



Pathways to a Centered Body

GENTLE YOGA THERAPY
FOR CORE STABILITY, HEALING BACK PAIN,
AND MOVING WITH EASE



Donna Farhi and Leila Stuart



PATHWAYS TO A CENTERED BODY

ALSO BY DONNA FARHI

The Breathing Book

Yoga, Mind, Body & Spirit: A Return to Wholeness

Bringing Yoga to Life: The Everyday Practice of Enlightened Living

Teaching Yoga: Exploring the Teacher-Student Relationship

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Illustrations by Sonya Rooney

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www.embodiedwisdom.pub

Illustrations by Sonya Rooney, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Photographs by Murray Irwin, Mannering & Associates Ltd, Christchurch, New Zealand
Cover and Text Design by Gopa & Ted2, Inc.
www.gopated2inc.com
Printed in China.

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN	978-0-473-38558-3
Title	Pathways to a Centered Body: Gentle Yoga Therapy for Core Stability, Healing Back Pain, and Moving with Ease.
Authors	Donna Farhi and Leila Stuart
Format	Softcover
Publication Date	05/2017

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The information provided in this book is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians or other qualified health professionals. This book is not intended to diagnose or treat any medical condition, but rather to describe one approach to healthy movement function. The reader is advised to regularly consult a physician in health matters, particularly for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition and before undertaking the practices in this book. The publisher and authors are not liable for any injuries, damages, or negative consequences allegedly arising from reading or using information in this book.

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Introduction

IN RECENT TIMES, core fitness has become a catch phrase for a multitude of physical fitness regimens geared toward firming and strengthening the core muscles of the body. With increasingly sedentary lifestyles and the accompanying epidemic of obesity that has followed, core fitness has become almost synonymous with losing weight and regaining a trim, flat, and defined waistline. For some of us, improving core strength and stability offers the promise of alleviation of back pain, allowing us to move through the day with less discomfort or to resume activities, such as running or playing golf. For athletes, dancers, and practitioners of Yoga, having a strong core may translate into having more refined control of the body and the ability to do breathtakingly virtuosic movements. But what do we really mean when we talk about having a strong core? Why is it important to center the pelvis and to have stability in the core muscles of the body? And what muscles are we actually referring to when we speak of the core?

As practitioners and teachers of Yoga with more than five decades of combined experience, we have observed this trend and believe many of the approaches to core fitness, and the movement disciplines catering to its pursuit, often have limited efficacy because they neglect to address the deeper foundation muscles that form the scaffolding for a truly centered pelvis and upright spine. Furthermore, when these deeper core muscles are weak, tight, or unbalanced, strengthening the more superficial muscles of the body may serve only to mask and even accentuate the preexisting body imbalance. The “abs of steel” that have become so much a part of our cultural obsession with the body beautiful actually can *contribute to* ongoing back pain, shallow breathing, and movement dysfunction. On the other end of the spectrum, we also have seen a worldwide epidemic of hypermobile Yoga practitioners who complain of chronic discomfort and reoccurring injuries. Most of these injuries are the result of the pursuit of extreme flexibility without building a foundation of strong and stable musculature.

THE CORE AND THE PSOAS

This book distinguishes between primary core muscles and secondary core muscles (more about these later). The primary core muscle we'll be exploring is the psoas muscle (pronounced *so-az* with a silent p), or more correctly, the iliopsoas muscle complex (Illustration 1, page 8). Defined as a "deep" abdominal muscle, the psoas lies in the back or posterior of the abdominal wall and cannot be readily palpated.¹ The structure of the psoas is exceedingly complex, and some of the finest anatomists, clinicians, and somatic practitioners have differing views about the movement function of the psoas. These three factors—that is, its deeply buried position, difficulty in palpation, and controversy over its function—go a long way toward explaining why the psoas often is omitted from discussions about core stability and why it has been given so little mention in movement practices and, indeed, in many clinical and therapeutic modalities.

Because of its unique central position and function, the psoas has a multidimensional influence on our experience of stability, strength, ease, and coordination. From their origin in the back of the body, the left and right psoas muscles are anchored to the lumbar spine. The muscles swoop diagonally forward to the front of the pelvis and then make a backward detour to attach to the inside of the thigh bones. Given their distinct angles of pull on the spinal column, pelvis, and hip bones, the psoas are a key determinant of the position of the pelvis and have a profound effect on the functional stability of the body. For this reason, we believe balancing this muscle should *precede* strengthening of the secondary core muscles. Once the psoas is acting as the primary initiator of core movement, the other secondary core muscles contract in concert to achieve optimal strength and function.

Dr. Janet Travell, coauthor of the classic trigger point manual *Myofascial Pain and Dysfunction*

calls the psoas "the hidden prankster" because of its deeply concealed and difficult-to-access location, and its ability to cause pain that is commonly attributed to other dysfunctions.² A more apt term might be "hidden treasure" because when patiently released and balanced through awareness and gentle exercises, the psoas can facilitate profound healing and relief from a multitude of discomforts and conditions.

As teachers who have worked with hundreds of Yoga students from all walks of life, it has been our experience that when the psoas does its job in centering the pelvis and stabilizing the lumbar spine, it minimizes the effort of more external muscles. When the psoas is functioning optimally, the pelvis and lumbar spine will be in a neutral position and stabilized from deep within, creating an experience of effortless verticality that is expressed in graceful integrated posture and movement. This physical centeredness can liberate energetic resources and promote a harmonious flow of energy and breath in the body (known as *prana* within the Yoga tradition or *qi* or *chi* in martial arts traditions). Creating core balance also may help you to feel more emotionally secure and able to meet previously overwhelming situations with robustness and resilience. Knowing how to hold your ground may correlate to a powerful psychodynamic stability and imperturbability that gives skillfulness to your speech and action. However we quantify the meaning of core, being centered in the present moment can help us to live from our deepest values and to focus on what ultimately matters.

