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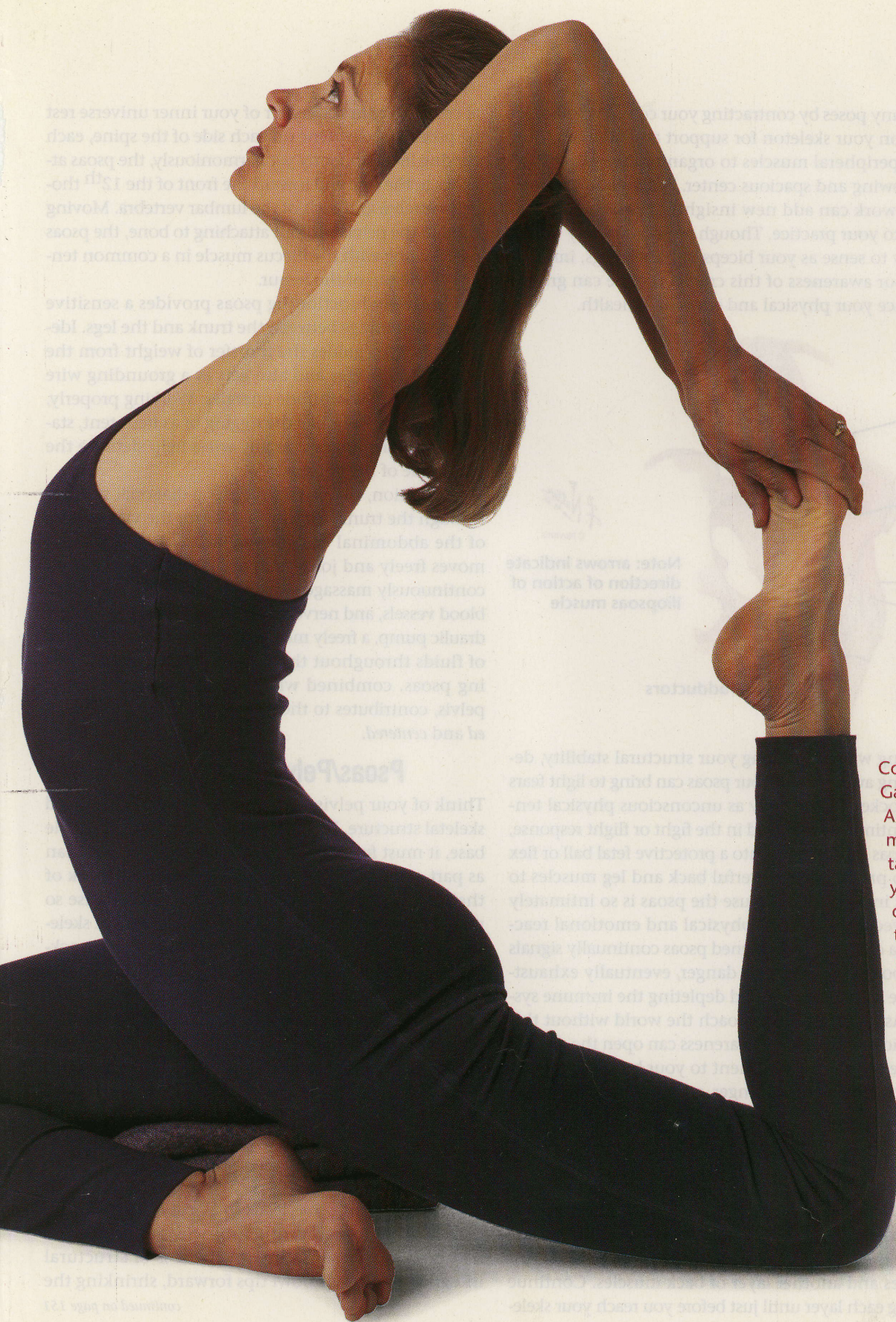
The Psoas is:

- a) A remote tribe in Papua, New Guinea.
- b) A revolutionary computer operating system.
- ✓ c) The muscle that is the key to your structural stability.

If you guessed C, you're correct. Buried deep within the core of your body, the psoas (pronounced "so-az") affects every facet of your life, from your physical well-being to who you feel yourself to be and how you relate to the world. A bridge linking the trunk to the legs, the psoas is critical for balanced alignment, proper joint rotation, and full muscular range of motion. In yoga, the psoas plays an important role in every asana. In backbends, a released psoas allows the front of the thighs to lengthen and the leg to move independently from the pelvis. In standing poses and forward bends, the thighs can't fully rotate outward unless the psoas releases. All yoga poses are enhanced by a released rather than shortened psoas. (When you reverse your orientation to gravity in inversions, however, the psoas must be toned as well as released to maintain proper spinal stability.)

