

Mulabandha

Mula means ‘root.’ The root of the body is in the basin of the pelvis, both physically – in the form of the tailbone and sacrum, buttressed like the keystone of an archway by the hipbones – and energetically, in the form of the muscles of the pelvic floor (‘pelvic diaphragm’) that cradle the plexus of energy known as the Muladhara Chakra. It is from the base of the pelvis that one creates an energetic lift that rises up through the physical spine and the subtle passage of the sushumna nadi.

The movement called *Mulabandha* (Root Lock) comes as you draw muscular energy through the perineal muscles toward a center point. The bones of the pelvis serve as the foundation and vessel. The vessel has to be firmly anchored by grounding downward through the rim of the perineum – the pubic bone, the tailbone and the inner surfaces of the sitting bones. The pelvis must settle on its foundation like an urn to contain the energy of the breath.

With the initiation of the inbreath, the inner movement of Mulabandha at the center point is in the opposite direction — a lifting that is a drawing-up, almost as if the muscles were drawn up by a lift or suction that takes place above the center point. This lift will come from Uddiyana bandha. The Mulabandha itself is not so much just a tightening or clenching of muscles – though it is often described as a tightening inward and upward of the anal sphincters – but a subtler action than that; a firming of the muscles of the pelvic floor as the foundation for bringing about an inner lift. For this to take place, the foundation must first be set.

Adjusting your Legs and Hips to Open the Pelvic Floor

While sitting, take your right thigh in your hands, close to the hip, and manually turn the muscles of the inner thigh inward – toward the centerline of the body. Lean slightly to the left and forward as you do this, and move your right sitting bone back and out while tipping your sacrum – just below your waistline – forward so that your lower back moves more deeply into your body. Do the same with your left thigh.

As you adjust your thighs by turning them inwards, a number of things happen, all of which serve to level and open the pelvic floor, setting it up for the lift of Mulabandha:

- Your sitting bones move back and apart, opening the pelvic floor.
- Your pubic bone descends, leveling the pelvic floor.
- Your hipbones wrap forward, expanding your lower back at the area of the sacrum, and your sacrum tips forward. The forward tip of the sacrum bolsters the inward curve of your lower back and strengthens the lumbar spine, making it less effortful to sit upright.

Creating the Inner Lift of Mulabandha

To feel the link between the inbreath and Mulabandha, first begin with an exhalation; exhale smoothly until the sound of the breath stops and you have a feeling of pressure in the lower abdomen just below the navel. Despite the extra effort to press the breath out, keep your heart lifted and open, staying soft and silent in your throat, neck and head, softening your inward gaze.

After a slight pause at the end of the exhalation, you feel a natural impulse to inhale. Begin your inhalation from a point in the core of your abdomen, about three inches below your navel and a couple of inches above the pelvic floor in front of the sacrum. It's as if the subtle initial pull that draws the breath down into the body begins here. Without losing the inward tilt of your sacrum, as you inhale feel how your tailbone begins to release downward toward the earth. Your lower abdominals tone and press gently against your sacrum, supporting it, and this action seems to 'pull' your inbreath all the way down to the base of your pelvis. This action, as we will see, is related to Uddiyana bandha, which is inseparably linked to Mulabandha.

Follow the downward grounding or drop of your tailbone from where the tailbone meets your sacrum; as your inbreath deepens, draw your tailbone forward toward the pubic bone just enough to create a toning of the muscles of the pelvic floor. Do this through a feeling of the tailbone being heavy and a kind of hollowness beginning just in front of the sacrum, drawing the breath in by its very emptiness; this will keep you from tipping your sacrum back (rounding and collapsing your lower back) from overworking your tailbone.

At the same time, you can further tone the muscles of your lower belly — just above the pubic bone — and draw them in and up to support the front of your sacrum, as well as support the deeper movement of the diaphragm at your back body. These transverse abdominals are different from the abdominal muscles above: they are postural muscles which provide support to the lower back without hardening the belly and limiting the breath. It is possible to do create this gentle tone while keeping the feeling of hollowness at the front of the sacrum. The action here is entirely different from hardening the rest of the abdominals to suck the belly in for the sake of appearances.

A subtle dance takes place here between the tilt of the sacrum and the actions initiated with the tailbone, in combination with the gentle toning of the transverse abdominals just above the pubic bone. As you first adjust to tilt your sacrum forward into the body, your pubic bone draws down and back toward the center, leveling and opening the pelvic floor. As you draw your tailbone down and forward toward the pubic bone — without losing the inward tilt of your sacrum — the muscles of your pelvic floor 'magnetize' the two bones, drawing them toward each other



To adjust your posture, lean to one side and hold your thigh with both hands. Turn the thigh inward (toward the midline of the body), drawing the inner thigh muscles back toward the sitbone. At the same time, slide your sitbone back away from the center of the pelvic floor (by leaning and arching your lower back inward. Spiralling the adductor muscles of the inner thigh inward will help this shift of the sitbones). This sets the foundation of the pelvic floor for mulabandha.

through actions in the muscles of the pelvic floor to create a toning and lift that can be felt as a squeeze of the muscles at the center of the perineum.

Yet as we've been suggesting, this 'magnetizing' of the tailbone and pubic bone toward each other is not by itself enough: it creates a toning of the perineum, but not necessarily a lift. The lift comes with a firming and lift of the abdominals just above the pubic bone — enough to support the action of the diaphragm, but not so much as to limit it. This is the essence of Uddiyana Bandha, which is a necessary counterpart to Mulabandha.

