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Āsana Variations

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I have already stated that āsanas can be practiced in various ways. I should now like to discuss the possibilities for varying certain āsanas and discuss why you might do this.

One reason we work with āsana variations is to extend our physical capabilities. Most people begin a yoga practice with the expectation of achieving certain results. You might wish to strengthen your back, cure yourself of asthma, free yourself from pain, or simply feel more energetic. These particular goals are achieved by practicing the āsanas in various ways. For instance, someone with a stiff shoulder would adapt particular āsanas to address that lack of mobility. Someone dealing with asthma would perform āsana variations that focused on opening the chest and lengthening the breath cycle. Āsana variations help us achieve maximum gain with minimum effort by intelligently addressing our physical needs.

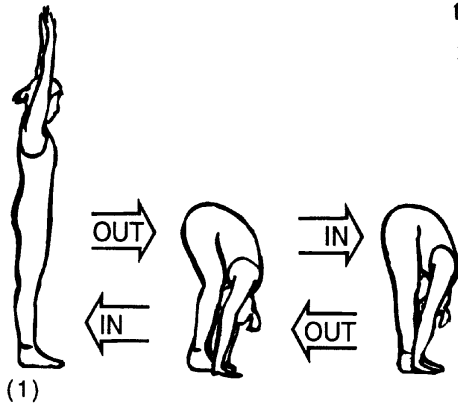
The other important reason for practicing āsana variations is to encourage attentiveness. If we practice the same āsanas over and over again for a long stretch of time, they can easily become mere routine, even if the choice of āsanas and breathing exercises is well planned and designed specifically for our condition and goals. Our attention to what we are doing steadily diminishes with this kind of unbroken repetition, and boredom sets in. Varying the āsanas renews attention and opens our senses to new experiences. Attention is the state of being in which we are fully present to what we are doing, enabling us to feel all that is happening in our bodies. Being in the state of open attention creates the opportunity for experiencing something we have never felt before. If we do not work with variations and instead repeat the same postures over and over again, we lose this opportunity for new experiences. Staying alert and constantly discovering new awarenesses are essential features of a correct āsana practice. The proper practice of āsanas requires our mind to be fully

focused; this is automatically achieved by arousing interest and attentiveness through new experiences.

Ways of Varying an Āsana

Varying the Form

Figure 18:
Three possible
variations of
uttānāsana.



The simplest way to vary an āsana is to alter its form. Figure 18 shows several different variations of uttānāsana.

One possibility for varying uttānāsana after bending forward is to straighten the legs as you breathe in and then bend them slightly as you breathe out (1), making the legs work harder. The stretch in the legs can be made even more intense by placing some padding under the toes and ball of the foot. Practicing uttānāsana in this way puts a lot of strain on the lower back and is therefore considered risky for some people. Know your limitations before choosing such variations.

If we want to strengthen the back with the help of uttānāsana, we bend fully through the exhale, then come up halfway again as we breathe in (2). The legs remain slightly bent so that the whole back is worked only moderately.

In a third variation of uttānāsana we bend fully through the exhale, then clasp the hands behind the lower back and bend the legs (3). This variation creates a lot of movement in the lower back but reduces the risk of overworking the back by bending the legs.

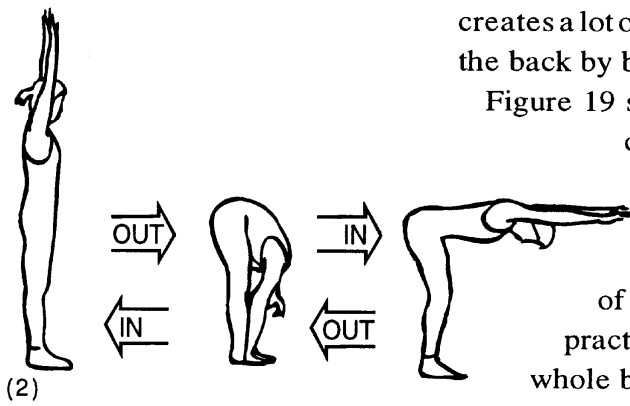
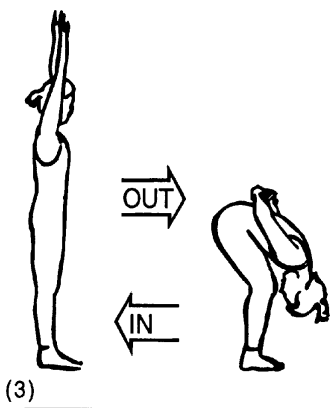


