

The Mula Bandha



by Dr. David Coulter

*The classic text on hatha yoga, the **Hatha Yoga Pradipika**, emphasizes the importance of mastering mula bandha for both advanced pranayama practices as well as an aid to awaking the spiritual awareness necessary for meditation. Swami Vishnu-devananda taught mula bandha as part of the practice of consciously sublimating the lower emotions and sensual desires into a higher spiritual consciousness. Unless this sublimation takes place, and the tendency for the untrained mind to flow outwards into the world of sense-objects is checked, meditation and the awakening of the kundalini are not possible. This reversal of psychic energy is essential for any real lasting control of the mind. We hope that Dr. Coulter's clear anatomical presentation of the mula bandha will help serious students to master this important practice. BEFORE ATTEMPTING TO COMBINE MULA BANDHA WITH ANY PRANAYAMA EXERCISES PLEASE TAKE INSTRUCTION FROM AN EXPERIENCED YOGA TEACHER.*

The Meditative Postures and Mula Bandha

Yogis tell us it is important to apply mula bandha (the root lock) in all the sitting meditative postures. Only by doing this, they say, can we have a sound approach to meditation and govern the energy and vitality of the base of the body. It is the position of the lower extremities that determines the experience of the root lock, and this depends on four things: hip flexibility and the angle between the thighs and the pelvis, the amount of abduction of the thighs, the position of the feet and ankles, and the angle at which the perineum faces the floor. Because these differ from posture to posture, and because the experience of the root lock is fundamental to the experience of each, we shall have to consider the six standard poses individually.

In the friendship pose the base of the body feels open, and because of this, concentration is needed to hold the root lock continuously. But if a soft, padded surface is placed against the front of the perineum, this prop mildly stimulates the muscles of the pelvic floor and of the urogenital triangle. You can use a folded-up washcloth for this purpose, or purchase a little wedge-shaped 'mula bandha cushion'. In either case the prop will allow you to feel the essence of the root lock and leave your mind free for meditation.

In the adamantine pose the problem is similar. If you sit between the feet directly on the floor, you can hold the root lock only with constant attention, especially if the thighs are together, because the perineum is isolated and pulled open. On the other hand, if the knees are spread apart, the buttocks come together and the lock is easier to maintain. Sitting on a bench, you can tilt the pelvis forward, pressing the urogenital triangle against the supporting plank and thus making it simple to hold the lock.



FRIENDSHIP POSTURE (IN CHAIR)



ADAMANTINE POSTURE ON A BENCH

Press the yoni with the left heel. Keep the right heel pressed at the space just above the organ of generation. Contract the anus and draw the apana vayu upwards. This is called mula bandha. The apana vayu which does the function of ejection of excreta has a natural tendency to move downwards. Through the practice of mula bandha, the apana vayu is made to move upwards by contracting the anus and by forcibly drawing it upwards. The prana vayu is united with the apana and the united prana-apano vayu is made to enter the sushumna nadi. Then the yogi attains perfection in yoga. Kundalini is awakened. The yogi drinks the nectar of immortality. He enjoys Siva-pada in sahasrara chakra. He gets all divine vibhuti and aishvarya. When the apana is united with prana, anahata sounds (mystical inner sounds) are heard very distinctly. Prana, apana, nada and bindu unite and the yogi reaches perfection in yoga. This highest stage cannot be reached by the first attempt. One should practice this again and again for a long time. The siddhi in the practice of pranayama is attained through the help of bandhas and mudras. The practice of mula bandha enables one to keep up perfect brahmacharya, gives dhatu-pushti (nerve-vigor), relieves constipation and increases jatharagni. During the practice of concentration, meditation, pranayama and all other yogic kriyas, mula bandha can be applied.

—SWAMI SIVANANDA

In the easy posture the acute angle of the thighs with the trunk makes it difficult to hold the root lock for more than a few seconds. It's almost as difficult as trying to hold the lock while squatting. It is easier to hold if the thighs are more horizontal, as when the easy posture is lifted up by a cushion and the front of the perineum (the urogenital triangle) is facing a folded-up washcloth or mula bandha cushion.

Of the three classic sitting postures, the root lock is most difficult to hold in the lotus posture: the extreme position of the lower extremities tends to draw the anus open and to stretch the entire



PULLING BACK STRAIGHT IN EASY POSTURE



LOTUS POSTURE

Through the mula bandha, prana and apana, nada and bindu unite and obtain perfection in yoga.

