

through Strength Awareness

Mula Bandha and hip alignment.

BY FLO FENTON

‘While practising Mula Bandha the yogi attempts to reach the true source or mula of creation. His goal is the complete restraint or bandha of the chitta, which includes the mind (manas), the intellect (buddhi) and the ego (ahamkara).’

B.K.S Iyengar, ‘Light On Pranayama’.

For many who practise yoga today, the above goal may seem unattainable in this lifetime, and perhaps one not sought after. Most practitioners of yoga (especially in the west) have humbler aims, including the desire to be stronger, more flexible, look in better shape, or be free of pain. In my experience as both a practitioner and teacher of yoga, a basic requirement for any of these goals is the awareness and ultimately the correct placement of the hip girdle and pelvic floor in space. Following on from this awareness comes the ability to feel and to work with mula bandha, which deepens the benefits of any pose further, on levels including but also beyond the physical.

Mula Bandha or ‘the root lock’ is the action of working the mid-point in the pelvic floor to

create a feeling of lifting that point higher up into the core of the body. The area that we want to work corresponds spatially with muladhara chakra, which is defined (by Mr Iyengar) as ‘Nervous plexus situated in the pelvis above the anus at the base or root of the spine – the main support of the body.’

Muladhara chakra is also the resting-place of the kundalini, which when awakened can be made to ascend the line of chakras, ultimately piercing sahasrara, creating union with the universal soul.

As they are the main support of the body, and the home of kundalini, working with the hip and pelvic area correctly can create strength and power. Working incorrectly can lead to a loss of power, not only in a pose, but also in our

daily lives, be it physically/posturally, emotionally, or spiritually.

The energy of the standing poses should be upward, defying gravity. In order to get the strength in the pose necessary for this feeling of ‘lift’ to occur, we need a firm foundation. The placement of the feet is important, but the real basis of strength comes from the correct alignment of the hips, and thus the spine (and internally, all of the chakras).

Think about Tadasana. Very often I see students (especially women), some long-term practitioners, who let their tailbone stick right out behind in Tadasana. There is an arch in the lower back, compressing the lumbar vertebrae, and the energy of the pose is escaping out of the belly. There can be no upward channeling of energy from this position. The tail needs to tuck under, so that the tailbone is hanging straight down towards the floor, and muladhara chakra is directly beneath sahasrara in space. From here the navel can be retracted and lifted, narrowing the waist from front to back, and locking in the strength of the pose. See *photos 1 and 2*.

This simple tucking under of the tail, and aligning muladhara chakra so that it is pointing straight down towards the floor will radically improve your awareness of, and ultimately bring into being, correct alignment in most of the poses. If you think about it, what we are doing is bringing the center of gravity to the centre! In Trikonasana, tucking the tail under before moving in to the pose will help to prevent the rolling forward and downwards of the top hipbone (a common misalignment) See *photos 3 and 4*. In Virabhadrasana two (see

photos 5 and 6) and Parsvakonasana (see *photos 7 and 8*), the correct placement of the hips before bringing the front knee into flexion will not only prevent the buttocks sticking out behind and compression of the lumbar spine, but will also inhibit the tendency of the bent knee to fall inward. In Virabhadrasana two the tendency for the spine to lean forwards over the bent leg will be alleviated, and in Parsvakonasana it will be easier to prevent the top hip and breast from rolling down towards the floor. What we want to achieve in all of our standing poses is for the back surface of the body to be completely on one plane. It is very helpful to practise doing them with your back against a wall. Try especially to eliminate any gaps between the wall and your waist, and try to press both shoulder blades evenly to the wall. In Virabhadrasana two and Parsvakonasana, try to keep the outer edge of the bent knee as close to the wall as possible. Doing Tadasana with the whole of the back surface of the body (including the waist!) touching the wall is the best way that I know of to illustrate the movement that is required to tuck the tail under in the standing poses.

