



Change, Transformation, and the Universal Pattern of Myofascial Holding

by Will Johnson

At the 1994 Annual Meeting I attempted to define and distinguish between what I have come to call the two primary paths of Rolfing: Rolfing as a path of therapeutic change and Rolfing as a path of transformation. I continue to find this distinction useful and would like to clarify and expand on it in this article. I would also like to speak directly of transformation and explain how I am using this term. The word “transformation” is often utilized to describe a broad range of conditions, many of which I believe are more accurately described by the label “change.” I have found it more useful to reserve the label “transformation” to describe a highly specific condition involving a radical shift in the way we experience our body and mind, and I would like to try to explain within the context and metaphors of Rolfing how I understand that shift to occur.

Change and Transformation

The initial motivations for change and transformation appear to be fundamen-



tally identical. Both begin with a felt awareness of unsatisfactoriness which appears in the form of physical or emotional pain. However, the paths that change and transformation propose as a resolution to this awareness of unsatisfactoriness diverge almost immediately after this shared recognition. Change generally involves a forced manipulation of an existing condition. Starting with something, we attempt to manipulate it so that it becomes something else. Change always implies a perception of aberration or lack, a vision that somehow something about the existing condition is wrong and needs to be fixed. Implicit in the motivation for change is the perception and belief that how I am right now is not okay. A traveler on the path of change will view the form that the unsatisfactoriness takes as a kind of poison that needs to be removed from the system. Hopefully this removal can occur in such a way that the larger system itself is not significantly disturbed.

Travelers on the path of transformation may choose to relate to the manifestation of pain in quite a different way. Real transformation occurs not through willfully attempting to

alter an existing condition but through a deep and profound acceptance of that condition exactly as it is. By kindling an awareness of the condition as it is, accepting and relaxing into whatever is kindled, and then yielding to the deeply organic process that is inevita-

split off or rejected. Chronic pain, if accepted and felt deeply in this way, becomes the doorway to its own resolution. The resolution of pain offers us, then, the opportunity to integrate through reclaiming this dissociated part of ourselves. It is not just the pain

something like this: accept the truth of your condition exactly as it is, and that condition will inevitably begin to change on its own spontaneously and naturally. The corollary to this law is: do not accept the truth of your condition as it is, in fact willfully try to change it, improve it, or make it better, and all you may accomplish in the long run is to reinforce and secure the original condition from which you hoped to get relief. You may be able to effect cosmetic or superficial kinds of changes, but real transformational shifts in which our sense of self and identity is radically altered or affected, will not occur.

I would also like to add that acceptance in this context does not mean "putting up with." When we put up with an unsatisfactory condition, we more often than not attempt to keep it at arm's length and suppress its symptoms. Real acceptance involves deeply feeling into the condition exactly as it is. Nor does acceptance mean "indulging or prolonging." If we are honestly able to face and experience a sensation or condition as it is, that sensation or condition will naturally begin to shift its form of appearance.



bly stimulated, we are led to experiences of resolution that may go far beyond the alleviation of symptomatic pain. From this perspective pain is acknowledged as something not to be gotten rid of, but rather as a guide whose persistent presence is showing us a place in ourselves that we have

that is transformed through such an act of reclamation, however. By reclaiming a part of ourselves that we have previously rejected, our sense of self must inevitably undergo a transformation as well.

A highly paradoxical law governs the way in which transformation occurs. It goes



It feels important to make this distinction between change and transformation at the onset of this article, and we will return to its implications as we go along. The differences between these two strategies may become clearer, however, if we turn our attention to the issue of what I refer to as real and profound embodiment.

The Disembodied State

What passes as normal in the world at large is what I have come to call "the disembodied state." There are two primary characteristics that define this state. In the first place there is very little actual felt awareness of the body. Now this lack of awareness is very peculiar in light of the fact that tactile sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell and even further. If you hold out one of your hands, you can very quickly get a sense of what I'm talking about. Just let yourself feel your hand exactly as it is. At first you may not feel much of anything, but gradually you may realize that you are aware of sensations of weight or tem-

perature as the cool air of the room passes over the surface of the skin. Just keep relaxing the hand and observing. Within a short time you will probably be able to experience much more subtle sensations than these. You may be able to feel deep inside the hand and become aware of a kind of tingling, what might be described as a vibratory or electric current composed of minute tactile sensations. Even though these sensations are extraordinarily small in size and are oscillating or sparking at almost unimaginably rapid rates of vibratory frequency, they can still be distinctly felt.

