

# Embodiment and Grace

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## What is Embodiment?

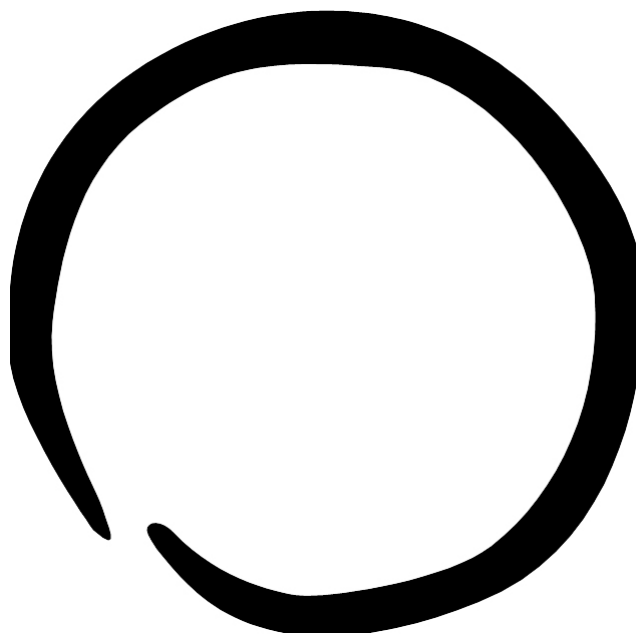
When we think about our work with our Rolwing clients, we think not only about helping them to achieve alignment, but also about helping them to achieve embodiment of the Rolwing process. What is embodiment of Rolwing Structural Integration? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do we recognize that it has happened?

Most Rolfers can define a certain physical sensation that they refer to as “the Line.” It may include (but is not limited to) such sensations as a quality of lift through the crown of the head and grounding through the feet, and a sense of lightness and connectedness throughout the whole body. Most Rolfers probably also have some particular markers that they look for in their client’s movement and expression that tell them that the client not only looks more aligned but is taking home a new quality of movement and being. These indications are what tell us that the client has experienced the work in a way that will truly change her life.

Embodiment is what happens when the client owns the work, lives and breathes the change. Embodiment is empowerment. Embodiment is what takes the client the next step forward in her own development and helps her to know that the changes she experienced during her Rolwing process truly belong to her and are not some magic owned by her Rolfer.

What are some of the hallmarks that we Rolfers look for to tell us that our client is bringing the “the Line” into her movement and her life? The list that follows contains

some elements of common sense and others that are more technical. It speaks of embodiment in a general way, and it speaks of embodiment in ways that are more specific to a Rolfer’s vision. It is far from a complete list, but hopefully it articulates some of the indicators that help us to see what may be happening with our client.



## Presence

One of the simplest ways to think of embodiment is that it has to do with presence, and presence has to do with being at home in the body. The person who is at home in her body is able to register and sense the continuously changing pattern of body sensations and respond appropriately to the information that these sensations give. Tight shoulders from spending too long at the computer cue her to stop and rest before she gives herself a repetitive stress injury. A funny, strained feeling in the back may let her know that she is lifting that heavy potted plant in a way that may injure

her, and allows her to find another way that may be more secure for her back. Sensation in the viscera fuels her intuition, her “gut feeling” about someone in her life, or is responsible for a sense of well-being that comes from being coherent [this is used as in physics] with the deepest layer of herself.

Some of our clients come to us with an already well-developed sense of their bodies, while others may live high in the control tower of the head and notice their bodies only rarely. Wherever the client is when she comes to us for Rolwing sessions, we are in an excellent position to help her take the next step towards becoming more present and alive in her body.

## Palintonicity

Embodiment has an equal sense of lift and ground: most people have a preference for orienting to space and what is around them, or to ground in their own internal world. The practitioner may see this in the client’s posture and movement, or by asking oneself the simple question, “Is this a person who has difficulty finding the ground, or difficulty getting up out of the ground?” Rolwing work usually doesn’t change the client’s first preference, but it does help the client achieve more balance. In the best of all worlds, we see that the client has both a sense of reaching the ground through her feet and a sense of lightness through the top of her head. In her movement she carries the potential for both the

gestures of pushing (for which you need grounding) and reaching (for which you need to orient to space and the other).