As in Tadasana for standing, so Dandasana highlights our natural tendencies in the sitting poses. For those who have tight hamstrings and whose back is generally stiff and prone to rounding, aligning the hips and pelvic floor in Dandasana will not require tucking the tail under; it is already tucked too far under, so that muladhara chakra is pointing forwards between the thighs (see *photo 9*). Any attempt to come forwards into Pascimottanasana from this position will only exaggerate the rounding of the back, creating a ‘hinge’ and with it dangerous compression of the spinal vertebrae at the roundest point. Even those who can successfully achieve the correct positioning of the hips and pelvic floor in Dandasana (tail pointing straight down to the floor, muladhara chakra directly beneath Sahasrara) may find that they ‘lose it’ in Pascimottanasana. This results in rounding the back (usually the upper back in this case) and concaving the chest. Those who are hyper-flexible may have the tendency to let the tail stick out behind and arch the lower back in Dandasana. Maintaining an awareness of the position of muladhara chakra, and keeping it in line with all of the others for as long as possible from Dandasana and into Pascimottanasana helps to promote hinging from the hips rather than a part of the

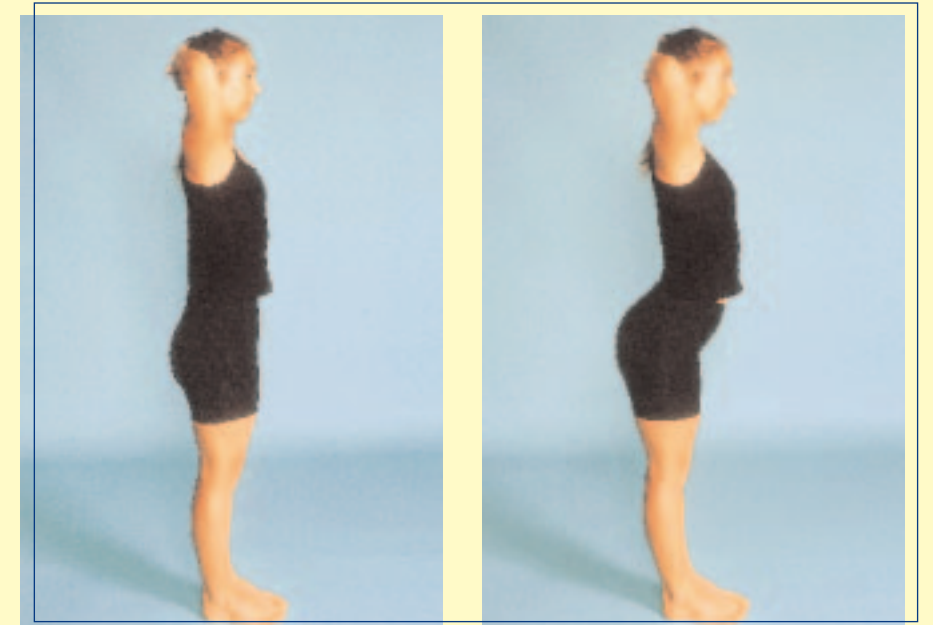


Photo 1 – Tadasana correct alignment.

Photo 2 – Tadasana incorrect alignment.