Now these sensations exist on all parts of the body all the time, and yet most of us manage somehow to completely block their felt presence from our awareness. How and why we do this have been particularly interesting questions for me. I believe that the mechanism through which we're able to block out awareness of these subtle bodily sensations is a systematic pattern of tensing through the myofascia (with the attendant loss of tonicity that must inevitably follow). Because we all do this to a greater or lesser degree I have come to view it as a *universal* pattern of myo-

fascial holding, distinguishing it in this way from the highly *individual* patterns of myofascial restriction that manifest in an individual body as a result of the personal history of that body. I further believe that the reason why we do this is that such tensing is mandatory in the creation of the quality of consciousness that passes as normal in the world at large.

The second characteristic that typifies the disembodied state and that typically accompanies (and may even prove to be dependent on) this universal pattern of myofascial holding is the involuntary, internal monologue of the mind. The disembodied state is a function of the relative absence of bodily sensations and the overwhelming presence of this internal voice. You are probably quite familiar with this aspect of mind. It provides a running commentary on your life and leans toward judgments and criticisms (of self and others), hopes, fears, desires, and aversions. Its speculations are almost entirely about the past and the future. The present moment possesses virtually no reality to the disembodied mind. If, however, we are lodged in the fantasy of past and future time, we are literally not present, and one of the

main features of the disembodied state is the forfeiture of any sense of real presence. Lost in our minds, we have little awareness of our bodily sensations. Neither are we very aware of sounds or, I would even suggest, sights.

Within the world of disembodiment we create our concept and sense of self through identifying with the speaker of the monologue whom we name "I." But by so identifying with the mental component of the disembodied state, we seriously limit our fullest potential as human beings. Instead, we content ourselves with a diminished awareness of body and a mind that is limited to its most superficial dimensions, both dependent on the discomfort of a pervasive pattern of myofascial holding that we are forced to accept as normal.

The Embodied State

Fortunately, the relationship between the body and the mind that so typifies the disembodied state can be reversed. To initiate this reversal, we have to begin by kindling an awareness of the tactile sensations of the body. We



are able to do this simply by turning our attention to the body and observing and accepting its sensational presence exactly as it is in this moment. You may remember that when you first went to observe your hand you couldn't feel much at all, but as you kept patiently observing this area tactile sensations began spontaneously to appear until the whole hand became a mass and current of small, shimmering sensations. By observing these sensations in this way, you did not create them. They are there all the time. All that you did was to shift your awareness in such a way that enabled the sensational presence of the body to make itself felt. You accepted (i.e., you deeply felt) the reality of your hand as it is.