The **precise location** of the muscular action of Mulabandha differs significantly between men and women. In **men**, the toning and lift is in the space between the anus and the root of the genital organ, in the muscles just beneath the prostate (which is why the practice of Mulabandha can contribute to the health of the prostate). In **women**, it is higher, at the cervix or the opening of the womb. It is to the inside of the body, at an angle back toward the spine from the opening of the sexual organ.³ The toning and lift of Mulabandha takes place at this deeper point inside, whereas in men it initiates closer to the surface at the perineum. Classically in sitting postures such as Siddhasana, the heel is placed at this point in the perineum to encourage Mulabandha; but for women, this is of less help.

Overall, the action of Mulabandha is an inner toning that is supple and supports the breathing process; it is not a hardening or gripping that would otherwise tighten the groins. Notice the inner feeling that comes with the proper tone: you can feel an inner firmness at the core of the pelvis that supports the spine and makes it even easier to sit upright. At the place where the sacrum meets the tailbone, you can feel a kind of division of energy: your tailbone lengthens downward, grounding you with the actions of Mulabandha, while the front of your lumbar spine lengthens upward.

Above all, these actions feel natural and supportive rather than forced and constrictive when you first initiate the bandhas with the inhalation. The inner lifts and actions we describe here naturally take place with the actions of the natural course of the breath, and the muscular actions of the bandhas come in 'behind' them to firm and support this inner lift. You should still feel a measure of freedom and fluidity inside, an ability to stay a bit soft and to move and expand inwardly with the breath.

Connecting with the Inner Feeling of Mulabandha

What does the 'lift' of Mulabandha feel like? We are not clenching the muscles and pushing them upward; rather, the action feels like an 'updraft' of energy. The analogy of a burning candle might give us a sense of this kind of 'updraft' or 'wicking' action.

The bony vessel of the pelvis resembles the rim of hard wax of the candle that cradles the pool of liquid wax – the softness of the inner body and fluid potential

3 Moola Bandha: The Master Key, Swami Buddhananda, p. 81

of the pranic energy of the breath. As the flame burns, it draws the wax into the wick, where the fuel of the wax is transformed into fire. In the same way you can experience the energy of the prana in Mulabandha as liquid energy that is drawn to the center and upward, like wax both drawn upward by and transformed onto flames of Kundalini energy that rise upward through the sushumna, the central channel, toward the heart. Notice that the wick doesn't 'push' the wax upward; just as air feeds the flame, drawing the wax upward, so it is the action of the body drawing the breath in that feeds the flame of Mulabandha, concentrating and drawing the pranic energy up from the root.

Like a candle, the stability of the foundation is essential; tip the candle and the wax will drip out, depleting the flame. If the pelvis is not grounded and centered, the energy of the breath 'leaks' and is dissipated – it can't be gathered and transformed by Mulabandha. With good alignment, Mulabandha blazes with the inner flame of the prana.

Uddiyana Bandha

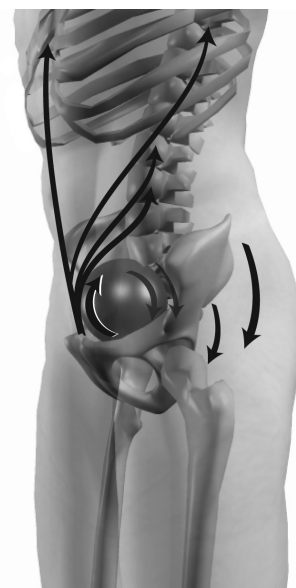
Inseparable from Mulabandha is a scooping or sucking action right above it called Uddiyana Bandha. This movement lifts the weight of the lower abdominal organs off the perineum as it draws them back and up against the front of the lumbar spine. This brings about the inner feeling of 'suction' that entices the upward draw of Mulabandha.

Uddiyana Bandha is given special importance among the bandhas. Uddiyana means 'flying upward.' The lift of Uddiyana bandha occurs about three inches below the navel and opens the floating ribs behind the kidneys, making space for movement of the full circumference of the diaphragm as well as making space for movement in the root. Paradoxically, Uddiyana bandha creates just enough toning and lift of the lower abdomen that it leaves the belly unrestricted by gravity and allows enough freedom for the belly to be a 'Kumbha' or 'pot' for retaining the breath. This freedom of the lower belly is what distinguishes Uddiyana bandha from just tightening the abdominal muscles.

The elements of Uddiyana bandha bear some explanation:

A simple description given of Uddiyana bandha is given in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, where it is presented as one of the ten mudras: "The belly above the navel is pressed backwards towards the spine (56)... The portions above and below the navel should be drawn backwards towards the spine. (58)" It's worth noting that although Uddiyana Bandha is often taught – particularly as a cleansing technique – at the end of an exhalation, no mention of this is given here in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika.

Because of its terse simplicity, this description, as with all of the bandhas, leaves much to be interpreted and explained on many levels.



The action of Uddiyana Bandha might be thought of as a rotating sphere of energy at the core of the pelvis, which simultaneously creates a downward anchoring of the diaphragm and an upward lift of the abdominals which allows maximum volume or space for the breath.

Uddiyana Bandha is not really an ‘outer’ action of the abdominal muscles, but an **inner** action that exerts its effect on the abdomen, so that the (lower) abdomen draws in and up – paradoxically enhancing, rather than contradicting, the action of the diaphragm as you inhale.

A way to think of it is to imagine a sphere of energy at the core of the pelvis which is rotating back (as shown in the illustration), simultaneously creating a gentle tone and lift just above the pubic bone, and a descent along the front surface of the sacrum. Thus there is a release downward — in keeping with the pull of the root or crura of the diaphragm — and a lift upward, which actually allows the lower rib cage to expand three-dimensionally with the diaphragm. (The alternative would be if the abdominals were lax: the back would arch more, constricting the rib cage and diaphragm.) Through the action of the bandha the prana — the expansive energy of the inbreath — rises up to the heart, while the body remains yet anchored and grounded.