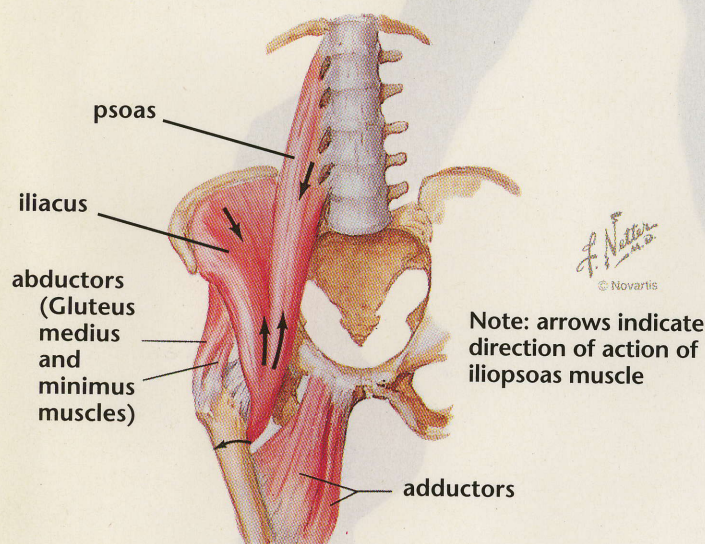
Whether you suffer from a sore back or anxiety, from knee strain or exhaustion, there's a good chance that a constricted psoas muscle might be contributing to your woes. Getting in touch with this deeply buried muscle can be humbling at first. You may discover that you've been do-

By Liz Koch | Photographs by Rosa Lau



Cofounder of The Yoga Garden, a studio in San Anselmo, California, model Amy Cooper has taught yoga for 20 years, and helped Koch develop her insights on the psoas in yoga. Beginning from roots in Iyengar yoga, Cooper has drawn on many sources to develop a teaching style that encourages students to find the yoga practices that best enhance their lives.

ing many poses by contracting your core, instead of relying on your skeleton for support and allowing your more peripheral muscles to organize around a toned but flowing and spacious center. But if you persevere, psoas work can add new insight, openness, and stability to your practice. Though your psoas may not be as easy to sense as your biceps or hamstrings, improving your awareness of this crucial muscle can greatly enhance your physical and emotional health.



Along with improving your structural stability, developing awareness of your psoas can bring to light fears long locked in the body as unconscious physical tension. Intimately involved in the fight or flight response, the psoas can curl you into a protective fetal ball or flex you to prepare the powerful back and leg muscles to spring into action. Because the psoas is so intimately involved in such basic physical and emotional reactions, a chronically tightened psoas continually signals your body that you're in danger, eventually exhausting the adrenal glands and depleting the immune system. As you learn to approach the world without this chronic tension, psoas awareness can open the door to a more sensitive attunement to your body's inner signals about safety and danger, and to a greater sense of inner peace.

Meet Your Psoas

To locate this powerful muscle, imagine peeling your body like an onion. The first layer is the skin; next come the abdominal muscles in front and the massive muscles of the sides and back. One layer deeper lie the intestines and another layer of back muscles. Continue peeling each layer until just before you reach your skele-

tal core: There in the center of your inner universe rest the psoas muscles. One on each side of the spine, each working independently yet harmoniously, the psoas attaches to the side and toward the front of the 12th thoracic vertebra and each of the lumbar vertebra. Moving through the pelvis without attaching to bone, the psoas inserts along with the iliacus muscle in a common tendon at the top of the femur.

A healthily functioning psoas provides a sensitive suspension bridge between the trunk and the legs. Ideally, the psoas guides the transfer of weight from the trunk into the legs and also acts as a grounding wire guiding the flow of subtle energies. Working properly, the psoas functions like the rigging of a circus tent, stabilizing your spine just as guy wires help stabilize the main pole of the big top.

In addition, the psoas provides a diagonal support through the trunk, forming a shelf for the vital organs of the abdominal core. In walking, a healthy psoas moves freely and joins with a released diaphragm to continuously massage the spine as well as the organs, blood vessels, and nerves of the trunk. Working as a hydraulic pump, a freely moving psoas stimulates the flow of fluids throughout the body. And a released, flowing psoas, combined with a stable, weight-bearing pelvis, contributes to the sensations of feeling *grounded* and *centered*.

Psoas/Pelvis Relationship

Think of your pelvis as the foundation of a balanced skeletal structure. For your pelvis to provide this stable base, it must function as part of the trunk rather than as part of the legs. Many people mistakenly think of their legs as starting at the waist, perhaps because so many major leg muscles attach to the pelvis. But skeletally and structurally, your legs start at your hip sockets. If your pelvis tilts forward or back or side to side every time you move your legs, the bones can't bear and transfer weight properly. Your psoas will then be called upon to help protect the spine by stabilizing your skeleton. Since the psoas can contract and release independently at any of its joint attachments, it can compensate for structural imbalances in many ways. But if you constantly contract the psoas to correct for skeletal instability, the muscle eventually begins to shorten and lose flexibility.

