

# Steven J Fox

## CENTERING AND THE ROLF PROCESS

In yoga, meditation, the martial arts, dance and psychic training we find a shared concern with a process known as "centering". It is implied that attaining one's "center" is the true goal of any quest for personal integration.

A center is a point about which activity collects or a point from which activity originates. Depending upon context and perspective, a center serves as either focus or source. A growth **center**, for example, may combine the talents of a Gestalt therapist, an acupuncturist, a midwife, a yoga instructor, and of hundreds of people participating in private and group activities. As new activities arise from their collective energies, the center becomes source as well as focus.

When we look at how most disciplines use the word in reference to individual development, it is more difficult to understand. There is more said about techniques for centering - which are often precisely defined - than about the "center" itself. If described at all, the center is described indirectly, through metaphors, as a creative void, an inner light, or the ground of being.

*The center is the link between man and Existence", according to Rajneesh. It is the root. You may not know it; knowledge is not essential for the center to be. But if you do not know it, you will lead a life that is rootless".(1)*

Techniques of centering are ways to cultivate this knowledge of what already is. Some proceed through perfection of the body, others through the mind - yet all are striving to bring balance and integration to the entire being and to evoke the capacity to see and feel deeply. In pottery, an act of centering transforms a mass of clay into art. In human transformation, balance and integration reveal psychological and spiritual as well as aesthetic wholeness.

Which centering technique we adopt depends upon our needs, abilities, and resources. The choice is less important than our willingness to make a commitment and to persevere, since all techniques share the aim of developing **concentration**, an ability to focus attention and energy. Unless we concentrate and then practice to enhance the power of concentration, we cannot progress very far on any path.

The other element common to centering techniques is **insight** or **awareness**, which arises from concentration and practice. Insight cannot be attached to any particular form; rather, it indicates an awareness of that which transcends all forms - awareness of the center or sources which in Buddhism might

be termed "selflessness" and in Jungian psychotherapy the "Self" as opposed to the ego. For most of us, insight comes slowly, subtly, almost imperceptibly.

### The Essence of Rolfing

Can Rolfing, (2), or Structural Integration, be regarded as a "centering" technique? Does it expand and integrate the mind, the emotions, and the spirit along with the body?

Some definitions might lead us to believe it is a manipulative method aiming at physical change alone:

*"Rolfing balances the entire body - front to back, right to left, outside to inside - through work on the muscles and connective tissue. It is designed as a sequence of ten private sessions, each about an hour long, during which a Rolfer releases chronic tension and reorders the physical structure. The result is a body better aligned to gravity's influence, more integrated in appearance and function, and capable of smooth, efficient movement". (3)*

From the above, it is hard to imagine that rolfing is similar to hatha yoga, Aikido, or meditation. There is no mention of increased consciousness, no hint of integration of various levels.

Yet the **experience** of rolfing is truly one that has a centering influence, both on the practitioner and the client. Despite differences in technique, practising rolfing is much like practising yoga and meditation, and the **manipulation** we sometimes speak of has more to do with sensitivity, influence, and guidance than with forceful pushing and pulling. The experience of being rolfed is similarly a kind of practice; requiring that we focus, release, explore our sensitivity.

Like other therapists and teachers, Rolfers must accept and support those they wish to influence. Before making contact, we must let go of private concerns, thoughts, and judgments in order to be "centered" and open-hearted. Only then can we give our full energy and attention to the process of educating other people about their bodies.

A similar process of centering takes place for rolfing clients. With the help of the Rolfer, they focus on their physical being - on how it looks, functions, feels. During the rolfing session, their attention is constantly drawn to physical places they have forgotten about or blocked off. They may focus on a tight spot in their buttocks, or on slight movements at the elbow joint; they may notice how muscles in the lower leg produce flexion and extension of their feet, or feel how knees and ankles connect. Being present and concentrating are essential for learning.

One of my clients remarked how different and even exciting swimming was after being rolfed. *"I could **feel** the movement of each stroke in my arms*

*and shoulders and back! Before, I just moved my arms mechanically, but now I can sense the motion almost at every instant".*

It doesn't require many words to teach people about their bodies. Provided there is the support and trust that permits such communication, touching is simpler and more direct. Rolwing teaches people about patterns of contraction, ways in which they have become smaller and tighter, less powerful and responsive than they might be. They learn how they can change by letting go of tensions, by sensing previously unconscious areas of the body, by breaking old movement patterns and discovering new ways of standing, sitting, and walking.

In psychotherapy, a patient becomes aware of patterns of thought and behaviour that hinder satisfactory self-expression, relationship and work in the present. In rolwing, too, we are called upon to uncover and dispel obstacles that have arisen in the past. When we find an area where there once was serious injury, we may have to physically work through thickened connective tissue to restore proper positioning and movement. Or we may come upon a sensitive, protected area where emotional expression is blocked. Occasionally, a client will recall or relive painful episodes from the past, whether physical or emotional in nature. At such moments especially, rolwing must be a cooperative endeavour. The hands of the Rolfer are engaged in a dialogue with the tissue of the client. Nothing can be accomplished without the willingness of the client to focus and to release and of the Rolfer to offer continuous sensitivity and support in addition to technical skill.

