yoga.

Basically, all physical and mental knowledge is an experience. A conception uncorroborated by experience remains a speculation and we can never be certain of its reality. The extent of our knowledge is therefore limited by the greater or lesser extension of our perceptions.

Indian philosophers have asserted that all knowledge is built upon experience. But they maintain that an outward perception only is not a real knowing, and that the only way for us to know a thing completely, outwardly and inwardly, is to identify ourselves with it. Only when we are one with it, can we know it in itself and not merely as it appears to be. This is the intention behind Yoga which refers to identification.

Sanskrit, the Indo-European language of the Vedas, India's ancient religious texts, gave birth to both the literature and the technique of yoga. One definition of the word Sanskrit, "well-formed, refined, perfect or polished," connotes substance and clarity, qualities exemplified in the practice of yoga.

The Sanskrit word yoga has several translations and can be interpreted in many ways. It comes from the root yug and originally meant "to hitch up," as in attaching horses to a vehicle. Another definition was "to put to active and purposeful use." Still other translations are "yoke, join, or concentrate." Essentially, yoga has come to describe a means of uniting, or a method of discipline. A male who practices this discipline is called a yogi or yogin; a female practitioner, a yogini.

Yoga comes out of an oral tradition in which the teaching was transmitted directly from teacher to student. The Indian sage Patanjali has been credited with the collation of this oral tradition in his classical work, the Yoga Sutra, a 2,000-year-old treatise on yogic philosophy. A collection of 195 statements, the Sutra provides a kind of philosophical guidebook for dealing with the challenges of being human.

Giving guidance on how to gain mastery over the mind and emotions and advice on spiritual growth, the Yoga Sutra provides the framework upon which all yoga practiced today is based. Literally meaning "thread," sutra has also been translated as "aphorism," which means a tersely phrased statement of truth. Another definition of sutra is "the condensation of the greatest amount of knowledge into the most concise description possible." Keeping these meanings in the mind, we might think of the art and science of yoga as a kind of magnificent tapestry that is woven together by the threads of universal truths.

The word yoga can also be used as an extension for knowledge, love, action, etc. Since these are also means of liberation (moksha) and are thus the instruments of

reintegration (Yoga). The activities of the mind are said to be five in number. These are ascertaining of facts (pramana) false knowledge (viparyaya knowledge contrary to facts), imagination (vikalpa), sleep the experience of being unconscious and memory (smriti). The modes of ascertaining the real nature of things is direct experience. Deduction therefrom, and the traditionally transmitted revelation. The mental activity which through sensory perception leads to the exact knowledge of things as they constitute the ascertaining of facts through direct evidence.

### History of Yoga

Yoga's history has many places of obscurity and uncertainty due to its oral transmission of sacred texts and the secretive nature of its teachings. The early writings on yoga were transcribed on fragile palm leaves that were easily damaged, destroyed or lost. The development of yoga can be traced back to over 5,000 years ago, but some researchers think that yoga may be up to 10,000 years old. Yoga's long, rich history can be divided into four main periods of innovation, practice and development.

### Vedic Yoga

Now we are entering somewhat more technical territory, and I will have to use and explain a number of Sanskrit terms.

The yogic teachings found in the above-mentioned Rig-Veda and the other three ancient hymnodies are known as Vedic Yoga. The Sanskrit word veda means "knowledge," while the Sanskrit term rig (from ric) means "praise." Thus the sacred Rig-Veda is the collection of hymns that are in praise of a higher power. This collection is in fact the fountainhead of Hinduism, which has around one billion adherents today. You could say that the Rig-Veda is to Hinduism what the Book of Genesis is to Christianity.

The other three Vedic hymnodies are the Yajur-Veda ("Knowledge of Sacrifice"), Sama-Veda ("Knowledge of Chants"), and Atharva-Veda ("Knowledge of Atharvan"). The first collection contains the sacrificial formulas used by the Vedic priests. The second text contains the chants accompanying the sacrifices. The third hymnody is filled with magical incantations for all occasions, but also includes a number of very powerful philosophical hymns. It is connected with Atharvan, a famous fire priest who is remembered as having been a master of magical rituals. These hymnodies can be compared to the various books of the Old Testament.

It is clear from what has been said thus far that Vedic Yoga—which could also be called Archaic Yoga—was intimately connected with the ritual life of the ancient Indians. It revolved around the idea of sacrifice as a means of joining the material world with the invisible world of the spirit. In order to perform the exacting rituals successfully, the sacrificers had to be able to focus their mind for a prolonged period of time. Such inner focusing for the sake of transcending the limitations of the ordinary mind is the root of Yoga.