## *Two-way Lengthening in Pre-Movement*

In the moment when the client’s body adjusts to prepare for the movement that she will make, we hope to see lengthening in the axial complex (spine and cranium). Thus, movement initiates with a quality of lengthening instead of a quality of shortening. We see this bi-directionality in all segments of the body as the client prepares to move. We see the soles of the

feet sink into the floor at the same time that the trunk lifts off the hip joint, and we see the palms of the hands open to the object that they reach out to touch at the same time that there is stability in the shoulder girdle.<sup>1</sup>

### **Contralateral Movement**

Contralateral movement is something that emerges when both the client's capacity for orientation and her physical structure are balanced. Contralateral movement that arises spontaneously is very different than contralateral movement that is produced by a neocortical idea of what "good movement" looks like. When contralaterality arises spontaneously, we see it manifesting at different levels: in the spine, the lordotic and kyphotic curves counter-rotate to each other, and each vertebra shows its own individual, differentiated movement; in the shoulder girdle, it shows up in the sliding of the scapulae over the ribs and the responsive capacity of the whole shoulder girdle as it sits on the rib cage; in the pelvis, we see that each side of the pelvis has its own movement, differentiated from the other side; and in the limbs, we see contralateral swinging of the arms and legs.<sup>2</sup>

### **Responsiveness, Lightness, and Fluidity throughout the Body**

The fascial web has the consistency and coherency of a spider's web. It responds as a whole to all our movements. "Quiet spots" – places movement is not able to flow through – often indicate areas of trauma and holding.<sup>3</sup>

### **Dynamic Balance**

Balance, in a truly balanced body, is not a static event but a constant, fluid dance in which the client does not hold herself up against gravity, but rather flirts with it, first to one side, then to the other. Holding appears where balance has been lost.<sup>4</sup>

### **Grace**

Grace is a subjective value. It can't be measured on an EMG or translated into anatomy and numbers. It shows itself by a sense of pleasure and harmony that is experienced in the body when graceful movement occurs. It is revealed when we watch another person in motion and are touched by the beauty in her movement in a way that we may not quite be able to

name. For all its ineffability, grace is one of the surest indicators of embodiment.

### **Optimal Relationship with Gravity**

Gravity is the ever-present field in which we live. The concept that it is possible for the human structure to find an alignment, balance and quality of movement in which gravity becomes a supportive and enlivening force instead of one that must be resisted is the keystone of Ida Rolf's vision. When movement comes into harmony with gravity, what was tiring becomes effortless and fluid. Grace emerges.

### **Impediments to Embodiment**

Given that embodiment is pleasurable, graceful, beautiful and empowering, why is it that so many people live so far outside their bodies? This is a complex question that probably has as many answers as there are people to answer it. In this article several possible causes will be addressed.

The first is the omnipresent, modern "civilized" culture. Socialization in a global and ever-speedier culture teaches one, from the most tender age, to disregard the signals that the body sends. Judeo-Christian religions teach that sin and temptation come from the flesh – a holy life is one that is lived by learning to distance oneself from the body and its longings, especially sexual longings. Wilhelm Reich cites repression of sexuality as one of the most effective ways of keeping a group of people subjugated to the will of an organized entity such as a government or a church.<sup>5</sup> The medical profession schools its "patients" to be passive and give the authority for their bodies and health into the hands of "those who know" – the doctors. The enormous money-making machine that is the medical industry runs on the disempowerment of patients. The military-industrial complex requires men to not feel, harden their hearts, stand up straight, and obey orders. One has only to look at the "military" posture to see what values lay beneath it – locked knees prevent grounding and resting on one's own authority; pushed out chests and rock-hard abdominals prevent contact with softer emotions; tucked-in chins and straight cervicals create an atmosphere in which flexibility and the speaking of one's own opinion are not favored. Disembodiment is a socio-economic-religious question.

In a culture where the body is not felt and its wisdom is systematically disregarded, many different schools of thought have emerged teaching what the body "should" be like. Each school has its own definition of what "good posture" and "good breathing" are. Many yoga teachers instruct their students to carry the chest forward and the arms in external rotation. In *t'ai chi*, students often learn to tuck the pelvis under and to keep a constant slight bend in the knees, all in the name of grounding. Some lines of thought teach that the breath should be abdominal, others that breath should come into the upper ribs.