Figure 19 shows several variations of śalabhāsana. For many people the classic form of śalabhāsana (1) is too demanding to be useful, yet because it is a very effective and efficient āsana, it is a fitting addition to most yoga practices. Adaptation of classic śalabhāsana can be chosen to meet the requirements and strength of each person. The important point in choosing variations is to practice within your capacity while keeping the breath linked to the whole body, regardless of whether the body is moving or stationary.

By varying the arm and leg movements in śalabhāsana, you can intensify or reduce the work in the back, the abdomen, and the chest. For example, by placing the hands at the base of the ribs (2) and inhaling into the back bend with alternating leg movements, the work in the lower back, abdomen, and chest will be reduced while encouraging a significant arch in the upper back. Raising both legs and the chest on the inhale (3) will deepen the effect in the lower back and abdomen while still allowing for a significant arch in the upper back and chest. Raising the opposite arm and leg (4) will strengthen, balance and integrate the two sides of the body. As we strengthen we can use the arms to intensify the effect in the lower and upper back. Raising the arms to shoulder height (5) strengthens the neck and shoulder muscles and encourages their integration with the muscles of the back. This variation should be practiced only when there is sufficient arch in the upper back.



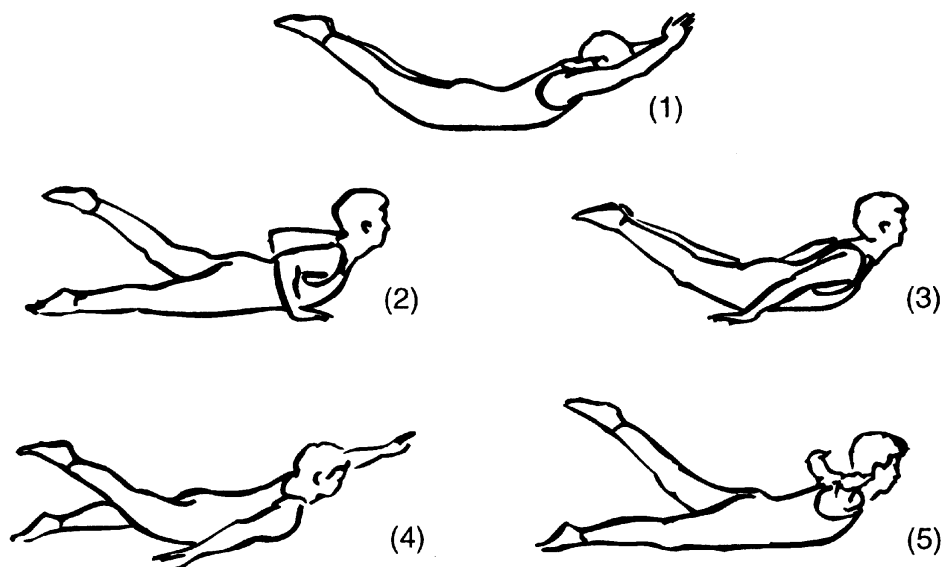


Figure 19:
Variations of
śalabhāsana.

In śalabhāsana, retaining the breath following the inhale is very strengthening. Śalabhāsana itself will facilitate a deep exhale and retention after exhale. Each variation in body and breath will change the effect and function of the āsana in specific ways. In all the variations shown here, the legs, arms, and forehead can return to the floor on the exhale. Or you may choose to exhale in the raised position, which will deeply work the abdominal region.

A person with stiff legs is not restricted from enjoying the benefits of the classic form of paścimatānāsana, shown in figure 20, step (1). For example, bending the knees on the exhale (3) will deepen the forward bend. Indra Devi, a very accomplished yogini and my father’s first Western student, told me this is how my father first taught her paścimatānāsana, adapting the classic pose for her needs. Raising the seat (4) will also allow for a deeper bend. Variations of the arm positions such as are shown in examples 2 and 5 will work the upper back and shoulders while assisting to deepen the āsana. You should not, however, use the muscles in the arms to attempt to intensify the forward bend.

