

Deep Impact

by Linda Knittel

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Seven years ago, as yoga instructor Sianna Serman was practicing a blend of yoga styles, the nagging case of sciatica she had endured since 1990 became too much to bear. Without knowing quite what to expect, she began a 10-session *Rolfing/Structural Integration* series. "After each session I would go right home to my yoga mat and try different poses," says Serman, who lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. "I was amazed to find that my body was literally unwinding. Each session would open up so many new layers for me to explore."

Through her yoga practice and the three months of *Rolfing/Structural Integration* work, Sherman was able to eliminate her sciatica and keep it from returning. These days she teaches Anusara Yoga full time to the burgeoning yoga community in Cincinnati, and also nationwide. She also recommends *Rolfing/Structural Integration* to her students whenever she gets the opportunity. "The effect Rolfing has had on my yoga practice is so remarkable I would make something up just to get on the table," she says.

Rolfing/Structural Integration has the reputation of being the Asthanga Yoga of body work – sometimes intense, other times painful, and not for everyone. But many yogis are discovering it can help correct the various physical imbalances that keep them from reaching a more stable state of body and mind. It is easy to imagine how the structural integration brought on by *Rolfing/Structural Integration* might drastically effect an advanced yogi like Sherman, but what about those whose practice is still in its youth? Can it transform their practice too? That was what I hoped to find out when I recently signed up for several sessions with certified Rolfer Karen Lackritz of Eugene Oregon.

Rolfing/Structural Integration and yoga appear to be variations on a single theme: both working toward towards the physical and the emotional evolution of the individual through the lengthening and integration of the body- not a surprising parallel considering that the techniques of *Rolfing/Structural Integration* has its roots firmly planted in the principals of yoga. The simultaneous study of yoga and biochemistry was certainly an unusual pursuit for Rolfing creator Ida P Rolf in the 1920's, but it is what's thought to have given her a foot in both worlds. Early in her academic career, in a quest to better address her own health issues, Rolf began supplementing her science education with classes in osteopathy, homeopathy, and other progressive modalities. She began to formulate ideas about how the body's structural alignment affected one's behavior and emotional well-being. Rolf suspected that if imbalances in the body's composition could be corrected manually, an improvement in mental state would naturally follow. To test her theory, Rolf began using bodywork techniques to literally reorganize the structure of her patient's bodies.

Over the next 30 years, Rolf worked on perfecting her technique and formulating a means through which it could be taught finally in the mid-1960's after spending a good deal of time immersed in the alternative community of Esalen in Big Sur, California, Rolf developed the sequence of 10 one-hour bodywork sessions that now serve as the foundation for the conventional *Rolfing/Structural Integration* process, "(Rolf) created a technique that uses the reorganization of human anatomy not only to better health but also to reach higher states of consciousness," says Lackritz, who has been practicing the technique for 18 years.

Given that *Rolfing/Structural Integration* can bring about such lofty outcomes, it seems almost ironic that my first session with Lackritz included standing in front of a mirror in my underwear. After filling out a questionnaire about my current and past health, I described the various physical problems I thought might be limiting my yoga practice.

For example, I complained that stiffness in my hips has made sitting in lotus uncomfortable, while years of running had given me tight Achilles tendons and flat feet, making certain poses almost impossible.

After she listened to these concerns, Lackritz and I took a long look at my reflection. Almost at once she could see that there was a restriction plaguing the entire right side of my body—a tightness that was causing my right arm to hang low, my right hip to flare, and my torso to constrict. I was surprised I had never before noticed these misalignments, because they were so clearly present.

For the most part, ***Rolfing/Structural Integration*** is performed atop a large, flat table that can be raised and lowered to provide the optimum position for each technique. Each of the 10 sessions focuses on a specific area of the body. For instance, the first session might work the rib cage while the seventh addresses the head and neck. Each session builds upon the changes made in those that preceded it, creating complete integration and a feeling of overall balance at the end of each session.