When our clients are not at home in their bodies, they allow other people (including their Rolfers) to tell them how their bodies should be. As long as they are attempting to conform to an externally imposed idea, no matter how intelligent it may be, they are caught in trying to dominate their bodies and their movement. Fluidity and grace can only emerge when movement arises spontaneously from an inner sense of what is right. As Rolfers, it is very important to remember this. Ida Rolf's vision of how a balanced body relates to the gravity field is the guiding star of our work, but even such an advanced understanding of the body is subject to failure if we try to impose it or hold it in place instead of allowing it to emerge.

Another significant factor that impedes embodiment is trauma, and most people have passed through some form of trauma in their lives. In a moment when death appears to be imminent (be it from surgery, a car accident or a near-drowning experience), the body mobilizes an enormous amount of energy to insure survival. If this activation is not used up in fight or flight, or if its attempts at activating defense are thwarted, this high energy "freezes" in the nervous system. One of the side effects of this "freezing" (which, at a physiological level, is a co-activation of both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems) is a loss of presence and feeling in the body.<sup>6</sup>

Some people lose presence and feeling by rigidifying their bodies: muscles lock, tighten, and fibrose, and no matter how many times they are massaged or get Rolfing sessions they do not let go. Their holding is part of a deep, central control, a sense of being "scared stiff" that only releases when the individual's overall sense

of safety in the world is able to shift. Other people, often the ones who have been the most severely traumatized, manifest this “freezing” in the opposite way – they become hypotonic. Their tissue seems wooden or lifeless, and they often relate having little or no feeling in the body parts where this flaccid quality is present.

Whatever prevents embodiment, the path back to feeling and owning one’s body is a dialogue with oneself, a discovery, and a discipline. The role of the Rolfer is to help the client undertake this dialogue by releasing structural restrictions that may be causing pain and limitation, by aiding the client in perceiving her habitual way of living in her body, and by working with her to explore new options to these habitual patterns.

### **The Way Home – Finding a New Paradigm**

Many clients think of going to a Rolfer like they think of taking their car to the mechanic – drop it off in the morning, come back in the afternoon, pay and drive away. Moving from expecting to be passive and having the Rolfer “fix it” to being an active part of her own process is a paradigm shift that our client may need some help to make. Other clients – the type with great self discipline that impose an ideal on their bodies – may, by contrast, need to learn to feel the difference between willfulness and allowing.

Often, a part of the discomfort that our clients report in their bodies has its root in the way that they relate to their bodies, and our work as Rolfers may also call us to help them examine this relationship and evaluate whether it serves them well or not. We do this, in the first place, by listening and watching with an eye for the overall pattern, then by asking gentle questions that help to plant a “seed of doubt” about that which we observe, and lastly by offering other possibilities and helping the client to feel the contrast between one way of being and the other.

Our own embodiment as Rolfers is vital to this process. If we are comfortable in our bodies, if we have the habit of being aware of the subtle shifts and clues that they give us during the course of the day, and altering the course of our actions according to this information, we will be in a much better position to sense the places where our clients have lost connection and help

them reestablish a link. If we are kind to ourselves and nonjudgmental of the way that emotion, sensation, and movement combine to create our lived experience, we can model this way of being for our clients – one of the most effective ways to help them make a significant shift.

There is a resonance that occurs between the tonic function of one body and another when they are in close proximity or linked by touch. Thus, one very effective way to help your client to fill into a place in her body that she does not inhabit, or to experience a new quality of movement that you want to help her find, is to connect with that quality of movement in your own body as you touch her. If I want to help my client feel how the spine can lengthen in both directions, I allow my own spine to lengthen as I begin to touch her, and she may spontaneously feel that deep letting go in her own spine.

### **Acts of Attention vs. Acts of Tension**

One of the most difficult qualities of relationship that our clients bring to the work is an idea that they must somehow master their bodies. In this worldview the body is subject to the commands of the will. The client gives the orders, the body obeys, and if it does not, a fight ensues, a fight whose price is rigidity, pain and dysfunction. As we all know, a monologue is not a conversation and does not stimulate harmonious relationship. By the same token, a one-way flow of commands from will to flesh effectively kills dialogue and the possibility of a life that breathes with the wisdom not only of the mind, but of the body.

“Grace-full” movement is a quality that emerges when we remove the impediments to that grace. All the qualities listed above as hallmarks of embodiment are part of the body’s innate, natural resources, and when not overrun by our internal inhibitions, will be the body’s first choice for movement.