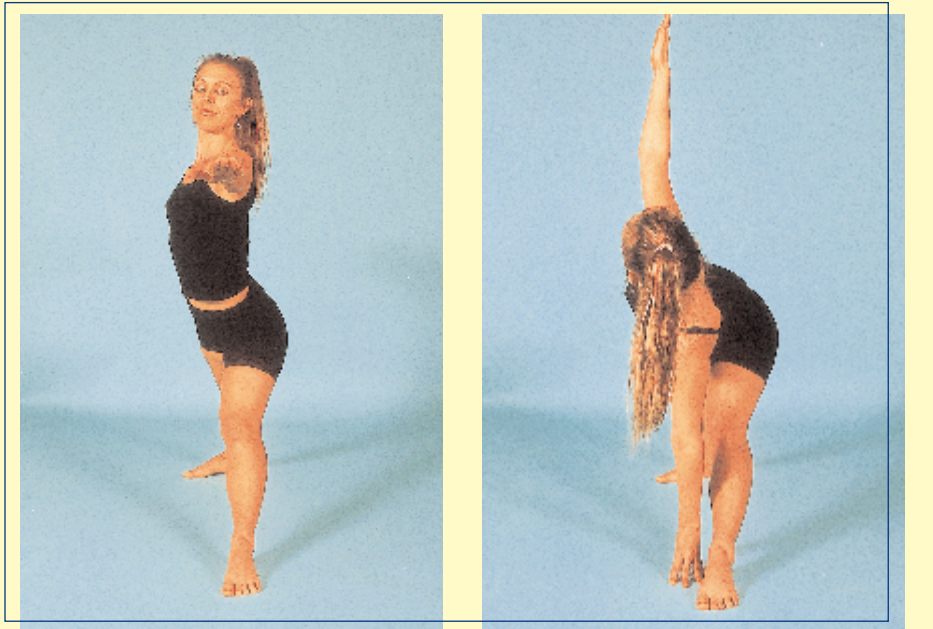


Photo 3 – If the tail sticks out before moving into Trikonasana...

Photo 4 – ...this crooked version of Trikonasana will be the result.

spine, and helps to keep the front of the body open. Props are suggested when it is impossible for the student to prevent the tail from coming forwards in Dandasana (see *photo 10*). Two or three folded blankets accurately placed right under the sitting bones (i.e. the front edge of the blankets no further forwards than the fold under the flesh of the buttocks) creates an upward tilt for the rear of the pelvic floor, achieving correct alignment. (See *photos 11 and 12*).

When awareness of how to spatially align the hips is mastered in these basic poses, we can begin to use this awareness to improve and

strengthen all of the poses, and extend our awareness upwards from the base to align the whole spine. In Adho mukha Svanasana (Down-Face Dog) for example, start by lifting the tail bone as high as it will go, so that the tip of the tail is the highest point of the pose. To achieve this you may have to lift your heels higher off the floor than you are comfortable with. Don't worry! It is more important to get the spine (and thus the chakras) in line, than get the heels on the floor. For those more flexible practitioners whose heels are on the floor, and whose tail is still the highest point, can you extend your awareness of the line of the chakras in this pose,

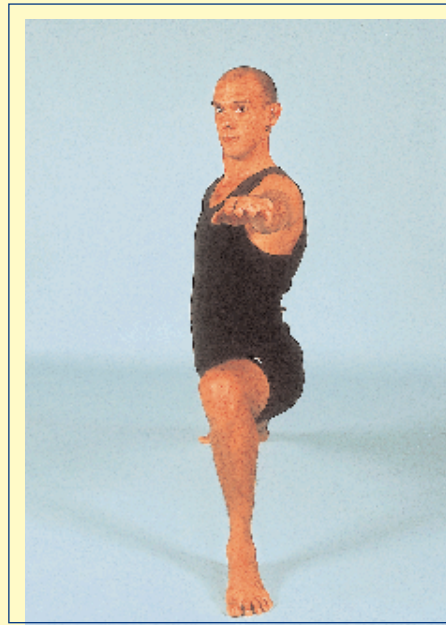


Photo 5 – Incorrect hip alignment in Virabhadrasana two.



Photo 6 – Correct hip alignment, tail tucked under, in Virabhadrasana two.



Photo 7 – Collapsed Parsvokanasana.

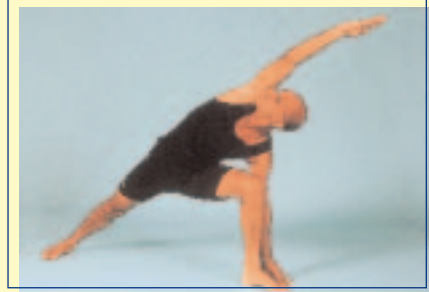


Photo 8 – Correct Parsvokanasana, with tail tucked under.

