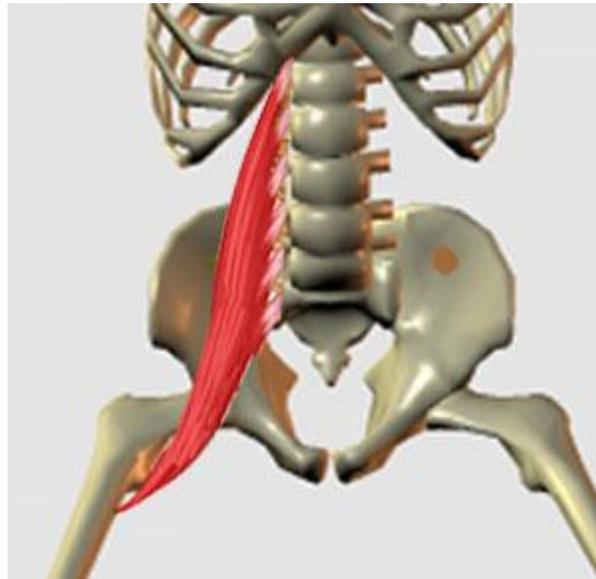


# The Psoas: Release or resolve?

By Carmen Littlejohn



*“Only when the psoas is free to move, can the energy of the body flow smoothly, the emotions balance, and our thoughts be integrated.” - Liz Koch*

Every stimulus that enters the body creates a physical reaction. Sometimes this stimulus is perceived as threatening, causing a stress response. I believe that most postural and health problems come from this stress response. Why do some of us have bodies that are pain free and others have bodies bound in patterns of rotation, dysfunction, and chronic pain? The answers may lie in the works of people such as Liz Koch, David Berceci, Peter Levine, and Moshe Feldenkrais. These scholars have studied the physiological results of stress, anxiety and trauma on the body. I believe Thai massage can play an important role in helping the body move through these physiological reactions. The psoas, an often misunderstood muscle, may play an important role in helping us to do this. Attempting to understand it better may give us clues to help heal the body more completely. I will be looking at the responses within the body and in particular at the response of the psoas muscle. In this paper, I will discuss whether we influence this healing through releasing the psoas or use the psoas as an influence to help resolve the problem.

Peter Levin is a pioneer in studying the influence of trauma on the human body. His work looks at animals in the wild asking why, when they are obviously threatened routinely, are they rarely traumatized? In his book, Walking the Tiger, he states that all animals possess a reptilian brain. The reptilian brain is our instinctual way of responding to danger that is inherent in all animals. Humans also have a reptilian brain. It is with our reptilian brain we respond in ways such as fighting, fleeing, or freezing. Animals in the wild when threatened will either fight back, flee for safety or as a last resort, freeze and play dead. Humans also have a natural instinctual response to

danger. The hypothalamus, pituitary and adrenal glands all release chemicals that send adrenaline pumping through the body. The parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, also known as the autonomic nervous system, are activated. The sympathetic system creates the fight, flight, or freeze response. The parasympathetic system returns the body back to homeostasis. When the fight or flight response is triggered, the body experiences symptoms such as rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, tremors, anxiety, panic, and a bracing of our muscles. The brain triggers body movements and muscle contractions. Normally the sympathetic nervous system is deactivated after the danger has passed. But often in humans, we get stuck in this response and the effects of the trauma become long term. This energy and the hormones remain in the body causing layers of problems. Levin theorizes that our emotional and physical symptoms of these traumas are not triggered by the actual trauma, but because the “frozen residue of energy has not been resolved and discharged. This residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits.” In the wild when animals experience a stressful situation, they shake all over releasing the hormones and muscles and creating a “re-setting” of the nervous system. Humans often do not play out this natural response. Our bodies should naturally shake off this energy once out of danger, just like animals. “After an incident of trauma is over, our nervous system should naturally deactivate itself by shaking out any residual tension-causing chemicals remaining from the traumatic episode. This shaking sends a signal to the brain informing it that the danger has subsided and it should turn off its alert status. If the nervous system doesn’t deactivate itself, the body continues to remain in a kind of short-circuited loop, with our brain continuing to believe it’s still in danger and therefore commanding the body to maintain a state of readiness. Consequently, our muscles hold on to the excess charge. If they don’t get an opportunity to release this charge, they create a chronic tension pattern within the body,” states Bercelli. Traumas that do not get processed close to the time of its occurrence cause a variety of secondary problems such as, emotional issues, digestion issues, depression, cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic pain syndromes, and anxiety disorders.

