

# AN INTERVIEW WITH IDA ROLF

## *Rolfing—How it Started, How it Grew, and Where It Is Now*

**Somatics:** Dr. Rolf, years ago, when first I became interested in Rolfing, people told me that they thought you were European born. Where were you born?

**Rolf:** New York City. I'm very much a New Yorker. I'm as New Yorkish as any New Yorker you'll meet. I was born in New York. I was educated in the public schools of New York. I went to college at Barnard College of Columbia University in New York, I took my doctoral degree from Columbia University, and I married in New York.

**Somatics:** Your doctoral degree was in what area?

**Rolf:** My doctoral degree was in chemistry, physiological chemistry...

**Somatics:** Did you go into teaching after that?

**Rolf:** No, I had what was for me and for a lot of women at that time a piece of luck. There was a European war, and all of the young men were either in Europe or were being trained to go to Europe if they were being withdrawn from their young men's positions in industry and in research. Their employers were afraid they would be withdrawn so they weren't hiring them, and they started hiring women. And actually, I don't know how many of us women who got our starts through this accident appreciate the fact that for us that war was a great blessing. It gave us the opportunity to go out in the world and show that we could take the place of many of these people who had been withdrawn, many of these young men.

**Somatics:** Where was the first place that you were employed then?

**Rolf:** I was employed by the Rockefeller Institute who also had seen the signs that their young men, their young staff, were being withdrawn for service.

**Somatics:** Was it inorganic you were working on at that time or organic chemistry?

**Rolf:** I was working in organic chemistry. As a matter of fact I was working in chemotherapy. And I was one of the workers in a laboratory at the Rockefeller Institute. They were trying to solve the problem of solvisan and neo-solvisan. The American product was very toxic. The German product was fine, but the German product was no longer available; and Americans were trying to put an American solvisan on the market, but for some reason or another it persisted in being very toxic. So part of the research of the Rockefeller Institute as its wartime service was to try to get a better product.

**Somatics:** In your book which appeared last year, *Rolfing*, you began the discussion talking about entropy and the law of entropy. As a chemist you might suggest how the law of entropy fits into your conception of Rolfing. Do you believe that disordered structure tends to create entropy?

**Rolf:** There is no question about that. But that hardly needs physics. That makes just common sense, it seems to me. I don't see how anybody with eyes in their heads can expect that a very disordered body carried in a fashion which it was never designed for can fail to be disorganized and not be able to perform as it was designed to perform.

**Somatics:** Do you understand that gravity is accepted as a positive force by living bodies? Is gravity a positive thing if the body is in structural alignment?

**Rolf:** I think there is no question about that, and I think that we show the evidence of this day by day in our work. This happens over and over again. People come back to us and say, “I don’t know what you did to me last time. I can’t imagine what you did to me. I feel so much better. I sleep so much better. I behave so much better. I’m so much more calm. I’m more tolerant. What on earth did you do to me?” We haven’t done a thing expect to make it possible for them to live in a friendly instead of unfriendly environment.

**Somatics:** So as soon as the structure has been rearranged and during the days that follow, does gravity continue to further align and smooth out that balance?

**Rolf:** Oh, I don’t think that there is any doubt that that is so: the body will go as far as it is physically able to go within the laws of physics.

**Somatics:** Would you think that, because Structural Integration precipitates changes in the body that continue evolving toward balance, that the idea that Structural Integration is a fixed and static treatment would be false? Does Structural Integration actually lead not to just permanent changes but to growing changes?

**Rolf:** Progressive changes. There is no question but that Structural Integration per se is merely the beginning of a progression. You’ll see it as you watch people who have been integrated or as their friends say it, Rolfed. I don’t doubt that there are other systems of structural integration in the world, but the one you come in contact with the most is often Rolfing which I had the good luck, if you want to call it that, of putting on the market.

**Somatics:** When did you begin to get the notion of moving away from chemistry?

**Rolf:** I actually moved away from chemistry under the pressure of outer circumstances. My father was ill for a long time before his death and he had a big business, a construction business. Somebody had to take over supervision of it and so I left chemistry just by virtue of trying to get things straightened out in my own personal affairs.

**Somatics:** What idea was the seed of Structural Integration?

**Rolf:** I don’t know, but I remember speculating as I was traveling on a train to Europe as to what was going to happen to behavior if you changed chemistry. I remember speculating on that. The first way to change chemistry would be to change physics. This I recall—I don’t know where it came from; it was just an accident.