As Yoga teachers, we are well aware that functionally integrated movement can never be reduced to one muscle. Rather, full movement capacity is the net result of the individual parts of the body working together in a synergistic relationship. So let us be clear at the beginning: we don't see a competent psoas muscle as a somatic

panacea for all that ails you. That would be too simplistic. But we do believe its role in providing an easeful experience in the body has been little understood, and when the psoas is given even a modicum of attention, the results are often quite remarkable. We also believe that many of the methods for releasing the psoas are unnecessarily painful and can contribute to this deep muscle becoming even more contracted. We have seen students with conditions such as chronic lower back pain and unrelenting sciatica, as well as those with long-standing sacroiliac discomfort, feel immediate relief from simple exercises that can be practiced in as few as 5–10 minutes. When you consider that most of the exercises in this book require little more than an inexpensive Muscle Release Ball and a few blankets, that's a small investment for a big result.³ The accessibility of these techniques can be especially significant for dancers, Yoga practitioners, athletes, and others who may not be able to afford regular bodywork and therefore are highly motivated to manage their own self-care. Many of our students have been surprised to discover that it is possible to correct longstanding conditions, such as hyperlordosis (an accentuation of the lumbar curve), with exercises and supported releases that, when practiced correctly, are without exception *pain free*.

SIX-STEP PROTOCOL

To fully benefit from this work, we have developed a step-by-step protocol that will build both your cognitive and experiential understanding of the psoas as well as how to access its support. The six steps in this journey are as follows:

1. Find It: It's difficult to change any part of the body if you don't know where it is, what it looks like, and how it functions. The field of experiential anatomy (as opposed to purely theoretical study) uses visual imagery of anatomical structure combined with awareness through movement to give

a *felt* experience of body structure. We'll begin this process by learning about the anatomy of the iliopsoas complex followed by some simple techniques for tracing and locating the muscle. This information is in Chapters Two and Three.

2. Soften and Hydrate It: We believe that stretching any muscle before it has been warmed, softened, and hydrated can contribute to further defensive binding and potential injury of muscle tissue. Unfortunately, many Yoga methodologies do not include sufficient conditioning movements and proceed immediately to static postures that pull on the muscles. Consider how moistened pastry dough can be rolled paper thin, whereas dry crumbly dough cracks and crumbles even with the slightest pressure, and you get the idea. We'll introduce you to some effective techniques that use pulsing and oscillatory movement to generate circulation of fluid through muscle, fascia, and organ tissue. This information is in Chapter Four.

3. Release and Lengthen It: Incorporating the support of full diaphragmatic breathing, we learn to release and lengthen muscles as a dynamic process of uncoiling followed by slight retraction. Gentle stretching and releasing can further hydrate muscle and fascial tissue. In this section, you'll learn a veritable treasure trove of both active and passive release positions and techniques for gently and painlessly releasing the psoas muscles. This information is in Chapter Five.

4. Balance It: When significant asymmetries exist between the right and left sides of the body, it makes sense to address these imbalances *before* strengthening work, otherwise you risk the possibility of simply reinforcing your existing imbalance. Many of the techniques shown in this section can be helpful for those with spinal scoliosis (lateral curvature of the spine) and for one-sided spinal discomfort. This information is in Chapter Six.

5. Strengthen It: This section will teach you to consciously activate the psoas. We will introduce

you to the secondary core muscles and explain why coactivation of these muscles is such an important component of spinal health and optimal movement function. Then, the secondary core muscles can work synergistically with the psoas to support dynamic movement. This information is in Chapter Seven.

6. Move from It: This section offers you some suggestions for how to heighten awareness of psoas integration while practicing Yoga postures. Although our emphasis is on Yoga, many of these postures are practiced by athletes, dancers, and somatic practitioners in modified forms. We have also included a special section on how to safely mobilize your hip joints without compromising sacroiliac stability. You'll find this information in Chapter Eight. Sustaining good posture and movement alignment in all everyday activities reduces the allostatic loading (otherwise known as "wear and tear") on other body structures, such as knees, hips, and spine, promoting lifelong healthy joints, ligaments, and tendons. This information is in Chapter Nine.

A BROADER DEFINITION OF CORE STABILITY: A KOSHIC PERSPECTIVE

Before we begin learning about the anatomy of the psoas, this introduction would be sorely lacking without at least some mention of the broader definition of core stability. While the subject of this book is primarily the physical dimension of core stability, we recognize the core *as a multifaceted experience of self that is centered in the present*. From a Yogic viewpoint, the visible physical body is only one dimension of our total embodiment. When we watch an airplane take off, we see the obvious external structure of the plane that is essentially an aluminum cylinder. Yet we're equally aware that what we can see (the visible plane) is not what gets the plane off the ground. The complex hidden wiring of electrical and com-

puter systems, the engine and jet fuel, and the decisions of the pilot make the plane airborne yet are largely invisible to us. Similarly, our physical structure contains muscles, bones, connective tissue, internal organs, and body fluids, but a larger intelligence orchestrates these raw elements. In the Yogic tradition, we recognize that these invisible elements that operate on the level of the energetic, emotional, mental, and spiritual planes are all interwoven. What Yogis have known for centuries is now being scientifically backed by the discovery that our mind and emotions have a profound effect on our physical body. Conversely, the state of our physical body and health can have both positive and negative consequences on our mental and emotional state, as well as our ability to function in the world.

Although a thorough discussion is outside the scope of this book, we have outlined the geographic mapping of the body from a Yogic perspective and how core stability may be interpreted through this lens. In the Yogic paradigm, the body consists of different sheaths or *koshas*, which range from the gross experience of our physical structure, such as our muscles and bones, to subtler dimensions of embodiment, such as the flow of breath or a persistent pattern of thought or negative self-belief. Although you can't measure your thoughts and emotions with calipers, you know how deeply unsettling it can be to move through the day literally "off-balance" because your clear thinking has been eclipsed by a strong emotion such as anger or fear. Similarly, having a mental habit of always "being ahead of yourself" can have you sitting on the edge of your seat, pelvis tipped forward in anticipation of the next moment. The following *koshas* listed below may give you a broader perspective of what it means to find and sustain a sense of your true center.