The practical physiological effect of this bandha is to provide muscular support for the sacrum and lumbar spine. The simultaneous downward anchoring at the sacrum and lift at the back ribs with the inhalation creates a ‘negative pressure’ in the thoracic cavity that actually encourages the diaphragm to work more efficiently, because the lungs themselves are anchored as they are stretched and opened by the action of the chest and diaphragm.

As the back body expands and lifts with the breath, the solar plexus at the front body softens downwards, allowing greater freedom for the diaphragm to move. Because of Uddiyana bandha, even the action of filling the upper lobes of the lungs is done from this action deep within the pelvis; when you keep the center of your heart open (with Jalandhara bandha) and the space of the diaphragm at the kidneys and floating ribs open, your rib cage as a whole spreads and rises evenly with the breath, the breath expanding from the inside out.

Without the anchoring provided by Uddiyana Bandha, it’s easy to become a ‘chest-breather,’ using the front chest for the breath while using the diaphragm only minimally. By the same token, if there is no expansion at the back body from the action of the diaphragm, it is just as easy to become a ‘belly-breather,’ not using the full capacity of the diaphragm or chest.

To sum up: Uddiyana Bandha is an important key to a full breath that makes the best use of the diaphragm and rib cage. It tones the lower belly and supports the spine in a way that actually allows the diaphragm greater freedom of movement, supporting its expansion.

Connecting with the Inner Feeling of Uddiyana Bandha

Uddiyana Bandha intensifies the feeling of the upward ascent of the prana toward the heart with the inhalation. Although the inbreath first descends toward the pelvic floor as we breathe in, the actions of Mulabandha and Uddiyana Bandha creates a

strong ‘updraft’ of the prana from deep within the pelvis as we continue to inhale into the midchest and top chest. Particularly with the pull and lift of Uddiyana Bandha, the diaphragm blossoms as the midchest and upper chest expand on all sides with the breath. At the center of this opening flower is the heart, suspended on the firm stalk of the spine. A full breath encourages the heart to open with the support of this inner lift. The heart is often described as a lotus with the petals facing downward; with the upward ascension of the prana, the petals turn upward, opening one to higher states of awareness.

The Pulsation of the Breath: a More Concrete Description

Each inbreath involves a dual movement. With the inbreath, the pelvic diaphragm releases downward as the central diaphragm begins to draw the breath; yet as you continue to fill with the breath, there’s a rebounding of the pranic energy of the inhalation from the pelvic floor, as you feel a subtle toning and lift to the pelvic diaphragm. This happens because of the expansion of the chest, which starts to draw the belly – from the pit of the abdomen in the core of the pelvis – in and up. A subtle upward pull through the core takes place and gradually intensifies. Like an updraft of air pulling at a candle flame, the opening of the upper body to the breath subtly pulls the energy of the breath up from the root.

The dual action is paradoxical: there is a downward release yet a subtle upward pull. A distinction between muscular and pranic energy is at work: these two, muscular action and pranic energy, can move in opposite directions, creating convection currents of energy inside that bring a powerful inner lift of pranic energy. The muscular action is the action of the diaphragm pulling down through the core of the body to draw the breath in; yet at the same time there’s a feeling of lift and expansion as the breath / prana expands in the heart.

These movements are **accompanied and supported** by the **bandhas**. When we inhale, the actions of the three bandhas take place subtly and spontaneously, rather than through a muscular effort. If we simply exhale, however, the inner lift from the rising prana can be lost with the downward and outward movement of the apana. If instead we practice the bandhas intentionally along with the Loops on the exhalation, we can circulate the pranic energy within, even as we send the physical breath out. In the dance with the Prana, the Prana leads, and we respond, using the bandhas like steps in the dance.

At the completion of the inhalation there’s a natural pause or suspension of the breath within. A subtle pulsation takes place before the exhalation begins: the central diaphragm gently pulses downward as if taking an extra breath before it turns round and releases upward to send the breath out.

As the diaphragm releases upward and sends the breath out, the pelvic diaphragm – if unassisted by the bandhas – tones and returns to a neutral position. The body is built to exhale passively simply through relaxation of the diaphragm and muscles of the upper chest. But a more active breath, tempered by the Ujjayi sound, requires

more muscular engagement with the exhalation, sending the breath out with control using the muscular actions of Mulabandha and Uddiyana Bandha. The firming and lifting of the muscles of the pelvic floor with Mulabandha, and the upward press of the abdominal muscles of Uddiyana bandha act with the diaphragm to press the breath out more completely.

Jalandhara Bandha



It's uncertain how Jalandhara Bandha got its name. It may be that the sage Jalandhar was the first to practice it; but the word *jalandhar* itself can also be broken down to suggest its meaning. *Jala* is a 'net,' 'web' or 'snare' used in the context of catching birds; *dhara* means 'bearing' or 'supporting,' as well as 'vein.'⁴

Thus it could very well be that the bandha simply resembles the way hunters or fishermen hold their nets under their chin while working with it; and the more yogic meaning may refer to the lock or bandha being placed on the 'net' or network of nerves in the neck to produce a relaxation response in the nervous system⁵ – as well as slowing down the heart by means of the pressure placed on the arteries of the neck. The bandha is itself a kind of 'net' that contains the expansiveness of the breath in the heart. Jalandhara Bandha opens and positions the vocal diaphragm so that it is fully responsive to the movements of the breath; moreover, it provides a 'lock' that contains the energy of the breath within, helping one to retain the breath quietly in Kumbhaka.

