

# EXPLORE THE PRACTICE OF **MAHA MUDRA**

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# INTRODUCTION

# When *maha* and *mudra* are put together the meaning is “a powerful and mighty whole-body seal.”

*Maha mudra* isn't something you see in the average yoga class. Though you may not have heard of it until now, it is one of the key practices described in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (a practice-based yoga text that dates back to the fifteenth century C.E.)—and for good reason. *Maha mudra* requires the simultaneous use of several powerful yoga techniques: *asana* (a physical posture), *bandhas* (energy locks), breathing, and breath retention. So what is this practice and why is it important?

Let's start with the translation of *maha mudra*. In Sanskrit, *maha* means “great” or “powerful and mighty.” *Mudra* has several meanings—most commonly “gesture” or “seal,” but also “to move toward delight.” The term *mudra* is also used to refer to hand positions or, in this particular case, a whole-body position. When *maha* and *mudra* are put together the meaning is “a powerful and mighty whole-body seal” or “a whole-body seal that moves the student toward delight.” Sounds intriguing, doesn't it?

The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* comprises four chapters. As with any good teaching methodology, it progresses from easier to harder, gross to subtle, and basic to advanced. The first chapter covers asana, or the body. The second chapter delves into *pranayama* (breathing practices) and describes specific breathing techniques and their benefits. The third chapter covers mudras—this is where maha mudra is discussed. And the fourth chapter is about *samadhi* (the culmination of all the previous techniques) and the benefits of a dedicated yoga practice.

## WHAT IS MAHA MUDRA?

In the scope of a practitioner's journey, maha mudra is considered an advanced, subtle practice. So what does maha mudra look like, and what are the benefits of this mighty full-body seal?

In the physical sense, maha mudra looks very similar to *janu sirasana* (head to knee pose). Janu sirasana is a seated forward-bending pose that's practiced with one leg externally rotated, knee bent, and the other leg straight and neutral. The difference between maha mudra and janu sirasana, however, is that, rather than trying to fold toward the straight leg, as in janu sirasana, in maha mudra you take hold of the foot of the straight leg with both hands and pull up away from it.

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# While the outer form of the pose is important, what's happening inside is of greater significance.

So we can say that maha mudra is a forward bend in which you are actively lifting away from the leg you are folding over, keeping your spine long and your head in alignment with your spine. You hold this position on both sides, starting by folding over your extended right leg first.

While the outer form of the pose is important, what's happening inside is of greater significance. Let's go back to the translation of mudra as "seal" for a moment. What are we sealing in? The answer to this question is the heart of the practice, and it involves some of the more subtle yogic techniques. We are sealing in *prana*, or "vital energy." The practice of maha mudra is the practice of holding, directing, and collecting vital energy.

How do we do that? In three ways: through the use of the bandhas, the use of the breath (inhalations and exhalations), and the application of retentions and suspensions (holding after inhalation and exhalation). When you put all of these elements together, the practice is rather challenging. Holding the active forward fold in and of itself is challenging for many people. Then you add regulation of breath, combined with retention and suspension and the bandhas, and you have yourself a very potent combination requiring physical, mental, and energetic endurance.

The benefits of such a practice accumulate. You build and contain energy, you become increasingly internally focused, and you develop the ability to concentrate and remain steady for longer and longer periods of time. Eventually, energy is directed toward the spine, or more specifically, the main energy channel, called the *sushumna nadi*. The *Pradipika* tells us that this is the focus of kundalini yoga—the process of awakening dormant energy so that it can ascend to higher realms of consciousness, ultimately uniting with supreme consciousness, allowing the practitioner to experience the state of yoga.



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# PHYSICALLY PREPARING FOR MAHA MUDRA

Including back-strengthening poses in your practice and developing awareness of good head and neck alignment are important requirements for maha mudra.

Since maha mudra is a challenging practice, it's important to prepare the body for it in a few ways. Looking at maha mudra from a physical standpoint, we are asking the body to hold a seated forward bend for a significant amount of time on each side.

On one side of the body we have a leg in external rotation which, for many people, can be difficult: If our hips are particularly tight, we can experience discomfort in the knee and have trouble aligning the pelvis. Doing some poses that help to "open up" the hips is a great way to prepare us to hold the position of the bent leg in maha mudra.