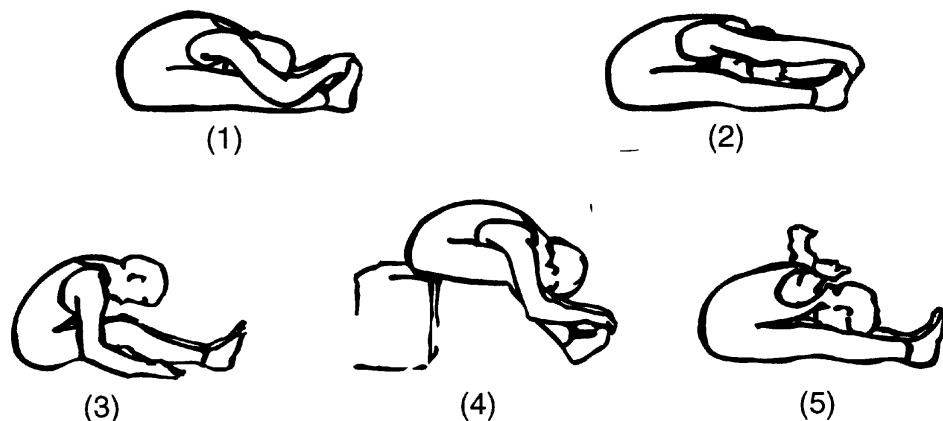
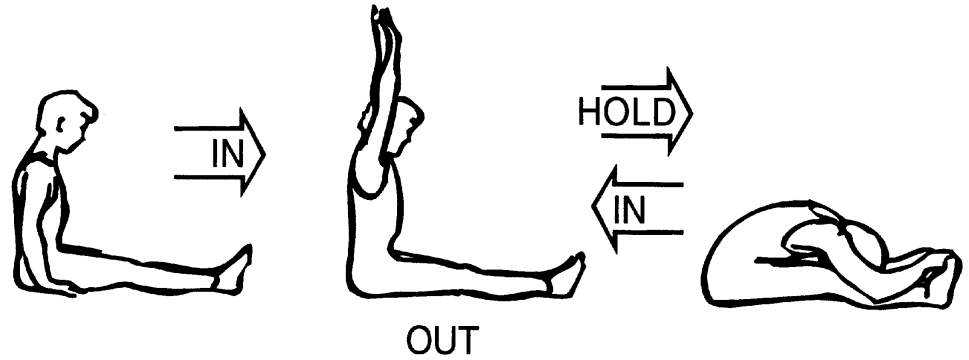


Figure 20:
Variations of
paścimatānāsana.

Figure 21:
Varying the breath
in pāścimatānāsana.



This should instead occur without force, the movement linked to the exhaled breath. The forward bend can be intensified on the exhale and relaxed on the inhale so that the body's natural elasticity is enhanced with the breath.

There are a great many āsana variations such as these. Each time we practice a variation, the effect of the āsana, and consequently our attention, is directed toward different areas or needs. Āsana variations are not just for people with specific physical problems. They can help all yoga practitioners remain open to discovery.

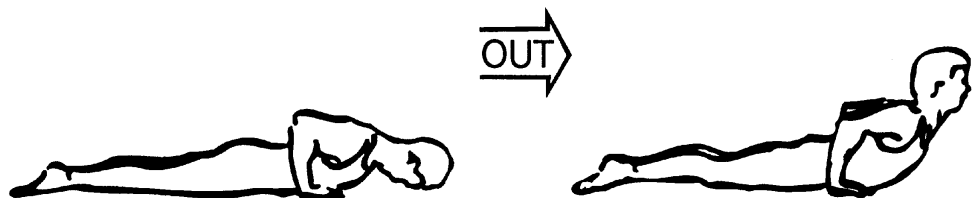
Varying the Breath

Another way to vary an āsana is to alter the breathing. For example, instead of freely inhaling and exhaling we can direct the breath so that the inhalation and exhalation are of the same duration, or we might choose to hold the breath.

