

Building the Architecture of Jalandhara Bandha Using the Image of Patanjali

Patanjali is commonly portrayed (as Richard Freeman described him in a class recently) as something of a composite, half man and half snake. Seated in what we may suppose is the full lotus position, his lower body is portrayed as that of a coiled snake, specifically a cobra. (In various depictions the snake's three coils may extend up to Patanjali's lower ribs and diaphragm or they may end somewhere below his navel.) Above this we are given a dual picture: in one, the cobra rises up behind the seated man, expanding into a large – and impliedly boundless – hood, represented in the standard image by seven cobra heads with their hoods joined together; in the other, a man (albeit a four-armed man) sits up and under the great cobra canopy above him.

In Jalandhara Bandha, a pose commonly prescribed for many pranayama practices, we sit in full lotus (or another cross-legged position) and allow the head to fall easily forward towards the rising heart. How might we use the standard portrayal of Patanjali to describe what we might call the pranic architecture of this pose? This will be the subject of this note.

For the purposes at hand, I will make a large assumption. I will assume that we are familiar, at least in a general sort of way, with the neuro-muscular patterns of the natural inhale and exhale of the breath. So, as just a bit of a refresher, think of cat pose (or cat-cow, as it was often called), in which we begin on all fours, shoulders over wrists, hips over knees, with a neutral spine. On the inhale, the pubis drops, the upper edge of the sacrum falls forward into the body, and the heart gently lifts to form an even convexity of the spine. On the exhale, the tailbone drops (as if to direct a vestigial tail between the legs), the back rounds up, and the shoulders spread out like the wings of a heron in gliding flight. In this we find the natural patterns of the inhalation and the exhalation.

For the purposes of transferring talk of this pattern to a seated position, I like to refer to the drop of the pubis on the inhalation as an opening of the inhale valve and the drop of the tailbone on the exhalation as an opening of the exhale valve. More fully described, the opening of the

pubic valve is the dominant (pranic) action of the inhalation. But it also possible to open the *exhale* valve of the tailbone on the *inhale*. To do so is to access the non-dominant (or recessive) action in the inhale pattern. Or somewhat more accurately stated, the release of the exhale valve as a part of, or in the course of, an inhale breath is a prime component of the non-dominant pattern of inhalation. Similarly, the opening of the tailbone valve on the exhale is the dominant (pranic) action of the exhalation, but we may also open the *inhale* valve of the pubis on the *exhale*. This is the non-dominant (or recessive) action of the exhale pattern, or rather it is a principal component of the non-dominant pattern of exhalation.

My description of using the breath to build the architecture of Jalandhara Bandha begins by focusing on the non-dominant pattern of the inhalation. On the inhale, the skin of the lower back (approximately in the kidney area) begins to slide up along the back of the spine towards the back of the head. (Thinking of the rounded back in exhale cat pose may help here – but keep in mind that now this is occurring on the inhalation.) At about the same time as the exhalation initiates this upward flow, the skin of the lower back, starting from approximately the kidney area, moves in the opposite direction down towards the tailbone, taking the neighboring buttocks flesh along with it. This downward flow, originating at about where man ends and snake begins in the classic depiction of Patanjali, eventuates in the drop of the tailbone which is the opening of the exhale valve. But keep in mind that this central ingredient of the exhale pattern is being accessed in an inhalation. We should not, however, think of these two opposing flows – the arcing upward and the curving downward – as initiating from a common point of division. We should not, that is, take the distinct separation between snake and man in the portrayal of Patanjali too literally. Rather at the outset these two opposing movements feel more like they overlap and flow through one another in their opposite coursings.

So far, all of this was on an inhalation in which we were drawing on portions of the non-dominant exhale pattern, that is the pattern of the exhalation that is present in, but non-dominant in, the inhalation of the breath. Now we will move on to the exhalation and back to what may be more familiar ground. Maintaining what the inhale has already built of the exhale pattern, we will fill out this pattern on the exhale by expanding the upper thoracic area of the back outward, left and right, into the spread of the heron wings of the shoulders. (Here what we are up to matches the picture of the inhale cat pose with its arched back and broadened,

somewhat internally rotated shoulders.) On the exhalation, the heron wings expand and lift into flight.

Well, this may be quite a lot for one cycle of breath to accomplish. But it is the patterns that we are looking for, and they do not need to be developed all at once in a single breath cycle. It is altogether appropriate to think in terms of using several, or many, cycles to explore building, or augmenting, these pranic ideas in our body. Anyway, there is more to come. But before continuing with the story, let's pause to ask just how it is that this description, so far as we've taken it, relates to the standard depiction of Patanjali.

As Patanjali is classically presented, in the lower half of his body he *is* a snake, and in the upper half of his body he is both a man *and* a snake. In showing him from the waste down as thrice-coiled cobra, we have a representation of the interweaving energies of the folded lotus legs that can be drawn up to vitalize the upper body and to spin the wheels of the ascending chakras. By representing the upper body in terms of both a man and a snake, the portrayal depicts how the lotus energies of the lower body open and ascend through the central channel of the upper body. And if we now imagine Patanjali at the same time allowing his head to fall forward, the hood of the cobra represents the unbounded broadening in all directions of the upper back, neck and shoulders of someone sitting in Jalandhara Bandha. In this way we may use the image of Patanjali as a guide to developing the pranic architecture of Jalandhara Bandha.