On the other side of the body we have a straight-leg position which stretches the hamstring muscles. Many of us sit a lot and have tight hamstrings. Prior to practicing maha mudra, including in your practice some poses that stretch the hamstrings and lower back is essential. Not only do we want to be able to straighten the front leg in maha mudra, but we also must be able to tilt the pelvis forward toward the front leg; very stiff hamstrings and hips can make this nearly impossible to do.

Last but not least, we must strengthen and lengthen the spine. Unlike janu sirsasana, where we fold forward over the straight front leg, in maha mudra we are actively pulling the torso away from the straight leg and aligning the head with the spine. This can be quite challenging for the back muscles, and many students struggle with the proper head and neck position. Including back-strengthening poses in your practice and developing awareness of good head and neck alignment are important requirements for maha mudra. Poses like low cobra and *salabhasana* (locust pose) can build back strength. Aligning the head and neck when you are upright in standing poses is helpful for building cervical spine (neck) awareness. Then, you can apply the alignment you've explored to poses where you are not upright like *parsvottanasana* (pyramid pose) and (eventually) maha mudra.

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## PREPARING THE HIPS AND HAMSTRINGS



## **EKA PADA RAJA KAPOTASANA (Half Pigeon Pose)**

Half pigeon is a fantastic pose for encouraging external rotation of the hip joint in preparation for maha mudra—particularly the modern variation of half pigeon, in which you fold forward, allowing your body weight to stretch and open the hips over time.

Begin from all fours or downward facing dog. Bring your right shin forward, toward the top of your mat, bringing the knee just to the right of your centerline, and your right foot as close to your right thigh as necessary to avoid strain in the knee. Square your pelvis toward the front edge of your mat and extend your left leg behind you straight back from the hip joint, toes pointed. Your left knee should be pointing straight down.

If your right buttock does not easily rest on the floor, prop it up with a blanket or block so you can maintain a level pelvis. Flex your right foot if possible, and fold over your right shin.

Ideally, you will feel a strong stretch in your right outer hip muscles. Stay for 10 slow and deep breaths.

The intensity of the stretch may diminish with practice and you may feel ready to go deeper into the pose. To do so, move your back leg farther back, move your right knee to the right a little more, and bring your front shin closer to parallel with the short edge of your mat (just as long as this doesn't bother your knee!); this will intensify the hip stretch. You can also let more of your weight drop into the pose by removing or adjusting any props you were using (perhaps unfolding your blanket a bit or choosing a smaller prop).

To come out, plant your hands on the mat in front of your shin, and press back to all fours or down dog. Switch sides.



## **PARSVOTTANASNA (Pyramid Pose) VARIATION**

In preparation for maha mudra, parsvottanasana is an excellent pose for stretching your hamstrings, practicing hinging your pelvis over a straight front leg, and strengthening your back muscles.

Start from *tadasana* (mountain pose). Step your left foot about three feet behind you, and turn your left leg out so that your foot is at a 45-degree angle, your left heel lined up with your right. The rest of your body should continue to face forward. Firm both legs by lifting your kneecaps. As you press the outer edge of your left foot down, rotate your left thigh toward your centerline. This action will bring your left hip forward to face the front of your mat.

Bring your right hand to the back of your pelvis, and reach your left arm up alongside your ear. Broaden through your chest, lengthen throughout your neck, and center your head over your shoulders.

Inhale and grow even taller. On your exhale, begin to hinge from your hips, folding forward only as far as you can *without* rounding your spine (which may be halfway forward or less; stop the moment you feel your back wanting to round). Keep both legs straight and strong and engage your lower belly to support your lower back. Draw your left hip point forward and your right hip point back to help square your pelvis. Lengthen through your torso without allowing any rounding in your spine—this is the same action and alignment required in *maha mudra*. Keep lifting the front of your shoulders up and away from the floor and keep lengthening through the crown of your head.

Stay for 10 slow, deep breaths. After a few breaths, see if you can hinge forward a bit more—without bending your front knee or rounding your back. Come out of the pose on an inhale, rooting down through your feet and leading with your chest to return to standing. Then switch sides.



## **JANU SIRSASANA (Head to Knee Pose)**

Janu sirsasana combines the hip-opening work of half pigeon with the hamstring stretch of pyramid pose. Its shape is also very similar to that of maha mudra.