When successful, the Vedic yogi was graced with a "vision" or experience of the transcendental reality. A great master of Vedic Yoga was called a "seer"—in Sanskrit rishi. The Vedic seers were able to see the very fabric of existence, and their hymns speak of their marvelous intuitions, which can still inspire us today.

### Pre-Classical Yoga

This category covers an extensive period of approximately 2,000 years until the second century A.D. Preclassical Yoga comes in various forms and guises. The earliest

manifestations were still closely associated with the Vedic sacrificial culture, as developed in the Brāhmanas and Âranyakas. The Brāhmanas are Sanskrit texts explaining the Vedic hymns and the rituals behind them. The Âranyakas are ritual texts specific to those who chose to live in seclusion in a forest hermitage.

Yoga came into its own with the Upanishads, which are gnostic texts expounding the hidden teaching about the ultimate unity of all things. There are over 200 of these scriptures, though only a handful of them were composed in the period prior to Gautama the Buddha (fifth century B.C.). These works can be likened to the New Testament, which rests on the Old Testament but at the same time goes beyond it.

One of the most remarkable Yoga scriptures is the Bhagavad-Gîtâ (“Lord’s Song”), of which the great social reformer Mahatma Gandhi spoke as follows:

When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad-Gita. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies—and my life has been full of external tragedies and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita. (Young India, 1925, pp. 1078-79)

In its significance, this work of only 700 verses perhaps is to Hindus what Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is to Christians. Its message, however, is not to turn the other cheek but to actively oppose evil in the world. In its present form, the Bhagavad-Gîtâ (Gîtâ for short) was composed around 500 B.C. and since then has been a daily inspiration to millions of Hindus. Its central teaching is to the point: To be alive means to be active and, if we want to avoid difficulties for ourselves and others, our actions must be benign and also go beyond the grip of the ego. A simple matter, really, but how difficult to accomplish in daily life!

Preclassical Yoga also comprises the many schools whose teachings can be found in India’s two great national epics, the Râmâyana and the Mahâbhârata (in which the Bhagavad-Gîtâ is embedded and which is seven times the size of the Iliad and Odyssey combined). These various preclassical schools developed all kinds of techniques for achieving deep meditation through which yogis and yoginis can transcend the body and mind and discover their true nature.

### Classical Yoga

This label applies to the eightfold Yoga—also known as Râja-Yoga—taught by Patanjali in his Yoga-Sûtra. This Sanskrit text is composed of just under 200 aphoristic statements, which have been commented on over and over again through the centuries. Sooner or later all serious Yoga students discover this work and have to grapple with its terse statements. The word sûtra (which is related to Latin suture) means literally “thread.” Here it conveys a thread of memory, an aid to memorization for students eager to retain Patanjali’s knowledge and wisdom.

The Yoga-Sûtra was probably written some time in the second century A.D. The earliest available Sanskrit commentary on it is the Yoga-Bhâshya (“Speech on Yoga”) attributed to Vyâsa. It was authored in the fifth century A.D. and furnishes fundamental explanations of Patanjali’s often cryptic statements.

Beyond a few legends, nothing is known about either Patanjali or Vyâsa. This is a problem with most ancient Yoga adepts and even with many more recent ones. Often all we have are their teachings, but this is of course more important

than any historical information we could dig up about their personal lives.

Patanjali, who is by the way often wrongly called the “father of Yoga,” believed that each individual is a composite of matter (prakriti) and spirit (purusha). He understood the process of Yoga to bring about their separation, thereby restoring the spirit in its absolute purity. His formulation is generally characterized as philosophical dualism. This is an important point, because most of India’s philosophical systems favor one or the other kind of nondualism: The countless aspects or forms of the empirical world are in the last analysis the same “thing”—pure formless but conscious existence.

### Post-Classical Yoga

This is again a very comprehensive category, which refers to all those many types and schools of Yoga that have sprung up in the period after Patanjali’s Yoga-Sûtra and that are independent of this seminal work. In contrast to classical Yoga, postclassical Yoga affirms the ultimate unity of everything. This is the core teaching of Vedânta, the philosophical system based on the teachings of the Upanishads.

