

**The Upside of Down: Understanding Rolfing**  
by  
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To be human is to be upright. The journey towards vertical begins the moment that we as infants lift our head to look about. Opposed to this inner impulse upwards is the constant downward pull of gravity. Our human structure, at a fundamental level, is organized around this balancing act between up and down. The broadest goal of the Rolfing process is to align the body so that balance can be found and experienced within the gravitational field.

Ida P. Rolf, Ph.D., who developed the Rolf Method of Structural Integration, found that most people have postures that are significantly misaligned in relationship to the constant demands of gravity. The Rolfing process is a method to help people unravel those postural and movement patterns which are perpetuating an inefficient response to gravity and to discover the sense of lightness and lift that seems to arise effortlessly when the body finds its intrinsic balance. In short, it's a Rolfer's job to find the up in down.

A simple way to understand alignment with gravity is to think of what you must do to keep a sheet of plywood, standing on end, upright. If the sheet is perfectly vertical then you need to exert no effort at all to keep it up. If it starts to fall in either direction you have to push against it to bring it back to center. If it moves only an inch off center you can push it back into place with very little effort. The further it gets from the center line the more effort you must exert to bring it back into balance with the vertical force of gravity.

To get a sense of this in your body, try a simple exercise. Keep your feet firmly on the ground and from your ankles rock forward until you feel your weight on your toes and then rock back until you feel your weight on your heels. Continue rocking back and forth making the rock smaller each time until you find the middle between the two extremes. The middle is the place where you feel the lightest on your feet and use the least amount of effort to remain standing. Most people are very surprised to find that they are in quite an unfamiliar body position. That place of lightness is where the major blocks of the body are balanced one on top of another and where the overall structure aligns itself with the vertical downward pull of gravity. The Rolfer's hope is to make that "place of lightness" a familiar and ongoing experience for the client.

Now image that you cut the plywood horizontally into six pieces and then joined the pieces with six sets of hinges. The six segments mirror the major "hinges" of our body: the ankles, knees, hips, lower back, mid-back and neck. Imagine what you must do to balance this hinged sheet on its end. To accomplish this you will have to split your attention. You must monitor the overall structure with regards to vertical and you must also check the hinged joints so that the different pieces remain stacked one on top of the other. Only the interplay between these two areas of attention will keep the hinged structure upright.

Like any therapeutic discipline Rolfing has a number of crucial concepts that guide the practitioner in his or her work. A central concept is "the line". "The line" reflects the true vertical of gravity's downward pull. It is that place where the plywood stands on its own. In our body experience the line is felt as that sense of lightness that arises when we are balanced front to back and side to side and when we are aligned top to bottom in a balanced relationship with gravity.

Intimately related to the concept of "the line" are the ideas of "the core" and "the sleeve". The human body is a many-layered structure with muscles lying upon muscle lying upon bone. Roughly speaking those muscles that function deep in the body and that work to maintain the structural integrity of the body are "the core". The larger muscles that lay on the surface of the body and that move us about are "the sleeve". To understand the relationship between "the core" and "the sleeve" think about the hinged

sheet of plywood. The overall attention to maintain the entire plywood structure upright reflects the role “the sleeve” plays in keeping us upright. The attention you must give to keeping the hinges aligned reflects the function of “the core”. The interplay of these two functions reflects the interplay of attention necessary to keep the hinged plywood structure upright.

The last idea in this conceptual toolbox is that the body is an ongoing process of balance. The human structure is a highly mobile structure that is a constant balancing act between opposing muscles and muscle groups, between “the core” and “the sleeve”, and between movement and support.

With these ideas in mind it is time to return to my initial contention that the primary goal of a Rolfer is to find the up in the down. What Rolfers see daily is that if our bodies are organized, in a balanced fashion, in relationship to “the line”, and if “the core” is functioning as the basis of support, then the outer muscles of “the sleeve” are free to perform their primary task of moving us about. The overall internal experience of this organized body is a feeling of grounded stability out of which arises a sense of lift upward through the center of the body.

The task of the Rolfer is twofold. The first job is to encourage changes in the client’s structure through insightful manipulation of the connective tissue that binds the body together. The intention behind the hands-on work of the Rolfing process is to restore the balance by removing those restrictions in the connective tissue network that inhibit the balance of the major segments of the body in relationship to “the line”. The second task is to help make shifts in the unconscious movement patterns that perpetuate the imbalances in our physical structure and to provide new options for the way we walk, sit, and stand. At the heart of the movement re-education of the Rolfing process is the attempt to give to each client the sense of how the feeling of grounded stability yields a sense of lightness and lift.

Of course, most people who come to get Rolfed are not looking to discover “the line”. They usually come with specific physical complaints from which they want relief. What Rolfers have found over and over again is that by encouraging openness and balance in the muscles and tissues of the body many of the chronic aches and pains tend to diminish and disappear. Because the hands-on work is so successful in treating chronic pains and improving posture and movement efficiency most people think of Rolfing only as a method for treating specific complaints. The hands-on work is just one tool to open people to the fact they can experience their bodies in a new way.

Rolfers view themselves as body educators. They hope that their clients, as a result of the Rolfing process, come away with a deeper awareness of their bodies and find new ways in which they can more efficiently manage the stresses and strains of daily life. The strength of Rolfing is that it has the potential to remind us that significant changes can be made in our lives at any time, that our self-experience is always open to revision and that there really is an upside to down.

**Mark Donahue** has a degree in Philosophy from Sonoma State University. He began his massage studies in 1985 and was certified as a Rolfer® in 1987. He was certified as an Advanced Rolfer® in 1998. Mark is a Teacher-in-Training at the Rolf Institute. He has taught the Advance Foundation of Somatic Practices and has been the assistant teacher in basic Rolfing® classes. Mark is an enthusiastic student of movement education and has studied and taught Tai Chi Chuan since 1975. He has also practiced meditation since 1978. Mark has a successful private practice in Monterey, where he also resides.