

Breathing Through the Whole Body: Toward a New Functional Definition of The Line

by Will Johnson, Certified Rolfer © 2012

Even though Ida Rolf always presented The Line as the highest value to which the work can aspire, it remains the most neglected, and unexplored, aspect of the teaching as we have continued mostly to focus on Rolfing's therapeutic applications, rather than its evolutionary implications. In her more lyrical moments, Dr. Rolf would speak of Rolfing as a kind of handmaiden to the force of evolution that, if Darwin is correct, has kept propelling our species all these millennia to an ever more upright posture. My primary attraction to Rolfing was always as an experiment in the evolution of consciousness, and the understanding that I got from Dr. Rolf was that the two primary forums in which evolution can be observed to occur—body and consciousness—were deeply intertwined and appeared either together or not at all. The image that she used to express this potential for evolutionary growth was The Line.

The main problem with The Line, of course, is that no one was ever able to craft a workable definition of what it actually might be or what constituted its embodiment. As Structural Integrators, we understandably approached any discussions or exploration of The Line as a structural issue, but this single minded insistence that The Line be explained and approached in purely structural terms has never proved satisfactory and, I would suggest, has even proved to be something of a red herring. Because no two bodies are identical, it simply isn't possible to craft a structural definition of The Line that is applicable to everyone. For The Line to indicate, as I believe it does, a path of transformational practice that any body—tall or short, stout or slender, young or old—can explore and pursue, there needs to be a common denominator to its expression that applies to all bodies.

I would like to suggest that The Line is what happens when every joint of the body can remain in constant, subtle motion in resilient response to the force of the breath. The evolutionary practices of The Line, then, work to let go of the restrictions to a whole bodied breath through playing with balance.

* * * * *

Notice that I didn't say a thing about vertical alignment. Vertical alignment, the keystone of a purely structural perspective, is not alone sufficient to embody The Line. We can stand up quite straight and tall but still restrain the breath. We can't, however, experience breath moving through a body that is grossly out of alignment. In other words, by paying attention to the possibility of a breath that can move through more and more of the body, we have no choice but to become more structurally aligned.

The Line can never appear through the static. It's not like becoming a perfectly positioned fence post, but more like what happens when we ride a bicycle. It can only be approached through allowing constant, natural movement to keep occurring throughout the entire body, and the natural source of this constant movement in a relaxed body is the breath. Surrendering to the constant motion of the breath takes the body, and the consciousness that it expresses, out of the static into the ecstatic (ex-static).

My continued inspiration for this understanding is Dr. Rolf herself. During my auditing class she responded to the question "how should a Rolfed body breathe?" by suggesting that, in a truly balanced body, movement would be felt to occur at every joint of the body in natural, resilient response to the force of the breath (and she even went on to suggest that this movement could be experienced in the joints between all the small bones in the feet as well as the sutures in the cranium!), and I increasingly believe that this functional image of The Line works extremely well as a common denominator that applies to every body.

* * * * *

The contraction and relaxation of the diaphragm create a force that can be transmitted through every joint of a relaxed body just as the force that creates ocean waves causes motion to appear throughout the entire body of water through which the wave is passing. As we all know, a body whose structure is grossly misaligned cannot relax its tensions because, if it did, it would simply topple over. Bring the body to greater alignment,

and the body can start to relax and let go. For relaxation to continue, though, motion needs to keep occurring throughout its entire length in resilient response to the breath. If that motion ceases, we forfeit our relaxation and the myofascia gradually hardens. From this perspective what the hands-on sessions of Rolfing can be viewed as actually working on are the fleshy holding patterns and tensions that are the result of resistance to the free flow of breath through the body.

* * * * *

Resistance to the transmitted motions of the breath appears as a purely physical phenomenon through freezing the tissues of the body at its joints, but it also appears as a phenomenon of consciousness through its role in creating the quality of consciousness that passes as normal in the world at large, a quality in which there is often a great deal of semi-conscious thinking going on and very little awareness of bodily sensation. Within this essentially disembodied consciousness we identify with the speaker of the internal monologue (whom we name “I”), and the manifestation and nurturance of this “I” is best conducted through holding various parts of the body still (the head freezes, the belly grabs, the legs become frozen stilts, and on and on with infinite, highly personal variations).

When everything in the body can start to move again, it’s not just the frozen stillness in the soft tissues and energetic patterns of the body that starts melting. The internal monologue of the mind—that manifests as a litany of unbroken and unbidden thoughts—and the condensed and highly compacted sense of “I” that accompanies it can start melting away as well, revealing in their place a dramatically different perspective of consciousness, what the Buddhists describe as *sunyata* (open dimension of being) or *rigpa* (our natural state), what the Sufis call *fana* (melting away). My strong sense is that the evolutionary effect on consciousness that Dr. Rolf seemed to imply might occur to someone exploring Lined states is wholly concordant with these descriptions.