In a way, the dualism of classical Yoga can be seen as a brief but powerful interlude in a stream of nondualist teachings going back to ancient Vedic times. According to these teachings, you, we, and everyone or everything else is an aspect or expression of one and the same reality. In Sanskrit that singular reality is called brahman (meaning “that which has grown expansive”) or âtman (the transcendental Self as opposed to the limited ego-self).

A few centuries after Patanjali, the evolution of Yoga took an interesting turn. Now some great adepts were beginning to probe the hidden potential of the body. Previous generations of yogis and yoginis had paid no particular attention to the body. They had been more interested in contemplation to the point where they could exit the body consciously. Their goal had been to leave the world behind and merge with the formless reality, the spirit.

Under the influence of alchemy—the spiritual forerunner of chemistry—the new breed of Yoga masters created a system of practices designed to rejuvenate the body and prolong its life. They regarded the body as a temple of the immortal spirit, not merely as a container to be discarded at the first opportunity. They even explored through advanced yogic techniques the possibility of energizing the physical body to such a degree that its biochemistry is changed and even its basic matter is reorganized to render it immortal.

This preoccupation of theirs led to the creation of Hatha-Yoga, an amateur version of which is today widely practiced throughout the world. It also led to the various branches and schools of Tantra-Yoga, of which Hatha-Yoga is just one approach.

### Yoga in the Western world

A few gurus, namely Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and Paramahansa Yogananda, brought the knowledge of yoga from India to the United States. It remained a fringe practice for Westerners until facets of yogic philosophy and Hindu symbology were adopted into the mainstream American consciousness during the hippie movement in the 1960s.

Ever heard of a little band called The Beatles? It wasn’t too long after the band traveled to India that yoga found itself deep in the capitalist-industrial-complex, where American corporations saw how much money could be made off of yoga

being branded as “chic.”

This is when yoga was repackaged as a luxury workout rather than a spiritual belief system.

### **Types of yoga**

Yoga has never been used in a narrow sense, rather it is all pervading no aspect of life seems to be devoid of yogic – approach for the welfare of the humanity during its existence. If the aim of yoga is the “union of the individual soul with the supreme soul with the supreme soul,” it can be understood that there are many ways and methods to effect that union. Hence, yoga is of numerous types depending on one’s inclination, resources, and capacity. The main types of yoga are Gyan yoga, Karma yoga, Ashtang yoga, Raja yoga, Hath yoga, Kundli yoga, and Sama yoga. All lead to the same destination salvation or union with Supreme Being.

The eight limbs of the Yoga Sutras are meant to be learned in the order they’re listed here. A person must master each step before they continue to the next one.

### **Yamas**

Yamas are the principles that teach us how to treat others and the world around us. These include:

#### **Ahimsa (non-harming)**

This principle refers to behaving in a way that nourishes growth and contributes to the life force around us. Yoga and activism are interlinking mindsets in this way. Social justice seeks to uplift and liberate all people from harm, which is ahimsa at work within the collective.

This tenet is about treating and caring for others as an extension of us.

On a side note, Western yogis sometimes preach that in order to be a yogi, one must be vegan. However, Indian diet almost always consists of dairy products, which are revered for their health benefits. Being a vegan is a valid choice, but it isn’t necessary to embody yoga and its values.

#### **Satya (truthfulness)**

We all wear masks, or different personalities, depending on who we’re interacting with. Yoga asks us to drop the mask and find our true, authentic self — and to act from this self.

When we’re able to show this true self to the world, we live more closely with reality and not within maya (illusion). Speaking the truth isn’t always the easiest path, but it is the noble one.

When we use our voice to speak against injustice in a system that seeks to silence it, we are practicing Satya.

#### **Asteya (non-stealing)**

This principal is not as literal as simply “do not take material items from others.” It’s about respecting other folks’ energy, time, and resources.

In order to practice Asteya in personal relationships, we must create and honor boundaries.

This can also be applied to our Earth. When we take from the land without giving back, we’re creating an imbalance, which isn’t the middle path of balance that yoga asks us to walk.

In addition, to appropriate yoga — to take yoga from its original space in the world and use it in a way that serves the individual rather than honor its roots — is to go against this piece of yoga itself.

#### **Brahmacharya (abstinence)**

This may be applied as total celibacy, but it can also be

performed by simply treating our primal life force as sacred. We carry sexual energy within us, and yoga asks that rather than spreading it in many directions without thought, we mindfully use it in ways that align with the rest of yoga philosophy.

