

ROLFING ALIGNS WITH TAI CHI AND YOGA

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How would it feel to live in a body which is lengthened, opened and balanced; better organized and aligned in gravity? For nearly thirty years, the rigorous discipline of Rolfing Structural Integration has been making this state a reality for people, and evolving continuously, becoming ever more elegant and refined in its understandings of structure, alignment and bodily life.

While there is abundant research out there, mostly the world knows about Rolfing from the reports of regular people who attest to its results; an overall experience of increased energy and gracefulness, acute or chronic pains that are released. People typically report feeling both lighter and more grounded, more capable and confident; even that they think more clearly. Some people come to Rolfing for psychological growth, since one's inner world is expressed and held in her or his bodily shape.

Rolfing Structural Integration accomplishes these things through the skilled manipulation of the soft tissues of the body, especially the fascia. Fascia is the connective tissue, it enwraps every muscle, bone and organ of the body and it gives us our shape. As Rolfers, we use our hands to lengthen, differentiate and mobilize these tissues; the body literally changes shape. We are trained to do this in such a way that the body is encouraged to regain its natural freedom and alignment in gravity. It is a little like Chiropractic but for the soft tissues rather than the bones.

Something which has always held a special fascination for me about this work is the remarkable way in which it interfaces with two much older disciplines, yoga and Tai Chi. If you practice either of these ancient systems, or are thinking about beginning, Rolfing has a great deal to offer you.

ROLFING AND TAI CHI

Proper alignment in gravity is vitally important to the Tai Chi student. Without such alignment, relaxation is impossible, power and truly rooting into the earth is tenuous at best. The breath is hampered as well. And, as Ida Rolf said, "Rolfers make a life study of relating bodies and their fields to the earth and its gravity field, and we so organize the body that the gravity field can reinforce the body's energy field. This is our primary concept."

Stiff fascia, shortened muscles and tendons and tight ligaments all pull us into postures of strain, which are "at war with gravity," to quote Ida Rolf again. They create, for example, torsions in ankles, knees and/or hips. These make the low postures of the Tai Chi form difficult at best; painful or impossible at worst. Legs that are pulled up into the pelvis too tightly greatly hamper the Tai Chi student, for so much of the form and push hands depend on open, flexible hip joints. How else can the knee stay over the ankle? As the Rolfing process begins to help your legs "drop out" (differentiate) from your pelvis, you may be amazed at how much more free and mobile your legs and hips feel. As the work progresses, the spine, sacrum and cranium become able to undulate and move, as they did when you were a child, no longer locked into the shoulder girdle and pelvis so rigidly.

Rolfing also "opens up" the feet, giving them a living, resilient quality which people typically describe as "grounding." It frees the head from restricting neck muscles which often pull it forward, allowing it to rest lightly on the neck, a key ideal of Tai Chi.

As the myofascial restrictions throughout the torso are eased, the breath becomes full and easy. Rolfing frees fascial sheets that are glued together throughout the body, so that only the muscles needed for a motion "come along," rather than dragging surrounding structures with it. Such length, order and feelings of moving more from our core of beingness are happy things for anyone, but often even more appreciated by Tai Chi students.

ROLFING AND HATHA YOGA

When I was first Rolfed, my experience of yoga changed greatly. Postures not only got easier, but I felt that I was receiving much more benefit from them. My energy was able to be more involved with what a particular posture was supposed to be about, rather than struggling with a dozen other structural restrictions which were unrelated to the pose ("You mean this isn't a hamstring stretch? Oh...".) Prior to Rolfing, my yoga felt more like I was doing the poses in a tight net. It was a "net" made of my own stiff connective tissue. Rolfing stretched and freed up that net. It was like a boost, a head-start toward that more enjoyable level where the yoga postures could really begin imparting their intended benefits.

Rolfing and yoga share as goals the deepening of your somatic awareness, proper alignment, balance, differentiation (of myofascial structures and of the segments of the body,) the lengthening of tissues which have shortened and the decompression of joints.

One of the advantages of Rolfing is that the Rolfer's fingers can work much more specifically and precisely than a yoga asana typically can. At the same time, it is also more comprehensive. Often in your yoga postures the very tightest tissues and/or joints involved are "gluttons"--they receive most of the benefit, while many other tissues which also need it are not being engaged much at all. Rolfing systematically addresses every muscle, joint and fascial sheet in your body's patterns, not only those which are most hampering.

Another example of how Rolfing helps the yoga student is in the area of differentiation. Many people, for instance, have an adductor compartment which is fascially "glued together" with either the quadricep or the hamstring compartments; no matter how much you try to stretch one, the other comes along. A Rolfer will slowly sink in, using fingers or knuckles perhaps, and bring differentiation to these fascial "envelopes."

Rolfing's benefits for the yoga student are far more numerous than these two examples--it is truly a match made in heaven--but we are limited by the size of this article. For a complete look at how Rolfing empowers yoga (and vice versa,) there's a wonderful and very readable book called Bodies, Health and Consciousness: A Guide to Living Successfully In Your Body Through Rolfing and Yoga, by Rosie Spiegel. I highly recommend it.

There are obviously a great many benefits of yoga and Tai Chi which Rolfing does not deliver. Rolfing does not strengthen muscles. It does not work to directly cultivate Chi or Prana--although softening areas of tissue that are chronically hardened is an important prerequisite for the free circulation of energy through the body. Rolfing does not have the rich philosophical framework of its two older cousins. Most obviously, it is

not a "practice" we cultivate over years and years, reaping the countless benefits which only such depth can provide.

But it is a unique "foot up" into the essence of these two ancient systems, allowing much fuller benefits to be received earlier in practice. At the same time, Tai Chi and yoga will continue and deepen the benefits of Rolfing. These three disciplines all share the goal of living in our bodies happily, effectively, consciously and vibrantly in each moment of our day, in all areas of our lives.