Shortening the psoas leads to a host of unfortunate conditions. Inevitably, other muscle groups become involved in compensating for the loss of structural integrity. The pelvic bowl tips forward, shrinking the

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drop to the net. You need to decide before you let go of the bar whether you want to drop to your seat or to your back. If you go for a seat drop, keep your body in an L shape with your legs extended and your arms at your sides. If you go for the back drop, land flat with your arms extended. What you want to avoid is hitting the net with your body in a V, because this will cause you to whiplash and slam your face into your knees. Any questions?"

I had studied the net drop for long enough to understand what I needed to do, and was intellectually convinced that I was ready for it. Nevertheless, my hands began to sweat and my stomach turned flips as I climbed onto the pedestal. I grasped the bar so tightly I probably left my fingerprints on the tape, and took off. Back and forth I swung through several arcs of the pendulum as I had done a hundred times, but this time everything was different. I seemed to be over an abyss rather than a net. And I was all alone. I think my teacher was shouting something to me but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

For a fleeting instant I had the illusion that I could cancel the whole experiment by yelling: "I changed my mind; I'm not ready; hold me on the safety lines." Then, reality struck. There would be no rescue. It was either the seat-drop or the back-drop and I was on my own. I decided for the seat, released the flybar and fell for a long time before I landed in the net halfway between the L and the V, bounced like a crooked ball, and came to rest. I made a quick inventory of my body parts, found them all in working order, let out a victory whoop, and descended from the net with an exultation of meadow larks singing in the vast, new space of freedom that had opened up within my chest.

Death says, "Play it safe." Life says, "Risk it." At the vital edge something dangerous calls my name. What will I risk to stay alive?

From Learning to Fly: Trapeze—Reflections on Fear, Trust, and Letting Go by Sam Keen © 1999 by Sam Keen. Reprinted by permission of Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved.

The Psoas

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distance between the pelvic crests and the legs, and the femurs are compressed into the hip sockets. To compensate for this constriction, the thigh muscles become overdeveloped. Since full rotation of the thighbones can no longer occur in the hip joints, much of the rotational torque is transferred to the knees and the lumbar spine—a recipe for knee and lower back injuries. In your yoga prac-

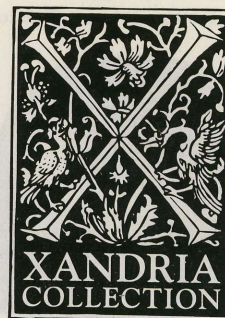
All sorts of physical traumas can compromise the optimal, healthy functioning of your psoas: injuries to the pelvis or spine, surgery, broken bones and joint injuries in your feet and legs, even a torn ligament from overexuberant stretching in yoga.

tice, if you feel strain in your knees or lower back in seated and standing poses, your body may be telling you that you need to lengthen your psoas.

In addition to structural problems, shortening the psoas limits space in the pelvis and abdomen, constricting the organs, putting pressure on nerves, interfering with the movement of fluids, and impairing diaphragmatic breathing. Finally, by limiting your options for movement and by constricting your center, a shortened psoas decreases both your vitality and your connection to the sensations at your skeleto-muscular and emotional core.

Losing touch with your core can happen in myriad ways. You may be born with structural imbalances that eventually lead you to engage the psoas for support. All sorts of physical traumas can compromise the optimal, healthy functioning of your psoas: injuries to the pelvis or spine, surgery, broken bones and joint injuries in your feet and legs,

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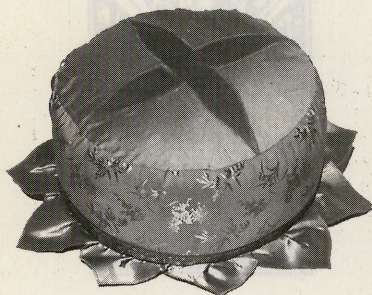
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even a torn ligament from overexuberant stretching in yoga. No matter what their source, muscular imbalances that compensate for injuries, overdeveloped muscles, and chronic muscular tension all add to structural instability that affects the psoas.

Keeping your psoas released during yoga practice liberates attention previously directed toward your contracted core, allowing you to sense more clearly the delicate balance of action between other muscle groups.

In addition, our living environment often does not support the proper use of the psoas. From car seats to constrictive clothing, from chairs to shoes that distort posture, many features of modern life curtail our natural movement patterns. In fact, a chronically tightened psoas may date back to your first steps. Baby shoes that constrict the foot, impair the movement of bones, or limit ankle mobility can alter a child's skeletal balance and stifle psoas vitality. Other child-rearing paraphernalia can add to the problem. Rigid plastic baby carriers limit movement, eliminating the natural protection and give-and-take of a mother's body, and playpens restrict the crawling essential for neuromuscular and skeletal maturation. Walkers give infants a false sense of stability, encouraging them to stand and walk before the bones are fully formed and ready to bear weight. Rushing development in this way teaches children to rely on their psoas muscles, rather than their skeletons, for support.

