

STRUCTURAL STRETCHES

Self-Exploration and Cultivating the Vertical¹

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*When your body is not aligned,
The inner power will not come.
When you are not tranquil within,
Your mind will not be well-ordered.
Align your body, assist the inner power,
Then it will gradually come on its own.*

Nei-yeh

Taoist ancient poetry²

Stretching changes the tonus of the myofascial web. Stretching systematically, with the Principles of Rolfing and Rolf Movement Integration in mind, can change the human shape, as well. If we perceive through the sensations that stretching produces, explore our limitations of form through micro-movements, and be present to the resulting tissue releases and autonomic discharges, we can not only transform ourselves, but also enhance our self-awareness, self-image and self-esteem.

What is perhaps most important, by challenging and exploring our restrictions through sensation, we discover the self-regulating, self-organizing power of our own bodies. We know that when the body is released from restrictions, it naturally finds its own way to a higher level of function and integration. When the stretches are performed with awareness, they access and

activate the soma's inherent orthotropic nature; *i.e.*, its innate tendency to self-correct and seek uprightness.³ This integration is not imposed from without, but discovered from within.

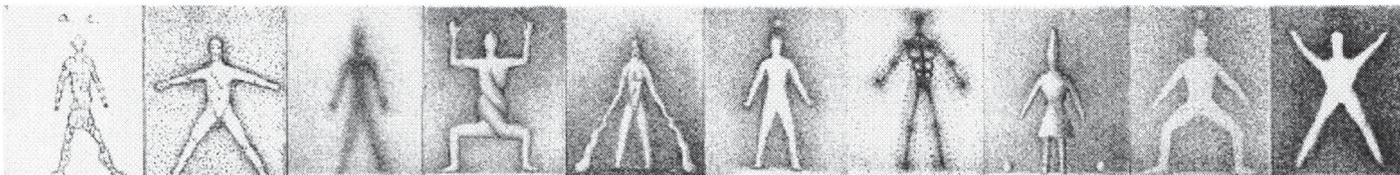
Over the course of twenty years of teaching and clinical practice as both a Rolfer and a Rolf Movement Practitioner, I have developed a series of stretches that I believe captures the essence of our manipulation and movement work.. The sequence of these stretches tracks the basic Rolfing "Recipe". The system includes precise instructions, which guide the user's exploration of functional relationships, connections and lines of transmission. It accounts for both structure and function. The stretches alter shape – *i.e.*, *trans-form* — by releasing patterns and altering the tonus and organization of the myofascial web. At the same time, they facilitate exploration of sensations and inner

states and movements, as well as their expression.

Rolfers themselves can use the Structural Stretches to enhance their own understanding and embodiment of the work. The Structural Stretches also can be given to clients – either as "homework" between sessions, or as a tool to further their own explorations and transformations following a Rolfing series.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Soon after I received my bachelor's degree in clinical psychology in 1973, I participated in a study group with Dr. Jose Angelo Gaiarsa — a psychiatrist who combined the theories of Carl Jung and Wilhelm Reich, and introduced somatic therapies to a whole generation of psychologists in Brazil.⁴ There, for the first time, my eyes were



opened to the importance of proprioception to self-image and self-esteem — as well as to transformation. Then, in 1981, as a newly certified Rolfer®, I became interested in the connection between the physical structure and emotions, as theorized by Wilhelm Reich and his followers, and by Ida Rolf.⁵

During my advanced training in 1984 in Boulder, Colorado, with Emmett Hutchins and Peter Melchior, I started stretching in order to access my own bodily experience in an effort to concretize the concepts that I was being taught, which often seemed too abstract to me otherwise.⁶ Later, in New York City, my friend Dorothy Hunter and I found that we were both experimenting with stretches in a similar way. We began meeting in Central Park in the mornings to share our discoveries.

Back in Brazil, I continued my personal research, developing sequences of stretches to reproduce the effects of each of the standard Rolfing sessions. I was inspired to include my whole body in the stretches after my contact with the Mézière Method —, and later with RPG, a derivation of the Mézière Method brought to Brazil by Phillipe Soucard.⁷ In those methods, the postures involve the entire body, thereby producing postural changes by affecting the entire myofascial net. These whole-body stretches gained power and effectiveness when placed in the context of Dr. Rolf's profound understanding of structure.⁸

In 1986, as an assistant Rolfing instructor, I began to use the stretches as a pedagogical tool to enhance the students' proprioceptive experience of the sessions.

But I soon realized that the stretches could be used clinically. Done in preparation for a session, they created more resilience and openness in the client. During sessions, the stretches could elicit greater client participation and help the practitioner to perceive the client's limitations. Finally, the stretches were a powerful tool for clients to take

home — to explore their own bodies and connections as I had. I also observed that the stretches helped clients actively maintain the results of each session.

