

# Exploring The Bandhas

Mulabandha provides core strength by supporting and stabilising the spine. Anyone practising yoga or undertaking load-bearing physical activities can benefit from knowing how to 'turn it on.' Graeme Northfield explains...



My own interpretation and application of Mulabandha has been transformative in both my Ashtanga yoga practice and daily life. Having had spinal problems and chronic back pain for most of my life, it has been a revelation for me to harness and apply the strength-giving benefits it offers.

Mulabandha is not just for experienced yoga students. It is not an 'add-on' to the practice; it is one of the building blocks in establishing sound mind-body movement patterns and is helpful for beginners commencing their journey on the road of a life-long yoga practice.

So what is Mulabandha? How do we use it? What benefits does it offer?

Mulabandha and other bandhas are part of a larger grouping called mudras, meaning 'muscle control', 'restraint', 'seal' or 'lock'. Bandha means to 'bind' or 'bond'. The word 'lock' is particularly relevant because 'unlocking' the power of Mulabandha takes

patience, practice and clarity of mind but your time and effort will be rewarded as your yoga practice develops over the years.

There are many bandhas and mudras; the most useful in asana practice and daily activities is Mulabandha. There is some confusion about Mulabandha, partly due to the fact that each yoga system has a slightly different approach and also because it can be difficult to define and apply.

In yoga texts, Mulabandha is usually defined as the activation of the perineum (the soft tissue area between the anus and the genitals) and often refers to the more esoteric nature of controlling energy currents through the body. This can be hard to quantify, so let's look at some specific physical applications and the associated benefits.

There are two mudras that are closely related to Mulabandha. They are Ashwini mudra, activated by contracting the sphincter

muscles of the anus, and Vajroli mudra, activated by contracting the urethra (similar to the action of stopping the flow, mid-stream, when urinating).

It is possible to isolate and control these two mudras and Mulabandha separately but I have found in my asana practice and daily life, that a gentle contraction of all three at the same time is most beneficial. (By focusing on a contraction of the sphincter muscles, all three can be activated.) This leads to a strengthening of the pelvic floor muscles and pelvic diaphragm. This is the first stage of Mulabandha.

From here, stage two involves a drawing in of the lower abdomen using the most internal muscle of the abdominal wall, the transverse abdominis, along with the lower portion of the obliques.

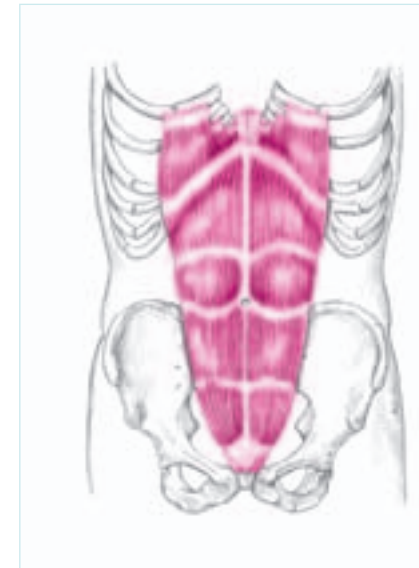
There are four main muscles of the abdominal wall (see illustrations, right). The innermost three, the transverse abdominis and the internal and external obliques, extend from the hips to the lower ribs and form a girdle-like support system for the spine. The fourth, the rectus abdominis – known as the 'six-pack' – runs vertically in the centre of the abdomen.

My experimentation with Mulabandha has led me to a third stage which I suggest is necessary for a complete stabilisation of the spine. This third stage is the contraction of the upper oblique muscles, which is done by drawing the front lower ribs in and down.

There is some confusion concerning the difference between Mulabandha and Uddiyana Bandha. Some people call the drawing in of the lower abdomen Uddiyana Bandha, or a variation of Uddiyana Bandha.

Uddiyana Bandha is actually a complete 'sucking up' of the lower and upper abdomen (see exercise 1a, page 36). It is an exercise performed prior to asana work and in various pranayamas and assists in isolating the transverse abdominis and releasing the rectus abdominis, which is helpful when it comes to activating Mulabandha during your practice. Uddiyana Bandha develops elasticity and tones the intercostal muscles and diaphragm, which enhances deep thoracic breathing.