Begin seated in *dandasana* (staff pose). Make sure you have not lost the natural curve in your lower back. (Your pelvis should not be tilting backward, which will cause the lower back to round). Prop yourself up on a cushion or one or more folded blankets if necessary, sitting at the very edge of them, and roll forward on your sitting bones so that you are almost spilling off whatever you are sitting on. Lengthen through your spine as you firm your thighs and press them and your heels down.

Bend your right knee, externally rotate your right thigh, and bring the sole of your right foot to your left inner thigh. If there is space between your right knee and the floor, support your knee with a block or blanket. Have a strap handy if you suspect that you won't be able to hold your left foot with your hands. Continue to lengthen through your spine and place one hand on either side of your right leg. Inhale and lengthen even more. Then, on your exhale, turn your torso so that your sternum is facing your right leg (this is a slight twist). Inhale again, sitting up even taller, and then exhale and, with a long spine, begin to hinge forward from your hips, taking hold of your foot with your hands or a strap. Continue to lengthen through your spine as you fold over your right leg, grounding down through your right outer hip. Hold for 10 slow breaths. After a few breaths, see if you can move deeper into the fold. Lift back to vertical on an inhale and then switch sides.

These three poses will help to physically prepare you for the challenge of maha mudra. Next we will work with the breath in order to mentally and energetically prepare you for this advanced practice.



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**BREATHWORK  
IN SIDDHASANA**  
(Accomplished Pose)

...when this pose is perfected  
the three bandhas (locks) arise easily  
and the breath spontaneously pauses.

According to Svātmaṛama, the author of the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā*, there are 84 important āsanas. Of those, he tells us that four are essential and that of those four, one is of the utmost importance. That pose is called siddhasana, or “accomplished pose.” It is a simple seated posture with the thighs externally rotated and the spine tall. Svātmaṛama tells us that when this pose is perfected the three *bandhas* (locks) arise easily and the breath spontaneously pauses.

### **HOW TO PRACTICE SIDDHASANA**

Even for flexible yoga students, sitting in siddhasana for extended periods of time can be quite challenging. I highly recommend sitting on a cushion or folded blanket for support. Sit near the edge of your prop, in order to achieve a neutral position in your pelvis: Move the top of your sacrum forward to create a slight (but not excessive) curve in your lower back. Think of the pelvis like a bowl of water: We want the bowl to be level so the water doesn’t spill, not tilting too far forward or back.

Bend your left knee and place your left heel at the base of your pelvis (perineum). Bend your right knee and place your right foot on top of your left shin, tucking your foot into the crease between the upper and lower left leg so that the right heel comes into contact with your pubic bone.

Again, keep your pelvis neutral. Lift up tall through your spine, stacking the vertebrae and maintaining all the natural curves of the spine. Draw the fronts of your shoulders back slightly, align your ears with your shoulders, and draw your shoulder blades down your back. Gently lift your sternum. Lengthen your neck, leveling your chin with the floor. Reach the top of your head toward the sky.

## **NOW LET'S PRACTICE CONTROLLING THE BREATH**

Close your mouth and begin *ujjayi* breathing: Slightly contract your throat to regulate the inward and outward movement of the breath, creating a soft “windy” sound on both the inhalation and the exhalation. First work on extending the breath to a full five counts as you inhale and a full five counts as you exhale. Watch for tension or choppiness in your breath. Make it smooth by relaxing your efforts instead of straining. Once five counts become comfortable and consistent, try for six counts in and out.

The next step is to control how the breath moves. This involves controlling your physical movements when breathing and syncing your mind with the process. As you begin to inhale, first fill your chest, then allow the ribs to widen and expand, then let the low belly expand. The inhalation moves from the top down, which means *prana* (in this case, referring specifically to the energy of the chest region) is moving down.

# The more skilled at this practice you become, the more prepared you will be for maha mudra.

With the exhalation, we move the opposite way. As you breathe out, first draw the navel back toward the spine, then let the ribs soften, and finally empty the chest. The energy of the pelvic floor (called *apana*) is now moving up. Mentally follow the top-to-bottom inhalation and the bottom-to-top exhalation (I call this directional breathing).

Work with this specific way of breathing for several minutes. Keep your inhales and exhales long and even. Keep the breath as smooth and as free of tension as possible. While it may seem simple, this process is very detailed and subtle. Practice daily to build your stamina, focus, and concentration. The more skilled at this practice you become, the more prepared you will be for maha mudra.



