

Structural Bodywork as a Spiritual Discipline

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At the age of 25, I went through the most difficult phase of my life. A two year long depression was accompanied by a deep sense of life being meaningless. What stopped me from committing suicide at that time were the results of a process called Structural Integration, sometimes also referred to as “Rolfing”, after the pioneer in the field Ida Rolf Ph.D. Apart from solving several physical problems (pain in knee and ankle after two surgeries) it showed me a way of finding inner peace and balance, through work on my body. As a result of this, I started practicing Zen meditation and became a Bodhisatva, I started practicing and teaching Hatha Yoga and most important of all I became a practitioner of Structural Integration.

Gravity is the therapist

The basic ideas behind Structural Integration are relatively easy to understand. They are ideas of organization and of architecture in the human body. In a skeleton we can see what an optimal organization of the bones (of all bones, not just the spine !!) in theory should look like. In our physical reality these bones are held in rotations and twists by shortened or overworked muscles and rigid connective tissue.

The further one moves away from the optimal balance the more the organism has to work to maintain stability and to counteract the downward pull of the earth's gravitational field

For example : for every inch the head is in front of the shoulders, the muscles of the back and neck have to hold approx. 30 lb.. more every waking second of the day. On the other hand, the closer we can get the skeletal structure, to its optimal position, and that implies the more we reduce the rotations in the legs (E.g. bow legs or knock knees), pelvic tilts, twists in the vertebrae or rotations in the arms , the more stable a human being will be.

And exactly this is accomplished in Structural Integration. The shortened tissues are lengthened, adhesions are dissolved and better movement patterns are established, always with the focus of organizing all bones as close as possible to their optimal position.

Spiritual Aspects

What happens in the emotional, the spiritual or the causal body? Because a human being is truly “whole”, any change in one of the bodies will induce changes in all other bodies. Thus the integration of the human physical structure has much further reaching consequences than getting rid of physical pain. These “holistic” aspects were also the deeper interest of Dr. Rolf whose thinking was really that of a human architect with a spiritual vision.

The link to the ancient spiritual practices of Zen or of Hatha Yoga is obvious. The claim of all these practices is very similar: the better you organize the physical structure and improve the breathing patterns, the easier it will be to appease both your mind and your emotions and ultimately even resolve the karmic constrictions you are involved in.

In Zen meditation - Zazen - utmost attention is placed on the question of how you sit while meditating.

What is the position of the pelvis, how does the spine stand on top of the pelvis, where is the head, how do we breathe? And equally the Hatha Yoga asanas, they are not just stretching exercises but, if practiced carefully and regularly, reposition the bones of the body closer to what Dr. Rolf called *the Line*.

The Vision

Finding this “Line “ is the true goal of Structural Integration. *The line* is a meditation, a visualization, an intent. It goes from the center of the earth through the core of your body up into the infinity of heaven. It describes the situation of us incarnated in physical matter between the polarity of heaven and earth. If we go too far up we lose ground, if we get wound up entirely in earthly things, we lose the contact to spirit.

It is a dance between these two extremes, every day - it is the koan which every one of us has to solve.

It is the line that monks and nuns in Zen monasteries attempt to find.

In this sense, Structural Integration is a spiritual discipline. Ida Rolf used to say: “Structural Integration is not a technique or a method - it is a way of life.”