There is no doubt about this.

—Hatha Yoga Pradipika

breadth of the perineum. At the other end of the spectrum is the accomplished posture (without supporting cushion), in which the underneath heel places pressure against the central tendon of the perineum and thereby stimulates the muscles of the urogenital and pelvic diaphragms. This makes it possible to hold the lock spontaneously in that posture with little additional attention. In order of difficulty, holding the lock in the auspicious pose is somewhere between these two. As with the friendship, adamantine, and easy postures, a supporting prop at the front of the perineum makes it possible to hold the root lock with only the tiniest thread of attention.



ACCOMPLISHED POSTURE



AUSPICIOUS POSTURE

Mula Bandha, the Root Lock

Mula bandha (the root lock) is a gentle contraction of the pelvic diaphragm and the muscles of the urogenital triangle, which includes the muscles associated with the genitals and the urethra. It does not counter intra-abdominal pressure so much as it seals urogenital energy within the body, controlling and restraining it during breathing exercises and meditation (this is a literary rather than a scientific use of the term 'energy'). What actually happens is more easily sensed than described, so we'll begin with a series of exercises. First try sitting in a hard chair covered with a thin cushion. In a neutral position, neither perfectly upright or slumped, try to blow out but without letting any air escape. Try hard.

Notice that the pelvic region contracts and lifts up involuntarily enough to counter the downward push from the chest and abdominal wall. Now try the mock blowing maneuver again, but this time keep the pelvic region relaxed, and notice that it feels like straining for a bowel movement. Try it one last time, but this time lift the entire anatomical perineum consciously, and you will quickly sense that these efforts bring both the pelvic diaphragm and the muscles of the urogenital region into play.

Next sit really straight, arching the lower back forward. Exhale, pressing in with the abdominal muscles, and notice that it is natural to find a focus for your attention at a point between the anus and genitals. You may sense a slight tension in the muscles of the genitals, but little or none in the anus, and certainly none in the gluteal muscles. This describes the root lock. You don't have to make extreme efforts. The cushion on which you are sitting places enough pressure on the muscles of the urogenital triangle to focus your awareness on the lock.

Now try the same exercise in a slumped posture with the back round-

ed to the rear. This changes everything. It shifts your attention from the front of the anatomical perineum to the rear, and it elicits a mild ashwini mudra [anal lock] instead of mula bandha because you are tipping backward

*Anatomy of Hatha
Yoga is the only
modern authoritative
source that correlates
the study of hatha
yoga with anatomy
and physiology.*

*It is a cornucopia of
readable and reliable
information on the
subject.*

toward the plane of the anal triangle and away from the plane of the urogenital triangle. Sitting straight rocks you up and forward so that contact with the cushion favours the root lock. The lesson: sit straight if you wish to apply mula bandha.

If this is still confusing, it will be helpful to first experience a gross version of the root lock. The best concentration exercise for this is to sit upright and try breathing in concert with slowly increasing and decreasing tension in the perineum. With the beginning of exhalation gradually tighten the muscles of the pelvic diaphragm and genitals, aiming for maximum contraction at the end of exhalation. As inhalation begins, slowly relax. Repeat the cycle for ten breaths several times a day. At first it may be difficult to tighten the muscles without also tightening the gluteal muscles, but if you are careful to sit straight it will become easy.

With practice you will be able to sense the contraction of successive layers of muscles from the outside in. Starting superficially and with a minimal effort, you can feel activity in the ischiocavernosus, bulbospongiosus and superficial transverse perineal muscles. And with a little more attention you can activate the deep transverse perineal muscles and the urethral sphincter. And with yet more effort you can activate the pelvic diaphragm.

The central tendon of the perineum, which is located at the dividing line between the anal and urogenital triangles, appears to be the key structure around which the more delicate versions of mula bandha are organized. This is an extremely tough fascial region into which the superficial and deep transverse perineal muscles insert. If you can learn to focus your attention on this tiny region while creating minimal physical contraction of the nearby muscles, you will be feeling the root lock. (Yoga teachers who speak of placing awareness on the perineum are referring to this region.) Concentrate on the sensation, and in time mula bandha will feel natural and comfortable. With experience you can hold the lock constantly, which is what yogis recommend for meditation. ☸



Excerpt taken from
Anatomy of HathaYoga by H. David
Coulter published by Body and Breath,
Inc 2001, ISBN 0-9707006-0-1