As I was developing the Structural Stretches, Rolfing itself was evolving. Rolfing Movement Integration was taking shape through the contributions of Vivian Jaye and Jane Harrington. The Definitions and Principles of Intervention⁹ — as well as new ways Rolfers found to look at structure,¹⁰ Peter Levine's work on shock and trauma,¹¹ and Dr. Gaiarsa's neo-Reichian approach to the somatic manifestations of psychological attitudes — gave the stretches an added dimension for me. Specifically, the internal experience the stretches evoke is more than sensorial; it also provides access to other layers of human experience. Because the soma is in some sense the synthesis of our experiences (as well as the potential ground of our future manifestations), stretching often elicits effects beyond the physical dimension — such as emotions, energetic experiences, and insights — all of which should be witnessed and acknowledged.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

The Structural Stretches encompass both structure and function, form and movement. For best results, maintain a perfect awareness in the positions. Maintain each position until you reach your personal limit, at which point you will experience a sense of physical limitation. Then, by challenging the limits of form through micro-movements or through focused breathing, you can contact the nature of the restriction. If you then allow the elongation to occur, the body accommodates to the change in form until you reach the next most obvious restriction. Then, you may continue the exploration.

Somatic holding patterns often have con-

nections to emotional, cognitive or spiritual dimensions. As a holographic system, these dimensions are interconnected and resonate with each other. Thus, challenging somatic holding patterns and allowing them to change has the potential to affect the whole person; and new levels of order and function can be attained across multiple dimensions. Therefore, the stretches should be conceptualized and practiced as whole body postures; and attention to other dimensions of being and their integration is imperative. Above all, do not treat yourself as an object to be stretched; instead, use the stretches to learn how to live your form and be open to whatever new form wants to emerge from the conscious exploration of your current limits.

First, you must become active by going into the posture, holding it, and fully sensing your limits. Then, you can gradually entertain what wants to emerge by easing or intensifying your sensations. Breathe with awareness, and allow and become the inner movements that appear as old patterns dissolve. Allow space for discharges of the Autonomic Nervous System (*e.g.*, goose bumps, yawning, temperature changes, slight trembling, etc.) and physiological changes, so that you can accept the form you were, embrace the form you are, and become the form that wants to emerge. This involves combinations of doing and relaxing, maintaining elongation while eliciting motility and inner movement, and holding the posture while executing micro-movements.

If you contact your limits with full awareness and gradually let yourself go, the Structural Stretches will allow you to gracefully find higher levels of integration and function. They are not about imposing any preconceived form on yourself or willfully exceeding your limits; rather, they are a personal investigation of how to activate the inherent orthotropic nature of your body.

STRUCTURAL STRETCHES FOR SESSION 1

The first hour is about opening the sleeve, generating more space for breathing, and decompressing the pelvis from above (thorax to hips) and from below (hips to legs).

Getting Ready

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Your back and shoulders are relaxed. Your arms are parallel to the torso, the hands with palms down and aligned with the forearm. Allow your whole body to be supported by the floor. Become aware of your breathing.



Sequence 1: Through the Arms

A. Gently elongate your arms away from the neck and shoulders. The arm movement begins from the midline of the body and travels all the way to the fingers and beyond. Then move your arms away from the sides of your body until they are level with your shoulders. If you find resistance, explore the restriction with breathing and micro-movements until it releases.



A.

B. As your arms approach an angle of 60 degrees to the body, allow your shoulders to rotate externally so that your palms face upward; then continue to abduct your arms until they reach an angle of 90 degrees.



B.

C. Continue the movement, always respecting and exploring restrictions, until your arms reach a diagonal above the shoulders. Be sure the front and back of your neck are loose, long and relaxed. When you are ready, allow your arms to slowly return to the *Getting Ready* position.



C.

Note: If you experience autonomic responses, wait for the cycle to complete itself; maintain the stretch (release it a little if necessary); and be open to the experience, focusing on the sensations, emotions or thoughts that may arise until the breathing comes back to normal.

Sequence 2: Through the Legs

Lie on your side with the pelvis perpendicular to the floor. Allow the upper knee to hang from the pelvis without touching the floor. (If necessary, bring the upper iliac crest posterior. This will help the knee to hang loosely from the hip). Allow the weight of your thigh to slowly open the hip joint. You can bring your knee closer to or farther from the torso to explore different attachments of the leg to the hip. A gentle touch on the knee may elicit a relaxation. Perform the stretch on the opposite side.



Sequence 3: Head and Neck

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Place your arms at a 45° angle from your torso. Allow your feet and lower back to rest comfortably in contact with the floor. Feel the stretch through the arm from the midline of the body. Allow the shoulders to move away from your neck toward the hands and beyond. Maintain awareness of your breathing and allow your torso to open out and expand.

A. Rotation of the Head. Unlocking your elbows, lengthen from ear to fingers while rotating your head on its axis. The back and front of your neck should remain comfortably stretched. Turning your head to the side without hyperextension will allow you to explore the relationships among the head, neck and arms.