1. Physical Body (*Annamaya Kosha*)

Structural Core Stability is defined as the ability to center your body in a clear relationship to ground,

gravity, and space. Bringing awareness to the core structures of the body can assist in the synergistic activation of both primary and secondary core muscles. Your body is then able to organize itself around a *fluidly stable* and responsive core. This supports you in your ability to transfer and direct force from the feet and legs up into the pelvis and through the spine into space and to mediate the force of gravity coming down through your body with minimal stress through your structure. The practices and inquiries in this book can help you to build structural core stability. Working with your physical body can become a doorway to deeper aspects of your self.

2. Energetic Body (*Pranamaya Kosha*)

Energetic Core Stability is defined as having a steady, reliable supply of energy to support daily activity. This is not the agitated energy that arises from stimulants such as sugar, caffeine, or alcohol, but a calm vibrant energy that is the result of a well-nourished body and the ability to settle into your center. Eastern traditions call this energetic center the *hara* or *tan dien* and both finding and learning to move from this potent center is a lifelong process.⁴ In Western science, we refer to this center of intelligence as the “abdominal brain” or enteric nervous system, known colloquially as our “gut instinct.”^{5,6,7} The enteric nervous system of the gut constitutes an independent brain that is in an ongoing communication with the rest of the body.

In the Yogic tradition, the energetic body is understood as *prana* or life force, the mysterious animating force that orchestrates all the self-regulatory functions of the body, such as the movement of the blood, digestion of food, and elimination of waste. Prana underlies the support for the microcirculation of oxygen and nutrients at a cellular level and is expressed in full-body breathing through the movements of external respiration. These different roads all lead to the same destination: a deep navel center acting as a “Grand Central Station,” coordinating impulses

as they move in to and out of a firm center to each of the six limbs (the head, tail, two arms, and two legs). When energetic centeredness is mastered, even the smallest gesture appears to be orchestrated from the vital center, as can be witnessed in the movement of any great athlete, dancer, or martial artist. Although not all of us can become masters, anyone willing to invest a little time and energy can attain better posture and more grace in their movement.

The psoas muscles are the primary physical scaffolding supporting the energetic center. When you establish a stable structure with the help of the psoas, prana can circulate freely throughout your body. Movement that is initiated from your core is more efficient and requires less energy, which leaves more energy for you to enjoy your life.

3. Body of Feeling and Emotion (*Manamaya Kosha*)

Emotional Core Stability is defined as acquiring the ability to feel a broad range of emotions without losing a sense of a stable unchanging center. Cultivating emotional stability involves learning to welcome, meet, and greet your feelings and emotions through a neutral witnessing process that neither suppresses emotions nor inappropriately vents or expresses these emotions in a way that causes harm to others. Through this process, you learn to view your feelings and emotions as messengers offering valuable information about your experience, without eclipsing an awareness of the unchanging Self. Far from creating a cold-hearted detachment, being able to disidentify with emotions allows you to register your experience in high resolution without shutting down or becoming overwhelmed. This can increase your ability to remain centered and present for others who may be in the throes of their own strong emotional experience.

The psoas can be viewed as a repository of the instinctual emotions of the abdominal brain. Working tenderly with the psoas can sometimes unleash these emotions, but at the same time,

it can provide access to the strength and innate wisdom necessary for the healing journey toward emotional wholeness.

4. Body of Thought (*Vijyanamaya Kosha*)

Mental Core Stability is the ability to establish and sustain the practice of *pratyahara*. Pratyahara is a Sanskrit term that refers to the restoration of the senses to their fullest function, whereby you begin to notice the unchanging ground from which experience arises. To be truly centered is to have a simultaneous awareness of both the changing patterns of your mind and the unchanging ground of consciousness. Balancing your mental process includes identifying and compassionately looking at the tendencies, habits, and programming that consistently draw you out of your core and prevent the emergence of your deep inner wisdom. Such presence of mind allows you to respond to each situation perfectly and appropriately.

The psoas can register the mental programming and metaphors with which we live, often resulting in excessive muscular tension. For example, if you live with a belief system that no one can be trusted, your vigilance will be embodied as tension in the psoas and other muscles of your body. When the psoas is hydrated and balanced, it can be used as a reliable physical tool to tap into the stillness that underlies and contains all thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It may help to establish a sense of being seated in your Self, accessing and relying on your authentic power and wisdom.

5. Body of Liberation (*Anandamaya Kosha*)

Spiritual Core Stability is about having a connection to your core purpose or *dharma* and truthfully maintaining a faithful allegiance to your unique life path. When you live with a sense of connectedness and intimacy with the world and others, ultimately there is no center and no periphery, no you or me, only an indivisible oneness. Working with the psoas can help you to have a felt sense of connectedness within yourself that can overflow into

your relationships in the outer world. The physical stability that results from balancing the psoas can even result in feelings of greater connectedness.

One of the most tangible and immediate ways to begin the process of centering yourself is through and in the body. Because each kosha is inextricably linked to all the others, centering the physical body is one of the simplest and most immediate ways of balancing the other koshas. The psoas can function as a “touchstone” for accessing and balancing all the koshas.

Ultimately, it does not matter which door you choose to walk through while in the process of developing a better sense of center, but we encourage you to return again and again to your body as a reference point. Then, as you explore the many experiential inquiries and exercises in this book, take a little time to notice whether the structural work you have done has evoked any change in how you feel energetically, emotionally, mentally, and even spiritually. We call this observational process “body weather reading,” and we encourage you to use this practice not only during and after you complete an exercise in this book, but also frequently throughout your busy day. Learning to recognize when you’ve moved away from center is the first step in finding your way back.

BODY WEATHER READING: THE IMPORTANCE OF BASELINE PERCEPTION

If you’ve ever gone for a walk in a large botanical park, you will be familiar with the maps posted at the entranceways with red arrows declaring “you are here.” Because unless you know the point from which you are starting, it’s impossible to navigate to where you want to go. Similarly, by doing a little body weather reading at the beginning of each practice session and noting how you are feeling, you then will be able to appreciate any changes that occur as a result of your practice. This process can be especially important when you are trying

to ascertain which practices are most helpful in ameliorating discomfort and healing injuries.