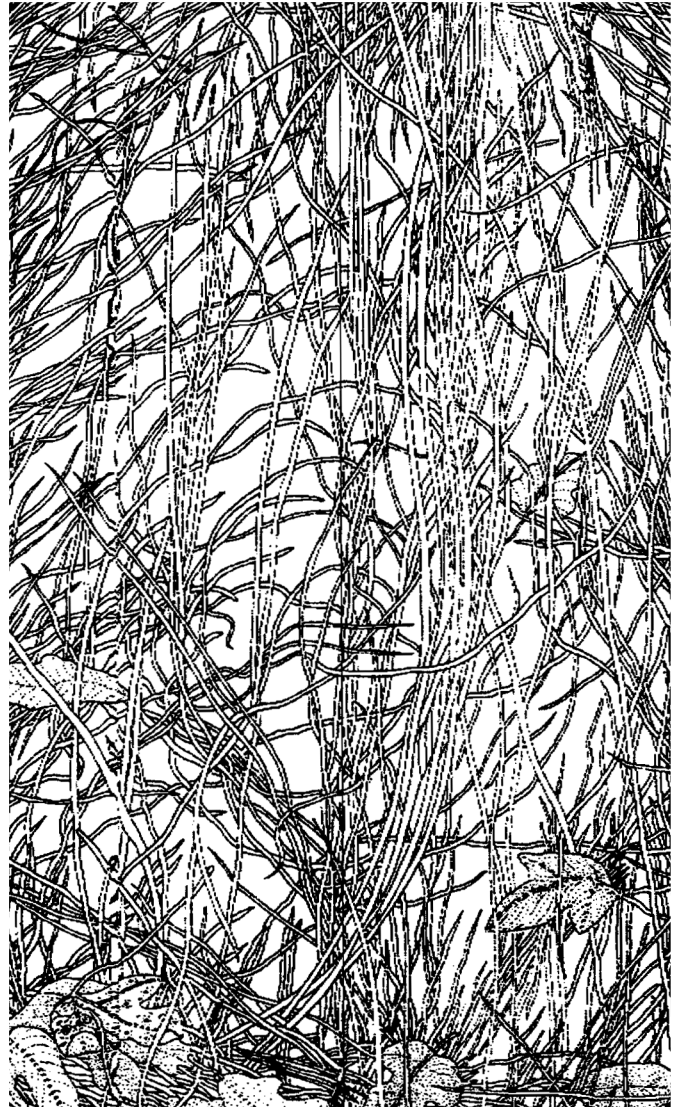
By broadening your focus, you can expand your field of awareness to include the sensational presence of the entire body. The whole of the body can ultimately be experienced as a unified field of shimmering, tactile sensations. Starting out from a numbed place in which you have little real awareness of body, you come to a much more vibrant place in which tactile sensations can be felt to exist everywhere. Initially this deeply embodied

state can feel quite exotic. Over time, however, as you become more familiar with the nature and process of this state, you come to realize that there is nothing at all exotic about it. On the contrary, it is felt to be completely natural, the simple function of a body that has learned to accept itself as it is.

Within this condition of embodiment the mind undergoes an equivalent transformation. Awareness of the tactile presence of the body lodges us completely within the present moment. The sensations of the body are so evanescent, changing and flickering on and off at such rapid speeds, that the only time we can have any real awareness of them is *right now*. The internal monologue of the mind, however, is almost entirely tied up in ruminations about the past and the future. You cannot be lost in the involuntary monologue of the mind and be aware of bodily sensations simultaneously. By shifting your focus and kindling an awareness of your bodily sensations, you effectively cancel out the mind's ability to indulge in past and future fantasies. At times this may even manifest as the monologue completely shutting itself off. As this superfi-

cial dimension of mind dissolves away, much deeper levels of consciousness and being are free to come to the surface of awareness. It's a bit like a layer of clouds dissolving to reveal the deep expanse of the sky and the warmth of the sun. This deeper dimension of the mind that the embodied state

naturally reveals is extremely open and spacious. It too feels enormously wholesome and natural. While it provides us with a sense of identity, it is of an entirely different quality from the predominantly isolated, egoic sense of self that manifests through the disembodied mind. Descriptions of





this state do not really exist within the psychological literature (itself being mostly focused on the *contents* of the mind), but are much more readily found in the literature of most spiritual traditions. The *sunyata* of Mahayana Buddhism is roughly equivalent as is the condition of *rigpa* (which is even translated as “the natural state”) from the pre-Buddhist Dzogchen teachings.

I would like to stress that transformation must occur simultaneously at the levels of both the body and mind, or it does not occur at all. I believe

that this at least partially explains why individuals who seek a spiritual transformation but do not include a somatic focus and practice in their search so often meet with frustration and disappointment. What this also means is that it is not possible to experience the physical ease and comfort of the embodied state if we are unwilling to experience the profound shift in consciousness that wants simultaneously to occur. Such resistance will simply not allow the myofascia to release.