Either emotional trauma or an ongoing lack of emotional support can also lead to a chronically contracted psoas, and thus to a loss of core awareness. If your fight/flight syndrome is triggered into constant arousal, eventually you lose contact with your inner world. One psoas workshop participant, for example, recalled her mother repeatedly admonish-

ing her, "Look where you're going, young lady." Constantly receiving the message that her body couldn't be trusted led her into chronic anxiety. She realized she literally watched every step she took, forcing her skeleton to sag under the weight of a drooping head.

As an adult, learning to consciously release your psoas can rekindle vital energies by re-establishing your connection to your body's internal signals—your instinctual somatic wisdom. Releasing your psoas encourages this process by allowing you to trust your skeletal stability instead of holding yourself up by muscular effort. Sensing your bones supporting weight translates into a physical and emotional feeling of "standing on your own two feet." With a properly functioning psoas, the bones bear weight, the muscles move the bones, and the joints connect the subtle energies of the body. Energy flows through the joints, offering a sense of continuity, like the string flowing through a pearl necklace that transforms it into something more than the sum of its parts. The psoas, by conducting energy, grounds us to the earth, just as a grounding wire prevents shocks and eliminates static on a radio. Freed and grounded, the spine can awaken.

Once you've learned to sense and release your psoas, you can apply these lessons to your yoga practice and everyday life. Keeping your psoas released during yoga practice liberates attention previously directed toward your contracted core, allowing you to sense more clearly the delicate balance of action between other muscle groups. And freeing your center creates a sense of relaxation and calm that can infuse all your activities. In his poem "Burnt Norton," T.S. Eliot wrote a phrase that perfectly captures the inner stability and peacefulness that accompanies a properly functioning psoas: "the still point of the turning world."

Author of The Psoas Book, a guide to the iliopsoas muscle and its effect on the body, mind, and emotions (Guinea Pig Publications; P.O. Box 1226, Felton, CA 95018; www.guineapigpub.com), Liz Koch has taught psoas workshops for over 20 years. She lives in Felton, California, with her husband Jeff Oberdofer and their three children.

Release Your Psoas

The internal awareness that develops through yoga is the most important tool for learning to release the psoas. And releasing the psoas will bring new freedom, ease, and structural integrity to your yoga practice.

It can be difficult at first to access the subtle sensations of the psoas. Buried in the body, engaged in habitual patterns of holding (especially when you're sitting or standing), and deeply linked to your emotions, the psoas is best approached with quiet attention, patience, and perseverance. Awareness is the first key. Like a flashlight that illuminates the contents of a dark closet, you can use your attention to clarify and define each sensation in your core.

Constructive Rest Position

Rather than trying to instantly correct all the imbalances and habitual compensations you've developed throughout your life, we'll begin by simply releasing the psoas in a posture called constructive rest position. In this pose, you don't need to perform any muscular action to release the psoas. Gravity will do the work.

To take constructive rest position, lie on your back, bend your knees to about 90 degrees, and place your feet on the floor in line with your hip sockets, 12 to 16 inches from your buttocks (Figure 1). Be careful not to flatten or exaggerate the curves in either your lumbar (lower back) or cervical (neck) spine. Rest your hands and forearms on your rib cage, on your pelvis, or by bringing them to the floor as in Savasana.

Now that you're in position, shift your awareness to the support of your

bones. Begin by sensing the weight of your bones sinking down toward the floor. Take note of any part of your skeleton that feels as though it is suspended, any place where the muscular contraction prevents the bones from surrendering to the pull of gravity. As your psoas continues to release, the distribution of weight will start to feel increasingly even throughout your body.

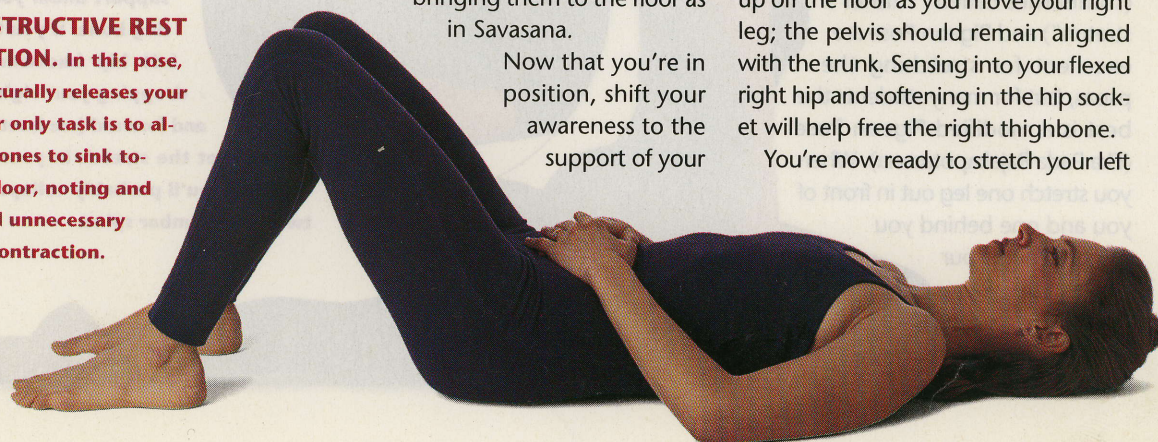
Active Supine Stretch

Once you've begun to understand the skeletal position and internal sensations that accompany releasing the psoas, you can move on to more actively lengthening the muscle. Starting from constructive rest position and keeping both knees bent, bring your right upper thigh toward your chest. Gently hug your right leg toward your trunk.