Human transformation requires trust and courage. We are always pressing against our own limitations and are being asked to take the next step, beyond the fears and rigidities we have imposed upon ourselves. In the body, these limitations may take many forms - tight jaws, hunched shoulders, narrow chests, to mention a few. People come to rolwing for different reasons. Some are professional athletes, dancers, actors, yoga teachers, people who are committed to perfection of the body; some are looking for help with chronic pain; most have an interest in personal growth and evolution. As each moves beyond his personal limitations, and experiences the increase of flexibility and energy it brings, courage and trust are strengthened.

### **Discovering Physical Reality**

Relieving and releasing chronic tension is not, however, enough to produce integration. When centering occurs in the body, we must also consider the environment and its effect upon us. As human beings, our environment is the earth.

"Grounding", "being grounded", the "ground" - these terms are pertinent to centering on the physical plane. Grounding refers to the flow of energy in the body, especially to pelvis and legs; to awareness of material reality; and to an appropriate relationship between an individual body and the earth.

How we deal with gravity is a determining factor as to whether or not we are grounded. After all, gravity **is**, quite literally, the influence of the earth upon us.

Let us first consider grounding as it pertains to awareness of physical reality and the flow of energy in the body. Gravity and body structure will be discussed in the next section.

People who are "ungrounded" are apt to have some bright ideas and good intentions. Unfortunately, when it comes to sorting out ideas that are possible from those that are not, and to translating those ideas into actuality, they are at a loss. Most of us are ungrounded to some degree: our energy travels upwards into the head rather than down into the pelvis and legs.

This was certainly my predicament when I first went to be rolfed. At that time, I didn't care much for my body - in both senses - and, though I had a good intellect, it wasn't of any use to me because I did not trust my capacity to sense or to feel or to intuit. There was no gut reality to guide me. Since my mind had a gift for doubting everything, I suffered from a bad case of indecision.

Getting in touch with my body was initially painful. I remember how uncomfortable it was when my feet and lower legs were worked on, during the second hour of rolfing. I wanted to jump off the table. As I continued with the process, my resistance to feeling my body slowly lessened. When I became attentive, I found that the sensations were often pleasurable. There were also moments of nervous laughter, squirming, groans, and intense sadness. As a result of rolfing, I was able to stand taller and to move with greater ease. My chest expanded, and I found I was able to breathe more deeply. In retrospect, I can also see how my self-image began to evolve, from that of an insecure, neurotic adolescent who refused to take anything seriously to that of a young man earnestly in search of answers. I was becoming more real and solid to myself.

The sequence of ten sessions may help to explain the gradual psychological transformation I underwent. For in rolfing, we start on the surface and slowly approach deeper structures. We start with what Ida Rolf (4) called the "extrinsic" or outer muscles - those employed in **doing** most activities - and progress to those she called "intrinsic", which lie deeper, are meant to initiate movement, and correspond more to our state of **being**. The intrinsic structures provide stability and balance at the core. As this level is vitalized and evoked, the Rolfing client generally acquires a greater sense of inner security and self-confidence.

In our work and daily lives, we Rolfers must remain conscious of grounding and of the goal of integrating mind and body. Otherwise, we will have nothing to offer our clients but scattered energy and intentions. To accomplish grounding, we need both to direct our attention and to use our bodies correctly.

While working, for example, we may want to focus energy from the lower spine down into our legs and pause to feel the contact of our feet with the floor. Keeping our knees unlocked or slightly bent, relying upon weight instead of muscular effort, are effective ways to accommodate gravity and to communicate proper use of the body.

While grounding is obviously a mundane concern, its bearing upon more exalted pursuits cannot be underestimated. How can we realize our emotional or spiritual potentials unless we first establish meaningful contact with the earth? Rolfing in itself does not produce enlightened beings. It puts people in touch with their **potential** for growth by providing them with grounding, balance, flexibility, and energy so that their bodies can serve as vehicles for continued development, whether pursued through yoga, meditation, or psychotherapy.

### **Structure and Gravity**

The major goal of Rolfing, as defined by Dr. Rolf, is to establish harmony or agreement between the force of gravity and the flow of energy in the individual. To achieve this end, the Rolfer is required to produce structural changes in the physical body. Release of tension - the process of "opening" - must lead to **integration** of a physical **structure** that is grounded.

