



On the Mat

by Christa Rypins

Releasing the central channel, part 1: Psoas, iliacus, and pelvic floor



KYTA
Conference
Presenter

This is the first of a two-part series working with the psoas to create space in what I call the central channel. Our tools are 1) breath, 2) fingers, 3) sensing, and 4) curiosity. We will use these tools to explore the deepest part of the front body, just in front of the spine. This is what is known as an eccentric exercise—eccentric refers to the increase in tension that occurs in a muscle as it lengthens, or “slides apart.”

Visualize muscle fibers gliding smoothly together and apart, like fingers sliding into each other and away, or warm, golden oil being poured into a slippery-smooth hip joint.

Psoas Release

The primary job of the psoas is to stabilize the spine while lifting and lowering the legs. To begin, lie on your back with mini-balls, a pillow, or a block under your pelvis, just above your sit bones. The prop will assist the low back in relaxing toward the floor. Bring the knees into the chest. Make sure the prop lifts your hips up high enough for your legs to be able to relax into your belly. Having to hold the legs interferes with the exercise.

Breathe. Let the lower legs sink into the upper legs, upper legs sink into the belly, belly and ribs sink into the spine, spine sink toward the floor.

Relax your tongue and jaw. In this position, the psoas can relax and drape toward the floor, like a hammock. The point of this exercise is to see how much the psoas can release, or slide apart, as the leg moves away from the spine. To do this, we must work with the muscle *where it is, or, within its comfort zone*, which is very different from using the muscle to perform a movement.

Now bring your right hand into your belly on the right side of your navel. Press firmly with your fingertips, as the psoas is behind everything else attached to the front of the spine. Take a breath in and, as you exhale, soften everything, moving your right knee away from you as if you were bringing the foot toward the floor, until you feel the psoas “pop up” underneath your fingers. When it “pops up,” or “fires,” this is the current end-range of your psoas flexibility. Bring the knee back to the chest, and begin again. Take a breath in, and then exhale, soften everything, move the knee away and look for the psoas fibers deep within. When you feel the “pop up,” bring the knee back to the chest. Do this exercise eight times. As you practice, the range may expand. After finishing the first side, breathe and experience the benefits, engaging a positive feedback loop. Possible benefits include deeper and easier breath, softer neck, and more-relaxed low back. Complete this exercise on the left side.



When you first practice this exercise, it is normal to have trouble discerning the firing of the psoas. We are not familiar with this type of self-examination, and it can take a while to get a sense of the muscle. Continue to explore and practice, and you will find it.



Sometimes the muscle is so tight it fires instantly. If you are unable to locate the “pop up,” press the fingers in different locations along the psoas muscle, from above the navel to below, while the knee is pulled into the chest, so you can feel the softness before looking for the “pop.”

Imagery may be helpful in softening, relaxing and improving psoas function. Try picturing a marionette string running from your ear to the inner back thigh—where the psoas attaches—as you lower and lift the leg. Or visualize muscle fibers gliding smoothly together and apart, like fingers sliding into each other and away, or warm, golden oil being poured into a slippery-smooth hip joint.

Releasing the Iliacus

While the psoas stabilizes the spine when the leg lifts, the primary job of the iliacus is to lift the leg. To work with the iliacus, come into the same start position as for the psoas. Start with a few rounds of breathing, allowing every part of your body to relax into the

➔ *continued on page 11*

On the Mat

continued from page 10

floor. Move the right knee two to four inches to the right side. With your right hand (some find it easier to feel the iliacus with the opposite hand), touch the bone in front of your pelvis, the ASIS, often referred to as the “hip bone.” Go down and in diagonally an inch or two, and press your fingers in toward the floor and out toward the side of the pelvic bone. The iliacus attaches along the inside of the ilium, the pelvic bone—once again, the deepest layer of muscle. The movement-breath flow is the same: exhale, soften, and move the knee away looking for the muscle to “pop up.” Because the iliacus can be harder to find, you may need to experiment with the angle of the knee and the placement of the fingers. Do the movement eight times. Experience the benefits before going to the second side.