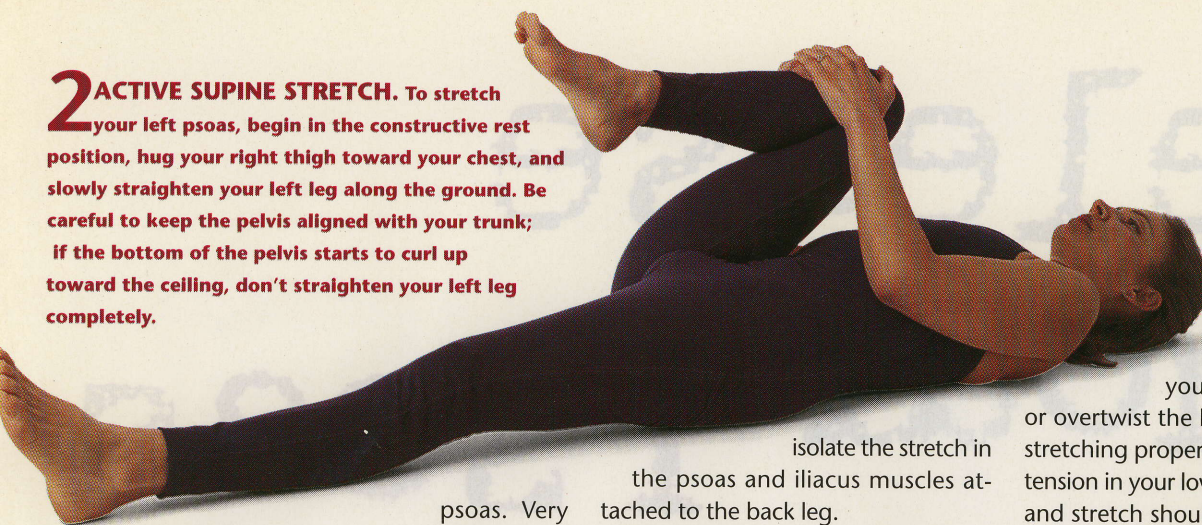
Be very careful not to curl your pelvis up off the floor as you move your right leg; the pelvis should remain aligned with the trunk. Sensing into your flexed right hip and softening in the hip socket will help free the right thighbone.

You're now ready to stretch your left

1 CONSTRUCTIVE REST POSITION. In this pose, gravity naturally releases your psoas. Your only task is to allow your bones to sink toward the floor, noting and relaxing all unnecessary muscular contraction.



2 ACTIVE SUPINE STRETCH. To stretch your left psoas, begin in the constructive rest position, hug your right thigh toward your chest, and slowly straighten your left leg along the ground. Be careful to keep the pelvis aligned with your trunk; if the bottom of the pelvis starts to curl up toward the ceiling, don't straighten your left leg completely.



psoas. Very slowly walk the left foot farther away from the hips (Figure 2). As the leg extends, keep your awareness on the front of the left hip socket, releasing any psoas tension you notice there. Once you begin to sense the psoas lengthening, follow the sensation all the way up the muscle to its attachment at the 12th thoracic vertebra, located behind the center of your solar plexus.

To amplify the stretch, push your right leg against your right arm as though you were gently kicking up toward the sky. At the same time, resist the push of the leg with your clasped arms. After a few moments, change sides. *Don't continue this pose if you experience pain or tension in your lower back. Instead, immediately go back to constructive rest position and relax, allowing gravity to release your psoas again.*

The Ultimate Stretch

All variations of the lunge (sometimes called "runner's stretch") and Pigeon Pose are excellent for stretching the psoas, but for many students the best is a modified Pigeon Pose (Eka Pada Rajakapotasana). When you stretch one leg out in front of you and one behind you while keeping your pelvis stable, you

isolate the stretch in the psoas and iliacus muscles attached to the back leg.

To come into this pose, start by kneeling on all fours. Swing your right knee forward onto the floor between your hands, releasing and rotating the right femur within the right hip socket, and bring your right buttock toward the floor. At the same time, extend your left leg straight back behind you. Make sure you keep your hips level and squared to the front (Figure 3). If necessary, place a firm bolster or pile of blankets under your right sitting bone to keep your pelvis level and supported. Don't bring your right buttock to the floor by torquing your right hip farther forward or farther toward the floor than your left (Figure 4).