What are these inhibitions to movement? They are deep, unconscious history and learning. Like the burned hand that learns to withdraw when it feels the heat of the stove, these inhibitions create shortening and retraction when triggered. Each time that the child was hurt or frightened she pulled back, and in the presence of a similar stimulus, she responds in the same fashion. On the other hand, in the presence of a

pleasurable stimulus, her body lengthens and opens, and situations in her life that remind her of this initial pleasurable stimulus will produce a similar quality of movement. Thus, in the unconscious way that our clients organize movement, we can observe the history of all that has happened to them.

Some inhibitions are the better part of wisdom – it is true that the burned hand teaches best, and when the child first learns that flame can burn, she learns the self-preservation of pulling back from fire. Other inhibitions may have served her well in her younger years but are now no longer in keeping with the level of resource that she may have developed in her life in present time. Thus, a woman who learned as a little girl to please her parents by not asserting herself may no longer depend on her parents, but may still have difficulty saying “no” to authority figures. She may carry her chin tucked tightly down towards the front of her neck and have difficulty looking directly at the person to whom she is talking.

When dealing with the shortness, tightness and pain that these habitual movement inhibitions may create in our client’s structure, it is wise to remember that one tensional pattern does not get conquered by imposing another. If my client’s rib cage is held in expiration and her shoulders are internally rotated, I do not help her to find “good posture” by following the cultural dictate “shoulders back, chest out, chin in.” Should she manage, by force of will, to pull her shoulder blades together and pick up her expiration-fixed rib cage from the lumbodorsal hinge and hold it there, she will now have double the tension than she did before.

That which is held needs permission to let go. The permission comes from awareness, presence, and gentle invitation. Once the need met by the short, tight movement pattern has been felt and identified, it is possible to choose a new option, one that may be more in keeping with the client’s present moment in life and level of resources. New options for movement and ways of being in the world can and do emerge spontaneously when, by an act of attention, the client ceases to do that which is habitual, if only for a moment, so that something new can happen.

Creating this window of opportunity for the client to move a step forward towards integration and towards a new option is not a difficult thing to do, but certain conditions must be met. Each inhibition, each shortening, and each holding has a reason for being, and that reason is rooted in early survival strategies. The organism knows that the way it developed to cope works for a very simple reason – it is still alive, and for this reason the survival mechanism, as dysfunctional as it may be in some ways, has high value for the system.

Convincing this (successful) strategy not to engage so that something new and possibly more pleasurable may arise does not happen by force or by will. It happens in a moment of safety where the habitual defenses can be let down for a moment. It happens when we, as Rolfers, can help the client have a new experience, in her body, in the way that she moves or breathes or carries herself. She may feel this in a moment when her structure shifts and suddenly she has the support and openness that she has desired for a long time. She may also feel this when her Rolfer helps her find a new way of moving, or of standing, that gives her the ground to say “no,” or to look people in the eye. When she feels the power of the new possibility, the client will return to it again and again, for the simple reason that it feels good and she likes it.

In sum, the choice to move into a pattern that brings a deeper level of ease comes from an *act of attention*, not an *act of tension*. The act of attention has three phases: 1) identification of the habitual pattern; 2) the choice to not move automatically into the habitual pattern; and 3) the emergence of the new possibility.

The body/being is wise beyond our imagination. Given the respite that a moment of mindfulness can bring, grace flows to the fore. The flesh desires fluidity, lengthening, and ease and knows, intrinsically, how to coordinate those qualities.

When we can work with our clients, not only to release the restrictions that hold them structurally, but also to help them learn to undertake this act of attention on a daily basis, then we have helped them step forward into a quality of aliveness that will unfold for the rest of their lives. We have

stimulated a new quality of relationship between Rolfer and client where we are truly partners with our clients on their deepening journey into embodiment.

### Endnotes

1. Frank, Kevin, “Tonic Function – A Gravity Response Model for Rolfing® Structural and Movement Integration.” *Rolf Lines*, March 1995.
2. Author’s notes from a class with Hubert Godard.
3. Wing, Heather, *Rolfing Movement Integration – An Introduction*. Private Publication.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Reich, Wilhelm, *The Function of the Orgasm*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.
6. Levine, Peter, *Waking the Tiger*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997.