The root '*jal*' can also be interpreted as a 'cool drink of water,' while '*andhar*' can also be a word for 'garden,' or a place you go to be uplifted. So Jalandhara Bandha could also be thought of as a cool drink that takes you to an inner place of upliftment, an inner garden of peace.

The bandha is classically performed by lowering and pressing the chin to the sternum – as the chest is being raised with the breath toward the chin. When the other two bandhas are performed, it feels quite natural to do this to fully accommodate the breath, at least to some degree. This action is not meant to strain the neck, though all too often the practitioner pulls the chin in too much toward the neck or forces the chin down toward the chest, pulling at the muscles at the back of the neck, sabotaging many of the qualities that the bandha is meant to have. To think of Jalandhara Bandha as a 'chin lock' tends to suggest that the bandha consists solely of pressing your chin toward the chest, which would produce this strain in the neck.

The alignment of the head and shoulders in the case of this bandha is actually meant to open the vocal diaphragm fully, as well as bring the upper chest to its full

⁴ *The Yoga of the Breath*, Richard Rosen p. 255

⁵ The theory is that this takes place by placing pressure on the vagus nerve in the throat, producing a relaxation response.

expansion in order to make room for the fullest Kumbhaka possible. Paradoxically, while this bandha creates a closure that allows us to retain the breath in Kumbhaka, it also works to open the vocal diaphragm to hold the breath in, in much the same way that the back of your throat softens and opens when you yawn. By the same token, this action in the throat of Jalandhara bandha brings the soft subtle qualities that are essential to the Ujjayi ‘sound’ as the Ujjayi breath directs the prana or breath upward.

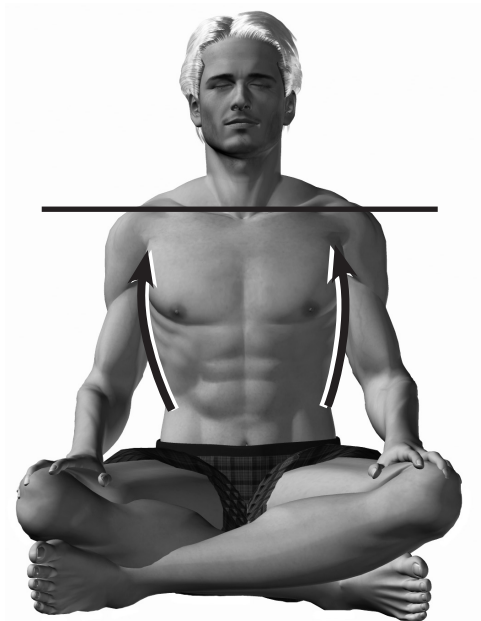
The actions associated with Jalandhara bandha are also important because all too often, when breathing into the upper chest, we overuse the muscles of the neck and shoulders to ‘pull’ the upper chest open. With this, your shoulderblades pull up the back, the back of your neck tightens, and your heart drops, collapsing your top chest. All of these actions are associated with ‘chest breathing’ and create stress and tightness where there should be freedom and ease. The actions of Jalandhara bandha work precisely to counter these tendencies.

For our purposes, then, we can think primarily in terms of the actions that bring these results in Jalandhara bandha, rather than the ‘locking’ of chin to chest that — for most of us — would only cause strain and limit the effectiveness of the bandha.

Alignment of the Shoulders for Jalandhara Bandha

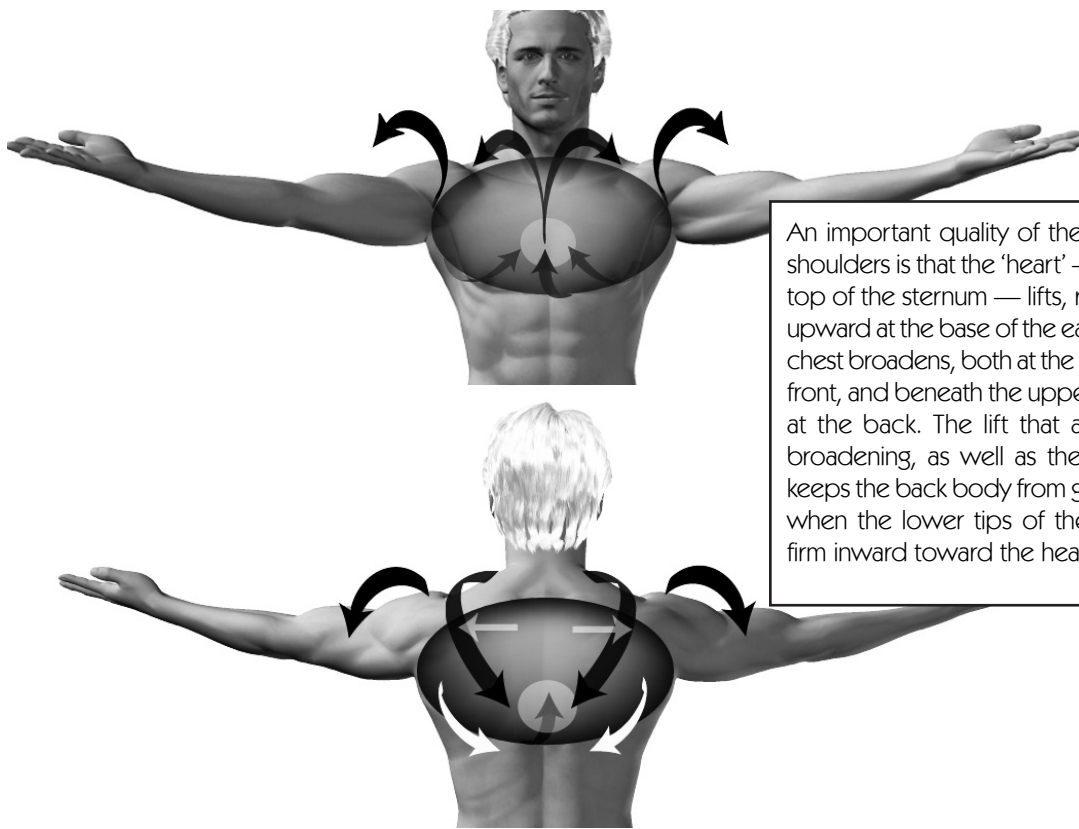
To align your shoulders for the full expansion of the breath in Jalandhara bandha,