For the purpose of understanding structure, picture the body as a series of segments or blocks stacked upon each other and separated at the joints. Imagine the center as a vertical axis running through the body, from the feet to the top of the head. In an ideal body, this vertical axis will run through the centers of gravity of each body segment - lower legs, thighs, pelvis, thorax, shoulders, neck, and head - so that no extraneous muscular effort will be required for standing. (5)

When we observe actual bodies, we can see how far they deviate from the ideal. In almost all, some segments are displaced from a vertical axis, being too far forward or back, too high or low, or rotated. Such displacements relate to patterns of tension seen throughout the body. How did these bodies become distorted? The history may be complex: physical accidents, emotional upsets, habits of use are all implicated. We need not unravel all the causes and influences from the past. The critical fact is that such displacements and tensions are perceptible to the trained eye, that they bear witness to a struggle between structure and gravity.

When Dr. Rolf saw a man whose weight fell on one foot more than the other, who had one hip higher or in front of the other, she realized he was experiencing discomfort, a lack of balance and support from the earth. Because gravity cannot flow through his body - because at critical junctures this energy is constricted or thrown off-center - he must rely excessively upon certain muscles to maintain an upright posture. This continuous effort results in chronic tension, which might be felt as a stiff neck, low back pain, or tight shoulders. When the physical structure is imbalanced, there is also restricted

movement, of muscles, blood, lymph, even nervous impulses. And movement is the law of life.

Over many years of study and practice, Dr. Rolf perfected her techniques for improving structure and flexibility. The results were surprising, even to her. She found that as structure was altered, not only did function improve but that a transformation occurred that went beyond mere physical change.

### **One Man's Experience**

A man in his sixties came to me complaining of backaches, muscles cramps in his legs, and an overall sense of stiffness and low energy. He could not put on his pants, he said, without leaning against a chair or a table or the wall. Looking at him, it was possible to see why. His entire left side - from his foot to his shoulder - was pulled back, and his left hip appeared higher than his right. He stood primarily on his right leg, with his torso tilted from his left hip to his right shoulder. While a teenager, he had had a serious motorcycle accident in which his right leg nearly had to be amputated. Evidence of the accident was visible not only in malformation of his right leg and foot, but in his entire body pattern.

After three sessions, his legs were better balanced under his torso. The weight fell more evenly on both feet. He informed me that he was now able to put on and take off his pants without leaning against something. As we continued working together, he expressed delight at how much more alive and energetic he felt. He sensed the greater capacity for movement in his pelvis; it became possible for him to stand and to sit in ways that reduced tension in his back and neck.

Unlike many people who come to Rolfers, this man was not oriented towards expanding his consciousness. He came seeking relief from painful symptoms - and for no other reason. But as his ability to focus and to release expanded - and as his body became softer and more flexible - he started to take more interest in his health, in physical activity, and to be curious about other forms of mind/body development.

### **Conclusion**

Rolfing helps to organize the physical body around a vertical axis, which brings the individual into harmony with gravity. Simultaneously, it enhances the capacity to fully experience physical sensations, movements, and release of tensions. Integration always implies both awareness and actual use: the two are inseparable. Our ultimate goal is to develop awareness of the body center or core, so that in standing, sitting, walking, running, dancing - in whatever we do - we carry this awareness with us, and retain the quiet self-possession and grace that arise from knowing this center.

The emotional and spiritual changes that accompany physical transformation vary from individual to individual. For most people, however, rolfing is an

opportunity to discover their own beauty and personal power and to acquire a sense of being uplifted rather than dragged down by contact with the earth. Sensitivity and intuition are expanded, since it is by experiencing ourselves that we learn to experience others.

The process does not stop after the tenth session. Rolfing is progressive in its effects, and rolfing clients usually find that their bodies continue to evolve for many months. This is a period of assimilation as well as continued growth. With the experience and the learning tools acquired through the Rolf process, the individual has the opportunity to seek on his own, with further guidance and advice from a Rolfer available only if he should feel the need or desire. Now the body takes over as guide and teacher, and the body is perhaps the most powerful teacher of joy, compassion, insight, and humility.

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For additional information on rolfing, publications about rolfing, and a list of Certified rolfers in the United States and Europe, write to:

**ROLF INSTITUTE**, P.O. box 1868, Boulder, Colorado 80306, U.S.A.

### **SOME BOOKS ON ROLFING**

**Ida Rolf Talks about Rolfing and Physical Reality.** Edited by Rosemary Feitis. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Don Johnson, **The Protean Body.** New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D. **Rolfing: The Integration of Human Structures.** New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

(1) Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, **The Book of the Secrets-I** (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 211.

(2) The words **Rolfing** and **Rolfer** are service marks of the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration. Rolfers are trained and certified by the Rolf Institute and become members of the Institute upon certification.

(3) From an advertisement.

(4) Dr. Ida P. Rolf (1896-1979) was an organic chemist with the Rockefeller Institute who developed the technique of Structural Integration over many years before establishing a systemic training program and a professional organization.

(5) Anatomically, there is no **actual** vertical axis; the body's center cannot be identified as the spine or any intrinsic structure. Yet the concept of an axis is valid because it helps us to comprehend function.

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