Normally we coordinate each movement with either an inhalation or an exhalation. Sometimes, however, it is useful to move while holding the breath. Remember: if we want to increase the effect of the āsana in the chest area, we concentrate on the inhalation; if we want to increase the effect on the abdomen and lower back, we concentrate on the exhale. So to vary the breath in pāścimatānāsana, a pose that naturally works on the belly and lower back, we breathe in as we raise our arms, then hold this pose as we breathe out. Then without breathing in, we bend forward and pause (see figure 21). In this way we intensify the effect of the exhalation. Inhale to come back to the seated position, arms overhead. This sequence can be repeated as many times as an easy breath rhythm can be maintained.

Holding the breath after the inhale intensifies the effects through the chest area, and can be used to good advantage in such postures as bhujāṅgāsana.

Figure 22:
Varying the breath
in bhujāṅgāsana.



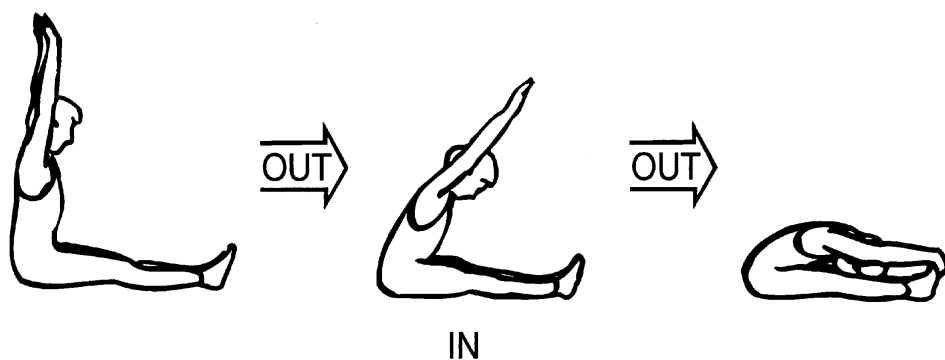


Figure 23:
Practicing
paścimatānāsana
in steps.

Another interesting variation to work with is reversing the normal breathing pattern. For example, in bhujāṅgāsana we would raise the upper body on the exhalation instead of on the inhalation (see figure 22). Many people use the belly more than the back muscles to push themselves up into bhujāṅgāsana. Breathing out contracts the abdomen and so doesn't allow it to be used in this way. Raising the upper body on the exhale will make the pose feel very different.

Once we know our own capacities for holding the breath with comfort, we can be imaginative with the way we use the breath. Suppose we want to focus our āsana practice to bring attention to the upper back. We would then choose postures such as bhujāṅgāsana or śalabhāsana that work this area, and at the same time focus on the inhalation in the breath cycle. We might practice making each inhalation longer than the one before. Or we might hold the breath after inhalation, which will increase the volume of air in the lungs and expand the chest.

Variations serve two purposes: to address a particular need and to create attentiveness. Holding the breath following the inhale or exhale can increase tension in the body. If you feel this happening, bring your awareness to the place where the tension is gathering. If the tension does not dissipate with awareness, slowly come out of the āsana.

Varying the Rhythm

Many āsanās can take on a new quality if we break them up into steps (krama). Figure 23 shows paścimatānāsana practiced in this way. On the first exhale we bend only half the way forward. Staying there, we inhale and stretch the back. On the second exhalation we bend forward completely. Practicing in this way not only makes a difference in our quality of attention; it also changes the way we arrive in the final position and hold it.

Varying the Preparation

Variations are possible not just in the āsanās themselves but also in the preparations we make for them. The exercises we practice before a particular āsana can make a difference as to what we experience and where we feel the

effects of the āsana. Oftentimes people will say that they did not feel anything after doing a particular āsana. If they do not feel any sensation in their muscles then they think nothing has happened. In situations like this it is helpful to change the preparation for that āsana, choosing one that moves the body in the exact opposite direction. Paying attention to the effects of both āsanās will give you a new certainty that something is really happening.

Varying the Sphere of Attention

While we are practicing an āsana we have the opportunity to direct our attention to different parts of the body. This can improve the quality of our āsana practice considerably.

Figure 24 shows two possibilities for where to place our attention in the practice of bhujāṅgāsana. We can direct our attention to the upper part of the back which is opening up as we breathe in (1), or we might direct our attention toward keeping the legs and knees on the floor (2). When beginners practice this āsana they often raise the legs off the floor as they raise the upper body. By attempting to keep the legs on the floor, the quality of work in the back is intensified.

