

The Supta Asanas

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In the last three issues some important standing postures with the variations, counterposes and the accompanying breathing pattern to be followed were described along with some of the benefits that accrue. If one has practised them at a fixed time each day, regularly, body should become lighter (laghutwa), circulation, respiration and digestion improve, leading to better health and a positive sense of well being. The breathing also becomes longer, smoother and more alive, thereby giving a sense of calm. It is the uniqueness of the system of our Acharya that he has inherited, that one is imperceptibly led to the control of breath or Pranayama, even while doing the asanas. The synchronous and long breathing also helps relax the muscles and joints

and attain the posture (Asana Siddhi) smoothly and with less effort. A regular practitioner could observe within himself both tranquility, and paradoxically, improved stamina, as revealed by the capacity to do the postures more deliberately with slow stretching and stay in the final posture longer and for more number of breaths.

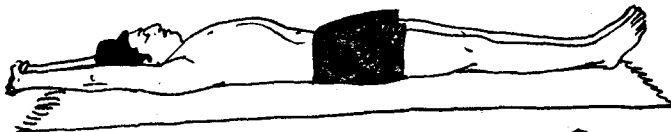
THE BANDHAS

It has been mentioned in earlier issues about the four aspects of yogic breathing. First is the Rechaka or long and smooth exhalation. Puraka is long inhalation. It is, however, possible to hold the breath in after inhalation, which is known as internal holding or antah Kumbhaka. Holding of breath out during the time interval between the

completion of exhalation (Rechaka) and the beginning of inhalation (Puraka,) is Bahya Kumbhaka

Readers may recall mentioning about the Bandhas or the contraction of certain group of muscles. It is now time to introduce the idea and practice of Bandhas also in the practice of asanas,

Three important Bandhas were mentioned earlier. They are Jalandharabandha, or locking the chin against the the breastbone. This may be done during both the kumbhakas and wherever the postures require the chin to be locked, which is normally the case during forward bending and keeping the back erect. In back bending and twisting postures, it will not be possible to do Jalandharabandha.



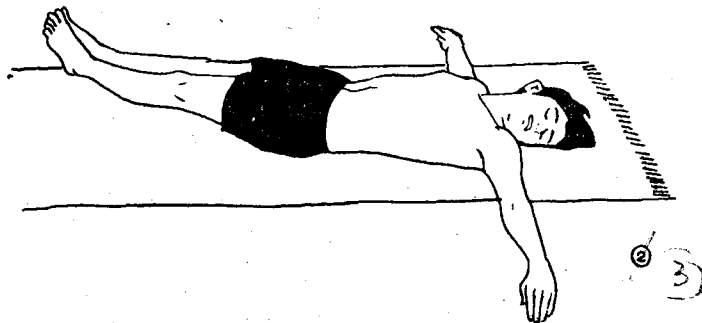
However, the other two Bandhas are to be practised in most of the asanas, especially after exhalation. The first is Moola bandha. It is done after a complete exhalation. After exhalation is over, the abhyasi is to anchor the body in the asana he is in and slowly and deliberately close the anus and then draw in the rectum with the help of contraction of perineal and surrounding muscles of the buttocks and also pulling the pelvic floor. It is called Moola Bandha or constriction of anus. Thereafter as if in a continuous movement, the abdomen, including the navel is drawn in, pushing the diaphragm up into the now almost empty chest cavity, when it is called Uddiyana Bandha (drawing in of diaphragm). It is actually the two Bandhas, Uddiyana Bandha and Moola Bandha which make use of both the pelvic diaphragm and diaphragm, which sepa-

rates the chest from the stomach that is one of specialities of yogic breathing when compared to other deep breathing exercises in other popular physical cultures.

It could be observed that it may not be possible to do the Bandhas initially (without practise of long inhalation and exhalation, so that the prana strength is first enhanced. If one has practised the standing postures mentioned in the previous three issues accompanied by the correct breathing pattern, and with food restriction (Tapas) and has reduced the waistline to its healthy level, then the Bandha could be attempted.

The one standing posture where all the three bandhas, could be effectively practised is Utkatasana and also its variation Ardha Utkatasana. After practising regularly the dynamic movements in

the standing postures, one should attempt to stay in the posture for a few breaths, say 3 to 6 to start with. In the initial stages one may be able to barely accomplish the posture. Then one should stay in the posture, say Utkatasana or Ardha Utkatasana for (about 3 to 6 breaths. Then one should stay in the posture comfortably and slowly increase the time to complete the stipulated number of breaths. Thereafter one should remain in the posture for a fixed period say 3 to 5 minutes. Further practice should be aimed at reducing the number of breaths for the same time duration. For instance, one may take 20 breaths to be in the posture. Later on it may be possible to remain in the posture steady and comfortable (Sthira and Sukha) for 5 minutes with perhaps 10 breaths only. This is one method of attaining Asana siddhi (perfection in posture)



which one can test for oneself.