In my particular case, given that I was only scheduled for three introductory sessions rather than the full 10, Lackritz decided to side-step the established series and get right into addressing my specific restrictions. As I lay back on her table, she began by working her fingers deep into the ligaments and membranes in my torso and rib cage. Her touch was gentle yet penetrating. Lackritz spoke to me softly, telling me what she felt as she explored the restrictions in my body. "There it goes," or "That's what it wants to do," she would say as areas of my body responds to her work.

I wouldn't describe ***Rolfing/Structural Integration*** as "relaxing," although I did experience a heightened sense of calm as Lackritz moved, molded, and manipulated different areas of my body. The work was definitely deeper and more focused than any bodywork I had experienced before, and the results were more immediate.

At the end of that first session, she had succeeded in expanding my rib cage. Not only did it look visibly lengthened, but I was also capable of holding a good deal more breath. In addition, the time spent working her palms and knuckles into my right arm and shoulder realigned my uneven arms. As I once again stood in front of the mirror at the end of that hour, I was amazed to see that my arms hung evenly. What's more, when I left, I felt as though I was lighter and more expansive.

Over the course of my next two sessions, I felt that my body was virtually transformed. In one session, Lackritz worked my inner thigh, releasing the tightness in my pelvic floor, which she promised would make a noticeable difference in almost all my yoga postures. At our third meeting, using leverage and her body weight, Lackritz slowly pulled her elbow over and over against the muscles and fascia that line my hips. Since I found this spot particularly tender, she had me breathe into the area, lessening the work's intensity. After only a few minutes, she had eliminated the restriction that had showed itself on my first day.

As I emerged from her office that third day, I stood much straighter, my rib cage was shifted, the fallen arches of my feet were more lifted, and there was a definite look of symmetry to my body. And while the process was a tad uncomfortable at times, in general ***Rolfing/Structural Integration*** was certainly no the intimidating and painful experience it is sometimes reputed to be.

"Over time the method has become a good deal more gentle, thanks to the advances in technique and better understanding of what we generally call structural typology," says Michael Salvesson, a prominent Berkeley, California Rolfer who also teaches at the Boulder, Colorado based Rolf Institute.

Yoga and *Rolfing/Structural Integration*

In many cases, this process of helping the body return to a state of balance includes fixing common muscular-skeletal problems, such as lower back pain or muscle strains. *Rolfing/Structural Integration* has been successfully used to ease ailments ranging from migraines to fibromyalgia. As impressive as the anecdotes may be, the relief of ordinary physical problems had not been Rolf's objective when she created the technique. "She saw her work as a means to cultivate the evolution of the individual," says Salveson. "In that way, I believe Rolfing is very much like yoga."

"The reason so many people who practice yoga are attracted to Rolfing is that both address the integrity of the body," says Lackritz, who has worked on many of her fellow yoga students as well as some of her teachers. "In many ways, Rolfing is an expression of the principals of yoga set in a form of bodywork."

The similarities between the two disciplines show themselves from the beginning. Just as a breath is the foundation of any practice, it is also the focal point of the traditional *Rolfing/Structural Integration* series. "In the first hour we work directly on the rib cage, manipulating the intercostals muscles and the membranes that envelope the lungs," says Lackritz.

The aim of subsequent *Rolfing/Structural Integration* sessions also align themselves with the goals of specific yoga poses. For example, when Lackritz worked on releasing restrictions in my pelvic floor, she was allowing the sitting bones to extend much like they do in Adho Mukda Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose). Likewise, the third hour of *Rolfing/Structural Integration* traditionally focuses on balancing the sides of the body, a process that Lackritz likens to Trikonasana (Triangle Pose).

When my sessions ended, I definitely felt more grounded and confident, both in my daily life and in my yoga practice. My sister recognized this as a shift, while my boyfriend described the change as a greater sense of clam. Perhaps it is coincidence, but there is now a feeling of ease to my poses and a greater rhythm to my breath. I have noticed that my hips have opened, my balance has steadied, and my mind had cleared – not to mention the fact that for the first time since sixth grade gym class, I can do a full split. And although no good Rolfer would guarantee such results, they would certainly tell you this: Flexibility comes when alignment happens.