We introduce the art of variation to bring something new and beneficial into our āsana practice. In a class I would recommend to some people that they stretch their legs fully and to others that they do the same āsana with bent knees. I would advise some to hold the breath after inhalation and others to hold their breath after exhalation. It is important to tailor your variations to match your particular needs.

Variations should never be introduced in a random way; they should only be introduced when they are warranted. We do them when we need help developing or sustaining attention, or as an aid to a particular physical need.

Respecting Classic Āsanās

It is important to understand that behind every yoga posture lies a principle; if we do not know or understand this principle we will not be able to perform the āsana or variations of it in the proper way. A teacher who respects the classic postures can help us recognize the principles they embody. What does this āsana mean? What is its purpose? What does it demand of us? Only when we have come to understand the underlying principles can we do variations of an āsana.

For example, paścimatānāsana, the seated forward bend, is a pose in which

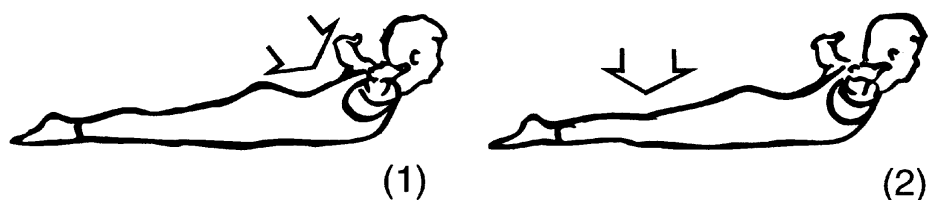


Figure 24:
Shifting the
sphere of attention
in bhujāṅgāsana.

we sit with the legs stretched out in front of us and grasp the feet with the hands, bringing the head down toward the shins. *Paścimatānāsana* translates as “the stretching of the west,” because in India we traditionally face the east when we pray or practice āsanās; in that position our back is facing west. So the real purpose of the āsana is to facilitate the movement of the breath in the back. A person practicing *paścimatānāsana* should be aware of the *paścimatāna* effect felt in the back of the body—not at the level of skin or muscles but *within*, at the level of the breath. Practicing *paścimatānāsana* means allowing the breath to flow along the back of the body.¹ It is not simply a matter of stretching the tissues, but rather of experiencing the feeling of the breath flowing through the spine.

Uṣṭrāsana, the camel pose, is a back bend performed from a kneeling position. With hands resting on the feet, the thighs are raised to vertical, as in kneeling, while the chest expands and opens on each inhalation. The principle of this pose is to facilitate the movement of breath into the chest. Space is created in the chest by stretching the intercostal muscles in the pose, and the whole front of the body is opened up. The pose allows the feeling of the breath to be experienced down the entire frontal line of the body.

“The feeling of the breath” refers to the feeling of energy or *prāṇa* moving in the body. The principle underlying each classic āsana has a particular implication to the movement of *prāṇa* in the body. A teacher who understands āsana from the point of view of whole-body feeling and the movement of *prāṇa* can adopt classic āsanās to the needs of each student. The student thus enjoys and benefits from the principle that is inherent to each particular posture.

The key to right practice and the appropriate variations of an āsana is to maintain the link between breath and body. Vīa the breath we can be with the whole body and observe the unfolding of an āsana. Rather than struggling with the body in an āsana, we monitor the āsana with the number of breaths and the breath ratio (inhale, pause, exhale, pause) that is appropriate for us. If the breath is smooth and has continuity, the āsana will be beneficial.

The breath is one of the means by which we vary āsanās. There is a natural elasticity in the body that is enhanced as we breathe in āsana practice. As the body moves the breath moves, and as the breath is stationary the body is stationary. Thus the breath and body become one movement, one process, and that is a very powerful yoga. Maintaining this link between breath and body, particularly in lengthening the exhale and pausing after the exhale, has more significance to the purpose of yoga than achieving a classic āsana for its own sake. The breath has a very important role in āsana practice. We should not compromise the easy flow of the breath to achieve the āsana.