Before you begin a practice session, take a little time (walking, standing, sitting, or lying down) to check in with your self. Using the koshas can be a handy framework for structuring your observations:

- How do you feel in your physical structure? Note any areas of tension or discomfort.
- What kind of energy level do you have today? Is your breath rhythmic?
- Are you aware of any particular feelings or emotions that are visiting today? If so, can you identify the nature of these visitors?
- Were your spirits high or low this morning? Reflect back to when you woke up.

After you practice an inquiry or exercise, take a few minutes to reflect again: has there been any physical change? If so, can you define it? If you began your session feeling depleted and fatigued, have your energy levels improved? If you began the session feeling anxious and unsettled, do you now feel more grounded? When you come up to standing at the end of each session and begin to move about your day, has your practice made a qualitative difference to the way you are operating in the world? It is through this careful observation and inquiry that you can come to know how to center yourself and to sustain that centeredness even as you step out into the world.

How to Use This Book

To understand the rationale of many of the exercises and inquiries in this book it will be helpful to read the next chapter on the anatomy of the psoas. If, however, you feel intimidated by the subject of anatomy, there's no harm in skipping this chapter and moving directly to the practices in the chapters that follow. Or, if you want to glean the most important anatomical points, you can read the **Key Concepts** summarized at the end of each section. Just looking at the pictures or reading the key concepts can offer valuable insights. Once you've experienced some of the benefits of the practices, you may become curious about why the exercises are so effective and feel encouraged to take a peek at the anatomy.

If you have an existing Yoga practice, Pilates routine, or other fitness regimen, consider adding one or two exercises to your routine. Take some time to trial those exercises, which will make it easier to discern whether a specific exercise is of benefit to you. Once you become familiar with those practices, explore a new one. Feel free to pick and choose those practices that feel relevant to your goals, but note that our protocol has a logical progression and the exercises have been sequenced accordingly. Eventually, you will develop a repertoire of practices that you can use to meet your personal needs—whether to release a tight back, open your body after sitting at your desk, or strengthen your core to prepare for a challenging athletic event. 



CHAPTER 2 

The Anatomy of the Psoas

Not part of this document



Foundation Practices

INTEGRATING BREATH AND CORE ENGAGEMENT

IN MANY OF the inquiries and exercises in this book, you will find it beneficial to integrate your movement with your breath. In Chapter Two, you learned how the diaphragm and psoas share a mutual point of origin and how relaxation or tension can be transferred from one to the other. Learning to use your breath to relax and release is also the beginning of learning to use your breath to condense and engage your core muscles. Unfortunately for many people, the common command to “hold in the belly” crudely translates to “hold the breath.” For other people, holding in the belly can be a completely unconscious ongoing activity. Certainly, if you try to engage your core through an isolated action of your outer abdominal wall, or through a static and unyielding abdominal contraction, you’ll find it very difficult to breathe freely. In this chapter, you’ll learn how to integrate breathing and movement so that you can consciously direct your breath depending on whether you want to relax and release, or whether you need to actively engage your core muscles for stabilization (while still breathing fully to support your activity). To achieve this, you’ll need to distinguish between the two main kinds of breathing: Abdominal Breathing and Diaphragmatic Breathing. Once you have these skills under your belt, we will introduce you to Constructive Rest Position as well as variations that you can practice for specific structural issues. To prepare you for deeper work in the chapters to come, we will guide you step by step in locating, finding, and feeling the pathway of the psoas muscles.

ABDOMINAL BREATHING

The thoracic diaphragm (just above your waist) is designed to be the primary mover of the breath. This double-domed structure not only moves up and down but also can radically expand the rib cage to the sides of the

body. As the diaphragm descends on an inhalation, it displaces the abdominal organs, causing a sequential wave through the abdomen that should go all the way down to the pelvic floor, resulting in a gentle downward swelling around the perineum (the area between the genitals and the anus). The abdominal wall will respond by *releasing outward* as the belly expands. During exhalation, the diaphragm ascends, and the abdominal organs naturally migrate upward. The upward ascent of the thoracic diaphragm draws the pelvic diaphragm upward, with the abdominal muscles *gently retracting toward the center* as the belly condenses. This natural mode of breathing is called Abdominal Breathing (also known as Belly Breathing) and is incredibly effective for releasing muscular tension and bringing awareness to the pelvic area. Use this type of breathing for the inquiries and exercises that help you soften, hydrate, release, and lengthen the psoas and spinal muscles. It also can help to release anxiety and emotional holding. But Abdominal Breathing is not the kind of breathing that supports your body in dynamic activity such as when you lift weight. Nor will Abdominal Breathing stabilize your body during sports such as skiing or horseback riding or enable you to move effortlessly from the ground to standing. Read on.

DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

In Diaphragmatic Breathing, the expansion of the breath is directed consciously to the lower border of the rib cage. On an inhalation, the diaphragm descends and the rib cage broadens. Some health practitioners refer to Diaphragmatic Breathing as Horizontal Breathing, which aptly describes the directional orientation of this breath. During Abdominal Breathing, the abdominal wall relaxes completely, whereas in Diaphragmatic Breathing, the abdominal wall becomes actively engaged.¹ Looking down your torso, you will see the abdomen expand but to a much lesser degree

than in Abdominal Breathing. Your deliberate engagement of the abdominal wall acts like a corset, preventing the abdominal organs from spilling forward. The abdominal organs have to go somewhere: as they meet the resistance of a firm abdominal wall, the organs are displaced *to the sides* and *to the back* of the body. While Abdominal Breathing is like putting a sleeping bag in a large stretchy pillowcase, Diaphragmatic Breathing is like compacting that same sleeping bag into a small canvas duffel. This containment of the abdominal wall increases the pressure inside the abdomen (known as intra-abdominal pressure). The resulting increased compaction through the core of the body is one of the mechanisms that stabilizes the spine. This is why the diaphragm is considered to be a key player in the activation of the core muscles.

As a result of this slight resistance of the abdominal wall, the diaphragm has to work a little harder to descend during this type of breathing, which strengthens the diaphragm. Strengthening the diaphragm can improve breathing function allowing you to take deep, full, and complete inhalations and exhalations, which in turn maximizes oxygen uptake and carbon dioxide removal. Diaphragmatic Breathing turns the diaphragm into a star contributor to core stability.