**Somatics:** You had studied in Europe?

**Rolf:** Oh yes, I studied in Europe, but that wasn’t my elementary study. My elementary study was all here in this country. In the late thirties, I used to visit a weekly yoga group that worked up in Nyack, New York. It was under Pierre Bernard. Bernard was doing great work, because he was bringing in the thoughts which all of us now acknowledge as our present day philosophies but which were relatively unknown at that time. Bernard was a Tantric trained yoga teacher. He was an American of Irish parentage, but I presume his family was all into Tantra. At any rate he was brought up as Tantric, and when he got to adulthood he became a teacher of the Tantric philosophy and pioneered yoga teaching here in the United States. He started out in San Francisco, worked his way East and, by the time I contacted him, he had the center up in Nyack, New York.

**Somatics:** Is there any relationship between the philosophy of Tantra and some ideas in Structural Integration?

**Rolf:** I don’t think there’s any doubt about that: so many of our modern ideas are pure and unadulterated Tantric philosophy translated into contemporary American life. The whole idea that mind and body are one was basically a Tantric idea. It did not come from our Western European medicine. Not at all.

**Somatics:** You have mentioned Tantra, you have mentioned Pierre Bernard and your interests in organic chemistry. What other persons or traditions were early influences?

**Rolf:** I lived a life of music which is gone and forgotten. My mother was interested in my becoming a concert pianist, but I didn't see that one. Also, I raised a couple of kids, you know. And I ran a household, and so forth.

**Somatics:** Did you participate in sports or dancing or any kind of physical education?

**Rolf:** No, no. I never was really interested in sports. I was too busy, and sports take time. I never had time for anything but just plowing ahead.

**Somatics:** Do you think it would have been an advantage to you to have been an M.D.?

**Rolf:** Well, I faced that question one time long ago when I was at the Institute. I could have gone on for an MD but, I didn't. I went for a PhD and I frankly confess I did it because it was easy. I mean I was offered a PhD for my work at the Rockefeller Institute so I took it. Needless to say, this was during the First World War when everybody was interested in giving things away in order to try and get people to stay with them. That is the way it happened.

**Somatics:** Who was the first person you ever placed hands on to help their problems?

**Rolf:** It was a music teacher. I had a couple of little boys that were then about seven or eight years old, and a woman who knew me was visiting us one night and she was saying something about her sister, Ethel—how she thought this and that about the way of teaching music. And I had said I would like her sister, Ethel, to teach my sons, because she sounded as though she had the kind of ideas that I would like to have them learn. And she said, "Well, that's a fine idea, but my sister, Ethel, can't teach anymore: she had a very bad fall, and as a result she can't use her right hand at all. She can't use either of her hands; her right hand is worse. She can't even comb her own hair; she can't wash her dishes; she can't do anything." I said, "You just let your sister, Ethel, come in and let me take a look at her." So sister, Ethel, came in, and I found what I thought I would find, namely that her whole arm structure had been displaced and disorganized. So I reorganized it, and afterwards sister Ethel combed her hair and washed her dishes and taught my sons. And I've been doing the same thing ever since—where I find disorder I try to introduce order.

**Somatics:** What was it, though, that made you think you could take your hands and go into her shoulder? At that point you were no longer a chemist; you were a person thinking in terms of anatomy and structure. Had you been studying anatomy and developing your ideas for structural change?

**Rolf:** I'll tell you a great secret, but don't ever tell anybody. I've never had an anatomy class in my life. My work with Ethel led me to see that when something is out of line the, obviously, parts aren't fitting. So I thought, "Just put them together and they ought to work."

**Somatics:** The piano teacher that you put together, did you give her one session only?

**Rolf:** Oh, heavens no. I worked with her for a period of maybe three months. A little bit later, and all of a sudden she was in the army—the women's corps—and that was the end of that. So I never really got my children properly trained in music.

**Somatics:** There was an enormous difference between working with sections of the body, somewhat as a clinician does, and the mature procedure that we are familiar with: namely, the ten formal sessions of Rolfing that are now current around the world. What was the specific line of thought that got you from individual work with an arm or a foot or an ankle to the notion of progressive stages involving the whole body?

**Rolf:** The body talks about it. That's all I can say: the body talks about it. Most people who have studied in my classes, know what I mean when I say 'the body talks about it.' If you start with ten people and do the first hour, low and behold, by the time they come in for the second hour every one of those ten people will show you the same narrow symptoms. They will show you that their legs are not under them, and will show you that their feet aren't walking properly. Their bodies beg you to stop the screaming so you get in there and try to do something with it. If you stop its screaming then it screams somewhere else and you do that in the third hour. It's that simple.