The breath is one of the best means for observing yourself in your yoga practice. How does the body respond to the breath, and how does the breath respond to the movement of the body? The breath should be your teacher.

¹. *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*
1.29.

7

The Bandhas

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The bandhas play an important role in the cleansing processes of yoga. I have already explained how prāṇāyāma helps to reduce waste matter in the body by directing the agni, the fire of life. Bandhas are the means by which this process can be intensified. The old texts tell us that by using the bandhas, the agni can be directed to the exact place where the rubbish has settled and is blocking the flow of energy in the body. The bandhas intensify the effect of the fire. The word *bandha* means “to bind or tie together, to close.” In the way it is used in yoga, *bandha* also means “to lock.” When we execute a bandha we lock certain areas of the torso in a particular way.

The three most important bandhas are the *jālandhara bandha*, the *uddīyāna bandha*, and the *mūla bandha*. Jālandhara bandha involves the neck and upper spine and makes the whole spine erect. Uddīyāna bandha focuses on the area between the diaphragm and the floor of the pelvis. Mūla bandha involves the area between the navel and the floor of the pelvis.

Bandha Techniques

To learn the bandhas you must work with a teacher—that is the only way to learn these techniques safely. In learning the bandha techniques you always begin with jālandhara bandha; you should practice this bandha for a while after mastering it, before attempting to learn the other two.

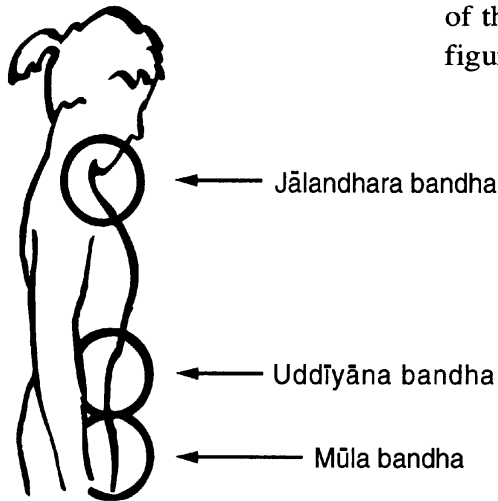
Jālandhara Bandha

Figure 29 shows the positions of the three bandhas discussed here. To begin jālandhara bandha, we lift the spine so that it is very straight. The head is then pulled back a little, the neck is stretched, and the chin is lowered. As long as the chin is down and the back is straight we are in jālandhara bandha. This bandha is possible to perform with many, though not all, āsanās.

Uddīyanā Bandha

Only when you are certain of and well practiced in jālandhara bandha should uddīyanā bandha be attempted. In this technique the diaphragm and the lower abdomen are raised. As you begin to exhale you contract the abdomen. By the end of the exhalation the abdomen should be fully contracted, drawn up and back toward the spine. With this contraction the diaphragm rises. When this bandha is mastered, the navel moves toward the spine and the rectal and back muscles contract. At the completion of uddīyāna bandha the whole abdominal area is hollow.

In this practice it is very important that both the contraction and the relaxation of the abdomen occur slowly. If the breath is held for ten seconds after the exhalation, for example, then you should take at least two seconds to release the abdomen. If the abdomen is not fully relaxed after uddīyāna bandha, the following inhalation will be restricted and you will experience a choking feeling. It is easy to get the right feeling for uddīyāna bandha in some of the easier āsanas such as taḍāka mudrā and adhomukha śvānāsana (see figure 30).



Mūla Bandha

Mūla bandha develops out of uddīyāna bandha: we release the upper abdomen and diaphragm but maintain the contraction in the lower abdomen. In other words, the area below the navel remains contracted while the area above it is released. We move from uddīyāna bandha into mūla bandha, holding the breath after the exhalation for both. We can maintain mūla bandha during the following breaths, even while inhaling.

Figure 29: The position of the jālandhara, uddīyāna, and mūla bandhas.