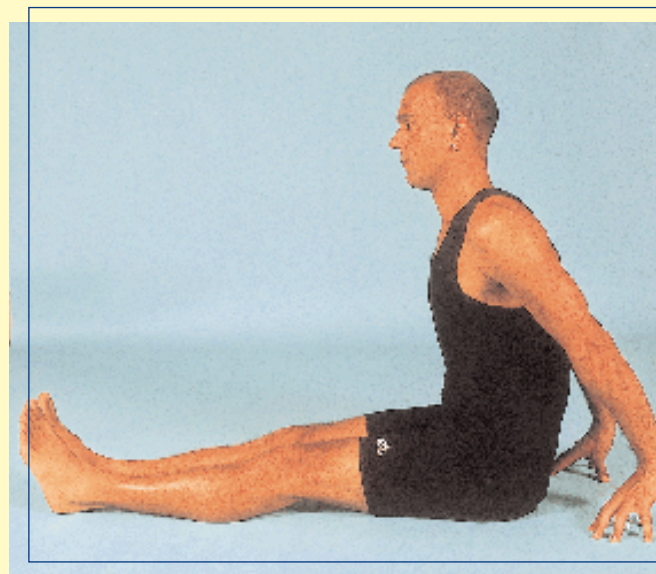


Photo 9 – Dandasana with stiff lower back/tight hamstrings, the tail naturally tucks under.

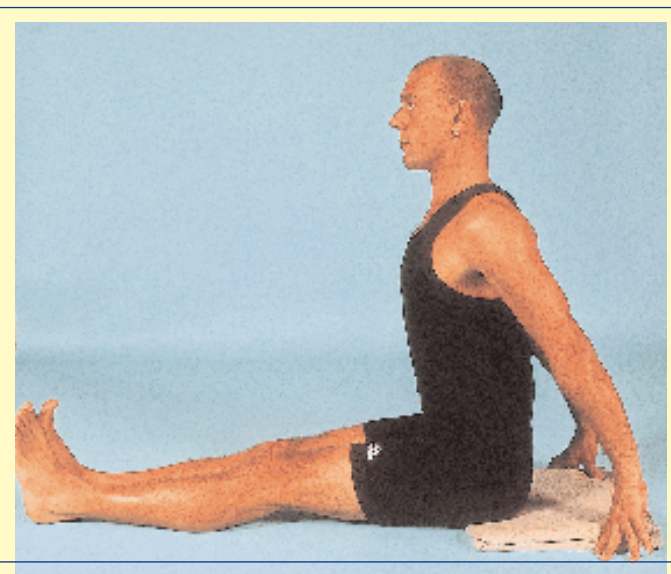


Photo 10 – Folded blankets help to correct alignment of the hips in Dandasana.

working with the hip and pelvic area correctly can create strength and power.

so that the heart chakra Anahat is in line with Muladhara also? Often those who are flexible tend to push the chest down to the floor too far in down face dog, compressing the thoracic and cervical vertebrae.

More than any other poses, backbends require our awareness of the positioning of the hips and thus the length of the lumbar spine in order that they should be beneficial and not detrimental to overall health and wellbeing. Allowing the tail bone to drop too far towards the floor in Urdvha Dhanurasana, for example, will create a 'hinge point' again in the lower spinal vertebrae, creating strong compression there, whilst not

much opening is happening in the latter half of the arch, the thoracic area. Lifting the tail to bring the sacrum closer to parallel with the floor will not only lengthen the lumbar spine, but will move the centre of gravity in the pose, creating more stretch in the chest, and a smoother overall arch. Initially, the knees may need to soften more than usual to achieve this; a 'letting go' of the ego may be required! (See photos 13 and 14).

Of course, for most of these corrections to be achieved, it is not merely a matter of knowing what to do, and then putting it into practice. Awareness of the spatial alignment of the hips and spine, along with the

awareness and gradual strengthening of Mula Bandha must be practised in the poses over time. Alongside this gradual journey of exploration and understanding in the asanas, we can improve our ability to align and work with the pelvis by using asanas which focus on and strengthen transverse abdominus, the lower back, and pelvic floor muscles.