(I want to note that the word “Brahma” may trigger certain folks. This word is often referred to in Vedic texts that enforce the caste system. This system in itself goes against all postulations of yoga, which ask us to treat one another in a mindful and kind way. It is important that we abolish the caste system in order to apply yoga principals to society at large).

#### **Aparigraha (non-hoarding)**

It has been said that greed is the root of all evil. Greed stems from a scarcity mentality. This results in individuals holding on too tightly to wealth, material items, and people, which perpetuates harm.

In order to live in a spiritually aligned way, we must trust that we always have enough, allowing money, items, and other blessings to flow in and out of our lives with ease. It’s imperative we continue to demand that our societal systems operate from a place of Aparigraha as well.

We can see how resource disparity and poverty are a direct result of greed and hoarding. This can be helped by building systems based on a foundation of mutual aid and sustainability.

#### **Niyamas**

Niyamas are the standards by which we should practice self-discipline.

#### **Saucha (cleanliness)**

Although gurus and yoga scripture do recommend bathing regularly, eating clean, and keeping one’s space clean, this tenet also refers to having pure and positive thoughts about yourself and others. When we are clean in the mind, we become clear channels for the divine to enter us.

#### **Santosha (contentment)**

We must practice the ability to feel completely content with the way everything is right now in this very moment. We live in a capitalistic system in which we’re told to always strive for and want more, which means we’re never satisfied with what we already have.

When we can just sit and feel complete with how things are in the present, we are practicing yoga.

#### **Tapas (heat)**

The saying is that practice makes perfect, and the reason for this is because repeated effort yields mastery of that which we are attempting to learn.

Tapasya reminds us that sometimes the process of mastery can be painful, but this pain (or heat) can be used to fuel our practice, and allow us to grow and learn from it.

#### **Svadyaya (self-knowledge)**

The Bhagavad Gita says, “Yoga is the journey of the self, through the self, to the self.” Yoga is meant to be a process of direct inquiry into our internal world. The more we dive inward, the more we can learn about the infinite nature of our consciousness.

This yogic tenet is often forgotten in the Western view of yoga as a workout because so much of it is externalized: We wonder how we look in a posture, if we are thin enough, or feel the need to compete with others in class. True yoga is a

personal process that has nothing to do with the outside world or how we're perceived.

### **Ishvarapranidhana (full surrender to the divine)**

Many folks who suffer from addiction are helped by a 12-step program. The first step to recovery is to surrender to a higher power.

The reason this is so medicinal is because it allows us to let go of the need to control everything. When we realize that there are greater forces at play in our lives, we begin to navigate life with humility and awe.

Yoga asks us to seek a supreme divine being (whatever that means to us personally), and allow ourselves to connect with them through our practice.

As you can see, the first two limbs of yoga (which are to be mastered first) are more about how we live than how we exercise. The rest of the limbs teach us how to practice yoga in our physical bodies and minds.

### **Asana**

Asana is the practice of the yoga postures.

Pantajali taught the physical practice of yoga as movements that are meant to be done with ease and joy. He taught that it's important to take your time with each pose, and move from posture to posture fully present by focusing the mind on the breath.

Yoga as a workout can be harmful because it can push students past their limitations, and it often leads to injury. The sutras tell us that yoga is meant to be done in a relaxed state that aims to connect one with their body and combat duality in the mind.

Daily asana results in increased wellness in the body and mind.

### **Pranayama**

Pranayama is breath control.

Yoga theory states that breath is the way we take in and interact with the subtle life force energy that surrounds us. When we're able to make breathing a mindful practice, we're able to invigorate our bodies with this life force and change the way that our central nervous system reacts to stress.

The original formula for breath control is a 1:4:2 ratio. Inhale (Purak, in Sanskrit) for 1 second, retain the breath in the body for 4 seconds (Kumbhak, in Sanskrit) and exhale for 2 seconds (Rechak, in Sanskrit).

Advanced breath work also incorporates different bandhas (binds) in the body. If you seek to learn more about these binds, please do so with a professional yoga teacher who is well versed in this type of instruction.

### **Pratyahara**

Pratyahara is sense withdrawal. This technique teaches us the way to journey inward and find ultimate peacefulness.

The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture, says our senses are likened to a boat on water. Each time the five senses are enraptured with external objects, the boat is swayed by the tumultuous waves of sense perception.