B. Elongation of the lateral neck. Bring your ear towards your shoulder. On the opposite side, feel the elongation all the way from your fingers to your ear. Make sure your elbows, shoulders and head are always free and unlocked.

C. Combination. These two positions can be combined to explore the relationship among the myofascial layers of your head, neck and torso.



A.



B.



C.

Sequence 4: Pelvic Roll

A. Settle your pelvis in a neutral position with lumbar relaxed and supported on the floor. Make sure your feet are under and supporting your knees. Become aware of your breathing, allowing your thorax to relax and respond to the motion of your breath.

B. Begin to explore the transmission of weight and connection through the pelvis and legs, and into the soles of your feet. Look for the easiest transmission through your legs and knees (the whole foot should remain in contact with the floor). Notice the natural movement of the pelvis and allow your head to respond. Explore transmitting more weight into your feet and observe the resulting pelvic rolls and head responses.

Note: Experiment with different distances between the knees and between the feet: open and close them slightly to see which position allows the fullest and firmest contact of your feet to the floor.



A.



B.

Sequence 5: Standing Up

A. Allow both knees to drop to one side, and then roll the torso so that it comes on top of your thighs and you are sitting on your ankles. Fold your spine forward, allowing your head to drop first to your knees, and then to the floor. Allow your spine to relax and elongate. Allow the cervicals to release as you bring your forehead closer to your knees. Allow your arms to hang free along the sides of your body; and your shoulders to fall away from the head and neck. Let your breathing occupy the inner space while you explore any restrictions and allow the back to lengthen.

B. To come to standing, first place your hands palms down, under your shoulders, then straighten your arms, and finally bring your feet under you one at a time. Take your time, and explore the position of the pelvis in relation to whole foot as it makes contact with the ground.

C. Flex and extend your knees, exploring how this brings the pelvis up and down. While keeping your spine and head hanging, raise the sitting bones until the back of your legs lengthen fully.

D. Find the most stable relationship between the feet and the pelvis. Then, with the knees still slightly bent, allow your breath to slowly unroll your spine until you come to standing. Let your head come last. Then straighten your legs.

E. Explore the options for the most appropriate relationship of all the parts from head to feet while relaxing and accommodating the shoulder girdle above the torso.

Now, with your eyes open, notice your breathing. Adjust the parts of your body in relation to each other and be aware of the changes; savor them. Pay attention to the environment around you and walk, experiencing yourself in motion.¹²

ENDNOTES

1. This article introduces Pedro's *Structural Stretches*, the complete series of which has been published as an illustrated manual, now available through the Boulder Bookstore.

2. Roth, H.D., *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-Yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999.

3. Maitland J., "Orthotropism and the Unbinding of Morphological Potential," *Rolf Lines*, 29 (1), pp. 15-24, Rolf Institute, Boulder, CO, 2001.

4. For an introduction to Dr. Gaiarsa's seminal work, see Gaiarsa, J.A., *Reich 1980*, Agora, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1982.

5. Some of my initial forays into the field are set forth in my Master's Dissertation — Prado, P., *Contribuições Sobre o Pensamento e Obra de Ida P. Rolf para o Trabalho com Postura em Psicologia* — presented at Instituto de Psicologia da Universidade de Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1982.

6. For helpful theory on stretching, see Lederman, E., *Fundamentals of Manual*

Therapy – Physiology, Neurology and Psychology, Churchill Livingstone, New York, 1997.

7. Souchart, P., *Auto-Postures*, Université de Therapie Manuelle, St. Mont, France, 1988.

8. Rolf, Ida P., *Rolfing: Reestablishing the Natural Alignment and Structural Integration of the Human Body for Vitality and Well-being*, Healing Arts Press, Rochester, VT, 1989.

9. See Maitland, J. and Sultan, J., "Definition and Principles of Rolfing," *Rolf Lines*, 20 (2), pp. 16-18, Rolf Institute, Boulder, CO, 1992.; Cottingham J.T., Maitland J., "Integrating Manual and Movement Therapy with Philosophical Counseling for Treatment of a Patient with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis: A Case Study that Explores the Principles of Holistic Intervention," *Alternative Therapies*, Vol. 6 (2), pp. 119-127, March, 2000.

10. See, e.g., Sultan, J., "Towards a Structural Logic," *Notes on Structural Integration*, (1) 1216, Hans Flury, Zurich, Switzerland, 1986; Schleip, R., "Primary Reflexes and Structural



A.



B.



C.



D.



E.

Typology," *Rolf Lines*, 21 (4), pp. 37-47, Rolf Institute, Boulder, CO, 1993; Flury, H., *Notes on Structural Integration*, Zurich, Switzerland, 1986 to present.

11 Levine, P.A., *Waking the Tiger — Healing Trauma*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA, 1997.