This posture stretches your left psoas. As you continue to extend back through your left leg, check again



3&4 MODIFIED PIGEON POSE. As

you bring your right buttock toward the floor, make sure your hips are level and squared to the front. If necessary, place support under your right sitting bone. If you torque your left hip backward and up, dropping your right hip down and forward (see inset), you won't get the stretch in your left psoas, and you'll probably collapse and overtwist your lumbar spine.

that you are keeping your pelvis facing squarely forward. If the pelvis torques, you'll lose the psoas stretch, and you may also compress

or overtwist the lower back. If you're stretching properly, you shouldn't feel tension in your lower back. The release and stretch should begin where your psoas crosses your hip at the front of the joint, and you should feel an upward extension through both the front and back of your trunk. The line of your body should form a continuous arc, with no abrupt angles.

Seated Poses

Now that you've discovered how it feels to release and lengthen your psoas, we'll use a simple cross-legged posture to illuminate the proper use of the psoas in seated asanas.

Sit on a firm, folded blanket, with your feet and lower legs off the blanket. Bend your right leg and draw the heel toward your left inner groin. Similarly, bend your left leg and draw the heel toward your right shin. If either of your knees feels strained or if one knee

is higher than the other, support that knee by placing a rolled towel or blanket or bolster under the knee or thigh.

Begin to notice where the weight of your torso grounds through your pelvis into the floor. Does most of your weight fall behind your sitting bones, or in front of them? If you sense your weight grounding directly through the bones, refine your questioning. Is your weight more on the front of the bones or the back? Lift your sitting bones off the blanket and pull back on the muscles of the buttocks, so that when you lower down again you shift more firmly onto the front of your sitting bones. See if this action provides a more effortless base of support for your spine, rib cage, and head.

To align your pelvis properly, you may have to raise your sitting bones by placing flat, firmly folded towels or blankets under your buttocks. When you get all your props placed correctly, you'll be on the front of your sitting bones, with your knees lower than your hip sockets (*Figure 5*). This relationship between knees and hips is critical in all seated postures because it allows your psoas to open at the front of the hip; in turn, this opening allows a release of tension throughout your legs and lower back. As

the weight of the body releases down through the bones, it grounds into the earth, and a subtle sensation of support rebounds upward.

When your pelvis is stable and your skeletal structure is free to align properly, sitting feels effortless. You shouldn't have to use muscular tension to hold yourself up—thrusting your chest forward or pulling your shoulders back to lengthen your trunk. If you feel as though your spine collapses without these actions, if your weight is still placed behind your sitting bones, or if your knees are still higher than your hip sockets (*Figure 6*), continue to add towels or blankets until you find the sensation of support that accompanies proper alignment.

If you still don't feel this support even though you're aligned properly, try shifting your weight slightly forward through your hip sockets until you feel a release at the core of your body. At first, this release may feel a little unsettling. You may even experience a subtle fear of falling. As the psoas lets go, you are shifting from a familiar feeling of controlling your posture with muscles to an unfamiliar feeling of relying on your skeleton for support. Since it's new, the sensation may feel a bit scary—or you may feel relief as you let go of unnecessary muscular contraction.

Standing Release

Maintaining a released psoas can be challenging in standing postures. Biomechanically, standing on two

legs is a very complex task, and many of us have developed habitual—but less than optimal—patterns of muscular contraction to help keep us upright. Fortunately, there's an excellent exercise that allows you to discover what it feels like to relax your psoas while standing. Take a block or thick book and place it 12 to 16 inches away from a wall. Stand on the block or book with your left foot, supporting and balancing yourself with your right hand on the wall. Let your right leg and foot hang completely released (*Figure 7*). Gently swing this leg back and forth like a pendulum, taking care not to let the trunk bend or twist as your leg swings. (If your pelvis is torquing, you're going beyond the released range of motion of your psoas.) See if you can sense the pendulum movement deep within your torso; it should begin at the very top of your psoas at your 12th thoracic vertebra, behind your solar plexus.

After you swing the leg for a few minutes, step down from the block and see if your two legs feel different.

You've released the psoas attached to the swinging leg, and most likely this

5&6 SIMPLE CROSS-LEGGED POSE.

In seated postures, your knees should be lower than your hip sockets, with your weight balanced on the front of your sitting bones. If your knees are too high and your weight falls behind your sitting bones, you'll have to work hard with your muscles to stay upright, rather than releasing and relying on the support of your skeleton.



leg will feel longer, freer, and more relaxed.

Now reverse your position and swing the other leg. This time focus not only on the leg you're swinging, but also on the standing leg. Check to make sure you're not leaning into the standing leg hip. Try to sense your weight passing directly down through your leg and foot and into the block. Even though this leg is now bearing weight, you can release the psoas by bringing your awareness to the front of the hip socket and softening any tension you notice there.