While Abdominal Breathing creates a mental state that is relaxed and even a little sleepy, Diaphragmatic Breathing creates a clear, attentive, and ready-for-action state of mind. You will practice this kind of breathing when performing many of the strengthening inquiries and exercises in this book, and when you need a bit more oomph to support your activity or movement practice.

BREATH RESTRICTION

If your psoas muscles are tight, this may lead to a diminished movement of your thoracic diaphragm. This can lead to breathing that is either predominantly a movement of your lower abdo-

men or predominantly a movement of the secondary respiratory muscles high in the neck and chest. Some health practitioners refer to high chest breathing as Vertical Breathing, which aptly describes the “up and out” directional orientation of this way of breathing. When you place your hands around your lower ribs you will feel little or no movement of your ribs. That means the thoracic diaphragm is no longer working as efficiently as it could.


Shallow, low Abdominal Breathing tends to pair with a collapsed body posture and an overall depressed and lethargic demeanor. Upper chest or Vertical Breathing tends to pair with a hypertonic military posture, with excessive tension in the upper back, neck, throat, and jaw; and often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, tension, and hypervigilance. The following inquiries will help you find a middle ground.

INQUIRY: Activating Diaphragmatic Breathing

In the following exercise, we are going to play a little trick on our body to “install” the precise movement of Diaphragmatic Breathing.² To begin, sit with crossed legs with the pelvis supported on a blanket or cushion (or sit on the edge of a chair with the feet wide apart) so your spine is erect. Begin by observing your breath just as it is. Bring your hands around your lower rib cage and notice whether it expands to the sides as you inhale or whether the rib cage has little or no movement. Now take a normal inhalation through your nose, then on your exhalation gently purse your lips and make a *WHO* sound (like the sound you hear when listening to a seashell). Imagine a candle flame just in front of you and that you are making your outgoing breath so gentle and smooth that it does not disturb the flame. Continue for ten breathes, breathing in through the nose and out through pursed lips. After ten breathes, let your breathing return to normal. Notice whether the quality of your breathing has changed. Has your exhalation become longer? Are your inhalations feeling fuller? Can you feel the thoracic diaphragm beginning to broaden the entire circumference of the rib cage?

Now complete another ten sets of the *WHO* breath. During this round as you exhale, notice

that the action of making the *WHO* sound is subtly activating the abdominal muscles. This gentle activation of the abdominal muscles tends to increase the length of the exhalation. Taking a *full exhalation* tends to provoke a *full inhalation*. Notice that after switching on your abdominal muscles during the exhalation, they remained switched on during your inhalation as well. This subtle activation of the abdominal muscles during inhalation is a hallmark of the type of breathing that supports core stability. Abracadabra . . . you are now taking a Diaphragmatic Breath.

Make a habit of taking ten *WHO* breaths three times a day as a way to retrain yourself to breathe diaphragmatically and to generalize this breathing during all of your everyday activities. Practicing before each meal is a good way to install this precise movement. You can become even more focused in this practice by counting your breaths with the aid of your fingers: close your fingers into your palms and after each exhalation open one finger, starting with the little finger on your right hand and finishing with the little finger of your left hand. You’ll be surprised how calm and steady your mind feels when you regularly complete this practice. 

Powerful Breath (*Ujjayi Pranayama*)

The pranayama technique of the Powerful Breath (*Ujjayi Pranayama*) often is engaged during active asana practice. This breath work will subtly switch on the abdominal muscles and support Diaphragmatic Breathing. Ujjayi involves a slight closure of the vocal cords, or glottis, at the base of the throat. When practiced sensitively, your breathing will sound like the echo of the ocean inside a seashell—a deep but soft “ssss” on the inhalation and an “hmm” on the exhalation. This type of breathing never should be forced so that you sound like Darth Vader: practicing in this exaggerated manner will only cause excessive tension.³

PRACTICES

Constructive Rest Position

Many of the inquiries and exercises in this book begin in Constructive Rest Position (CRP). As you will see, CRP can be an exceptional stand-alone practice for releasing the psoas and spine. You

can use it for 5–15 minutes (or more) with amazing results. At first you may feel that “nothing is happening.” We tell our students that when you put a cake in the oven you don’t pull your cake out of the oven after 3 minutes and declare that something is wrong with the recipe because the batter is still wet. Just as it takes time for a cake to bake, it can take time for the body to unwind and release. When you come out of many of these positions, you may be surprised to discover just how much the body has changed during your seemingly uneventful stay. If you tend to be fidgety and impatient, set a timer and put on some quiet soothing music. Cover your eyes and ensure that you feel warm. A wheat bag warmed in the microwave for a few minutes and then laid over the abdomen, can work wonders to facilitate relaxation. Take a little time to become familiar with the particular variations of CRP that work best for your body. This is not only a *go-to* practice; it is a *go-back-to* practice if you are feeling discomfort of any kind. Enjoy.

❖ *Body Stories: Embodying Emotions*

While practicing a psoas release that involved her partner touching her upper thigh, Loralie felt her back muscles tighten with painful sensations radiating up her spine. She relayed this to the assistant teacher, who suggested she immediately return to Constructive Rest Position. Within a few minutes, the painful sensations abated accompanied by a spontaneous welling of emotion and a realization

that the safe, yet intimate, touch of her partner had triggered memories of past sexual abuse. Surprisingly, as she rested in CRP, both the physical and emotional discomfort vanished within minutes. When Loralie decided she was ready to again try the assisted psoas release, she was delighted to feel a deep release along the entire length of her spine. ❖

Benefits

- Puts the body in an optimal position to release the psoas and spine.
- Alleviates compression in the lumbar spine and can release pressure in the sacroiliac joint.
- Calms the body, mind, and emotions while also promoting a sense of relaxed alertness.

Contraindications

- May be problematic for those with compromised disk integrity in the lower back.
- May be uncomfortable for those with inflammation in the sacroiliac joints or the lower back—try Variation A using the Muscle Release Ball (MR Ball).⁴
- If you have spondylolysis or spondylolisthesis, first try Variation D.