Bandhas and Āsanas

We should begin practicing the bandhas in simple āsanas so that the body can get used to them. Figure 30 illustrates some of these āsanas. The easiest position is lying flat on the back with the arms resting on the floor over the head (1). We can practice uddīyāna bandha in this position, which is called *taḍāka mudrā*. Taḍāka refers to the big pools on the temple grounds in India. Hollowing the abdomen in this position reminds us of one of these pools. Another simple position for practicing the bandhas is adhomukha śvānāsana, the downward-facing dog pose (2). Anyone who can easily practice the bandhas in these positions is ready to try them in a sitting position such as mahāmudrā (3). Mahāmudrā, the great mudrā, is essentially only called this when all three bandhas are involved. The position of the heel in the perineum supports the mūla bandha.

With the exception of jālandhara bandha, the bandhas can also be carried out in inverted positions such as the headstand. The bandhas are easy in this āsana

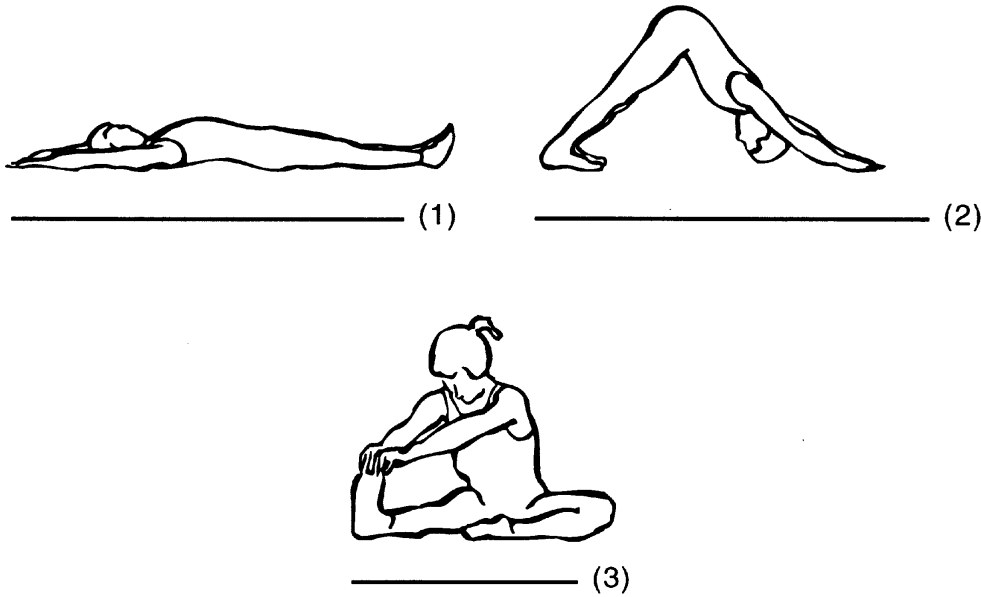


Figure 30:
Easy āsanās in which to practice the bandhas are taḍāka mudrā (1) and adhomukha śvanāsana (2). Only when the bandhas have been mastered in these positions should you think of practicing them in mahāmudrā (3).

because raising the rubbish to the flame (with uddīyāna bandha) and holding it there (with mūla bandha) is greatly assisted by the body mechanics of the posture. In all inverted postures, the rubbish is raised to sit above the flame. The flame burns up toward the rubbish and the rubbish moves down toward the flame.

If we master the breath in the shoulderstand, then this is also a good posture in which to practice the bandhas. The best āsanās therefore for practicing bandhas are a few of the inverted postures and all postures in which we are lying flat on the back or sitting with a straight spine. The practice of bandhas is very difficult or impossible in āsanās such as backbends and twists, and are therefore best avoided.

A word of caution: Do not use bandhas throughout the entire āsana practice. Like all other yoga techniques, bandhas should be practiced artfully and not obsessively. The help of a good teacher is essential.

Bandhas and Prāṇāyāma

Only when we can comfortably execute the three bandhas in the āsanās discussed above are we advanced enough to introduce them in our prāṇāyāma practice. Let's consider how the bandhas intensify the cleansing effect of prāṇāyāma. Jālandhara bandha positions the torso in such a way that the spine is held erect. This makes it easier for the prana to move the flame toward the rubbish that needs burning. Uddīyāna bandha then raises the rubbish up toward the flame, and mūla bandha helps us leave it there long enough for the rubbish to be burned.