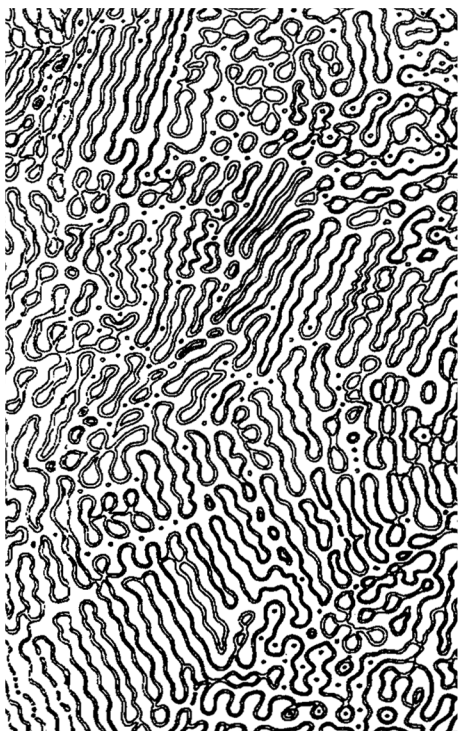
Does all of this come without a downside? I

wouldn't really call it a downside, but it does have its challenges. In the first place, we may not move directly from a condition of body that is numb and unaware of its sensations to the experience of the whole of the body as a unified field of freeflowing, shimmering, tactile sensations. When we begin to release the holding responsible for suppressing the felt awareness of the body, a whole host of unpleasant sensations can come quickly to the surface of awareness, and we may quickly understand why we have not wanted to feel the body! The law of transformation, however, tells us that deep and profound change can only occur through accepting the sensations of body as they exist. As we do this, the sensations begin to shift organically on their own. Within the condition and ongoing process of embodiment we will almost certainly be challenged to feel the unpleasant sensations that we so habitually attempt to suppress. The form that these sensations take may range from mild unpleasantness to the most intense manifestation of what I call our condition of primary contraction.

In addition, a felt awareness of bodily sensations can begin to reveal how enor-

mously powerful a force the current of sensations actually is. The full awareness of just how powerful this force is can initially be highly sobering. Over time, however, its unrestricted movement and strength of presence will come to be experienced as completely natural. Another area of challenge presents itself as we come to recognize that the process of unraveling that begins to occur when we turn our attention in this way to the felt awareness of the body can be a highly convoluted one. One moment we may feel an extraordinary flow of sensations passing freely through the conduit of the body, and the next moment a deeper level of holding may have made its way to the surface. As long as we can keep relaxing into and accepting the constantly shifting manifestation of sensations, however, the process continues. Layer upon layer of holding that we may never have even known existed keeps coming to the surface where, if we can accept its manifestation and not react to it and try to shut it down, it continues spontaneously to resolve itself.

The challenges that occur at the level of mind can be equally strong. The superficial-most level of the mind,





which ordinarily manifests as the internal monologue, may actually disappear within a condition of particularly profound embodiment. It is not uncommon for the enormous relief that initially can accompany this disappearance to be followed by a strong reaction of fear as the egoic mind realizes that it is losing its dominion and position of primacy. The disembodied state is the price that the egoic mind is willing to pay to maintain its position of ultimate authority. In other words, it is more important for the egoic mind to maintain itself than to experience the real and profound vitality that the embodied state offers if the price of that vitality appears to be its own demise and disintegration. The tenacity of the egoic mind should not be underestimated. It will use everything in its bag of tricks to try to convince you that the embodied state is foolish, wrong, not okay, potentially dysfunctional, or at the very least not worth the price of admission. Furthermore, the disembodied manifestation of mind has been running the show for so long that its habits are hard to break. Entrance into the embodied state requires long and patient practice of redirecting our atten-

tion. As soon as that attention wavers, the disembodied condition, in the beginning at least, may spring back quite resiliently to reassert itself.

An additional challenge is that the transformational shift that I am describing here is fundamentally taboo within the culture in which most of us who are reading this article reside. Our culture, itself fashioned according to the bias of the egoic imperative, has chosen to label the disembodied state as normal. Any deviations from that state, especially ones that involve the dissolving of the manifestation of identity that the disembodied state works so hard to create and reinforce, will be initially met with great resistance. Within the embodied state we learn to accept ourselves in such a way that we become aligned with the directional grain of our true nature. To do this, however, we may find ourselves moving counter to the directional grain of the culture in which we live. Within the disembodied state we align ourselves with the directional grain of the cultural norm, but we do this through creating a sophisticated pattern of bodily holding that creates constant tension and the gradual diminution of our essential vi-

brancy. Ultimately we all have to make a choice as to what we truly want in our lives.