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# THE THREE BANDHAS

The yoga tradition holds that when we control our breathing, we directly tap into the subtle body and are able to affect the movement of prana (vital energy) within us, potentially freeing up energetic “blocks.” By unblocking what was stagnant or “stuck,” the practice of pranayama gives us access to the energy within, but how do we gain more control of that energy, and how can we build it rather than lose it?

According to the yoga tradition, the answer is to apply bandhas or energy locks to our practice. There are three main bandhas that help the yogi contain and direct energy within the body. The first is called *mula bandha* which translates as “root lock.” Its location is said to correlate with the base of the spine, specifically the perineum (which is between the pubic bone and the tailbone). By creating a mild contraction at the perineum, the pelvic floor is lifted and energy is directed upward rather than down and out. In other words: We prevent energy dissipation in this part of the body and that energy is instead lifted up.

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The second bandha is called *uddiyana bandha* which translates as “upward flying lock.” This action is applied at the navel center and is deeper and stronger than mula bandha. After an exhalation, when the diaphragm is lifted up out of the way, the entire abdominal area is suctioned back toward the spine and up under the rib cage. From the pubic bone to the ribs, a deep cavity is created, pushing the inner organs back and directing energy in and up toward the spine—hence the “upward flying” in this bandha’s name. This lock is only applied after exhalation, and there is no breathing taking place as it is applied and maintained.

The third bandha is called *jalandhara bandha*. It’s often referred to as the “chin lock” or “throat lock,” though *jalandhara* literally means “web” or “net.” To apply this bandha, one brings the chin slightly in and down toward the throat, creating a seal or “net” in the neck and throat region. As this lock’s name alludes to, upward moving energy from the chest area is “caught” with the net at the throat. From there, it is directed back down.

By applying the three locks at various times in breathing practices, we are able to gather, direct, and build energy within the body. In the practice of maha mudra, we put all three bandhas together, creating a powerful combination which moves energy toward the spine and, according to the yoga tradition, strengthens and enhances the student’s spiritual development.



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# PRACTICING MAHA MUDRA

By combining several yoga techniques, maha mudra creates a challenging and advanced practice. To prepare for this whole-body experience, I highly recommend first practicing the various techniques we've discussed individually. The more comfortable you are using these techniques by themselves, the more accessible and sustainable maha mudra will be.

Since this "gesture" requires multiple skills, I will break it down into three stages for you. In stage one, we will focus on the physical alignment coupled with regulated breathing. In stage two, we will add retentions and suspensions—holding after both inhalations and exhalations. In stage three, we will use all of the techniques together: body, breath, retention, and bandhas.

## **STAGE ONE**

To begin stage one, set up as if for janu sirsasana, seated on the floor with your left leg bent and your right leg extended out straight. Position your left heel at the perineum. If you have any difficulty sitting upright, it's important to sit on a folded blanket or cushion: Once you come into the pose, you need to be able to tilt your pelvis toward the straight leg, and if your hamstrings and lower back are stiff, it will be very difficult to do this. If it's challenging to reach the foot of the straight leg, you will need a strap.

Once you have your props and are seated on the cushion or folded blanket (if needed), hinge forward from your hips and either take hold of your right foot with both hands or place the strap around the sole of the foot and hold each side of the strap.

Firm your straight leg and ground the outer thigh of your bent leg. Pulling back on your foot or strap, actively lift your spine away from the straight leg. Don't try to lower toward the leg; rather, actively lift up, creating a long, straight spine. You will probably feel this engagement quite intensely in your upper back, and possibly your lower back as well. Resist the urge to sink or collapse.

Last, but not least, align your neck with your upper back. This can also be very challenging. Most students lift their heads up too much at first, bringing the neck into extension. Instead, slightly drop your chin to evenly lengthen all sides of your neck. There is no need to tuck the chin.

Once you have aligned the spine, begin a slow, smooth, steady, and even ujjayi breath. Simply hold this active position without collapsing and regulate your breathing to a one-to-one ratio (meaning if you inhale for five counts also exhale for five counts). Try this for about 10 to 15 rounds of breath.

Take your time coming out of the shape. Simply holding the maha mudra position and breathing intentionally will probably produce a physical and mental challenge. Change sides when you're ready.

Spend some time practicing stage one. Once you feel comfortable with the physical position and your breathing has become consistent, move on to stage two.