1. Tone the muscles on all sides of your arms as you inhale, drawing that energy upward with the breath and let it lift your shoulders – particularly at the fronts of your armpits – until your collarbones are level.
2. Draw the heads of your armbones back and firm your shoulderblades into your back, as if your heart were a magnet attracting them. As you draw your shoulderblades flat on your back, avoid ‘pinching’ them together — instead, let them flow down along the spine and firm inward toward your heart, especially at the lower tips of your shoulder blades.
3. Draw the bottom tips of the shoulderblades slightly toward each other and forward to cradle and lift your heart. Your upper arms will rotate outward as your chest lifts, broadens and expands.



Let this action broaden your collarbones and lift and open your top chest, filling the hollow space beneath your collarbones as the collarbones lift and roll back. Especially the fronts of the armpits move up, back and out as your shoulder blades draw down your back. Notice with this action that, although the shoulderblades draw down along their inner edges, the shoulders themselves do not move downward: your collarbones stay level. This keeps

collarbones ‘Level’



An important quality of these actions of the shoulders is that the 'heart' — the chest at the top of the sternum — lifts, releasing the neck upward at the base of the ears, and the upper chest broadens, both at the collarbones at the front, and beneath the upper shoulderblades at the back. The lift that accompanies this broadening, as well as the expansion itself, keeps the back body from getting 'crunched' when the lower tips of the shoulderblades firm inward toward the heart.

you from crunching your mid or lower back. Keep your shoulderblades engaged magnetically to your back, so that your collarbones float on the sea of the breath.

Feel the energy flow through your skin, upward from the base of your breastbone to your collarbones, and over your shoulders, flowing down your back and once again in toward your heart.

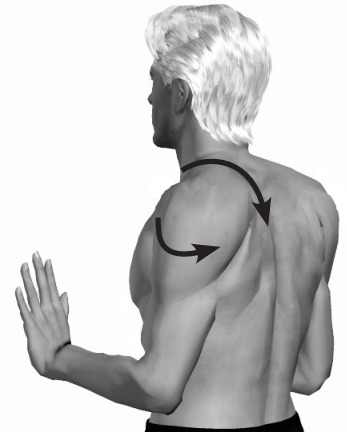
A Practice of this action of the Shoulders:

To work with these actions, stand facing the wall and place your hands at the wall, positioning them so that your forearms are nearly parallel to the floor, and your upper arms hang vertically at your sides.

Keeping your hands on the wall and your upper arms at your sides, lightly firm the muscles of your arms and lift your shoulders until your collarbones are level with the floor; draw your shoulders back so that you feel your shoulderblades draw flat and firm into your back. You should feel a squeeze in the muscles between your shoulderblades, but not go so far that you feel a pinching.

Keeping your shoulders square like this, isometrically pull your hands down toward the floor (in other words, although you make the muscular effort to pull down, your hands don't actually move). Feel how your upper chest lifts and broadens — especially

at the fronts of the armpits — as your shoulderblades draw down your back, and the lower tips of your shoulderblades draw toward each other and press forward to lift your heart. Though your shoulderblades draw downwards, your shoulders do not: your shoulders stay square, the collarbones remaining level. See how there is space to breathe into your side chest underneath your armpits as well, and how you can expand with the breath in all directions from this firm foundation.



Alignment of your Head for Jalandhara Bandha

As your heart lifts and opens with the actions of the shoulders, your neck releases upward at the base of your ears, taking the top of your throat back and up until your ears are more in line with your shoulders, and your head balances lightly on the top of your spine. Most often our head — particularly the top of the throat at the hyoid bone (at the Adam's apple just below the jaw line) — is too far forward, contracting and tensing the muscles at the back of the neck. This pulls the shoulderblades up the back toward the neck, collapsing your chest — the very opposite of the opening we look for in Jalandhara bandha. The alignment of your head in combination with the actions of the shoulders reverses this tendency, releasing this tension at the back of the neck while allowing the shoulderblades to flow down the back while lifting and opening the heart.

To get the best sense of the relaxing, releasing and lengthening quality of this head adjustment, as well as how it realigns the head with the spine, you can initiate it with the guidance of your fingertips at the top of your throat. Take your fingertips to your throat, just beneath the jaw line and to either side of your Adam's Apple. Your fingers are now placed roughly at the level of the hyoid bone. Gently guide the top of your throat with your fingers back and up toward the root of your palate (or base of your ears, if that's an easier way to think of it). This initiates a whole circuit of energy that draws the upper body, neck and head into alignment. Feel how



'Forward Head' with tension at the back of the neck

Guide the top of your throat back and up

With good alignment, the lift at the top of the heart joins with the lift at the root of the palate

Prana or the breath of exhalation goes out and the breath of inhalation enters in In a curvilinear form.

They do so of their own accord.

The great goddess (the pranasakti or energy of the breath, the Kundalini) stretches or extends upward.

