From the outside in: skin & fascia

The skin is the largest organ in the body – it covers the whole of us with a web of sensitivity and receptivity. It is rich in blood and nerve supply and is linked directly to our conscious and subconscious selves. It is involved every time we interact anything which is external to our physical bodies. It links the outside to the inside of us.

Beneath the skin are three layers of connective tissue called fascia. This is a silvery, fibrous membrane, fine in some areas, such as the between the pleura and the chest wall, and thicker and more dense in others, particularly where it covers the joints; in the lumbodorsal triangle[i]; along the outer thigh where it forms the tensor fasciae latae (TFL); and on the soles of the feet (plantar fascia). The layers are:

- **Superficial or subcutaneous fascia** – a continuous layer of connective tissue surrounding the entire body which lies between the skin and the deep fascia.
- **Subserous or visceral fascia –** lining the body cavities.
- **Deep fascia** – the most extensive of the three kinds of fascia, comprising an intricate series of connective sheets and bands that: envelop and separate muscles; form sheaths for nerves and vessels; form or strengthen ligaments around joints; envelop various organs and glands; and bind all structures together into a firm compact mass. The deep fascia comprise a continuous system, splitting and fusing in an elaborate network attached to the skeleton and divided into the outer and internal layers and the intermediate membranes.

Gradually scientists are discovering more about this web, and beginning to understand the key role it plays in supporting our bodies – something previously attributed solely to the musculo-skeletal system.

This web gives shape and form to our bodies – its main quality is its plasticity, meaning that it responds and adapts to our habitual movements over time, building up and thickening in some areas, and remaining fine and supple in others. Over time, the way the fibres build up will reflect the unique way we hold ourselves and our particular signature of movement patterns, making us instantly recognisable to our friends, relatives and acquaintances. Recently, it's been discovered that the fascia is also elastic, and is able to recoil and rebound. As body workers, this provides endless avenues for exploration and experimentation, giving hope to those of us who may have believed that our physical form was fixed and rigid, and therefore unchanging.

Just like the skin, the fascia connects the whole of our body. If you could climb into the body and walk along the pathways of fascia, you could move from the little toe to the ear canal without ever leaving its fibres. The deeper fascia runs through all our muscles, tendons and ligaments, connecting our insides with the external, creating another layer of connection, another pathway to integration between our deep inner selves, and the outer self we have constructed and present to the world.

Very often in yoga we work with the bones and deeper structures, adjusting and organising them, to move the outer body into various positions of stretch and relaxation. But what happens if we work from the outside in, rather than the other way round? If we work with the skin, we have direct access to the central nervous system. The same nerves that supply the skin also supply the muscles beneath it. And although there is still debate about whether the fascia has its own nerve supply, if we visualise stretching the fascia beneath the skin, we can access a still deeper sensation of stretch – a strong, endless sense of elongation, which seems unlimited.

We can work at several levels: with the elastic and uniquely sensitive skin; and with the plastic, but less immediately sensitive fascia. Visualise lines running over the body, and stretch along them in both directions – use your imagination, and be guided by the sensations you experience and the knowledge you have of your body. With some thought you can follow these lines deeply into and between your muscle sheaths, right down into the centre of yourself, and then rise up again to the surface. However

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you practice, whatever you imagine, if you sustain this work, and go deeply into it, the reward is the sensation of the tissues softening, releasing and changing texture.

Resources: *The Endless Web: Fascial Anatomy and Physical Reality – R. Louis Schultz*
Anatomy Trains: Myofascial Meridians for Manual and Movement Therapists – Thomas W. Myers
Fascial Release for Structural Balance – James Earls, Thomas Myers

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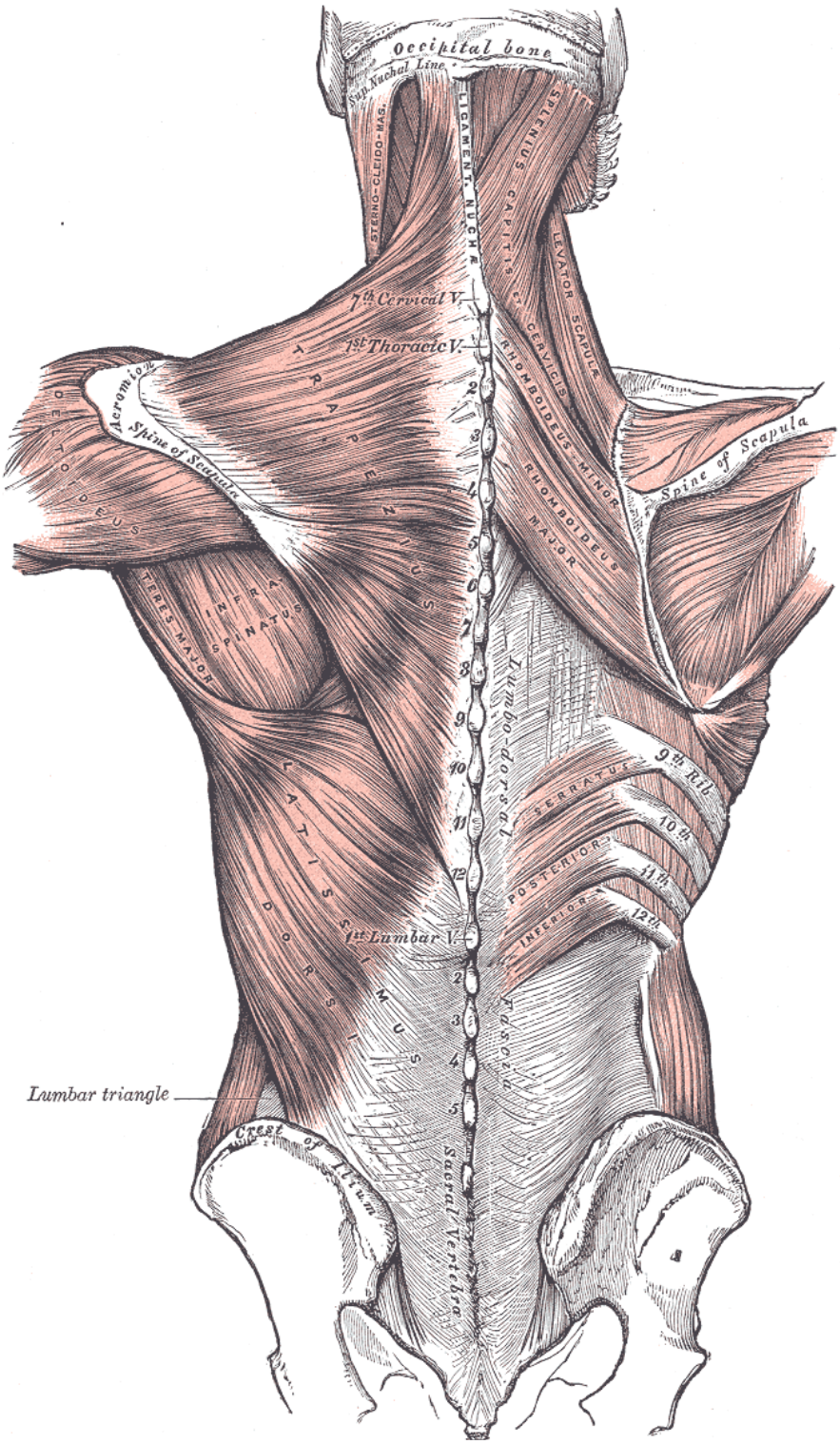
[i] **Lumbodorsal fascia**



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