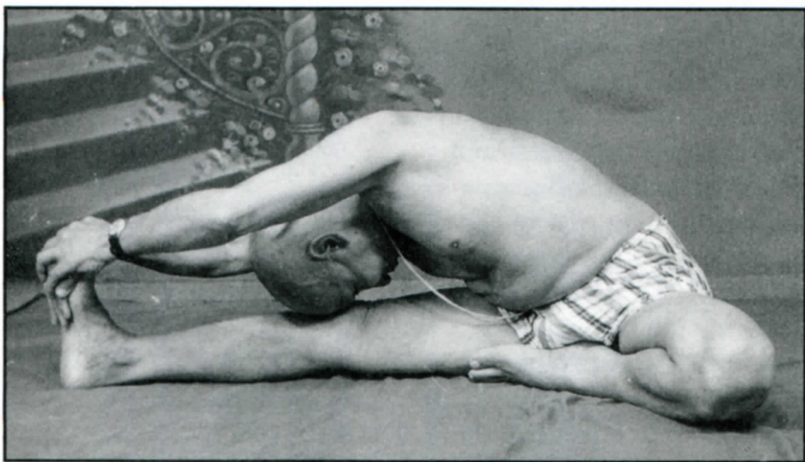
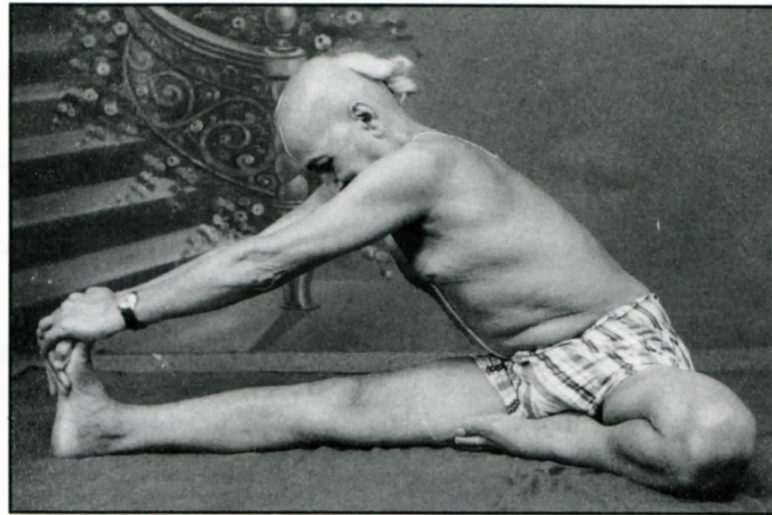
These three bandhas can be used during both āsana and prāṇāyāma practice. Jālandhara bandha can eventually be maintained during the whole process of

inhalation, exhalation, and holding the breath. Uddīyāna bandha can only be done during breath retention following exhalation. Mūla bandha, like jālandhara bandha, can be maintained during the whole prāṇāyāma practice.

Because uddīyāna bandha is only done as you hold the breath after exhalation, one of the most important prerequisites for anyone who wants to practice it is that you must be capable of holding the breath for a long time after exhalation without sacrificing the quality of either inhalation or exhalation. If this is not possible then you must not consider doing this bandha. If you want to do jālandhara bandha, you must make sure you are not tense in the neck or back so that you can hold your spine erect without any trouble while you keep the chin down. If you try to draw the chin down when your neck is stiff, greater tensions and pains will develop. Only jālandhara bandha can be practiced with kapālabhātī and bhastrika prāṇāyāma. You should not do the bandha in śītalī prāṇāyāma, because in that exercise you are moving the head up and down.

If the bandhas are to be practiced during prāṇāyāma, we must first establish a ratio of breathing—that is, inhalation, exhalation, and holding the breath—that we can maintain comfortably during twelve breaths without bandhas. We can then gradually introduce the bandhas. As in our daily āsana practice, we follow the principle of vinyāsa krama, building up to the strenuous practice of bandhas step by step. We then taper off gradually and finish our prāṇāyāma practice with simple breathing. We intensify our practice until we make progress in the preceding step, practicing patiently without forcing the body or the breath.

*Krishnamacharya
demonstrating mahāmudrā.*



*Krishnamacharya
in jānu śīrṣāsana.*

*Krishnamacharya in
mulabandhāsana demonstrating
all three bandhas.*