Tadasana (Mountain Pose)

Now let's investigate Tadasana (Mountain Pose). Stand with your feet directly underneath your hip sockets, and conduct an inquiry of your sensations. Does your pelvis feel like a stable foundation? Is the rim of your pelvis parallel to the floor? You can check by looking in a mirror, or by placing your hands on top of your hips and following the pelvic rim around to the front of your body, checking to see if both hands are level. Do both your legs transfer weight equally? Are you grounding equally through both feet? If your answer to these questions is "Yes," your psoas should feel released, and you should be able to sense gravity drawing your weight down through your bones. If your bones are aligned, you'll feel a slight sensation of rebounding from the earth, just as a ball dropped to the floor bounces up again. This rebounding force creates a current of energy that aligns the body, flowing up through your spine and out the top of your skull. If your pelvis doesn't feel stable and even, try returning to constructive rest position and the supine psoas stretch. After a few

minutes of releasing the psoas and stabilizing the pelvis, return to Tadasana and see if you feel more balanced.

the wall. Completely release your right leg and foot, allowing the leg to swing back and forth like a pendulum that begins deep in your torso behind your solar plexus. Don't let your leg swing so far that your trunk bends or twists; both movements are signs that you're moving beyond the point where your psoas can remain released.

minutes of releasing the psoas and stabilizing the pelvis, return to Tadasana and see if you feel more balanced.

Vrksasana (Tree Pose)

Once your weight feels equal on both feet in Tadasana, focus on sensing your ankles. Shift your weight ever so slightly forward and back over your ankle joints until you find the place where they feel most released. At that point, your psoas is also most free to release and to assume its proper function as a guy wire for the spine. Moving with proper alignment from Tadasana into Tree Pose requires that you continue to sense this connection between your standing leg and your spine, even as you shift all your weight onto one leg and lift the other into the air.

When you're ready, gradually shift from grounding your weight through both legs to bringing it all onto your right leg. A common mistake in this asana is leaning into the right hip (Figure 8), which can strain the hip ligaments on that side. Instead, balance your weight directly over the bones of your leg, allowing the hip socket to remain released and the right-side psoas to relax.

When you can ground your

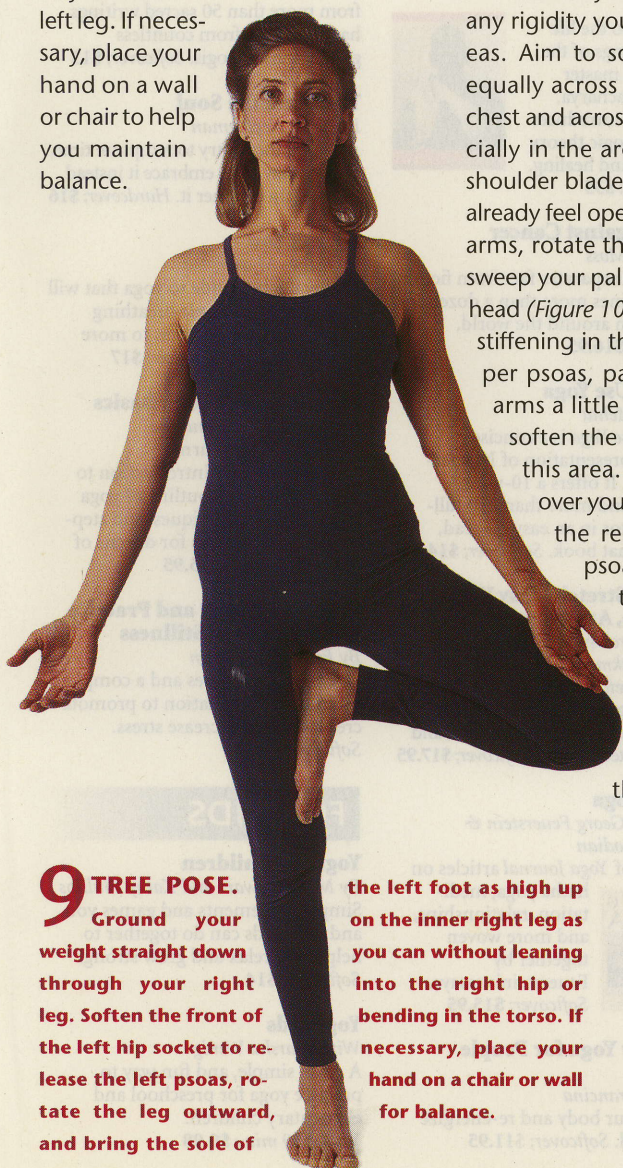


8 TREE POSE (IMPROPERLY LEANING INTO RIGHT HIP). Balancing by leaning into the hip is a common mistake in this asana. To avoid this problem, practice balancing your weight directly over the bones of your right leg before you rotate your left leg and lift the left foot to the right inner thigh. Allow the right hip socket to soften and the psoas to release.

