

Whenever any cultural intention underlies movement or action it imposes external requirements on the body, and the relationships between all of its parts. In yoga posture practice this should not be the case, otherwise the postures lose their intrinsic power to nourish and integrate. The physical intention, in every one of the different shapes, must only be to establish integrity in the relationships between the body parts and therefore in the body as a whole: or functional integration. This is sarvangabandha and includes all the other bandhas because it requires the integrated muscular activation of the whole body. Every part of the body is contributing directly to the integrity of the body as a whole, and each of its component parts. Each body part is supporting every other body part. This necessarily engages all the bandhas, even if they are neither named nor thought of. The individual bandhas can be functionally separated, but not within the integrity of yoga posture practice. Their active unity is Sarvangabandha: the bandha of the whole body.

That the mind can and does divide and fragment the body into separable parts does not render the body a composite association of distinct parts. The human body is an organic and intrinsic unity derived from a single cell through replication, differentiation, specialisation and organisation. This inherent unity is what provides the body with its remarkable intelligence and yoga posture practice with its remarkable power. The different parts of the body do not exist or act in isolation, they are each part of the structural and functional unity of the whole body. This is expressed directly in the ways that the muscles and body-parts collectively reorganise themselves simultaneously in even the simplest of movements, through the agency of the connective tissue matrix which not only organises but communicates almost instantaneously.

It is only by accessing and expressing this organic interdependence that yoga posture practice becomes more than stretch and strengthening exercise. By honouring in action the inherent integrity¹ of the body we are able to encounter its inherent unity with mind and spirit, and our inherent unity with life in its indivisible wholeness. We express this deeper wholeness when we act from the indivisible wholeness that our body is by nature and design. To do this we must activate it as a single unit, with each part contributing directly to the activity of the whole. We must support the spine with the whole body. We must release the breath with each part of the body. This of course takes time and training to become possible, and this is what yoga posture practice must make possible if its deeper fruits are to become available.

Sarvangabandha is the combination of Uddyana, Mula, Jalandhara, Pada and Hasta bandhas. Only when and if they are all present can the whole body enjoy integrity. Only when and if they are each present can any one of them actually be fully present. Of course the extreme nature of some postures inhibits one or more of the bandhas. Nevertheless to the extent that they are possible all bandhas must be present for protection of the joints. Even more so for integration to take place on any level. Sarvangabandha can be felt as a light spaciousness in the whole body, with no sense of any duality. Left dissolves into right, arm into leg, top into bottom and front into back. All possible distinctions are rendered meaningless and any sense of finite restrictedness dissolves through effortless action into a delicious emptiness pulsating with a radiant abundance. However this potent and nourishing experience depends entirely on refined and integrated muscular action: the bandhas in the whole body.

¹ unity

The muscular actions of the individual bandhas are actually no longer familiar nor easily accessible. This is because sedentary living diminishes structural and respiratory capacity, and neglects the inherent integrity of the body. The necessary structural muscles of the back, ribcage and abdomen, which are also accessory muscles of respiration, are not fully available to most people. This is visible in their poor posture and lack of stamina. Therefore the bandhas cannot be immediately done by most people. The muscular capacity on which they depend can be easily developed once they have been understood. This development naturally takes place in yoga posture practice when it is undertaken to re-establish functional and structural integrity. It does not happen if yoga posture practice is undertaken as strength and flexibility training.

The significance of Sarvangabandha should not be underestimated. It means as much in terms of impact as it does in terms of action. It is only the presence of sarvangabandha that reveals all the depths, subtleties and delight of the human body. For this to be understood it must be experienced. When it is the intrinsic relationship between the eight (ashta) limbs (anga) of yoga becomes clear. Although it usually is the case that we first experience Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi through the linearity of time the relationship between them is not inherently linear. Each one exists within the other, like a Russian doll. It takes time for us to find this out, as we open them one by one. Nevertheless they were all simultaneously present before we began to open them. So it is with the limbs of yoga. They also are inherently one.

In order to establish integrity in the whole body we require the presence of sensitivity, honesty, openness, intimacy and acceptance

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(Yama) and of integrity, trust, passion, awareness and absorption (Niyama). Only then will we be able to access the subtle nature of the body and be relieved of its limiting finite qualities in the awareness state of Asana; within which Pranayama takes place; within which Pratyahara takes place; within which Dharana takes place; within which Dhyana takes place, within which Samadhi takes place. Each of these six limbs of yoga is a natural infolding of the one that precedes it. Of course this infolding does not always happen, but its doing so is not the result of our adding anything to what is already being done. It is a matter of letting go more fully into what is already happening, for the limbs of yoga are not techniques, but the fruit of technique.

Asana is an awareness state experienced from and through the body. Pranayama is an awareness state experienced from and through the breath. Pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi are awareness states experienced from and through the mind in its various subtleties. So it is that samadhi is the secret inner face of asana. If asana is truly present then samadhi is immediately available, even if not always accessed. This is revealed clearly and indubitably by Sarvangabandha within which it is discovered that no part of the body can be fully stable and at ease if each other part is not also. Herein we have a direct expression of the unity of yoga, both in the mutual dependency of each bandha on all of the others, and in the simultaneous presence of the limbs of yoga within each other. At the same time we are irresistibly invited to experience the inherent unity of our apparent individuality with the indivisible wholeness of totality. This experience of being one with all is the subtle, inner face of sarvangabandha, in which we feel totally supported by the indivisibility of wholeness in all of its details and well as in its singular totality. This deep gift of the bandhas comes off the mat with us and into the ups and downs of daily life as the source of a deep and

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inexorable trust in the indivisible wholeness of life in all of its incorrigible particularities.

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