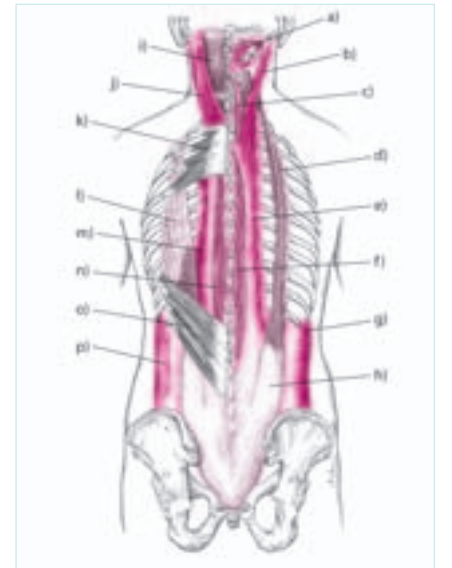
Another well-known bandha is Jalandhara Bandha or chin lock. Mainly applied during pranayama, it involves pressing the chin against the supra-sternal notch.



Rectus Abdominus.



External Obliques.



Transverse Abdominus.

Mulabandha can be referred to as 'core strength'. Developing core strength is an essential part of the foundations of yoga practice and, as such, it is important to give time to this before moving on to more challenging asanas.

Mulabandha should be activated in all movements: forward and back bending, twists, inversions and arm balances etc. Each of these movements creates differing challenges to maintaining Mulabandha.

It is not possible to hold Mulabandha if you are breathing into the belly. When Mulabandha is activated, the transverse abdominis and obliques set to work supporting the abdominal organs and giving a bracing effect, forcing the breath to open into the sides and back of the lower ribcage. This becomes apparent in the advanced Side Bridge exercises on pages 37 and 38 (particularly Advanced One).

As the breath deepens, it opens the upper ribs. This is a difficult technique for most people who are accustomed to 'belly breathing'. The posterior section of the lungs is where most of the gas exchange occurs. It is also in this area of the back where we tend to hold tension and feelings that are difficult to acknowledge. Opening the breath into the back can help create space to experience these feelings and begin the process of 'letting go'. Thoracic breathing strengthens and soothes the nervous system, enhancing mind/body control.

Mulabandha is one of the key elements for preventing and alleviating back pain. The activation of the core muscles gives grounding or bracing to support the spine and also connects the legs and hips to the upper body, allowing a free flow of energy and strength to be transmitted throughout the whole body.

The abdomen is one of the muscle groups where we tend to hold tension unknowingly. With increased awareness, sensitivity and control, we can differentiate between unconscious gripping and conscious controlled

activation and relaxation. The amount of activation required depends on the task at hand, be it a yoga asana or some heavy lifting.

To experience the full benefit of bandha work, we must remember to take the awareness and control of the body and mind that is gained on the yoga mat into our daily lives.

In a further article we will discuss the importance of working with a neutral spine in conjunction with Mulabandha.

*These following exercises (next pages), Uddiyana Bandha, Nauli and Side Bridge, are useful in isolating the abdominal muscles. Working with these abdominal muscles will help bring about the sensitivity and control necessary for the correct application of Mulabandha during your yoga practice. Maintain an activation of the sphincter muscles (stage one of Mulabandha) during each exercise.*

*Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli are classical yoga skills. Nauli is a kriya (cleansing technique) that tones the rectus abdominis, and massages and improves the blood supply to the abdominal organs. Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli also help the bowel to work more effectively (by strengthening the peristaltic action) and therefore can prevent constipation and aid the detoxification process.*

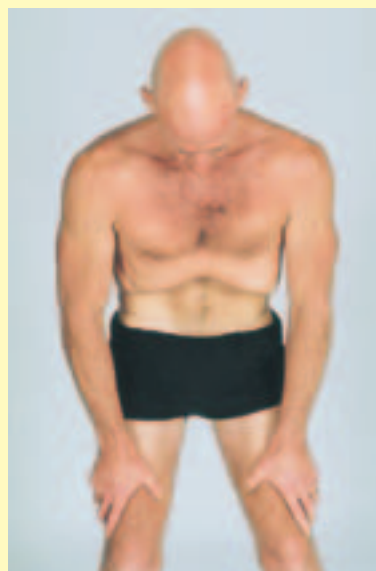
*Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli are best practised on an empty stomach, and empty bowel and bladder, and should not be*