7 STANDING PSOAS RELEASE.

To learn how it feels to release your psoas while standing, place your left foot on a block or book 12 to 16 inches away from a wall. Support yourself with your right hand against

weight straight down through your right leg, without leaning into your right hip or locking your right knee, you can start to turn and lift your left leg. Begin by softening any tension at the front of the left hip socket, releasing the left psoas. Then rotate the thigh bone in the left hip socket, contracting the external rotator muscles located behind the hip. Once you've rotated the femur, lift your left leg, placing the sole of the foot as high as possible on the inner right leg (Figure 9). Again, make sure you didn't lean into your right hip as you lifted the left leg. If necessary, place your hand on a wall or chair to help you maintain balance.

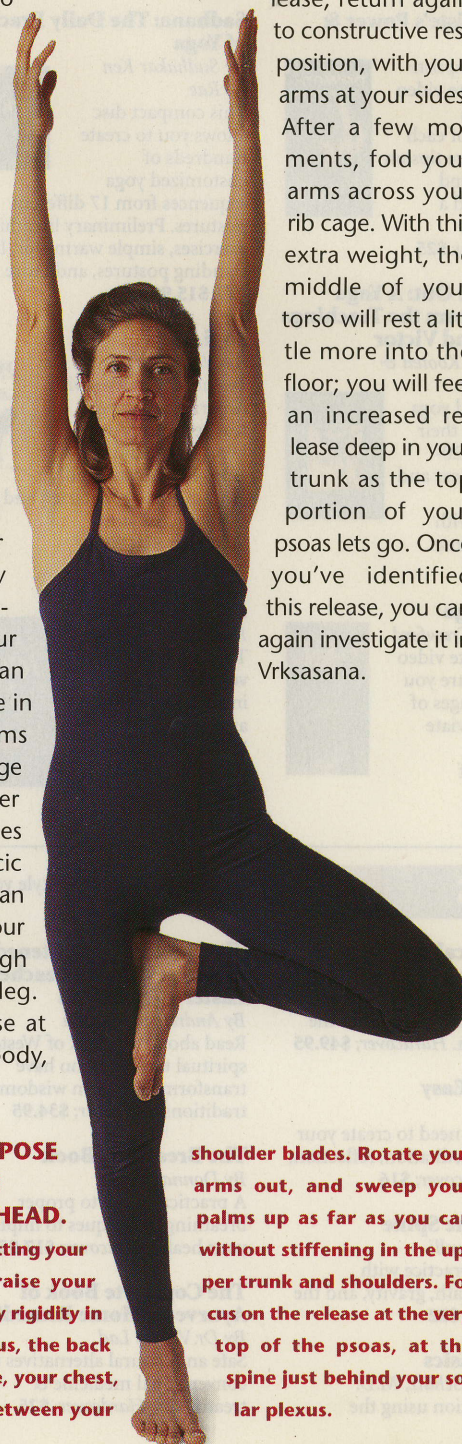


Psoas and the Arms

If you feel stable and aligned standing in Vrikshasana, you can add your arms to the pose. Just as your legs should be able to move independently of your pelvis, your arms should be able to move independently of your shoulders. And, as with your legs, this independent motion can only occur if your psoas is released. To avoid contracting your psoas as you raise your arms, bring your attention to your solar plexus and the back of your rib cage. Melt any rigidity you feel in these areas. Aim to soften and widen equally across the front of your chest and across your back, especially in the area between your shoulder blades. If these regions already feel open, straighten your arms, rotate them outward, and sweep your palms up above your head (Figure 10). If you detect any stiffening in the area of your upper psoas, pause and take your arms a little lower until you can soften the tension you sense in this area. Bringing your arms over your head can challenge the release of the upper psoas where it attaches to the 12th thoracic vertebra, and it can also challenge your stability through your standing leg. To maintain ease at the core of your body,

focus on sensing a downward release from the very top of your psoas. Feel your weight dropping down through your bones, even as your arms float up over your head.

If you have difficulty sensing this release, return again to constructive rest position, with your arms at your sides. After a few moments, fold your arms across your rib cage. With this extra weight, the middle of your torso will rest a little more into the floor; you will feel an increased release deep in your trunk as the top portion of your psoas lets go. Once you've identified this release, you can again investigate it in Vrikshasana.



9 TREE POSE.

Ground your weight straight down through your right leg. Soften the front of the left hip socket to release the left psoas, rotate the leg outward, and bring the sole of

the left foot as high up on the inner right leg as you can without leaning into the right hip or bending in the torso. If necessary, place your hand on a chair or wall for balance.

10 TREE POSE WITH ARMS OVERHEAD.

To avoid contracting your psoas as you raise your arms, soften any rigidity in your solar plexus, the back of your rib cage, your chest, and the area between your

shoulder blades. Rotate your arms out, and sweep your palms up as far as you can without stiffening in the upper trunk and shoulders. Focus on the release at the very top of the psoas, at the spine just behind your solar plexus.