**Somatics:** You just chase the scream until it has no place to go?

**Rolf:** Until it has no other place to go, and then you kiss them good-bye and tell them it was nice knowing them.

**Somatics:** Now, apropos of screaming, it has been said—and it varies with different people and different bodies—that Rolfing is painful and involves some kind of vocal display and very often a sound. Is use of the voice or shouting important in the process of Structural Integration?

**Rolf:** I wouldn't say that screaming is, but I would say that use of the voice is highly probable. There will be people who are not going to let anyone else see that they are suffering, who will see to it that you don't see any change on them or hear any change. But these are people who put a voluntary restriction on themselves. Yes, very often they'll squawk or they'll squeak but they'll not scream, though occasionally that happens too.

**Somatics:** The relationship between Rolfing and the kind of goals sought by psychoanalysis seem to be that they both seek a kind of catharsis. In Rolfing there's a kind of cathartic event, at least in terms of a person's spontaneous fantasies...

**Rolf:** I see it rather differently. As I see it, the psychotherapist is releasing symptoms which are literally nailed into the body in a physical fashion, and that psychoanalyst will not really be able to displace those symptoms, get them really out of that individual, until that physical body changes. Now physical bodies do change slowly under psychoanalysis as all of you probably have seen. I mean, you look at John and you haven't seen John for six months and you say, "My, you look different," and he says "Yes, I've been going through psychoanalysis." And, as a result of that, he has changed his ways of using his body, his arms, his legs, his face, his muscles and so forth. Now what we do, you see, is to release the physical things first, expecting that it is then a much simpler thing for the psychological problem to be released. We do not claim to be replacing psychotherapists, but we do claim to be making life easier for them and making them able to accomplish things in a shorter order.

**Somatics:** What would you call those emotions that are being released? Negative emotions? Grievances?

**Rolf:** For the most part they're negative emotions. You don't, after all, maintain joy in your body—at least I have yet to find somebody who really maintains joyousness in his body. Young children have it, as I am sure you would agree, but as we grow older we begin to accumulate negative emotions in our bodies, and they're nailed into the structure in the sense that you or anyone responds to a problem by tightening up here and tightening up there. And you stay tight until and unless somebody intervenes.

**Somatics:** These are defensive reactions which are involuntary?

**Rolf:** That's right: defensive. Take, for example, grief. You might hardly call the posture of grief defensive, but it is certainly a very prevalent posture that all of us recognize. Somebody goes down the street in a posture of grief, and if they maintain that posture long enough, they cannot of their own volition get out of it. But somebody else, who knows which muscles have tightened and which muscles haven't tightened, can probably reorganize those muscles to a point where they will balance each other and the guy gets out of his posture and is able to take on a new posture.

**Somatics:** Dr. Rolf, do you have a notion that certain parts of the body or certain areas of musculature in the body are clearly associated with certain kinds of emotions, or is it more general?

**Rolf:** This has been a notion that a lot of people have tried to introject into Rolfing, but I personally haven't bought it. Bill Schutz, for instance, will try to sell you this idea. And he'll bring out a lot of arguments that claim they are supporting him, but I personally don't feel that it's that way. I mean I don't feel, for example, that because a person has grief it's going to be in this part of the body or that. It is certainly true that in males, for instance, where you get a lot of stored up anger, it will be stored up in the groin area. I have seen this over and over again, but it's not the only area in which it will be stored and it's not every male who will store it there.

**Somatics:** Do you see any rationale for Wilhelm Reich's understanding that there are various segments of the body. Is that meaningful to you?

**Rolf:** I'm not really sufficiently informed about Reich's work to be able to discuss it right now.

**Somatics:** A parallel to that would be the notion that chakras are indeed fixed centers in the body. Does that relate to your understanding?

**Rolf:** Yes, I think chakras are fixed centers in the body, and I think they are determined by actual physical nervous structures in the body and the kind of field that a nervous structure maintains about itself. I think this constitutes the chakra. I don't know this; I have no authority for it, but this is my feeling about chakras.

**Somatics:** Do you, in general, feel quite sympathetic or comfortable with Hindu thinking?

**Rolf:** Yes. Those boys lived in an age when they just sat around and thought. They thought quite a lot of things, and a lot of them were very, very valuable I think. But the fact of the matter is that what they thought was not for the most part, committed to writing. I heard the story, for example, that one set of manuscripts about Tantric yoga had been committed to writing and, in the face of the thought of invasion of India by barbarians, those manuscripts were hidden, were buried in the mountains and were lost for hundreds of years. The transmission of all of that was, as they used to say, from mouth to ear.