To the same purpose, here is an alternative image that is a bit stiff but somewhat useful. Think of an old-fashioned kite assembled from balsa wood spars that are somewhat flexible, the two cross-spars forming the vertical and horizontal axes of our kite. Then the longer, vertical axis may represent Patanjali's spine from where it lifts up out of the cobra's coiled tail and extends in a gentle bowing curve to the back of his head. The horizontal axis of our kite, we may then imagine, lies cross-wise towards the top of the thoracic spine, bowing out, left and right, across the back of the shoulders. Even in a light wind, a kite needs a tail. (A stronger wind requires a longer tail or something to provide more weight to the tail.) The tail of the kite of our Jalandhara Bandha is the drop of the tailbone, hanging as the inhale lifts and lengthens the vertical axis of the body-as-kite. Without it, the natural action of the inhalation to lift and expand the heart will tend to flatten, rather than bow out, the curve of the spine of

Jalandhara Bandha. Attaching the tail counters this tendency. Dropping the tailbone tethers the base of the spine and thereby encourages its bowing outward, particularly as we come into the completion of the exhalation. (The tailbone also goes the kite's tail one better by subtly curling its tip forward to somewhat mirror the drop of the head at the other end of the long bow – if I may be permitted to alter the image again.)

Our description thus far is asking a lot of a single inhalation, even one repeated numerous times. But still we are not done. We have expanded both the vertical and horizontal axes of the back body of our Jalandhara Bandha. Now we want to further draw on the image of Patanjali-as-cobra and begin to draw the skin of the cobra's hood away from the two central axes – and in particular away from the vertical axis, the spine of the pose. We want to fully balloon the overarching canopy of the hood.

To this end we will work with the exhale breath, starting with a component of the dominant pattern of the exhalation. This is the natural tendency, if we sit with our head dropped in Jalandhara Bandha, for the back to round on the exhale as we release the tailbone down and under. Previously we have focused on a rounding, or bowing out, along the two axes of the posture, a curving of the spine and a spreading across the shoulders. Now, adding to this, we want to expand and fill out the rest of the hood of the cobra. Let's (initially) use a two-step dance to do this. First we will work with the area of the back body from the horizontal shoulder axis down to where the third coil of the snake's tail encircles Patanjali's body, though we might even imaginatively descend all the way to the tailbone. On the exhalation we begin to evenly draw the skin of our back body left and right away from the spine out to the sides of the body. We slowly expand the bowed out back body, extending the cobra hood in predominantly lateral directions, left side to left, right side to right. This is the first of our two dance steps.

After several breaths exploring this piece of the picture with our exhalations, we can turn to implementing the same idea with the remaining length of the spine extending from *above* the shoulder axis up to the back of the head. This is the second step of the dance. To do this we may need to call on a somewhat greater degree of imagination. This is because once we get above the shoulders we have much less skin on either side of the spine to imaginatively flow out to the sides of the body. So let us imagine that we have some kind of webbing that emanates from along the cervical

spine, fanning out to the left and to the right and attaching all along the horizontal shoulder axis. And then, with the exhale breath once again, we imagine this webbing expanding out left and right away from the vertical axis, drawing the skin towards the sides of the body. Perhaps even broadening the skin at the back of the head. In this way we begin to form, in conjunction with what has gone on before, the unbounded reaches of the cobra hood. In doing this, we might say, we are ballooning the hood.

With this we are almost done, at least for now. We have just one more ingredient to include in the mix. Near the beginning of this exercise, we made use of the non-dominant pattern of the *inhale* to release the low back, buttocks and tailbone down and away from the rising arc of the rest of the back. Now we will call on the non-dominant pattern of the *exhale*. As we complete the exhale breath that has expanded the hood of the cobra, we may also drop the pubis, opening the inhale valve to further inflate the hood – or, as we may say with our alternative figure, to provide the wind to fly the kite.

This final filling of the cobra hood completes our description of Jalandhara Bandha. To recap, here is a summary stated in terms of one inhale-exhale breath cycle, one long, slow, unforced Ujjayi inhale and one long, slow, unforced Ujjayi exhale. We begin the inhalation with an opening of the pubic valve to swell the heart. We then proceed to draw on the exhale pattern of the inhalation to extend the back body from roughly the kidney area, first, up towards the back of the head and, then, down towards the drop of the tailbone. In the ensuing exhalation, we invoke the exhale breath pattern to spread the back body outwards, left and right, ultimately drawing the skin of the back body towards the sides of the body all the way from the cranium to the tailbone. Finally, as the exhale completes itself, we again open the pubic valve to further inflate the cobra canopy that we have just created.

If all has gone well, we may wish to simply sit awhile, as does Patanjali “under” the hood of the cobra, enjoying our Ujjayi breath. But eventually we should appreciate that our description provides us with only a picture – and that we should not take the *picture* too seriously. The object of the detailing of our description is to identify patterns. And when we have done this, we may imaginatively take them apart and play with the pieces in different ways.