Again, the iliacus can be so tight that it fires instantly. If this is the case, relax in this supported supine Child’s Pose. Breathe. Picture the spine softening toward the floor, all the abdominal muscles relaxing and sliding apart.

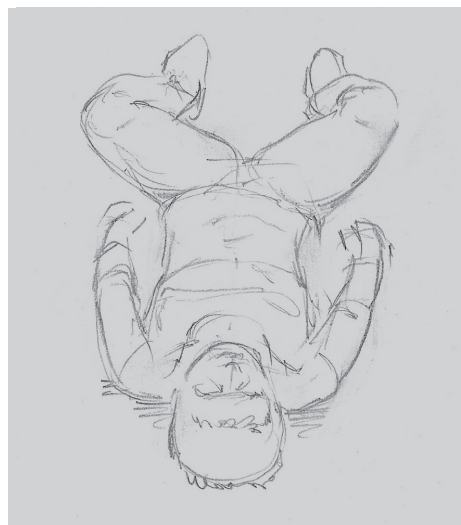
You have now released the psoas and the iliacus. Take the mini-balls or other prop away, bring the hips to the floor and feel the difference.

Releasing the Pelvic Floor

The bottom of the spine opens into the pelvic floor, and the top of the spine opens into the neck. Therefore, we can release tension in the neck by releasing tension in the pelvic floor. Try this next series for the pelvic floor and see what changes you feel in your low back and neck.

Lying on your back with the hips propped up and the knees pulled into your chest (same start position as the above exercises), reach down and touch both your sit bones with your fingers. Let that go, and touch your tailbone with one hand and your pubic bone with the other. Let that go, breathe deeply, and feel the movement that happens between those four bones as you inhale deeply and exhale fully. If you have a tight low back or habitually hold your belly in when you breathe, this can take some practice to feel. Don’t worry. Whether you feel it right away or not, you will receive the benefits of the exercise.

Ideally, you will feel the bones move apart on inhalation and come closer together on exhalation. This is caused by the organs moving down and forward with the inhalation, and back toward the spine and up toward the heart on the exhalation. The pelvic floor (the muscles between the four bony landmarks at the base of the pelvis) is like a trampoline, stretching out and pulling in. The bones move apart to make room for the pelvic floor to expand, and come closer together to help the muscles pull in and support the organs on their way back up in the body. Waking up to the sense of the breath in the pelvic floor creates *a lot* of space in the low back! If you have trouble feeling the breath all the way into the pelvic floor, practice breathing and picturing the movement of the bones to help awaken the pattern.



Start the exercise with an inhale, moving the lower legs a few inches toward the outer edges of your body. (Be sure to move the knees and feet in unison. People often open the knees and leave the feet together, affecting the front of the pelvic floor rather than the back, which needs the most release.) On the exhale, bring the lower legs together. Inhale and open both the knees and feet. Exhale and close the knees and feet together. Inhale and open the pelvic bones and legs. Exhale, letting the pelvic bones move closer together and the legs to come together. Inhale, allowing the pelvic floor muscles to slide apart. Exhale, picture the muscles between the sit bones sliding together to initiate the movement. Do this eight times.

Important: This is a release exercise. Don’t engage the deep muscles within the pelvic floor as if you are doing a Kegel exercise.

Remove the prop, bring your back to the floor and feel the difference in how your back rests on the floor, the release in your neck, and the ease of your breath.

In Part Two, we’ll perform small movements linked with the breath to create more space, function, and strength for the central channel. To prepare, practice this series often—you’ll be amazed at the change in the resting length of your psoas and iliacus, as well as the miracles that await you from feeling the breath in the pelvic floor! ■

Christa Rypins is a former professional ice skater who lived and performed with long-term chronic pain. She has a studio in Murphys, California, where she teaches the tools and techniques she used to become pain-free, strong, and limitless in her body once again. Christa will offer the workshop *Pelvic Power! How the Pelvis Works in Yoga and Life* at KYTA Conference 2011, October 4–7; she will also teach *Yoga for a Better Back for Yoga Teachers*, October 2–4 at Kripalu. ➔ www.intelligentbody.net