

CORE PRACTICE IN YOGA

By Christopher Baxter

Purpose of an Asana:

From a purely physical standpoint, what we seek in each posture is what will help us open, relax into, and strengthen our core self. In the ancient scripture of the yoga sutras, written by the revered sage Patanjali, an asana is described as embodying both *sthira* steadiness and *sukha* comfort.

Structural Foundation

There are many methods in yoga by which to establish steadiness and comfort in our practice at a muscular level. These functional concerns are also the crux of western physiological research. Inevitably they all must address the questions of

- what puts muscles into their best anatomical advantage
- what needs to be relaxed and what needs to be strengthened to provide optimum alignment

By first opening and then strengthening the muscles of the pelvic floor, we can build a strong physical foundation on which to anchor a physiologically safe practice. This broadening and strengthening, relaxing and steadying of the foundation is accomplished through a unique movement known as mulabandha.

Mulabandha

While there are various techniques for practicing mulabandha, for the general purpose of this article, mulabandha is best described as a subtle lifting or arching up of the pelvic floor into the center of the body. This is accomplished by a contraction of the muscles of the pelvic floor. (In most applications, the genital and anal regions are relaxed, however in certain positions such as back bending, more lift is asked of the perineal floor. This application results in a stronger inward pull felt in the anus and genitals.) The lift is accompanied by slow steady and continuous breathing (*dirgha* or *ujjayi pranayama*). In addition, when you lift your sternum and bring a soft smile to your face, the effect of the perineal lift extends through your esophagus and soft palate continuing all the way to the fontanel.

Imagine yourself standing. Can you visualize how the arch of your foot lifting up collects and organizes the entire weight of your body, distributes it through the ball and heel, and directs it easily down into the ground? In a similar way, as the weight of the torso is pulled down by gravity, the domed arching up of the perineal floor gives an equal and opposite lift through the central structure. As a result, your ankle, knee, and hip joints subtly realign. Your upper and lower leg bones move slightly into a more efficient weight bearing position above the feet.

This alignment enables your body weight to flow more easily through the pelvic bones and hip joints, down into the arch of the foot, and back into the ground. Because the weight bearing is directed more finely into the bones, muscles, and ligaments we instantly reduce stress and its associated anxieties. Because we use less energy, we feel less fatigued. We can actually smile and experience more joy in our practice.

In addition, when the perineal floor lifts it stimulates the core abdominal muscles to also lift and hold. This lift enables the chest and upper back to more easily lengthen. As a result of this inner lift, the back of the neck elongates, causing the crown to lengthen. The integrative effect is a subtle repositioning and alignment of the entire skeletal structure. As a result we feel stronger, we move easier and we can hold our position longer without strain.

Because of the unique way in which it unites many different branches of the musculoskeletal system, mulabandha enables the core muscles of the neck, shoulders, back, chest, abdomen, sides, hips, groin, and buttocks to be firmly rooted all the way down into the pelvic floor. Paradoxically we feel more grounded even as we feel lighter.

Core Strength

With practice, this rooting strengthens your core and enables your entire body to move into, hold, and move out of a wide range of positions with greater freedom, easier alignment and more safety. When your body feels safe and open you naturally relax, you breathe easy and you feel uplifted physically, emotionally and energetically. As a result, you experience more happiness in your body.

Our intention in this approach, then, is to empower our core to be comfortable, strong, and mobile through establishing stable support via a strong foundation. When we shift our emphasis from imitating postures to “coming from core”, we feel an ease of movement and a stability that even others can recognize. We let go of unnecessary contractions and receive enhanced benefits. We learn to support ourselves from the ground up and the inside out. We move in our bodies and our lives with more grace, power, and ease.

Distal Support

If we are not confident in having a strong and stable foundation in our body, the insecurity will motivate us to seek external forms of stability. We do this by contracting muscles “at a distance” from the center of our body. In Western physiology, this is referred to as distal support.

For example, if we squeeze the buttocks and legs firmly together in the cobra posture, Bhujangasana, we may feel solid, but the distal support is actually a rigid contraction. It is an unnecessary movement in relation to fulfilling the core musculoskeletal purpose of the posture, which is to actively strengthen the back and passively lengthen the front of the torso. By using only distal support, the breath and brain will feel constricted, the lower body unnecessarily tense and the energy disconnected between the upper and lower halves of the body. If the distal support of the leg and buttock squeeze is released and our core remains unengaged, we will feel weak and wobbly.

Through regular use of mulabandha, we learn that the protective tension and rigidity can be transformed into internal strength and lift. This enables us to reduce unnecessary injuries, release trapped energy, and live in our body with more joy.

With mulabandha to anchor your own power, you can create safety during a long sustained stretch, strengthen your trunk, and redistribute precious energy from contraction into conscious awareness. Once you have that core strength in place, you can choose the patterns of distal support that enhance your aims.

Mulabandha is not an all or nothing technique. It can be held as a gentle intention, a fully engaged perineal lift or somewhere in between. For example in the Child’s Pose, *Balasana* or *Garbhasana*, a light lift of mulabandha will assist the body in feeling safe. In everyday walking a 20% mulabandha gives relief to the knees and spring to the step. In a standing backbend, a fully engaged mulabandha, firmly held for the duration of the posture, gives firm safety and structural support.

Consistency

Mulabandha can be consistently lifted through the holding of a posture or rhythmically engaged and relaxed. For example, in the final position of the Posterior Stretch, *Paschimottanasana*, alternating the exhalation and lift of mulabandha with the inhalation and release of mulabandha assists the body to stretch and soften.