When we cut our senses off from the external world, we are able to dive within ourselves to the vast universe that lies inside.

I find this practice to be another revolutionary act in the world we live in today. Each time we sit with ourselves and curiously inquire within, we combat the harmfulness of constant externalization of the mind via social media, the news, and consumerism.

The easiest way to practice pratyahara is to close your eyes while practicing asana.

### **Dharana**

Dharana means concentration. Single, pointed focus of the mind aids in deep meditation.

You may choose to look at a candle, a deity statue, or another unmoving object during meditation in order to train the mind in this way. Once the mind has learned focus during meditation, we can take this type of concentration into our daily lives.

When we are able to do a task and focus all of our energy on it, we're able to perform it well and with care. Media today trains the mind to only focus for short stints of time, and to be constantly multitasking. It's important to practice dharana to live in a mindful way.

### **Dhyana**

Dhyana is meditation.

Many folks are nervous to begin meditating. They believe that a person can be good or bad at it. However, meditation is more a state that overcomes us, rather than something that we do.

There have probably been times you were riding a bicycle or reading a book and you felt an immense sense of peace, clarity, and stillness. The truth is, you were meditating. You were fully engrossed in the present moment. Dhyana simply asks us to set aside time each day to invite meditation into our minds and hearts.

We can improve our chances of experiencing meditation by sitting in a quiet space and using pranayama, pratyahara, and dharana in unison.

### **Samadhi**

Finally, samadhi is enlightenment.

The journey of the eight limbs of yoga is meant to take us from doing-ness to being-ness. Once we have mastered all the former steps in the sutras, we are able to accomplish the most important facet of life that propels our spiritual journey forward: the ability to stay in the present moment indefinitely. This does not mean that yogis are meant to stay stagnant. However, yogis who have reached samadhi are detached from the past and future. When they perform an action, they do not dwell on the outcome. All is done with love, and all is done with full presence.

### **Types of Bandhas**

A bandha is a lock or bind in yoga, which is performed in order to direct and regulate the flow of prana (life force energy) to certain parts of the body. Also referred to as an energetic lock, bandha was practiced by yogis of the past to promote energy flow and maintain optimal health.

Bandha is classified into four types: mula, uddiyana, jalandhara and maha. Each bandha is associated with a major energy channel and performance of a particular bandha will influence the flow of prana to that channel.

Bandha may also be called "energetic seal" by Western practitioners.

There are four main bandhas in the body:

- **Mula Bandha:** The root lock
- **Jalandhara Bandha:** The throat lock
- **Uddiyana Bandha:** Lifting of the diaphragm lock
- **Maha Bandha:** All three locks at the same time



### Why are they useful?

What is the point and purpose of closing off the throat, contracting and lifting the abdomen and of drawing inward at the centre of the pelvic floor? Both separately, and all at once?

Essentially, bandhas are engaged to gain control and lock your energy – prana, or life force – the way you want. The locks are employed to attain control of your energy system, to direct this energy to the parts of your body you desire it to go to.

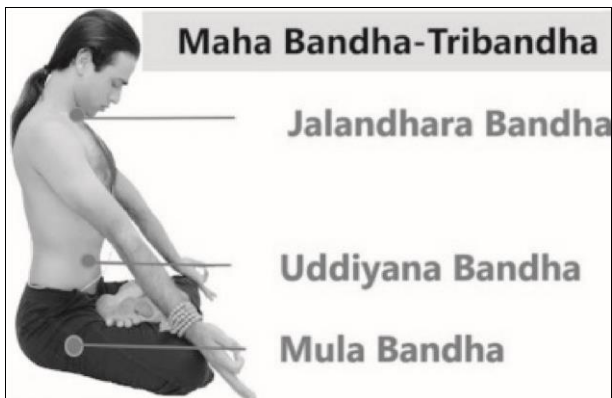
The root (Mula) and throat (Jalandhara) bandhas' function is to seal the upper and lower end of the spinal column. Jalandhara bandha temporarily prevents prana from moving up, while Mula bandha blocks the downward movement of energy and pulls it back towards the navel region. When both are engaged at the same time, it's like two sticks being rubbed together – with the application of the stomach lock as well, magnifying it to produce the fire of heat.

Bandhas are often first learned and engaged during practices of kriya and pranayama and once mastered can be used in asana practice as well. Bear in mind, it may take some practice until you're able to engage them to the most refined degree.