Bercelli believes that the emotional pain we carry within us, “isn’t just in our head. It’s also etched into our muscles.” The brain will unhesitatingly trigger body movements to increase our chances of survival when we are at risk of bodily harm. The response of muscles exposed to stressful events, whether physical or psychologically, is to contract. In response to danger, our bodies will often instinctually jerk into the fetal position. Two primary flexor muscles that contract to produce this action are the psoas and iliacus, or iliopsoas muscles. We often cannot just roll into a fetal position, but must walk through our days. This causes a secondary response of the erector spinae muscles to pull us back in order to keep us upright. Together this opposing motion creates spinal compression. This reaction can be damaging long term and cause other issues such as shoulder and neck pain. Bercelli states that since the reaction to trauma alters the tone of our skeletal muscles and their ability to function, this can develop into patterns of chronic tension that will eventually create additional body dysfunction.

Social conditioning such as getting bullied as a child, rejection, shame, or fear of failure causes the body to react in the same manner as if it were threatened physically. The body takes up a position of submission and withdrawal, slumping forward with head down. Moshe Feldenkrais “believes this is the cause of all postural expression. “All incorrect (posture) can be traced back to premature or too violent demands made on the person. The contractions that are maintained in all action, as a personal manner of doing, always express an emotional attitude. The attitude most frequently found is that of insecurity or the masquerade of ignoring it. Physiologically stiffening the body, lowering the head, sinking the chest, contracting and flattening the abdomen are all protective acts. The reaction to falling or threats of safety to the body, are all produced by flexor contraction and extensor inhibition. They either offer a hard, bony obstacle to the threat or they withdraw the vulnerable soft organs as far as possible. Bad (posture) is due to emotional attitudes formed in one’s personal experience of the world, all depending on the kind of security the environment has brought the individual to consider as essential for their safety. There are always two conflicting contractions. The unconscious contraction caused by their own fears, and the contraction of their compensatory, or masquerading posture used to hide the fear. They may appear almost normal but this takes constant vigilance and self reminding and the strain of voluntary action. The results are exclusion of movement in the parts under conscious focusing, rigidity and muscular tenseness, halting of breath, and all the rest of it. In the long run the pattern becomes habitual, semiautomatic, and familiar to the point of being considered one’s own nature, but only at the expense of strain and nervous exhaustion.” The body that people live with is often hard to live in. Getting a massage may be their only way of dealing with these chronic patterns that they don’t know any other way to heal.

Understanding the psoas is necessary to unraveling how the emotions can cause physical symptoms in the body. “Serving as a bridge, the psoas connects the physical to the emotional and the spiritual to the ordinary,” says Liz Koch. Liz Koch is the author of the Psoas Book. She has spent over 20 years studying the psoas and its affect on the body/mind /emotions. She also says as practitioners, “we have a responsibility to understand the complexity of the psoas and honor its instinctive response patterns.” The psoas is a large muscle of approximately 16 inches long. It attaches at the twelfth thoracic vertebrae down to the fifth lumbar vertebrae. It then passes through the pelvis attaching to the lesser trochanter of the femur. The psoas is the only muscle in the body to connect the lumbar spine to the legs. Through relationships with the psoas minor and iliacus, the psoas has direct influence on the pelvis and all of its contents. The psoas also attaches to the diaphragm. Together they form a muscular chain that is the junction for the largest network of sympathetic nerves in the body-the solar plexus. These nerve bundles contain more sympathetic nerves than any other part of the body. These sympathetic nerves are what engage the fight or flight response.

The functions of the psoas are many. It works primarily as a hip flexor. It supports the free swing of the leg in walking and is important in weight transfer from the trunk into the legs and feet. More importantly, it acts as a guide wire stabilizing the spine. It creates a shelf supporting the viscera and organs. Koch says that whether or not the organs can rest comfortably and function normally is determined by the length and tone of the psoas muscle. The psoas acts as a hydraulic pump. Its movement pushes fluid in and out of cells. When the psoas can move freely, it encourages a continuous flow of blood through the major arteries into the legs and feet. It also moves synovial fluid through the spine towards the brain and directly affects sexual function.

The psoas is often triggered by emotional events. These triggers can impair function of the psoas. When proprioceptive receptors responsible for organizing posture are disrupted, the iliopsoas muscle is required to function as a stabilizer rather than a mover. The psoas is now used in the role as a stabilizer, which is actually the role of the bones. This can cause many problems such as rotation in the spine, pelvis and legs, curves in the spine, tilting and twisting of the pelvis, medial and lateral rotation of the femur, and leg length discrepancy. It also creates flexing of the pelvis, which limits movement in the hip socket, therefore creating deviant walking patterns. This will mean compensation by other muscles and torque put on joints resulting in muscle strain, exhaustion and overall tension. Other symptoms may be, ribcage being thrust forward causing thoracic breathing problems, trunk shortening which will affect posture, food absorption and elimination issues, adrenals and kidneys stress, menstrual cramps, sciatic pain, scoliosis, and kyphosis.