Being both transcendent and immanent, she is the most excellent place of pilgrimage.

Vijnanabhairava, Verse 154

a number of things happen at once.

1. You feel a release in the muscles at the base of your skull, and the back of your head seems to lighten and float upwards.
2. Your head shifts back in space so that your ears draw more in line with your shoulders.
3. You can feel an energetic connection between the base of your ears and the top of your sternum; as the base of your ears moves back and up with the movement of the hyoid, your sternum lifts and your upper chest expands across the collarbones.
4. Your shoulderblades release and flow down your back – following the Shoulder Loop – as your head releases upward from the center of your soft palate at the back of your mouth; you can feel a lengthening upward from the center of your spine through the crown of your head.
5. On a subtler but no less tangible level, you can feel an energetic softening, release and even expansion of energy both at the base of your throat (in the area of the Visuddha Chakra) and in your neck at the base of your head – and even a release and lengthening throughout your spine, as well as in the area of your heart.

Jalandhara bandha simply continues the lines of energy initiated through these loops, bowing the head to the heart as the heart lifts, until (ideally) the chin meets the sternum. When done properly, the head does not come too far forward, nor does the chin pull back; the result is to center the vocal diaphragm over the central diaphragm while maximizing the space for the opening and lift or ‘doming’ of the vocal diaphragm with the inhalation. In one sense the neck is being closed or ‘locked’; at the same time this actually creates a greater opening in the back of the throat at the vocal diaphragm, an inner ‘doming’ of this ‘diaphragm.’ This ‘doming’ is a more modest and controlled version of what takes place when you yawn. In fact, to feel the opening that takes place at the back of the throat as well as the actions of the head and shoulders, try simply yawning.

Many people find that their chin will not reach the upper sternum. You may wish to place a light support like a rolled-up washcloth between the top of the sternum and the chin. However, the essence of Jalandhara Bandha is not a matter of pressing your chin to your chest; the subtle action of Jalandhara Bandha takes place in the throat from the actions of the loops. The essence of Ujjayi breathing is in fact the action in the throat and upper body that takes place through the actions leading to Jalandhara Bandha.

Connecting with the Inner Feeling of Jalandhara Bandha

When combined with the breath, Jalandhara bandha creates a feeling that you’re brimming with the power of the breath; with Jalandhara Bandha, your chin acts like a ‘cap’ or seal for the overflow of the heart, while at the same time your mind

comes to rest upon the heart as if upon a pillow. Let your face soften and your eyes drop downward, as if gazing down into your heart.

A Round of Seated Ujjayi Pranayama

Rechaka – Exhaling

Begin with an exhalation to clear your lungs and prepare the pelvic floor and lower abdomen for your inhalation. Exhale smoothly until the sound of your breath disappears and energy rolls through your belly, creating a feeling of pressure in the navel.

At the end of your exhalation, your heart should still be open, tongue silent, and eyes soft. There should be no sense of force or violence, no strain. Let go of any unnecessary gripping you may notice in your body or face.

Kumbhak

Look for the slight **gap** or **Kumbhak** that naturally occurs between the end of the exhalation and the arising of the inhalation. At this stage of your practice you don't need to extend it. To force an artificial kumbhaka before prana and apana have come into balance through your practice can produce a kind of "high," but by being in a hurry you forfeit the subtler relationship you might otherwise form with the *Prana* through patience, sensitivity and surrender.



A balanced exhalation coordinates the support of the lower abdomen as the diaphragm releases upward with the steady softening and release of the rib cage downward. All of the bandhas softly release by the end of the exhalation.

Puraka – Inhaling

After this pause, the inhalation is ready to blossom. The inhalation begins with a release downward in the pelvic diaphragm as the central diaphragm begins to draw the breath.

Actively lengthen downward through your tailbone without tipping your hipbones back or 'tucking' your pelvis. As you inhale, grounding through your tailbone, allow the sides of your chest to move back, opening your diaphragm to the breath.

When you have opened the lower two diaphragms to the breath in this way, the vocal diaphragm at the root of your palate reflexively opens, doming at the back of your throat like when you yawn. This gives a soft steadiness to your eyes and smoothness to the sound of your breath.

By the practice of Puraka or inhalation, if the Kundalini at the base of the spine is 'filled' and made to rest in a state of equilibrium, the body remains firm.

When through the retention of breath all the nadis are warmed up, the Kundalini rises up like a stick and its energies flood all the nadis of the body. On account of this the nadis are purified and made light.

Then the yogi is able to travel in space...

Yoga Vasistha p. 342

The Exhalation – Rechaka

The subtle art of the breath becomes most evident with the **exhalation**. For upon exhaling, if we simply release the bandhas – particularly Uddiyana bandha, the belly collapses downward and the upper body deflates. The breath does go out; but the feeling is dull, deflated and even unpleasant.

Truly speaking, when exhaling, **the diaphragm presses upward to expel the breath**, and should continue to be **supported by the abdominal region with Uddiyana bandha** so that the breath goes out in a gradual, comfortable flow without any feeling of collapse as the rib cage gradually relaxes upon the firm upward press of the diaphragm. The other bandhas are integral in supporting the upright and open posture of the heart with the exhalation as well.

The bandhas, as they are initiated on the inhalation, create an inner firmness and support. The art of the exhalation is to maintain that inner firmness, supporting the upward press of the diaphragm as well as the gradual and symmetrical release of the rib cage, without causing any feeling of tension or gripping.

It follows from this that if you 'hold' the bandha too firmly, you feel a gripping that limits the breath and makes you feel hard and anxious or constricted inside; if you 'let go' of the bandha too quickly, you feel deflated.