While Mula and Jalandhara bandhas can be performed both after inhalation and exhalation, Uddiyana and Maha bandha are only engaged in Bahya Kumbhka – external retention.

### Benefits of engaging these energy locks

So why is this locking up so beneficial, when yoga is apparently all about opening?



Well, bandhas are extremely fruitful for the brain centres, the nadis (channels through which prana streams) and the chakras (energy centres). They purify, remove blockages and harmonise and balance the self.

Bandhas temporarily halt the flowing of blood, so when released there is an increased flow of fresh blood. This flushes away the old, dead cells and activates the organs to strengthen, renew and rejuvenate as circulation is bolstered.

Engaging the bandhas also teaches and strengthens single point concentration, a steady and controlled breath and a clear, calm mind. It helps to regulate your internal systems, from sexual to hormonal to metabolic and digestive.

It's advisable not to engage Mula bandha during menstruation (the first two to three days) or when applying Ashwini mudra (a kriya exercise where the anus is clenched and unclenched).

### How to engage the bandhas

#### Mula Bandha: The Root

If we explain the bandhas in four steps, Mula bandha is the first.

Men can find it by contracting the area between the anus and the testes. For women – contract the muscles at the bottom of the pelvic floor behind the cervix. At first, the anal sphincter will also 'lock up', but over time and with practice you will learn to differentiate and hone in on the exact location of the root. And an easier way to find it? Here are three different suggestions:

**First:** look at the tip of your nose – you will automatically feel the sensation of the Mula bandha taking hold.

**Second:** for women; if you've ever worried that you've leaked through during 'that' time of the month – the lifting sense you make is locking Mula in. The muscles you contract to hold in what is wanting to flow out is the Mula region.

**Third:** (though this may take a bit of imagination!): sit cross-legged and imagine you're levitating! Instant Mula activation! Mula bandha also naturally comes into play during many day-to-day activities; climbing stairs, riding a bike, carrying shopping bags home. Engaging your root lock during your yoga practice allows your energy to flow up, not down and out, making it grow manifold and leaving you with that 'floaty' feeling. You will be lighter on your limbs, lighter on your mat and lighter in yourself.

- Want to know more? Read: Mula bandha – root lock
- Practice in class with Andrew Wrenn: Core Support and Mula Bandha

#### Jalandhara Bandha: The Throat

'Jal' means throat, 'Jalan' means net and 'dharan' means flow or stream. Therefore, Jalandhara can be interpreted as the locking of the energy flow through the nerves and vessels of the neck area. When engaged with Khecari mudra (curling the tip of your tongue back to the roof of your mouth), its effect magnificently heightens.

To find Jalandhara, sit tall and cross-legged. With your palms pressing into your knees, inhale through your nose and bring your chin towards your neck. Straighten your elbows, pull your chin back and engage the muscles there so you feel them tighten, then retain. It's the double chin you do want!

Jalandhara isn't often performed by itself; rather, it is performed in combination with the other locks in breathing practices. It compresses the sinuses and main arteries of the neck, putting pressure on the throat to balance the thyroid and regulate metabolism. Plus, it relaxes you and alleviates stress.

#### Uddiyana Bandha: The 'False Inhale'

'Uddiyana' means to fly or rise up, and is all about doing just that with your diaphragm. To learn to do so, it's helpful to stand with your feet shoulder-distance apart, bend forward – with a straight back – and place your hands on your knees (or shins, if your hamstrings allow).

With a "false" inhale (that is, the action of taking a breath without actually taking air in), make an upward movement and feel your abdominal wall and organs push up and towards your back, kind of like a suction back and up of all your insides as if you're trying to make your waist smaller.

Your ribs should be protruding over and in front of your abs. You hold this for as long as you can, exiting by releasing your hold, inhaling (always through your nose) and straightening up.

Uddiyana moves energy upwards with much more force than a pure Mula bandha alone. It creates a soft massage for the deeper internal muscles of the lower back and is a fantastic

remedy for abdominal and tummy troubles, as well as a stimulant for digestive juices.

For more on Uddiyana Bandha, read Uddiyana Bandha – Upward Flying Lock Practise in class with Nichi Green in her Prana Flow 4 Core class

### **Maha Bandha: The ‘Ultimate’ Bandha**

To do the ultimate of the bandhas? First engage Mula bandha, then fully exhale and activate Jalandhara. Next, bend forward and ‘suck up’ to hold Uddiyana. This is Maha bandha. To release, do so in the reverse order you engaged (Uddiyana first, Jalandhara second and finally, Mula bandha).