When asked about his view of Western civilization, the well-known Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn simply responded “lost in thought.” Check this out for yourself: when you become lost in thought (which, let’s be honest, we all do on a maddeningly regular basis), doesn’t

the body become still and frozen and breath become restricted and limited?

Alignment allows the body to relax, and resilient motion throughout the body in response to the force of the breath allows relaxation to continue over time. If this constant motion ceases, the body forfeits its relaxation, and the consciousness-shifting effects of an exploration of The Line will also equally come to a stop.

* * * * *

To explore The Line and its evolutionary potential, I don't really see any other alternative to bringing periods of formal practice into our daily lives. We all need to find the practices that work best for us, but in my experience this has been best explored through meditating in a seated, but highly motile and resilient, posture and through spontaneous movement and dance. Ultimately, Dr. Rolf spoke of Rolfing as a "way of life," just as Buddhist teachers speak of mindfulness practice as a 24/7 occupation.

These are the questions that interest me:

Where in the body do you hold yourself still when you breathe? Where and how do you inhibit and hold back the breath? What happens to you, at both the level of body and mind, when you let go and start allowing more movement to occur in response to the breath? The joints between the vertebrae of the spine are not unlike joints anywhere else in the body. They're designed solely for the purpose of movement. What happens when you pay attention to your spine, relax as completely as possible, and allow movement to occur between every vertebra as you breathe? By surrendering to the possibility that resilient motions naturally want to occur throughout the entire body in response to the breath, alignment and relaxation have no choice but to manifest. What happens to your sense of self when you let breath pass freely through you?

* * * * *

Rolfing has always had a shadowy corner of whispered murmurings and half-veiled suggestions that the work was not just about physiotherapy, but that a sincerely embodied exploration of its tenets

amounted to entering into a sort of mystery school (and indeed the human body is the mystery school campus par excellence). From a more purely physiotherapeutic perspective of Rolfing, anything but the most casual discussion of The Line with our clients may come across as irrelevant, too much information, way too esoteric, or simply distracting, but from the mystery school perspective of Rolfing, exploring The Line would be central to the intentions of the teaching. The Line tells us to play with balance and allow breath to pass through more and more of the body. Exploring this as conscious, intentional practice has a profound effect on both body and mind and leads us ever deeper into what has always struck me as the very strange and mysterious whatever-it-is at the core of embodied existence.

* * * * *

Let's head off some possible misconceptions about this functional approach to The Line. The Line is not some kind of goal to be attained and then maintained. Even to define it, as I earlier did, as a condition in which every joint in the body can move in response to the passage of the breath is misleading. It doesn't point to a consummated condition. What it points to is a path (not a goal) of mystery school practices, an attitude to embodied exploration in which we play with and explore conditions of upright balance while relaxing and letting go of the restrictions to a breath that wants to breathe through more and more of the body. The goal is not to embody some kind of perfected pattern of breath. The goal is just to do the practices, breath by breath, and see how they affect you.

The same can be said of balance as well. Balance is not a goal. We're not trying to arrive at some kind of consummate place of balance and hold ourselves there to experience the evolutionary shifts that Dr. Rolf intimated would occur. We're just playing with balance, one breath at a time, not unlike how as a child you played with balancing an upside down broom on your outstretched hand. Playing with balance in the context of surrendering to a breath that wants to breathe through more and more of the body is just that: it's what you play with, moment to moment, while exploring practices of letting go. Or, in the manner of a saying by Yoda, the sage from Star Wars, we might say: "there is no Balance; there's only balancing."

* * * * *

Rolfing as physiotherapy helps relieve the residual pain that has accumulated in a body's tissues, and the relief that we offer is, for most of our grateful clients, reward enough. The path of The Line is for people who want to further explore how playing with balance and relaxing the restrictions to the free flow of breath affect and alter their sense of embodied consciousness. We know that the force of evolution (which can be felt palpably as a deep energetic current) wants to keep propelling us to stand up ever straighter. My continued fascination in exploring what I've come to consider the practices of The Line is in how it's going to affect and influence who or what I experience myself to be, right now, in this moment. That's the mystery school practice.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, one of Buddhism's most seminal texts and whose words are ascribed to the historical Buddha himself, the instructions on the awareness of breath culminate in the suggestion "as you breathe in, breathe in through your whole body; as you breathe out, breathe out through your whole body." Why do you think the Buddha wants us to do exactly what Dr. Rolf was also suggesting is possible?

Will Johnson is a Certified Rolfer and the author of a number of books about the role of the body in spiritual practices, including *The Posture of Meditation* and *Breathing Through the Whole Body: The Buddha's Instructions on Integrating Mind, Body, and Breath*. Anybody wishing to communicate with him about the functional exploration of The Line and its effect on consciousness may do so through emailing will@embodiment.net.