To strengthen the pelvic floor muscles, and to start to feel and work with mula bandha, try sitting in easy cross-legged position making sure that the hips are neither tilting forwards nor back. Use folded blankets if necessary, as described for Dandasana. Try to feel or visualize the dead centre of your pelvic floor, the point between the genitals at the front and the anus at the back. A bit within the surface of the body from this point is the position of Muladhara. See if you can get the feeling of pulling all of your muscles in to this point, and then lifting that point higher inside the body. I like to teach this action as part of Ujjayi Pranayama, pulling up mula bandha on the inhale, with the visualization of drawing more prana in and up the central energy channel. Gradually this action will become more controlled as the muscles strengthen, and subtler as the awareness of this point expands.

There are many exercises which work to strengthen the abdominals and lower back; here are some of my favourites.

Lie on your back, with your arms extended over your head, with no gap between the skin of your lower back and the blanket, which should be beneath the sacrum and the whole spine. As you inhale, bring your knees up and onto your chest. As you exhale, try to bring your legs to a ninety-degree angle from your body, with the sacrum still on the floor. If your legs will not straighten, don't worry, but do try to get the soles of the feet to be flat and parallel to the ceiling. Start to work mula bandha, and also squeeze your knees together on each inhale. As you exhale, start to push your weight down into the back of your waist. Finally, try to feel the point just behind your navel, and as you exhale, pull this point in deep, towards your spine, and even hook it up a bit, under the front ribs. After five to 10 breaths here, inhale, and as you exhale sit your torso up off the floor and try to touch your feet with your hands. Take care not to let the back round; try arching your lower back in and coming up as if from the heart centre.

Stay here for five breaths, and then take your arms beside your ears, and on an exhale lie back down, vertebra by vertebra.

Leg raises lying flat on your back are most effective, but only if practised correctly. Only if you are very strong and can keep your lower back on the floor right the way through each down and up cycle should they be practised with straight legs. If the back arches off the floor, do them instead by describing a circle with the toes, so that on the inhale breath the legs are brought up to ninety degrees, and on the exhale the straight legs are brought down only half way. The knees are bent, the toes brush the floor and then the legs are straightened up to ninety degrees again. If the back still arches, try placing the hands palm down under the buttocks. Whichever variation you choose, keep the knees together, and remember inhale up, exhale down. Don't use momentum, use control; slow it down. Try two sets of five to begin with, and gradually work up to two sets of 15.

To strengthen the lower back, nothing beats Salabhasana. If you are weak, try keeping the torso on the floor to begin with, and raise only one leg at a time. Progress to lifting the two legs and the ribcage off the floor with the palms beneath the shoulders, and finally to extending the arms behind, palms up. In all of the variations, the knees must remain straight, and if both legs are lifted at once, knees together!

Finally, try practising Halasana (Plough pose) with the feet to the wall. The spine must be perpendicular to the floor, and the feet at hip height. Try to get the tip of your tailbone to be the highest point, and bring all the vertebrae in, so that none are sticking out through the skin. Finally, try to slightly concave the back of the waist. See if you can stay in the pose for 25 breaths.

Although alignment is important but not everything, being conscious of how we work with our bodies, and the short and long term effects of this work is a step on the path to a deeper understanding of who we are.

Flo Fenton has been practising yoga for 14 years and teaching for five. Trained in Ashtanga and Iyengar styles Flo focuses on strengthening core supports in the postures. For personal programs or class information contact yogafo@bigpond.com or Epicentre Yoga Room. www.byronyog.com



Photos 11 and 12 above – From Dandasana into Paschimottasana hinging from the hips, back straight. Using a belt held with outstretched arms helps to achieve this.



Photo 13 – This backbend looks impressive, but the 'hinging' in the lower back is severe and not much arch achieved in the thoracic spine.



Photo 14 – Though the knees are exaggerated, it is possible to see the smoother curve. There is less compression in the lumbar spine, and more opening in the chest. Eventually one would move toward keeping this length in the lumbar spine and straightening the legs more.