

# Breath, Locks, Flow & Gaze

## "The Internal World"

Before beginning to practice, it is necessary to discuss some of the fundamental aspects of Ashtanga Yoga. These elements exist within an unseen world. Without them yoga becomes nothing more than an outward expression of physical movement. When performed correctly these subtle tools allow the practitioner to enter into the mystical realms of prana and experience the subtle wonders of Ashtanga Yoga. These invisible tools are "Ujjayi Breath", "Bandhas", "Vinyasa" and "Drishti".

### Breath

**Ujjayi** is a specialized breathing technique which means victorious. This unique form of breathing is performed by creating a soft sound in the back of the throat while inhaling and exhaling through the nose. It is helpful to gently smile while breathing to allow the air to swirl around the back of the throat before continuing its journey to the lungs. This swirling action is what creates the unique sound which has been described as wind in the trees, a distant ocean, a cobra snake or, for the less poetic, Darth Vader from "Star Wars".

To assist those of you who are new to this type of breathing I have an exercise called the "Hhhaaa Method". You must sit up straight and take a full inhale through the nose and then let it out through the mouth with the soft sound of "Hhhaaa" as though you are *whispering*. Feel the air swirl in the back of the throat. Take a few breaths in this way and then **midway** through an exhale, close your mouth and let the air continue exiting through the nose instead of the mouth. Practice it a few times. Once you can create the sound in the back of the throat while exhaling, you are halfway to the full ujjayi breath. The second step is to gently smile while inhaling and create the same swirling sound as on the exhale. With practice it will become more familiar and soon you'll be able to utilize the ujjayi sound without any effort at all.

The main idea is to create a rhythm in the breath and ride it gracefully throughout the practice. This sound becomes a mantra to set the mind in focus. We must learn to listen to the breath. It is the guide which will tell us the quality of our practice. If we apply too much effort, the breath will become constricted or forced. With too little focus, the ujjayi breath may be drowned out by the sound of our own thoughts. Maintain awareness upon your breath and every moment becomes a meditation.

# Bandhas

**Bandhas** are a series of internal energy gates within the subtle body which assist in the regulation of pranic flow. There are three which I will discuss. They are “**Mulabandha**”, “**Uddiyana Bandha**” and “**Jalandhara Bandha**”. You may think of them as valves which work similarly to the valves within the circulatory system. When the heart beats, the blood surges through arteries and veins. Valves keep the blood from sloshing back toward the heart. In this way, when the heart beats, the blood continues its forward movement. **Bandhas** regulate the flow of **prana** (life-force) in a similar way within subtle energy channels known as **nadis**. When engaging the locks, energy is forced to spread throughout these pathways. We are then able to assimilate this energy on a cellular level as the prana bathes and feeds our subtle body and balances the gross nervous system.

## Mulabandha

**Mulabandha** is the root lock. It so called because of its location at the base of our nerve tree, the spinal column. There is a difference of location for this bandha in males and in females. In males the seat of **Mulabandha** is the perineal muscle which is located in front of the anus and behind the genitals. In females the location is near the top of the cervix.

A good way to understand its location is to imagine that you have a need to go to the toilet and there is none in sight. Which muscles would you use to resist this urge? In the beginning one may contract the anus in order to engage the appropriate area, but it is not necessary to be a “tight ass” in order to engage **Mulabandha**. It is more subtle than that. You may utilize a technique given to women to assist in the toning of the pelvic floor after childbirth. It is called the Keigel technique. While urinating, engage the muscles of the pelvic floor and stop the flow of urine and then release the contraction and let it flow again. This contraction will engage more muscles than necessary but over time you may learn to refine the action so that it is more specifically focused. In the beginning these locks may waver. With practice it will become possible to hold them for the entire duration of each yoga session. **For more details you may refer to a book entitled, “Moola Bandha, The Master Key”.** It is listed in the back of this manual in the “**Additional Practice Tools**” section on page 263.