**Somatics:** Is that the prime oral tradition that has influenced you, or is the martial arts tradition also important?

**Rolf:** No, I never went for the martial arts particularly. Frankly, I feel that by the time you go in for half a dozen different systems you haven't got any system. It doesn't work because you haven't carried out one particular tradition on to its logical conclusion.

**Somatics:** Can a person be Rolfed twice? Do you recommend taking the full ten sessions? Or would you do something else?

**Rolf:** No, you don't repeat those ten sessions. You go on to something which has now been uncovered by those ten sessions. You now have a different body and it has different problems. And those problems are very apparent to the eye of a well-trained Rolfer and so he goes into those problems.

**Somatics:** Is there an end to that?

**Rolf:** I don't think there's really an end although there are practical ends, as you know. I mean the practical end is when you get a guy so that he really can do not only a day's work, but a week's work and a good month's work and keep going.

**Somatics:** At that point, would Patterning be helpful?

**Rolf:** Yes. Patterning is valuable in its own way. It's greatest value in my opinion is that a person who goes into Patterning commits a certain number of hours of his time to being aware of how he uses his body, how he might use his body more efficiently. When he goes to a Rolfer, he expects to have something done *for* him and *to* him, but he doesn't have any such expectation when he goes to a Patterner. When he goes to a Patterner, he goes with the understanding that *he* is going to do something differently. Patterning is similar, but not equivalent, to Rolfig. Let's put it this way: it's on the way. Of course there are a good many people who haven't gone too far down the non-alignment road for whom Patterning is very valuable. But people who have *really* gone down the non-alignment road are usually in need of something more potent than Patterning. Everyone could profit from Patterning—don't misunderstand me. It's just a question of how fast you want to get there, and how deep you want to get into the problem. Patterning, for example, does not give you the emotional release that you very often get with Rolfig. But Patterning is very valuable in that it shows you how you use your body. Before the Patterner takes you on, you commit a certain number of hours of your time to thinking about yourself and how you behave and how you use your body.

**Somatics:** There is something else I have been curious about—are there people who should not be Rolfiged? How is that decided? I presume that there might be cases in which you would not dare Rolf certain bodies.

**Rolf:** Well, I, for instance, would not recommend Rolfiging for anybody who might even be suspected of having cancer, for fear of the legal implications of the matter. I do not know that the person suspected of having cancer would feel himself very much better if someone had the courage to Rolf him. But there are so many things that you have to take into consideration in terms of our prevailing culture.

**Somatics:** But if a person has severe low back pains or an arthritic complaint...?

**Rolf:** Those are the things on which we made our fortune!

**Somatics:** How did your full practice begin to form? You've already talked about the piano teacher...

**Rolf:** The piano teacher had a friend who had been to seventeen doctors and hadn't been able to get any relief—you know the story—and then that one had a friend, then the other one had a friend, and so it went. No problem about that.

**Somatics:** And you were successful, one after the other?

**Rolf:** One after the other. You see we had a key to open a door and nobody else had ever had the key. So there were a tremendous number of doors that went wide open. We weren't really out looking for the doors that wouldn't open. We had all the work that we could do with the doors that would open.

**Somatics:** Are there going to be more Rolfigers?

**Rolf:** Oh, I don't doubt it. We have many applications. We have applications now I think for two or three other elementary classes that are going to come off in the fall and so forth.

**Somatics:** And you are there supervising those classes?

**Rolf:** No, I no longer teach the elementary Rolfiging. The younger teachers teach that. I teach merely the advanced Rolfiging. We have two or three of those classes a year sometimes—one on the coast and one in Boulder, Colorado.

**Somatics:** How many Rolfigers are being trained a year?

**Rolf:** Oh, I don't know, I'd say perhaps 20, 25, 30—that would be the absolute maximum. I don't want too many Rolfers to be trained at one time lest the training thin out too much. I think it's more important to have fewer Rolfers better trained than it is to have more Rolfers poorly trained.

**Somatics:** Is a Rolfer fully trained at the moment of graduation or is there a developmental period before he is fully ready?

**Rolf:** It takes about five years, but in the meantime he's working. At the time he gets out of our elementary course, some of his well-meaning friends are willing to let him work on them. May those friends never diminish! (laughs) And actually there is a great deal of good he can do in the community. Indeed, I used to worry about the fact that so many of these young people went out without what I saw as really adequate training, until I realized that no matter how poorly a Rolfer was trained, if he had some of these Rolfering ideas and went into a community and spread them around, that community was better off than it would be with none of those ideas. So now I sleep more comfortably at night.