



ON THE MAT

by Christa Rypins

Connecting to the core

Engage your abdominals. Use your abs to support your back. Focus on your core. Those are phrases we've often heard in yoga class, or used ourselves when we teach. But what do they really mean? And how do we know if we—or our students—are following those directions correctly?

The “core,” or the transverse abdominus, is the most internal layer of abdominal muscle, often referred to simply as the transverse. This is the same muscle we access in practicing *uddhiyana bandha*, or diaphragm lock. The transverse can be engaged only when we pull in the abdominals, which is easiest to do on the exhalation.

To get a feel for the location of your transverse abdominus, stand in neutral pelvis with your spine elongated. (Imagine you have a tail hanging down.) Touch the front of your hip bones, technically the upper front bones of the pelvis, called the ASIS (Anterior Superior Iliac Spine). Bring your fingers a few inches to the inside of the bones, onto your lower abdomen. Cough, and you'll feel the muscle fibers fire into your fingertips. This is the lower transverse. Pull your abdominal wall in and up as you exhale and you'll feel those same muscles against your fingertips.

The transverse is a tube, so when you access the front, you might feel the muscles around the lower back activate. If we divide the transverse into quadrants, the pelvic floor and just above the pubic bone is quadrant one. Now move your fingers to just below the navel, and as you exhale, pull your abs in and up. Picture the transverse widening like a smile. This is quadrant two.

Move your hands to your waist and, as you exhale, squeeze the muscles of your waist as if you're tightening a belt from the inside. This is quadrant three. Next move your hands up to the sides of the ribs. As you inhale, feel the ribs expand into your hands; on the exhale, squeeze the muscles under your ribs, accessing the upper part of the transverse, quadrant four. Now let your arms hang by your sides, exhale, and pull your abdominal wall in and up. You'll feel all four quadrants of the transverse engage. Once you're familiar with this exercise, try leading your students through it.

Tight muscles contract first, and one of the hidden, habitually tight muscles that impedes our ability to access the transverse is the *psoas* (pronounced so-az). The psoas attaches to the T-12 vertebra behind the ribs at the front of the spine and extends down to the top of the thigh bone (the lesser trochanter). The leg hangs from the psoas. The psoas contracts to lift the leg and is shortened when sitting. Since we live in a culture of sitting, we essentially have an epidemic of tight psoas muscles.

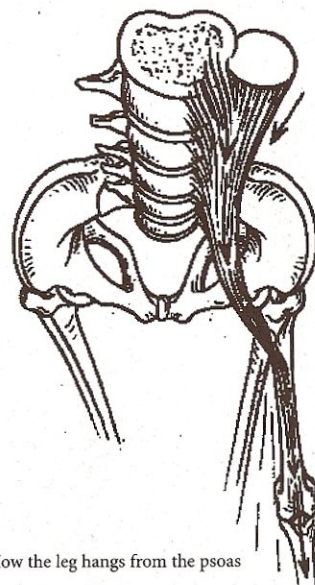
One easy way to release the psoas is to stand on one leg on a block or step and let the other leg hang. Imagine the hanging leg as the downward extension of the psoas muscle. Swing the leg gently back and forth, initiating the swing from the psoas. After practicing with one leg, stand on both feet and feel the difference in the two sides before proceeding to the other side. As you walk or run, picture the psoas swinging your leg forward. (This exercise is adapted from Eric Franklin's *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery*.)

Now repeat the exercise to access the transverse abdominus and see if you find it's now easier to feel the transverse. I begin all my yoga classes with a psoas release exercise to assist students in more easily accessing their core.

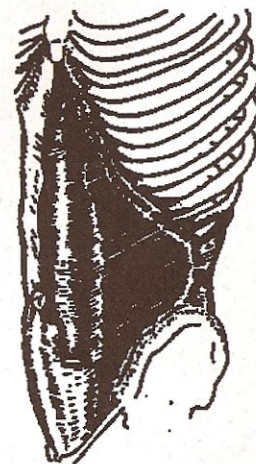
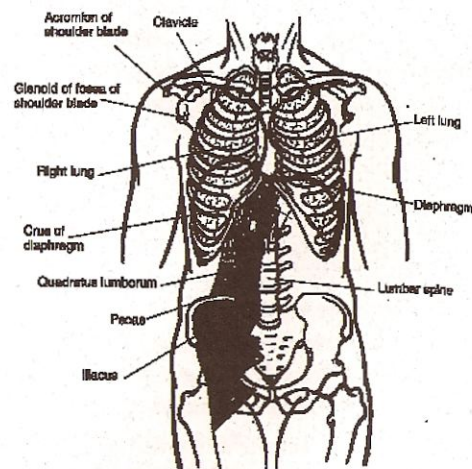
In yoga and in life, practice squeezing the air out each time you exhale by scooping the abs in and up to feel that “tube of support.” Noticing when you don't feel it can be as helpful as noticing when you do.

In my next article on core strengthening, we'll explore connecting the shoulders to the core, making us stronger with less effort. ■

Christa Rypins is a Kripalu Yoga teacher who incorporates Pilates and anatomical imagery into her classes. Her upcoming programs at Kripalu include Yoga for a Better Back, August 4-6; Effortless Movement from the Core of your Powerhouse, August 6-11; and Pilates and Somatics for Yoga Teachers, October 15-19, just before the KYTA Conference.



How the leg hangs from the psoas



TRANSVERSE ABDOMINUS MUSCLE

Illustrations from Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery by Eric Franklin.