## **STAGE TWO**

In stage two, we'll add breath retention and suspension. Begin the same way, by setting up your body with the necessary support, left leg bent and right leg straight. Hinge forward, take hold of your right foot, and align your spine. Begin one-to-one breathing and continue for several cycles.

Once your breath is smooth, steady, and even, hold the breath at the top of inhalation for your next three breath cycles: Remaining physically aligned, inhale for about five counts, hold for about five counts, and then exhale for about five counts. After these three breath cycles, take several breaths with no retention.

Next, you will hold after just the exhalation: Inhale for five, exhale for five, and then suspend the exhale for five. (I find that it's often more difficult for students to suspend the exhale than to retain the inhale.) Do this for three rounds of breath, then take several breaths with no retention. Stay present and do not push ahead or strain. If you are feeling tired or struggling with either the body or the breath, stop here and switch sides.

Ultimately, we want to put the retentions and suspensions together: inhaling for five, holding for five, exhaling for five, holding for five. This is much harder than the previous breath patterns: Each cycle contains a pause after the inhale and the exhale. Do this only once you are comfortable with the previous breath patterns. Try about three rounds combining the retentions and suspensions.

When you're finished, come out of the pose, taking your time to observe sensation as you do so. When ready, switch sides.

You might practice stage two for quite a while before moving on to stage three. Over time, increase the number of breath cycles on each side, building your endurance in both the physical shape and your breathing capacity.

## STAGE THREE

The third stage is the most challenging, and I would recommend first practicing it with an experienced teacher who can check your alignment and breathing and offer suggestions. It's important that you don't create strain or develop bad habits that you might need to untrain. At this stage, you add bandhas, which build energy (prana) and amplify the entire experience. Before introducing the bandhas, you should be comfortable practicing stage two—with continuous retentions and suspensions after inhalations and exhalations—for several minutes on each side.

Set up the same way you have been and begin one-to-one breathing. Once you add the retentions and suspensions, apply the locks: At the top of the inhalation, lift your pelvic floor (mula bandha) and hold. At the same time, maintain your neck alignment, which creates a seal at the throat (jalandhara bandha). On the pause after exhalation, reinforce mula bandha, maintain jalandhara bandha, and add in uddiyana bandha (this can be very challenging!): As you continue to suspend the exhale, strongly suction your entire abdomen back toward the spine and up under your rib cage. Before you inhale, first release uddiyana bandha, then inhale and continue.

You will probably notice a big difference in the intensity of the practice at this stage. Do several rounds on one side, then switch sides for the same number of breath cycles.

Come out and notice what you feel—whether it's physical, mental, energetic, or otherwise. Remember, this practice is deeply challenging. Build it slowly over time, and each time you practice maha mudra, be sure to first warm up with the preparatory work described previously.



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# CONTEMPLATION AND JOURNALING

It's important to remember that  
whatever experience you have,  
it is the correct experience.

Preparing for and practicing maha mudra requires discipline, consistency, effort, and an interest in the more subtle aspects of yoga (and, therefore, an interest in the more subtle aspects of ourselves!). Maha mudra asks us to be still, intentional, introspective, and controlled with our efforts. Our body is challenged but so is our mind and our breath. It's a technique that can at times feel daunting, overwhelming, frustrating, and even downright scary. However, maha mudra can also be invigorating, quieting, and empowering.

So let's take a moment to reflect on this practice. Set aside some time after maha mudra, and consider journaling on the following questions:

1. What aspect of maha mudra is the most challenging for you?  
Does it have to do with your body, your breathing, or something else?
2. When holding the mudra, which part of your body is most challenged?
3. Which portion of your breathing comes more easily: the inhalation or the exhalation?
4. What do you notice when you hold your breath? Is it hard for you to hold the breath?
5. Is it harder for you to retain the inhalation or suspend the exhalation?
6. Does the practice of maha mudra bring up any specific emotions for you?
7. What happens when you add the bandhas? Is that aspect of the practice easy or difficult?
8. When you come out of maha mudra what do you notice?  
What seems to be the predominant effect of this practice for you?

It's important to remember that whatever experience you have, it is the correct experience. Yoga is a process and your path is unique. Some of us take to maha mudra quickly, while for others it may be a real struggle in the beginning. Know that any yoga technique is developed over time. With regular, consistent practice, your abilities will grow.

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with the Wisdom of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

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**GET STARTED**