The feeling of a balanced exhalation is that the upper body seems to **relax and drape upon the firmness of the core** – the firmness at the center of the diaphragm – like a cloth floating down and draping upon a pillar. Ultimately the pillar – the firmness of the diaphragm – releases and relaxes too for the next inhalation.

In this description, **from the outside it looks and feels as if you are exhaling from top to bottom** – releasing the breath from the top chest, to midchest, to diaphragm and belly.

But **internally**, the exhalation initiates from the action of the diaphragm pressing upward, and the upper body relaxes downward upon that action. This action **keeps the energy of the Prana (inhalation) and Apana (exhalation) merged in the heart**, rather than allowing the feeling of the exhalation to drop back down into the pelvis with a feeling of heaviness and collapse. As Uddiyana is maintained through the exhalation, this also supports the organic extension through the core of the body, since Uddiyana bandha is at the heart of this postural support.

Exhalation is an art that requires as much attention as the inhalation; but in contrast to inhalation, the effort in exhalation is more passive, an act of witnessing and maintaining your presence and awareness. The exhalation completes the energetic cycle of the breath, progressively relaxing the body. With the exhalation, our main focus is to maintain the firmness at the core that is supported actively by the bandhas, while relaxing and releasing the breath. When the core is sturdy, you can experience this softening without feeling an inner collapse. As you exhale, keep the center of your heart lifted and open, and let yourself enjoy the gradual relaxation that takes

place on all sides.

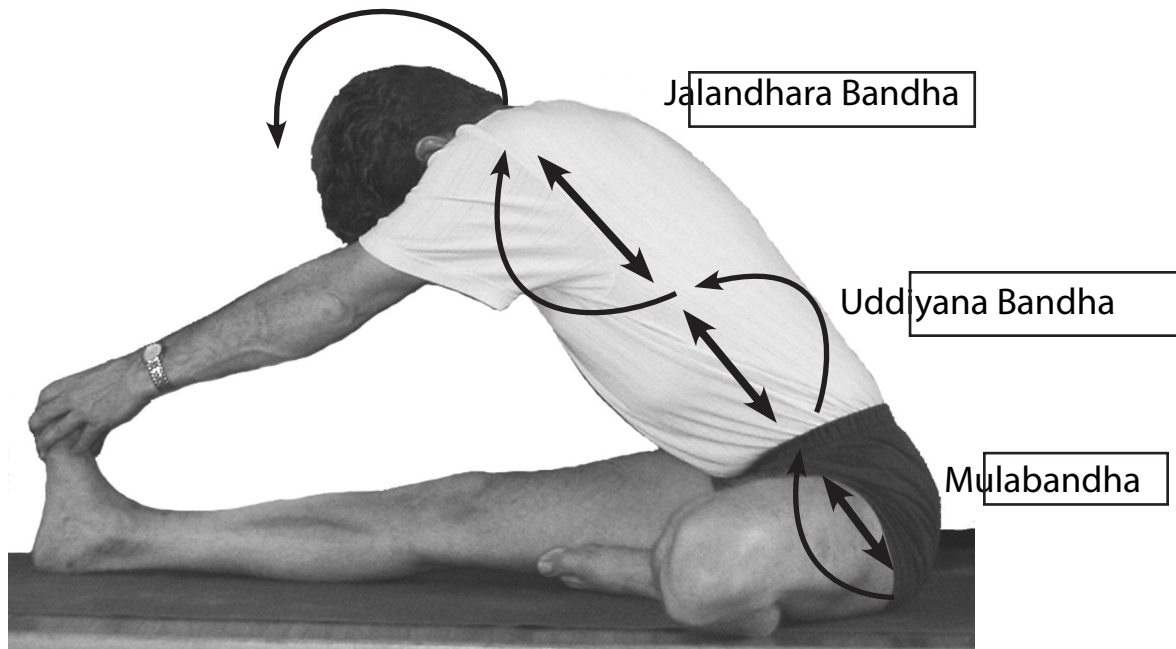
Listen to the sound of your breath as the center of the diaphragm presses upwards and your ribs gradually close like a flower closing at night. This kind of exhalation is an art of calming your nerves and brain through humility and surrender. The exhalation is an act of letting go and letting be, a pure act free of willful effort.

Maha Mudra

Maha Mudra is a powerful pose for practicing the Bandhas and retention of the breath. Through Uddiyana Bandha it draws the prana powerfully upward through the core of the body, and is effective as a preparation for meditation, though it should be practiced with care.

To do the pose: sit in Dandasana and stretch your legs in front of you, bringing them together. Use your hands to turn your thigh muscles inward toward the midline, so that your inner thighs descend toward the floor. Draw your buttock muscles back with your hands, so that your sit bones more easily move back and apart. This will tip your sacrum inward, helping you to sit squarely on your sit bones with your lower back firm and upright.

Bend your left knee and draw it back, placing your left foot at the inside of your right thigh, with the heel as close to the pubic bone as possible. Minimize the movement of your sit bones as much as possible during this shift, and keep your knee opened out to the side, your thigh relaxing down to the ground as the hip opens. If your left thigh is up in the air because of tightness in the hip, place a support – such as a rolled blanket – under the thigh so that it can relax down into the support.



Inhaling with — and through — the Bandhas

Turn your upper body to face toward your straight leg, and readjust your straight leg, using your hands to turn the top of the thigh inward toward the midline if necessary, so that the knee and toes point straight up toward the ceiling.

Reach forward to hold your left foot with both hands. If your back rounds or your left knee bends, place a belt across the sole of your foot and hold the ends of the belt. In this pose, both your left leg and your spine should be straight.