### **Benefits of Yoga**

#### **1. Improves your flexibility**

Improved flexibility is one of the first and most obvious benefits of yoga. During your first class, you probably won’t be able to touch your toes, never mind do a backbend. But if you stick with it, you’ll notice a gradual loosening, and eventually, seemingly impossible poses will become possible.

#### **2. Builds muscle strength**

Strong muscles do more than look good. They also protect us from conditions like arthritis and back pain, and help prevent falls in elderly people. And when you build strength through yoga, you balance it with flexibility. If you just went to the gym and lifted weights, you might build strength at the expense of flexibility.

#### **3. Perfects your posture**

Your head is like a bowling ball—big, round, and heavy. When it’s balanced directly over an erect spine, it takes much less work for your neck and back muscles to support it. Move it several inches forward, however, and you start to strain those muscles. Hold up that forward-leaning bowling ball for eight or 12 hours a day and it’s no wonder you’re tired. And fatigue might not be your only problem.

#### **4. Prevents cartilage and joint breakdown**

Each time you practice yoga, you take your joints through their full range of motion. This can help prevent degenerative arthritis or mitigate disability by “squeezing and soaking” areas of cartilage that normally aren’t used. Joint cartilage is like a sponge; it receives fresh nutrients only when its fluid is squeezed out and a new supply can be soaked up.

#### **5. Protects your spine**

Spinal disks—the shock absorbers between the vertebrae that can herniate and compress nerves—crave movement. That’s the only way they get their nutrients. If you’ve got a well-balanced asana practice with plenty of backbends, forward bends, and twists, you’ll help keep your disks supple. Long term flexibility is a known benefit of yoga, but one that remains especially relevant for spinal health.

#### **6. Better your bone health**

It’s well documented that weight-bearing exercise strengthens bones and helps ward off osteoporosis. Many postures in yoga require that you lift your own weight.

#### **7. Increases your blood flow**

Yoga gets your blood flowing. More specifically, the relaxation exercises you learn in yoga can help your circulation, especially in your hands and feet. Yoga also gets more oxygen to your cells, which function better as a result.

#### **8. Drains your lymphs and boosts immunity**

When you contract and stretch muscles, move organs around, and come in and out of yoga postures, you increase the drainage of lymph (a viscous fluid rich in immune cells). This helps the lymphatic system fight infection, destroy cancerous cells, and dispose of the toxic waste products of cellular functioning.

#### **9. Increases your heart rate**

When you regularly get your heart rate into the aerobic range, you lower your risk of heart attack and can relieve depression. While not all yoga is aerobic, if you do it vigorously or take flow or Ashtanga classes, it can boost your heart rate into the aerobic range. But even yoga exercises that don’t get your heart rate up that high can improve cardiovascular conditioning. Studies have found that yoga practice lowers the resting heart rate, increases endurance, and can improve your maximum uptake of oxygen during exercise—all reflections of improved aerobic conditioning.

#### **10. Drops your blood pressure**

If you’ve got high blood pressure, you might benefit from yoga. Two studies of people with hypertension, published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, compared the effects of Savasana (Corpse Pose) with simply lying on a couch. After three months, Savasana was associated with a 26-point drop in systolic blood pressure (the top number) and a 15-point drop in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number—and the higher the initial blood pressure, the bigger the drop).

#### **11. Regulates your adrenal glands**

Yoga lowers cortisol levels. If that doesn’t sound like much, consider this. Normally, the adrenal glands secrete cortisol in response to an acute crisis, which temporarily boosts immune function. If your cortisol levels stay high even after the crisis, they can compromise the immune system. Temporary boosts of cortisol help with long-term memory, but chronically high levels undermine memory and may lead to permanent changes in the brain.

#### **12. Makes you happier**

Feeling sad? Sit in Lotus. Better yet, rise up into a backbend or soar royally into King Dancer Pose. While it’s not as simple as that, one study found that a consistent yoga practice improved depression and led to a significant increase in serotonin levels and a decrease in the levels of monoamine oxidase (an enzyme that breaks down neurotransmitters) and cortisol.

In India lot of money is being spent on the research on yoga. It is again becoming popular every day. Centers are being opened everywhere to attract people to the practice of yoga. These big centers at Bombay, Calcutta, Chennai, etc., make people conscious that salvation of humanity lies in yoga.

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