

Rolfing® and Yoga align us for freedom

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Imagine a bodywork system that literally grew right out of yoga, a system that took the core principles of yoga and brought them to life in a whole new way through the bodyworker's hands. You could lie on the bodyworker's table and breathe into deep, yoga-like changes—the opening, the lengthening, the freeing up of “stuck,” contracted tissues. Happily, this bodywork system has existed for over thirty years. It's called Rolfing Structural Integration®, and it's arguably the most famous (it's definitely the most copied!) therapeutic bodywork system in the Western world.

About forty years ago, a scientist named Ida Rolf was captivated by the power of yoga. Simultaneously, she was compelled by the way osteopathic doctors could create healing through direct, hands-on manipulation of their patients' tissues. Through many years of rigorous exploration, Dr. Rolf combined these two influences—yoga and osteopathic work—into the approach now known as Rolfing Structural Integration®.

The living principles of yoga still shine at the heart of Rolfing®. But since the two disciplines come at those principles in different ways, they magnify the benefits of each other quite powerfully.

One principle shared by yoga and Rolfing is that of getting space in the joints. Compression and misalignment in joints causes tissue degeneration, pain, and restriction of movement. In addition, spiritually, separation and fear are associated with contraction. Happiness is associated with spaciousness, such as in Tibetan Buddhism, where they speak of “the sky of mind.” In the body and in the emotional core, spaciousness, openness, is the key.

Yoga postures free up joints through opposing muscular contractions pulling the bones of the joint apart to create space. Rolfers work with their fingers, knuckles or elbows to slowly “melt” and lengthen the shortened, hardened tissues to open up the compressed joints, for it's the soft tissues (fascia, tendons, ligaments, muscles) that hold the bones in their positions.

Another principle is alignment. Ida Rolf said that the average body, with all its random twists and tilts, is perpetually “at war with gravity.” This “war” costs us tremendous energy, every hour of every day. A body that is “organized”—structurally integrated—feels light and graceful, goals of both yoga and Rolfing. Yoga aligns through proper positions—held, moved through and worked with over time. Rolfing emphasizes precise lengthening of fascia (the connective tissue that wraps every muscle and bone in your body, literally giving you your shape). Most people feel the changes as soon as they get off the Rolfing table—they feel taller and more effortlessly upright.

Lastly, both disciplines contain potent wisdom about how our core beliefs and emotional patterns are expressed and perpetuated by our bodily structure. Hence, as the body becomes ever more pliant, free and fluid through yoga and Rolfing, our inner being also becomes more free and responsive. In this way, the two arts help us to fully and consciously inhabit our body; to live in our body with feeling and awareness.

Rolfing and yoga, each with their own unique approach, make an amazing combination. For this reason, I have always energetically urged my Rolfing clients to explore the worlds of yoga. And if you enjoy yoga, you may indeed find wonderful gifts in the worlds of Rolfing.

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