Having achieved this, then it may be good to introduce Bandha described above, which will go to increase the time taken for one breath. Obviously it requires not only stamina or Pranayama Bala, to hold the breath for the duration of the Bandha, but also a healthy stomach and digestive system and the pelvic organs. What Bandha is possible with ulcer, constipation, colic pain, proctitis, urinary infection, dysmenorrhea, obesity, weakness arising out of indiscriminate sex etc?

SUPINE POSTURES

The next group of Asanas taken up are those lying with face upward of Supta asanas. First is Tatakamudra (gesture of a pond), which makes use of the Bandhas effectively.

Start with Samasthithi. Inhale, raise arms overhead and interlock fingers. Exhale, do Uttkatasana. Do a few breaths with or without the Bandhas. Exhale, ~~keeping~~ keeping the palms a few inches behind the back. Now sit down. Inhale, stretch the legs forward together and lie on your back, keeping the hands along the sides of the body and palms facing down on the ground.

This is the starting position for all supine postures. One may start straightaway lying down, but the advantage of starting from Samasthithi is that one could get limbered up a bit and also one can be sure that the body is straight, making use of the sense of balance. However it is the traditional method.

The lying posture is called Savasana by some authorities.

Now keep the feet, ankles and knees close. Stretch the thigh, calf muscles. Press the heels, buttocks, palms, shoulder and neck and stretch the spine on inhalation, so that the entire back tends to be flat on the ground. By this it may be possible to stretch the neck and do Jalandharabandha. But it is preferable to use a small pillow to raise the head and lock the chin. Do a few deep long breaths.

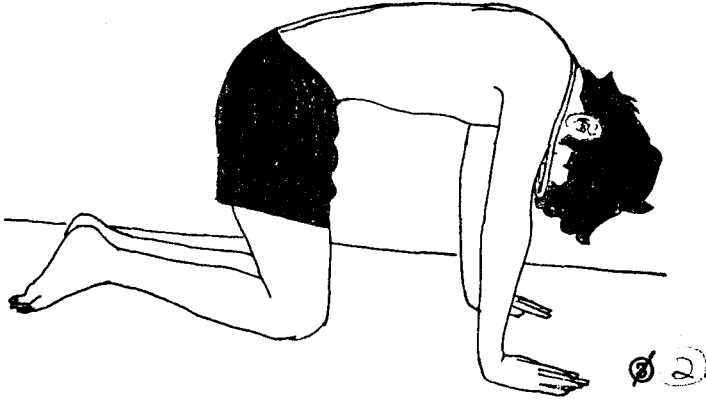
Then after a deep, complete exhalation, pressing the heels, knees, buttocks, palms, shoulders and neck and stretching other body muscles, do Moolabandha and Uddiyanabandha, so that the entire abdominal portion is drawn in completely making it scaphoid. It resembles a small, beautiful pond formed by the pelvic bones and the lower ribs. Stay on

the bandha ~~a~~ at least for a few seconds. This is Tatakamudra. Now, relax the drawn muscles and then inhale. Repeat for about 6 breaths. It may also be done with arms stretched overhead as in the sketch (1).

PREVENTIVE STEP

The Mudra may be better for some persons with legs bent and feet on the ground, close to the buttocks. One may practice also in the position given in sketch (2), which is Chakravakrasana.

Obviously it is not possible to do the Bandhas without adequate preparation of the body by asanas and by modulated breathing in asanas, as has been explained in all the previous issues. A sick person suffering from acute abdominal diseases will not be able to do them at all to derive any benefit. It is more a preventive exercise than curative. However, with asanas, breathing, a proper diet and a few other yama niyamas mentioned, the patient would become fit to start the practice of Bandhas and derive the immense benefits. Heuristically it may be observed that diseases like early stages of piles, proctitis, prolapse-rectal and vaginal, incontinence, constipation, indigestion etc, respond well to Tataka mudra. Some yoga therapists claim that it acti-



vates the liver and pancreas, so that certain diabetics could also benefit. There are yogis who claim that they can draw the diaphragm so much in as to massage the heart. Since its effect on the sex organs are clearly seen, people who practice from early life will maintain their youth for a longer period. It is helpful during childbirth if practised from early in life. Pregnant women may practice Moola-bandha, but not Uddiyana-bandha.

JATAVAPARIVRITHI

From the lying down position (as for Tataka mudra), inhale, raising the arms to

shoulder level. Inhale, raise the head slightly and turn the head to the left side. Exhale, pressing the palms, shoulders and pivoting the lower back take the right leg away by about 30° to 45°. Now on the next inhalation, take the left leg and also stretching it keep it beside the right leg, so that both the feet are together. Do 6 to 12 long breathes, doing the Moola and Uddiyana Bandhas if possible. The upper body should be straight. One would feel the stretching all along the ribs, hip and left leg. The stomach muscles on the left side are also stretched. This is called Jatavapa-

rivriti or activating stomach (or liver). This, when done with the Bandhas is extremely useful in reducing the side fat, increases appetite and generally helps the digestive system. It is useful in correcting stiffness in the lower back. The sacro-iliac joint is made supple. It enhances the effects of Tadasana, but laterally. This is the first twisting of the spine. After the required number of breaths inhale and return to the starting position. Breathe normally a few times and do the posture on the other side. The posture is illustrated in sketch (3)

