

A testimony to the Tendon Guard Reflex

By Rick Barrett, RPP

When people are startled or surprised they get stupid and stiff.

As inelegant as this sounds, it describes an important quality. This was something I noticed throughout my martial arts training and I used it to my advantage, particularly when competing in taijiquan pushing hands. Present an opponent with something he hasn't trained for in a way which threatens his comfort zone and he tightens right up, oftentimes freezing with that "armadillo on the road" feeling.

I noticed that my polarity clients would often exhibit "holdings" that echoed that state. Clients would come to see me with a pelvis, buttocks, neck, shoulders, etc. that would be locked into a position that seemed to say "Stop!" or "Go away!"

When I saw Sher Smith's article on "Tendon Guard Triad", it all came into focus. Sher wrote, "When a person experiences a perceived or real threat (stress), the body's first response is a reflex action of the tendon guard reflex (TGR) or "Shock Reflex". When a person is continually under stress, this reflex becomes frozen in a position of held tension." The ancient, "reptile brain" response to a real or imagined threat was to activate the tendons of the ankle (preparing for "fight or flight"). This caused tissues all the way up the back of the body to tighten as well. If the stress was considered "constant", the individual might eventually forget how to let go at all.

The inability of many in modern society to differentiate between a real threat to survival and something which is a "damn nuisance" has led to a very large problem. The TGR now doesn't wait for a physical attack by a Kodiak bear, it goes into action if we're 10 minutes late for an appointment or there is too much traffic on the drive to work.

Something happens in the brain when the TGR gets activated, probably at the amygdala. Information stops there and a red alert is sent out to the lower levels of the nervous system to handle the emergency. The higher functions of the brain often are frozen into inactivity, only overridden by the will of the individual.

Most of the clever ideas that we might have about handling emergencies are inaccessible in this state.

Clinical Applications

The technique described by Sher in her article was a godsend. It quickly released areas that used to require much more attention. It gave a deep, earthy release that affected the whole body. Some examples:

Pain: A man, age 55, saw me after several years of fruitless attempts to handle the cramping and pain in his feet. He had seen numerous specialists, including a neurologist who told him that he was "just getting old". Chiropractors, massage therapists, acupuncturists, etc., had not been able to give him relief. His legs and hips were unbelievably rigid, but he was oblivious to that. I worked the TGR and the piriformis, then slowly started to move his legs in a supported way. By the end of the session all pain was gone. Each subsequent session would include some TGR work. He would announce at the start of each session that the pain was "still gone".

Headaches: TGR release is particularly good for many headaches, particularly tension headaches. TGR pulls back and down on the occiput, causing a ridge of pain at the base of the skull. Occiput is pulled against the atlas, creating a mighty traffic jam at the sub-occipital ridge and foramen magnum. You can release it with craniosacral, but it keeps coming back whenever the TGR kicks in. Several clients with chronic headaches for over a decade, requiring extensive medication and resistant to other forms of treatment, responded brilliantly to this type of release, coupled with other polarity treatments. It seems to help greatly to explain the mechanics of the problem to the client, removing the pain from the "demons and humours" category and giving them something to do about it. Headache sufferers who had been reconciled to a life of continual pain are amazed and delighted.

TMJ: It has also shown to be effective for many types of TMJ distress. Clients unable to find relief with other treatments often respond immediately to this. The

powerful neck muscles pulling down on the occiput rotate the eyes upward. Sher says, "For efficient functioning of the vestibular system (the system that keeps a person in balance as s/he moves upright in space), the eyes must remain parallel to the ground. When the neck muscles contract pulling the head back, a counter pressure of muscular tension, including muscles of the TMJ, responds to return the head to its proper position with eyes parallel to the ground." There is a push/pull of two competing intentions that is neutralized by removing the artificial emergency of the TGR. You pull the fuse and the sirens and flashing lights cease.

Sciatica: The sciatic nerve exits the sciatic notch of the sacrum in tandem with the piriformis muscles. Sometimes it is actually inside the piriformis. The TGR will trigger contraction of the piriformis, pulling the ilia tighter against the sacrum and freezing the sacroiliac joint. Fear makes us "tightassed". Those muscles get shorter and thicker over time and that irritates the sciatic nerve, sometimes causing a highly debilitating condition. TGR, piriformis, and psoas releases have been very effective in assisting those with sciatic conditions, as well as various lower back problems.

A Valuable Model

The principles and techniques described by Sher have proven to be very helpful in a wide variety of situations. In the post - September 11th New York City, many people are in a continual state of hypervigilance. I find a way to work some TGR release into most sessions. It gives access to areas of deeper holdings in a way that is quite agreeable. I have been using this technique for a few years now and find it to be one of the straighter arrows in the quiver.

The above examples by no means limit application. Anything that may have its roots in a stress response will be better understood in the light of this information.

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