## Uddiyana Bandha

The second lock is **Uddiyana Bandha** which means flying upward. In its complete ex-

pression, **Uddiyana Bandha** is performed by exhaling fully and then drawing the lower belly inward and upward while simultaneously lifting the diaphragm. This level of uddiyana is primarily utilized during the exhale retention phase of specialized breath control methods known as pranayama. This full level of engagement is not possible to maintain throughout practice due to the inability to inhale while total uddiyana bandha is engaged. The level of **Uddiyana** we should hold for the duration of our practice is more subtle. Rather than sucking in the belly fully, we must instead simply maintain a stillness located three fingers below the navel. This will allow space for the diaphragm to drop during each inhale and the lung's expansion will find its way into the side ribs, back, and chest. The upper portions of the torso must remain soft and pliable so that the inhale expansion may occur to its fullest expression. Upon each exhale the lower abdominal muscles may contract to encourage a total emptying of the lungs. This contraction must then be released in order for the inhale to repeat fully, yet not relaxed so much that the lower belly rises with the incoming breath. The action is subtle. Too much effort and the breath is hindered rather than enhanced. Do not harden the belly as though someone is about to punch you in the stomach. That is over-doing it.

I like to use a visualization to assist in further understanding this bandha. Imagine that you have a string which is attached two inches below the navel. Take that string and draw it straight through the body and tie it around the spine. Now when you inhale the lower belly will remain still and you will maintain freedom in the upper torso. These bandhas are a subtle dynamic that may take many years to understand. Be patient. Don't worry if you don't get it right away. In time they will come. Just as mulabandha, uddiyana bandha should eventually be held for the duration of practice.

## Jalandhara Bandha

**Jalandhara Bandha** is the third lock to discuss. It is the chin-lock. This lock is not utilized as frequently as the other two. It occurs spontaneously in some asanas such as shoulder stand and is prescribed for use in others. It is, however, used extensively for pranayama. To engage jalandhara bandha you may extend the chin forward and then draw it back into the notch which is formed where the two clavicle bones meet, at the bony protrusions below your Adam's apple. When engaging all three bandhas simultaneously it is called "mahabandha" or the great lock. Bandhas are an integral part of Ashtanga Yoga but they cannot be understood through mental powers. Understanding of the them will grow from these early seeds of awareness as personal practice develops.

# Drishti

## “Looking Out / Looking In”

Drishti is a point of gaze or focus, yet it has little to do with our physical sight. The real “looking” is directed internally. We may fix our physical sight upon an external object or a specific point on our body, yet truly the drishti is meant to direct our attention to the subtle aspects of our practice which were discussed earlier, the breath and bandhas as well as the mind. Those of us with sight are easily distracted by our surroundings. Other students in the room, a clock on the wall, or myriad other forms may pull us away from the immediate concerns of practicing yoga with awareness. The drishti is a device designed to balance our internal and external practice. There are officially nine drishti points which I have listed below. You will find that each asana has a drishti assigned to it. It will be listed at the bottom of every asana page.

If you find the drishtis to be too difficult, then I have a general rule of thumb which you can follow as an alternative whenever you feel the need. Let your gaze move in the direction of the stretch. As an example, if practicing a spinal twist to the right, your gaze will follow in that direction by looking over the right shoulder. When practicing a forward bend, your gaze may move toward the toes, or, if both arms are over the head, then generally the gaze will be looking up in that direction. You may think of your eyes like the eyes in a doll which will follow the movement of your head. When the head moves, the gaze will follow in the same direction.

Remember the main focus is to look inward. Create an internal checklist which you can scan in a millisecond while practicing. On this list you may have Breath, Bandhas, Flow and Equality of Opposition. Do you feel tension in particular areas of the body? Where is your awareness? Is it spread throughout the body? Are you relaxed? The list may go on but the idea is that the drishti is your microscope to examine that which may not be seen externally. Below is a list of the nine drishti points of Ashtanga Yoga. Utilize the prescribed one for each asana or the general rule of gazing in the direction of the stretch.

- 1) **Nasagrai:** Tip of the Nose
- 2) **Ajna Chakra:** Between the Eyebrows
- 3) **Nabi Chakra:** Navel
- 4) **Hastagrai:** Hand
- 5) **Padhayoragrai:** Toes

- 6) **Parsva Drishti:** Far to the Right
- 7) **Parsva Drishti:** Far to the Left
- 8) **Angustha Ma Dyai:** Thumbs
- 9) **Urdhva or Antara Drishti:** Up to the Sky

*View Your Practice Through the Eyes of Drishti*