Emotional Safety

The parasympathetic nervous system connects the base of the spine (the sacrum) with the base of the brain (the medulla or reptilian/survival brain), the midbrain (frontal and thinking brain), and the crown of the head (referred to in spiritual traditions as the spiritual dome or crown or creation). This neurological system controls the vegetative functions (digestion, elimination) of the body and networks certain glandular secretions with organs.

Through learning to isolate movement of the perineal floor, both relaxing and lifting it, we actually articulate the sacrum and its associated neurological pathways. By directly palpating this “root” of our neurological intelligence, as in any massage, we relax, comfort, and assist the perineum in releasing long held tensions. The master glands in the brain (pituitary and pineal) receive the neurological information that all is well, and they rebalance the body chemistry.

The sense of well being is instantaneously transmitted to the entire organism by the endocrine and nervous systems working together. The parts of the body that usually clench in fear (the anal sphincter, genitals, internal organs, belly, and buttocks) relax. Our respiratory, cardiovascular, and digestive systems are signaled to relax. As a result, we feel an integrated sense of safety and comfort in our belly. Our emotions tell us all is well.

Personal Boundaries

Owing to inherited social concepts about our bodies, as well as various injuries and traumas that are a part of life, almost everyone holds some unconscious tension in the buttocks, belly, perineum, genitals and anal region. These are usually the oldest tensions in the body, frequently formed at the pre verbal times of our lives. Some practitioners find that as they relate to these parts of their bodies they encounter shame, guilt, fear, pride, arrogance, loneliness, numbness, abuse, or even survival anxieties. Others may be physically weak in these places due to hernia, episiotomy, or other medical circumstances.

Therefore to be willing to let go of even a portion of that protection is a very personal and intimate choice. We can only deeply relax here if we feel it is within our control to feel safe. Some are, and others are not, ready to make such a choice. Each practitioner must be sensitive to his or her own needs and be responsive to his or her unique developmental time in order to establish the psychological safety required for this practice. Because many of us have either denied or overemphasized this part of our body for so long, this practice (combined with compassionate awareness, steadfast patience, and relaxed determination) helps balance our energies.

We take steps to release our bindings only if we feel safe to create our own boundaries. Psychologically, it is a powerful choice and a developmental step to embrace our core strength.

As Marianne Williamson said: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.”

Owning our power is one of the great benefits of mulabandha practice. As we experiment with using core strength and letting go of our old ways of holding ourselves, we realize that it is possible to let go of our habitual methods of safety (tension, numbness, fight or flight, self sabotage, doing it right, looking good) and still survive. We find an inner confidence that lets us face and release our reluctance to embody all that we secretly know ourselves to be.

From Domination to Self-actualization

To anchor our shift in awareness from external authority to internal guidance we need to be aware of our fear based contractions. Reliance on external things, ideas, and images for our well being keeps us rigid in our body. This in turn limits our choices and creative expressions.

Turning to internal guidance allows us to apply yoga at a much deeper level. We can use the teachers and the teachings as resources rather than rules. The compulsion to replicate perfect images loses its hypnotic power over us. Instead of working to please the teacher, we can focus on realizing the union of our soul with spirit, which pleases and brings lasting joy.

This internal trust enables us to more readily self-source our creative response to the moment-to-moment flow of life. We learn to stand up for ourselves, to take responsibility for our choices and actions. Through standing our ground with core strength rather than being dug in with contracted distal support, we are able to contain and express our own Self in a more relaxed and powerful way.

The regular use of mulabandha can assist us in recognizing the need for personal boundaries that support us in taking steps to move toward our own creative expression. This practice enables us to start from a healthy base from the very first posture. As we practice, sourced and energized from core, we don't have to be super strong, super mobile, or super flexible to receive the benefits yoga has to offer.

This approach does not take away what you know. It helps you to recognize what it is you no longer need, release it, and build on what already nurtures you in your life.

May you find this practice uplifting, peaceful, and a worthy friend for life.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

To Optimize Your Practice

Have a clear intention

Respect your personal limits – physically, energetically, and emotionally

Practice with determination, intelligence, concentration, kindness, and humor

Relax into the effort; be steady and comfortable

Practice for your fulfillment, not the teacher's or other students' approval

Ask for assistance as needed

Move slowly with full body breathing

How to find your limit:

Breathing will shut down or go shallow

Sharp sensations

Strong sensations in joints, not muscles

No longer enjoying the work

Struggle and strain instead of steady, full, energetic engagement

When to practice: Yoga is best done on an empty stomach or at least three hours after a meal. Establish a time when you won't be interrupted and have at least one half hour to yourself.

Where to practice: A clean well ventilated, warm, quiet environment with a firmly padded, no-skid floor or mat is most conducive.

What to wear: loose comfortable clothing and bare feet.

Breathing: Use continuous ujjayi and/or dirgha pranayama throughout. This breathing will help your body to relax, feel safe and lengthen more easily.

Mulabandha: For internal support and maximum enjoyment – use mulabandha and a soft smile as often as you can remember. This practice will give you the internal support, safety, core strength, and one-pointed attention that is usually difficult to find and maintain. Please realize that the ability to locate, engage and maintain mulabandha is in itself a learning process that can sometimes take months to become familiar with. Be patient.

Contraindications:

Never force yourself into a posture. Always be gentle, yet willing to find your edge of comfort.

Stay within the limits where you can easily breathe and naturally smile. Your body will relax, open and strengthen.

If you have had surgery recently, or are in question as to whether this practice is appropriate for you, consult your doctor before beginning.

If you have untreated high blood pressure, or recently changed blood pressure medication, inverted postures are contraindicated.