*attempted if pregnant or menstruating. The application of Jalandhara Bandha can alleviate any pressure felt in the throat. Ideally, these practices should be learnt from a competent teacher.*

*Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli should only be performed while holding the breath out after a complete exhalation (bahya kumbhaka). The exhalation should be swift and can be through the nose or mouth. Take care that you lock off the breath and don't allow any air to flow in. Only hold the kumbhaka for as long as comfortable, so your next inhalation is smooth and slow. Do not strain. Before breathing in, relax the chest and abdomen.*

*For Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli, it is helpful to look at your abdomen in a mirror for instant feedback. Between each round, relax and take a breath or two before commencing the next round. More advanced students can try these while seated in Padmasana.*

**<1a uddiyana bandha (stomach lift)>**



Stand upright with your feet hip-width apart and parallel. Bend the legs slightly. Place your palms on your thighs, thumbs on the inside and fingers outside, pushing down through the palms. Inhaling, look up. Exhale quickly and completely. Bring the chin towards the sternum. Take the awareness to the ribcage. Lock the breath out (bahya kumbhaka) and activate the intercostal muscles with the action of trying to breathe in without allowing any air to move in. When this is performed, the rib cage will expand, the abdomen softens and draws in, activating the transverse abdominis, and the diaphragm will draw up under the lower ribs. Hold for as long as comfortable, then inhale. Do five to ten rounds.

**<1b uddiyana bandha (pumping variation)>**

Perform Uddiyana Bandha then release while still locking out the breath, allowing the abdomen to drop. Draw in the abdomen again. Repeat as many times as is comfortable with the breath held. Release. At first, do this slowly. Once the action of activation and release becomes easy, it is possible to quicken (up to 20 pumps per breath). Do five rounds.

**<1d uddiyana bandha (isolation of obliques variation)>**



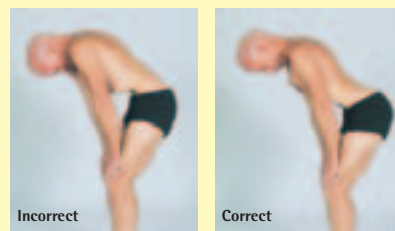
This exercise is more difficult and involves the isolation of the transverse abdominis while activating the obliques. While performing Uddiyana Bandha, draw the lower ribs on the left side of the body down towards the top of the left hipbone. Take weight off the right hand and increase the downward pressure through the left hand. Release, take a breath and repeat on the right side, this time taking the pressure off the left hand and increasing the downward pressure through the right palm. Be patient. If at first you don't get it, simply work towards activating a connection between the ribs and hips. This takes time to achieve. Do five rounds on each side. Then work at activating both sides simultaneously.

**<1e uddiyana bandha (standing upright variation)>**



Stand with the feet parallel and hip-width apart. Bring the hands on to the waist. Perform Uddiyana Bandha. Then perform while pulling in the lower ribs (see photo of Uddiyana Bandha in Padmasana). Do five rounds of each.

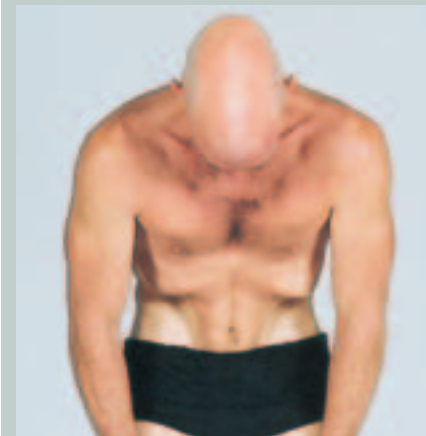
**<1c uddiyana bandha (pelvis, thighs & shoulders variation)>**



When comfortable with Uddiyana Bandha, the next stage is to bring awareness to the position of the pelvis, lower back, thighs and shoulders. While performing Uddiyana Bandha:

- a) Draw the shoulder blades in and down, effectively broadening the shoulders and taking them away from the ears.
- b) Tilt the pelvis back and forward, effectively rounding then arching the lumbar (lower) spine.
- c) While maintaining the arched position, roll the upper thighs inwards; broaden and lift the sitting bones.