You'll Need

- A yoga mat covered with a wool or cotton blanket.
- A towel, washcloth, yoga belt, MR Ball, and a bolster depending on the variation you practice.

Why: CRP not only is the go-to position for releasing the psoas but also is an excellent foundation practice for rebalancing and lengthening the entire spinal column. It is one of the most pow-

erful practices that we use for anyone with spinal discomfort. The careful placement of the legs establishes the skeleton as the primary support so that the deep core muscles can relax and release. The hip bones “plug into” the hip socket, and with the assistance of gravity, allow the whole length of the psoas to release the spine. The subtle relaxed alertness required to maintain the position of CRP represents a balance between relaxation and positive tension. This balances the three pillars of the nervous system—sympathetic (action and alertness), parasympathetic (rest and restore), and enteric (the brain in the belly).

How: To lie in CRP, place your feet far enough away from your buttocks that the upper and lower leg bones “rest against each other like cards” (Figure 1). In this position the rectus femoris (quadriceps) and the rectus abdominis (outer abdominal muscles) will be optimally relaxed. These two muscles are most likely to duplicate the action of the psoas. If your feet are too close to the buttocks, you will find that your upper thighs are unnecessarily tense and that the weight of your body primarily will be on the ball of your foot. If your feet are too far away from your buttocks, the abdominal muscles will be too engaged and the weight of the body primarily will be in the heel of the foot.

FIGURE 1



When the weight is balanced equally between the ball and heel of the foot, and you have some air space behind the knee, you are approaching the zone of an optimal CRP. Also check that the feet are hip-width apart; if the feet are too wide apart, the knees will fall inward; if the feet are too narrow, the knees will fall outward. Briefly, look down your torso and check that the thighs are in a parallel position and that the weight on your feet is balanced between the inside and the outside of the foot. Last, if you feel discomfort in your neck and it appears that your chin is higher than your forehead, place a folded towel under your neck and head until the forehead is *slightly* higher than the chin. Use as much towel support as is necessary to feel comfortable but do not use so much support that it causes the head to be raised significantly higher than the neck. Now relax for 5–15 minutes. When you are ready to come out of CRP, roll over to your right side and curl up to sitting.

Variations of Constructive Rest Position

Variation A—Psoas Awareness

with Muscle Release Ball: Resting in CRP, place a folded blanket or a half-deflated MR Ball under the pelvis so that the sacrum is fully supported. Place a folded yoga belt or thin washcloth at the

12th thoracic vertebra (T12), situated at the base of the rib cage just above your waistline (Figure 2). Ensure that the belt or washcloth is not too thick or it will be uncomfortable. Recall the origin of the psoas at T12 and the insertion at the lesser trochanters of the femurs. Imagine the 40-centimeter (16-inch) length of the psoas as a hammock that is suspended at one end by the lesser trochanters of the femurs while the base of the thoracic spine (T12) rests on the floor. Rest the hands on the upper abdomen. On each exhalation, imagine the hammock sagging a little closer to the ground. Visualize the diagonal pathway of the psoas from the front to the back of the body. Stay for 5–15 minutes. Carefully remove the MR Ball and washcloth and extend your legs along the floor. Notice whether you feel more space in the lower back and spine as a result of practicing this variation.

Variation B—Hyperlordosis

(Increased Lumbar Curvature): For some people with tight psoas muscles combined with an increased lumbar curve (hyperlordosis), it can feel more comfortable to raise the pelvis on a folded blanket (Figure 3). Alternatively, you can place a bolster against a wall and rest the balls of your feet on the bolster with the heels on the floor and the feet flexed at a 45-degree angle (Figure 4).

FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4



The supported flexion of the feet helps to shift the femur deeper into the hip socket, making it easier to release the psoas back toward the spine. You are not trying to flatten your lumbar curve or to press the back flat to the ground. Your aim is only to reduce the curvature (if it is accentuated) and restore the lumbar spine to a neutral position.

Variation C—Pelvic, Sacroiliac, and Lower Back Instability: Some individuals find that attempting to keep the thighs parallel creates profound tension. Tight psoas muscles and weak adductors (the muscles that assist inward rotation of the thighs) both can contrib-

ute to this tendency for the knees to splay apart. Using a cross-belt can secure the legs into a parallel position while at the same time stabilizing the pelvis and sacroiliac joints. The use of the cross-belt also can equalize the force between the left and right side of the pelvis.

To secure the cross-belt: Start with a 2½-meter (8-foot) yoga belt made of wide cotton webbing and a fastener at one end. Hold the fastener in your right hand in front of your right hip (Figure 5A). Now take the belt around the back of your upper thighs (just beneath the buttocks) (Figure 5B). Bring the belt across the left hip, crossing the



navel to the top of the right side of the pelvis (Figure 5C). Now take the belt around the back of the pelvis along the top rim of the pelvis, or slightly beneath the rim of the pelvis (Figure 5D). Do not put the belt across the back of the lumbar spine or waist. Finally, wrap the belt back to the front

of the right hip and secure the tongue of the belt into the clasp. Pull until the belt feels snug (Figure 5E). As you lie in CRP, move the belt a little lower down on the thighs and tighten the belt until you feel that your legs are held in a parallel position (Figure 5F). Any outward pressure of the thighs

against the belt only causes the cross-belt to draw the two sides of the pelvis more firmly together. Some people also find securing the belt around the shin and thighs works well to keep the thighs parallel and to give a sense of grounding through the legs and feet (Figure 6). You can use the cross-belt or shin-thigh belting technique during core stabilization exercises, in Bridge Pose (*Setu Bandhasana*; see page 125), or at any time when you want extra support for the pelvis, sacroiliac joints, or lower back. The cross-belt can also be effective during the practice of restorative postures such as Supported Bridge Pose (*Salamba Setu Bandhasana*) and for the practice of The Great Rejuvenator (*Viparita Karani*), in which the pelvis rests on a bolster with the legs up the wall, or the lower legs are supported on a chair (page 129).