I believe that the psoas, as a highly reactive fight or flight muscle is the primary muscle responsible for most of our physical and postural issues. Through working with the psoas during a Thai massage, can we initiate change posturally and emotionally for our clients? And if so, how is it best to work with the psoas, since it is already in a state of high arousal and panic? Koch says that balancing energy can balance emotional states. She believes that establishing safety is the first step to releasing trauma. Once instinctually safe, the body naturally begins to shake and discharge stored energy. With deeper levels of safety the body spontaneously releases deeper levels of holding. Often due to trauma a person may have disassociated from their feelings. The opioid state is a state that numbs the person when injured so they can continue to function. Many people who have been through traumatic situations have entered the opioid state and never release out. For them it's not enough to say "you are safe" or "trust me", they must feel it in every fiber of their being. This may take time; sometimes many sessions may be needed to create this trust. Levin says that "part of the dynamic of trauma is that it cuts us off from our internal experience as a way of protecting (us) from sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming. It may take (the client) a while to trust enough to allow a little internal experience to come through." Levin calls this Internal experience "felt sense". Eugene Genglin coined the term felt sense and describes it as "not a mental experience but a physical one, a body awareness

of a situation or event.” Levin says that if we direct our attention to these internal body sensations, rather than attacking the trauma head on, we can unbind and free the energies that have been held in check. When in contact with our felt senses we feel more natural, grounded and at home in our bodies. From this we experience well-being, peace, and connectedness. I believe if we can connect our clients to their internal “felt sense” environment during Thai massage, we can help facilitate healing. Berceli says it’s important to respect the psoas’s instinctual behavior pattern. He warns against palpating the muscle. He says palpating the psoas can re-voke the trauma defense mechanisms because the psoas is still activated. Koch says that although physical integrity hinges upon a released psoas, the ability to do this rests with the client not the practitioner. She states that rather than resolution, invasive techniques at best bring only release.

“Distinguishing the difference between release and resolution is crucial for understanding the iliopsoas muscle.” Berceli believes the key to successful recovery is to activate the body to return to a state of rest. Excessive energy created in the body during a traumatic event is always looking to be released. Since Thai massage works to move energy, I believe we can help create the space for this to happen. “Resolution is found through re-establishing safety on a very deep neuro-chemical-biological level.” Koch says there are many non-invasive ways to work the iliopsoas that supports resolution such as, rocking, gentle jiggling, falling and catching motions, and sensitive massage strokes. Also, we need to pay attention to cues from within. When individuals have holding patterns and can then let them go, this is a sign of reestablishing equilibrium. Thai masseurs often experience and encourage this letting go. Levin says simple awareness to subtle sensation and rhythm is what is important. Biological rhythms are fundamentally important in the transformation of traumas. He says that it may be difficult to have the patience to allow them to come into consciousness at their own pace. Although this pace is much slower than the pace at which most of us live our lives, we have to give our biological rhythms the time they need to reach completion. Proceeding slowly and becoming attuned to these rhythms is part of honoring this process. When the traumatized state of an individual is corrected, physical symptoms tend to lessen or disappear. We have access to a natural process genetically encoded within the body that enables us to heal from trauma. Levin says awareness means experiencing what is present without trying to change or interpret it. We should just be aware and allow the client to be in their felt sense. This awareness should allow the body to find its own natural rhythm of healing. In a Thai massage session even if we go into the psoas, we must bring these ideas with us. But most importantly, we must create safety at the deepest level.

Thai massage works with the energy system, so I believe that if the problem with the fear response is trapped energy we can directly affect this. By being aware and present, we can help create a space for the client to go into their internal environment which is where healing takes place. Working with the psoas is a very sacred place. We must approach it with respect and honor. We must never go directly into it unless first an incredible amount of trust has been established. We must also be aware that just releasing the psoas is not going to resolve the deeper problems. It is only a symptom to a much deeper issue. The healing lies within the client and

their ability to connect with their emotions and sensations. The Thai masseur's ability to connect with their body becomes a bridge to helping them find this place inside of themselves. We need to be aware that this has to happen at their own pace, the pace of their own biological rhythms. Even if we can release a psoas or make a change posturally, they may not be emotionally ready to hold that change. These patterns and conditioned responses are so ingrained in them and their reptilian brain that little triggers may send them right back to how they were. Therefore, deep healing can only happen when the person is truly ready to be healed. I believe that to work normally, a psoas needs to be released. I also believe that if we try to do this before a person is ready we will not be really helping them. We need to follow their energy and work with it to help bring about an organic and natural release. Only in this way can we create profound change on the deepest level.

## References

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However, because the psoas is a key determinate of both the position of the pelvis and spine, releasing and lengthening these muscles can go a long way towards helping to resolve back problems (regardless of their origin). As you become more skillful, you can adapt the practice of CRP with the use of blankets, belts, and blocks to tailor fit the practice for specific spinal conditions.Â 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