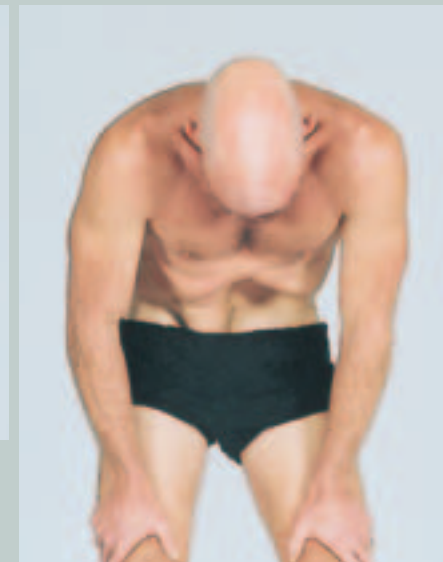
**<navli stage one>**



**Nauli Stage One (Isolation of rectus abdominis with activation of transverse abdominis)**

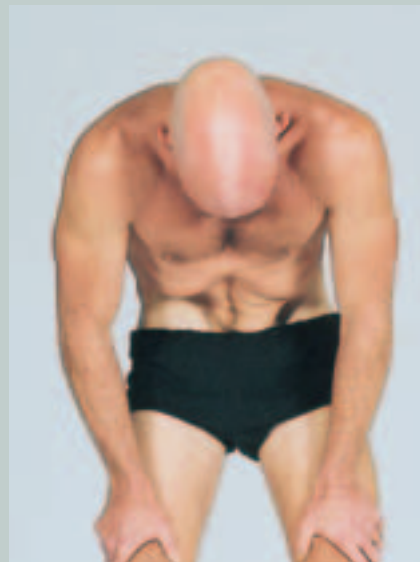
This should only be attempted once you are proficient at Uddiyana Bandha. Perform Uddiyana Bandha. Isolate and contract the rectus abdominis. If you do this while continuing to draw in the transverse abdominis towards the spine, this will have the effect of pushing out a compact line down the middle of the abdomen. Hold. Release. Do five rounds.

**<navli stage two>**



**Nauli Stage Two (Stomach rolling)**

This should only be attempted once you can isolate the rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis and obliques efficiently. Repeat Nauli Stage One (Isolation of rectus abdominis with activation of transverse abdominis) then transfer the upper body's weight into your hands. Alternate from one side to the other,



allowing the hips to swing a little from side to side as the rectus abdominis rolls from right to left, then left to right. Release. With practice, you can perform nauli while the hips are stationary and hold to the left (nauli vama) and right (nauli dakshina). Do five rounds of alternating from left to right, then right to left.

**<side bridge>**



This exercise works the obliques, transverse abdominis and the quadratus lumborum, connecting and toning the muscles that stabilise the spine, and is excellent for getting a feel of working with Mulabandha. Advanced One and Advanced Two Side Bridge also activate the latissimus dorsi (the 'lats'), which connects the lower back to the shoulders, and aids in spinal stabilisation.

*Beginners:* Lie on your right side, arms folded in front of the chest, feet flexed back and kneecaps pulled up. Keeping the body straight and hips vertical, inhale and lift both legs and upper body as much as possible. Hold for 10 breaths then repeat on the opposite side.



*Advanced One:* Lie on your right side with straight legs, resting most of your body's weight on the right elbow and forearm. If you need to, place the left foot on the floor in front of the right to help stabilise, otherwise rest the left foot on the right. Keeping the left hip above the right, lift the



**<side bridge continued>**

hips off the ground, supporting the weight on the elbow, forearm and feet. Ground the elbow downwards and towards the feet. Draw the shoulder down and in towards the spine. Pull the ribcage in and downwards towards the pelvis. Maintain a contraction of the sphincter muscle and awareness on the breath. Take as many breaths as is comfortable, slowly building up your endurance. Be conscious of slowing and deepening the breath, with awareness of the breath moving into the lower ribs at the back.

Roll over so that the weight is on both elbows and forearms in a plank position. Maintain a neutral spine position, grounding the elbows downwards and towards the feet. Hold for as many breaths as is comfortable.

Roll on to your left side and repeat the first stage. Keep an awareness of the lower ribs drawing in during the transitions.

*Advanced Two:* Repeat Advanced One, this time with a straight arm supporting the body.

Graeme Northfield has been a practitioner of Ashtanga yoga for more than 22 years. His approach is towards healing, and the focus of his teaching is to bring a greater awareness and a deeper understanding to the Ashtanga yoga process. He conducts workshops and retreats nationally and internationally.