Variation D—Spondylolysis

or Spondylolisthesis: This position may be helpful for students with spondylolysis (degeneration of the vertebral structure) and spondylolisthesis (a forward slippage of the lower lumbar vertebrae). Some people with these conditions feel more comfortable when they raise their lumbar spine and trunk higher than their buttocks on a stack of blankets (Figure 7). This position elevates the upper lumbar and lower thoracic vertebrae and reduces shearing stress on the displaced lower lumbar vertebrae and disks. Raising the lumbar spine and trunk may seem counterintuitive, but we have had amazing success creating comfort in students with these conditions who previously have been unable to lie comfortably on the floor.

FIGURE 7



INQUIRIES: Finding Your Psoas

It is helpful to locate the psoas through touch. Developing a *felt sense* of the pathway of the psoas can help you to get a clear kinesthetic awareness of how to soften, lengthen, or engage this muscle and thus increase the benefits of many of the practices that follow. If you can feel it, you can heal it! Tracing the attachments and pathway of the psoas muscle can highlight your awareness of this deep

abdominal muscle, but invasive palpation of the psoas is counterproductive and serves no useful purpose. Furthermore, manual deep palpation of the psoas can bruise muscle fibers and even damage arteries and internal organs. For these reasons, we suggest you decline any offers to have anyone massage your psoas unless trained and experienced in subtle release techniques.

If you've ever had a body worker massage a tight muscle too deeply, too quickly, or too specifically (poking with fingers or elbows), you'll know from experience that it results in defensive flinching and guarding. This is especially true of the psoas muscle because it is one of the first muscles in the body to contract during a fight-or-flight response. For this reason, approach tracing the pathway of your psoas with gentleness, sensitivity, and respect. You are *not* trying to put your fingers directly on the psoas muscle. It is buried under layers of tissue and organs. You simply are highlighting the presence of the psoas muscles in your mental landscape and then feeling the inferred movement when it is activated.

Give yourself at least 10–15 minutes for each side to create an unhurried and relaxed atmosphere while you learn to trace the pathway of these deep muscles. Always use the soft pads of the fingers to touch, never the fingertips, which can be too invasive. The psoas can be located easily when it is activated either with the breath or during the movement of hip flexion, or using both simultaneously.

Lie in CRP. If at any time during this exploration, you become agitated or you feel discomfort, stop immediately and return to the practice of Abdominal Breathing. It can be helpful to have an empty stomach, bladder, and bowel for this exploration. ❧

❧ *Locating the Attachments*

We'll start by simply identifying the location of the psoas attachments. It is important to do this inquiry one side at a time to increase the specificity of the experience in the brain. Begin with the right psoas muscle. To access the upper spinal attachments, place your left hand at the solar plexus, with the finger pads at your midline where the ribs join. Then move the fingers down and slightly to the right so they rest on the upper abdomen just below the ribs and approximately 4 centimeters (1-1/2 inches) from the midline. Under your hand, visualize the spinal attachments of the psoas on the transverse processes, bodies, and disks of the upper lumbar vertebrae. Imagine these upper fibers of the psoas filling with breath on your inhalations, and then softening and falling back into gravity to nestle along either side of the spine on your exhalations. Continue for several breaths.

The lower femoral attachments of the psoas are so deeply buried under layers of muscle that you can get only a rough idea of their location. In this inquiry, we will identify the landmarks that can

help you to locate the psoas insertion. Place the finger pads of the right hand just below the groin crease so that the fingers touch the inner thigh area. Move the knee slightly to the side and gently feel the large tendon that pops up at the inner thigh. With a soft touch, explore the topography of this tendon by feeling its shape and density. This is *not* the psoas! It is only a landmark—the tendon of one of the large adductor muscles. Now realign your legs and move your fingers 8–10 centimeters (3–4 inches) laterally to palpate the large tendon situated in the middle of upper thigh just below the groin crease. Feel this tendon contract as you lift the right foot off the floor slightly. This also is *not* the psoas! Again, it is another landmark—the tendon of the rectus femoris of the quadriceps group. Remember that this is one of the more superficial muscles that can duplicate the action of the psoas. Slide your finger pads off the rectus femoris tendon into the valley between these two tendons and approximately 3–4 centimeters (1½ inches) below the groin crease. You are now touching the surface directly above the shared

FIGURE 8



deep attachment for both the psoas major and the iliacus on the lesser trochanter of the femur (Figure 8). For our purposes, it is enough to be able to touch and visualize the approximate location of this attachment. Spend several breaths directing your breath into this area, imagining the psoas

muscle filling with breath on your inhalations and softening on your exhalations.

Repeat the same practice on the left side. Then rest for a few moments and notice whether your perception of the location of the psoas muscles has been clarified. ❧

❧ *Breathing Into the Psoas Muscles*

Once again, let's start with the right psoas muscle. Gently place the palms of both hands on the right side of the abdomen so they rest on the pathway of the psoas. Visualize the weight of the 40-centimeter (16-inch) length of the right psoas slung like a heavy hammock between the upper and lower attachments. Using an Abdominal Breath, on an inhalation, imagine that the psoas is filling and expanding with breath like a balloon as it inflates. On your exhalation, imagine the psoas deflating, softening, and sinking a little deeper toward the earth and nestling alongside the spine. Extend the exhalation so it is longer than the inhalation. Continue this practice for several breaths until you can sense that the psoas muscle is calm and receptive.

Some people find it helpful to silently talk to the psoas in a reassuring way using phrases like "It's okay," "I'm here," or "You are safe now." It may be helpful to add the tactile cue of your hand gently stroking the length of the psoas in a soothing way. As you exhale, lightly stroke down the length of the psoas several times either with the fingers or with the full palm. Experiment to discover which type of touch feels calming and reassuring. Continue this practice for several breaths.