Inhalation and Retention:

Mulabandha: without rounding your lower back, as you inhale scoop your lower belly inward (the beginning of Uddiyana bandha) and breathe downward into the base of your pelvis, lengthening downward through your tailbone. Scoop the tip of the tailbone forward with this scooping action of the inbreath, and feel how this action tones the pelvic floor, creating a slight squeeze in the muscles of the perineum.

Uddiyana Bandha: as your lower belly tones and lifts with the inhalation, bring the energy of the breath first to touch your back ribs at the area of the kidneys. Let the diaphragm expand here with the broad expansive feeling of the breath; and let your solar plexus – from the base of your breastbone to your navel – soften downward, making you soft and receptive to the breath at the front body while broad and firm at the back body.

Jalandhara Bandha: lift your shoulders away from your hips to level your collarbones and lengthen the sides of your torso. With your arms straight, firm the muscles of your arms and draw that energy up through your shoulders and into your heart; this action draws your shoulder blades flat on your back, as if they were magnetized by the expansiveness of your heart. As you firm the shoulder blades into your back, especially firm the lower tips of your shoulder blades into the body and toward each other, lifting your heart and lifting and broadening your top chest at the sternum.

A strong and expansive chest is central to Maha Mudra; it supports the extension of your spine and creates space for the strong upward lift created by Uddiyana Bandha. As your shoulders draw back and your top chest lifts and expands, your collarbones will rotate back, allowing full freedom of the breath in your upper chest.

Follow the energy of this lift and expansion from the top of your sternum to the base of your ears; let this line of energy draw the top of your throat – where your throat meets your jaw line – back and up, from ear to ear. Lengthen through the back of your neck, bringing a noble bow to your head, so that your chin descends to meet your sternum without compressing or hardening your throat. The more you lift and move back at the top of your throat while bowing from the nape of your neck, the more space you create for the inner doming of your palate – the vocal diaphragm. This is Jalandhara Bandha.

As you **inhale**, each action is helped by the vertical lift created in the body by the

inhalation; by the same token, this lift also creates the kind of ‘negative pressure’ internally that inspires the bandhas, until their completion with Jalandhara Bandha. The end result is a corresponding ‘pressure drop’ in the head, so that the mind descends into the heart as the head cools.

Particularly at the top of the inhalation, support the lift created by the inhalation by firming at the base of the pelvis by toning the muscles of the perineum as you scoop your tailbone down and forward, and your lower belly in and up (Mulabandha). Firm at the center of the Solar Plexus to support the lift at the center of the diaphragm created by Uddiyana Bandha. Bow your head forward in Jalandhara Bandha, holding the ‘doming’ at the root of the palate and gently exerting pressure on the softness of the throat as you retain the breath.

As you **exhale**, gently release Jalandhara Bandha to allow the breath to go out freely and smoothly. But keep the gentle firmness at the center of the Solar Plexus as the center of the diaphragm presses upward to expel the breath, and your ribs relax smoothly downward without collapse. Keep the tone of the lower belly with Mulabandha, not letting the belly drop, though the firming and lift at the perineum can be gently and gradually released. At the end of the exhalation, the bandhas can be released to make space for the next inhalation.

Through these actions, maintaining the key elements of the prana or energy of the inhalation, keep the experience of the breath as centered in your heart, and imagine the exhalation moving upward through the core of the body, rather than feeling a collapse downward. The exhalation should be smooth, comfortable and relaxed, without any feeling of gripping or drop.

After one or more rounds of the breath with this mudra, sit quietly to feel and enjoy the quality of both breath and mind.

A **simple practice** of Maha Mudra would be to simply press the air out using Uddiyana Bandha while maintaining a strong Shoulder Loop so that your chest doesn’t drop and your shoulders don’t round. Let your exhalation be held outside of you, suspended in the outer dvadashanta, for as long as is comfortable, and then take the next breath in, drawing the breath down to your pelvic diaphragm.

The full practice of Maha Mudra is more demanding and can be strenuous; your posture must be firm and you must be comfortable with your practice of the Bandhas and of (outer) retention of the breath.

Full Practice:

1. Exhale completely, using Uddiyana Bandha – a strong action of the lower abdominals – to press the breath out smoothly and evenly.
2. Holding the breath out, engage Mula Bandha by drawing your tailbone down and forward, actively firming and lifting the muscles of your pelvic floor.

3. Draw your lower abdominals strongly in and up in Uddiyana Bandha, drawing from the lift of Mula Bandha; lift the diaphragm upward and lift and open your rib cage with a strong Shoulder Loop, as if breathing in, but keep your throat closed with Jalandhara Bandha. No breath comes in, and a powerful suction is created up the core of your body as your abdominal muscles press back toward your spine. Your belly should hollow as it's lifted up under the rib cage through the action of Uddiyana Bandha.
4. Maintain a firm Jalandhara Bandha, with chest open and head bowed, so that the prana that is being drawn upward so strongly can move easily toward the crown of your head. Hold this inner lift, with the breath held outside of you, for as long as is comfortable.
5. To inhale, first release your diaphragm downwards, and then release Jalandhara Bandha enough to draw the breath in smoothly, without gasping or jerking your diaphragm.
6. The practice is strenuous and effortful, but you should not allow it to create strain or tension through practicing too aggressively. It's not necessary to do many repetitions: try practicing it once, and then sit for meditation and watch how powerfully your attention is drawn inward into meditation.

If you have a heart condition or concerns with your blood pressure, consult with your physician before attempting the full practice. The practice also works the abdominal region strongly and can create pressure in the eyes if practiced wrongly. Your health concerns need to be taken into account especially before you begin the full practice of Maha Mudra, and medical consultation as well as the direct guidance of a competent yoga teacher is a must!