Repeat the same practice on the left side; then rest silently for several moments and notice whether you have a stronger felt sense of both the location and presence of your psoas muscles. ❧

🌱 *Accessing the Psoas with Diaphragmatic Breathing*

Because the psoas and the diaphragm co-contract, the presence of the psoas is easily felt while practicing a Diaphragmatic Breath. When inhalation is deliberately initiated from the thoracic diaphragm, the emphasis of the movement is on the lateral broadening of the rib cage. You may want to place your hands on your lower ribs as you inhale and gently expand sideways into the firm pressure of your hands. Or you might imagine you have an elastic band wrapped around your lower rib cage, and with each inhalation, you expand into the circumference of the band. If tactile cues are helpful to you, wrap a yoga belt loosely around your lower rib cage. As you inhale, expand the breath to make contact with the belt.

Lie in CRP. Now recall the location of the right psoas muscle and its diagonal pathway from the solar plexus to the groin. Place your left hand on

the upper attachment of the right psoas (as you did in the previous exercise).

Take a diaphragmatic inhalation, consciously expanding the ribs sideways and minimizing the movement of the breath in the abdomen and chest. The abdomen, which is soft, will expand with the breath, while the psoas, which is hard, will rise up from below to meet the finger pads. If you are unsure whether you are on the line of the psoas muscle, walk the fingers slightly medially or laterally to differentiate the softness of the abdomen and the hardness and vertical orientation of the psoas. You can gently move the finger pads from side to side to feel the underlying ropey texture of the psoas. Make sure that your touch is superficial. Take two more diaphragmatic breaths and feel the psoas contract and rise up on the inhalation then recede on the exhalation. 🌱

🌱 *Tracing the Psoas with Hip Flexion*


For this inquiry, step your feet closer to your buttocks in CRP. If you are unsure whether you are feeling the contraction of the psoas muscle, while inhaling diaphragmatically (or suspending the breath after inhalation) lift the right foot off the floor approximately 5 centimeters (2 inches). The psoas will further contract and become more palpable as the hip bone flexes. Lower the foot back to the floor as you exhale. Repeat a few times until you think you may be feeling the psoas contract under your fingers. Remember to use a light touch.

Walk the finger pads approximately 3 centimeters (1 inch) down the length of the psoas muscle. Gently palpate the contraction of the underlying psoas muscle at that level for two or three diaphragmatic breaths. If necessary, confirm your

location by lifting the foot off the floor to contract the psoas even more. If you experience any discomfort, lighten your touch. You want the psoas muscle to rise up to your fingers rather than pressing the fingers into the abdomen. Repeat this process of superficial palpation at several different levels along the course of the psoas. Walk your fingers down the stiff length of the muscle little by little taking three or four diaphragmatic breaths at each step. Continue until you reach the groin crease.

If you are unsure whether you are actually feeling the psoas, do not press more deeply into the abdomen. Rather, be more specific and precise with the diaphragmatic breath or with the location of your finger pads. If you suspect that you are feeling the psoas contract, you probably are. 🌱

 **Body Stories: Learning To Be Gentle**

Leah, a workshop participant, reported that accessing her psoas dramatically changed her life: “All my life I’ve been very hard on myself. When I feel my psoas muscles now, I feel a warmth and softening deep inside that reminds me to treat myself more gently.” 

Restoration

Even gently tracing the psoas can agitate a chronically contracted psoas muscle, so it is important to soothe it by returning to the breathing and stroking practices just noted. Spend at least 5 minutes calming your psoas muscles. If it is comfortable, turn over onto your belly and rest your forehead on crossed forearms. Stay in this position doing Abdominal Breathing for several breaths. Notice any feelings or sensations in the area of the psoas muscles. Alternatively, you may find it soothing to lie with your lower legs supported by a bolster.

NO PAIN IS YOUR GAIN

With these basic foundation practices under your belt, you are now ready to explore the other inquiries and exercises in this book. Each time

you enter a practice, notice whether it is best supported through Abdominal Breathing or Diaphragmatic Breathing. Feel whether particular movements are best practiced on an inhalation or exhalation. Also consider that the particular CRP that best suited you yesterday may not be the ideal fit today depending on what you are feeling in your body. Forget the cultural credo of “no pain, no gain.” Pain is the body’s way of saying, “Try another pathway.” It is the clearest message the body can give you to alter your position and instead explore how “no pain can be your gain.” Having an impeccably high standard for comfort will lead you toward the best alignment of your unique structure and move you ever closer to your true center.



CHAPTER 4

If you have not already registered for the book's pre-launch offer, which includes the 20-minute companion video where Donna takes you through three practices featured in the book, [click here](#):

www.embodiedwisdom.pub/pcbsample



*An Extraordinary New Approach for Realigning Your Structure
with Simple, Pain-Free, and Effective Yoga Therapy Techniques*

YOGA TEACHERS DONNA FARHI AND LEILA STUART have joined forces to produce a definitive guide to centering the body, sharing their gentle, yet incredibly effective, approach to balancing body structure for optimal pain-free movement. This book demystifies the catch phrase “core fitness” and teaches you how to center your pelvis and find optimal spinal alignment as the foundation for true core strength and stability.

Using easy-to-understand anatomical terms combined with exquisite illustrations, the authors unravel the complexities of the deepest core muscles, the psoas, to reveal its function as an extraordinary unifying structure for the entire body. In a step-by-step protocol, you’ll learn how to release, balance, and engage your core muscles, and you’ll learn how to safely improve your flexibility in Yoga practices without compromising pelvic and spinal stability. As deeply held tension is resolved, this work will help you to feel more grounded, mentally focused, and emotionally calm.

Pathways to a Centered Body is an invaluable practical guide for Yoga and Pilates students and teachers, personal trainers, dancers, and athletes as well as physical therapists, chiropractors, and somatic practitioners, indeed, anyone who wants to live in their body with greater ease. With more than 108 color photographs, concise instructions, and rich experiential anatomy inquiries, this manual will be a requisite text for movement training programs worldwide.



DONNA FARHI is a Yoga teacher who has been practicing for forty years and teaching since 1982. She is one of the most sought-after guest teachers in the world, leading teacher training programs and intensives internationally. Considered the “teacher of teachers,” Donna has written four contemporary classics: *The Breathing Book* (1996); *Yoga Mind, Body and Spirit* (2000); *Bringing Yoga to Life* (2005); and *Teaching Yoga* (2006). American born, she now resides in New Zealand. Visit www.donnafarhi.co.nz



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