The Universal Pattern

The pattern of myofascial holding that generates the disembodied state functions as a kind of dam to contain the life force and prevent it from passing freely through the conduit of the body. This life force appears to us through the felt awareness of the body's tactile sensations. The sensational presence of the body is not static, however. Once you are able to kindle an awareness of the body's sensations and have gained some familiarity with how the manifestation of these sensations keeps on extending itself, you realize that this life force is very much like a current in a river. It wants to move freely. It does not want to be contained or held back. As you learn to continue settling into the condition and process of embodiment, you realize that you have to learn how to yield completely to the force of this current. Any unconscious restrictions to it will shut it down and recreate the conditions and experience of disembodiment. To yield to the current of the

life force is to release the universal pattern of myofascial holding.

The universal holding pattern generates a kind of force field, which I call the bubble of separation, surrounding the body. Do you know how you often encounter another person and it feels as though your energetic fields are like two bumper cars bouncing off each other? There is very little real communion that can occur through such a confrontation. The condition of disembodiment generated by the universal holding pattern creates what I call the myth of separation, the belief that who I am is an entity named "I" who resides in this body and is forever separated from the rest of existence that I perceive to exist beyond the perimeter of my physical body. The myth of separation, the disembodied culture's primary tenet of personal identity, creates and promotes the experiences of fear, isolation, and intense loneliness. Our physicists tell us, however, that nothing can exist in a vacuum, that everything is connected. Everything penetrates into and out of everything else. Such a notion must appear as a grave threat to the egoic mind which wants to lay exclusive claim to a



small bit of physical space, forfeiting its connection with the rest of the universe in the process. Fear, isolation, intense loneliness, and a feeling of not belonging or being interconnected with the larger forces of nature appear to the egoic mind as a small price to pay for this exclusivity. When we let go of the universal pattern, the life force begins to pass freely through us once again, and feeling awarenesses of profound interconnection and belonging become commonplace. Two people who are able to encounter each other from the perspective of a deeply embodied state will both find that the formerly impermeable force fields that create their individual bubbles of separation dissolve away during the interaction. They no longer experience themselves as individual bumper cars caroming off the surface of the other, but instead begin to experience themselves and each other as being part of a deep common ground of being out of which their individual bodies ultimately manifest. Indeed this experience of deep connection and merging is one of the most rewarding dividends of the embodied state. Ultimately, it will be recognized as the condition in which

our individual bodies are the most comfortable.

Just as the notion of an individualized, egoic existence forms the basis of identity within the disembodied state, so does the felt awareness of this common ground of being gradually come to form the basis of identity within the embodied state. The shift in identity that accompanies the felt awareness of this common ground is truly radical, and it is what I reserve the term "transformation" to describe.

Implications for Rolfing

Our primary function as Rolfers is to help people release unnecessary myofascial restriction from their bodies. Fundamental to our vision is the belief that unnecessary myofascial restriction limits the fullest potential of the human being. The paradox that we are faced with, however, is that what most people believe they want from a therapeutic encounter is "greater functionality within the condition of disembodiment." Most people want what I referred to at the beginning of this article as change. They want the offending symptom removed, but

they also want to be able to go back to business as usual once that removal has been successful. They don't necessarily want their awareness of self turned completely inside out.

The faculty's continued focus on a second-paradigm approach to our work and the companion project to upgrade and refine our skills of manipulation are, I believe, in large part a responsible reaction to the realities of the marketplace in which we find ourselves. People often come to us with specific aches and pains that they hope to have relieved. Highly skilled Rolfing has been shown to be effective in answering this request for change. It is a noble request, and the relief of pain is a noble act. It would be irresponsible on our part if we were to show these people the door out of a position that "Rolfing is not about change, but about transformation; the only thing I as a practitioner am interested in is real and profound transformation, and I don't care that what I do is capable of helping you experience the change that you're after." As an organization we can and should be proud of our increasing ability to help people in this way.

At the same time there is a whole other segment of

people who are attracted to Rolfing not because they have a specific ache or pain from which they want relief, but because somehow they intuitively know that to explore the experience of the body through Rolfing may assist them in clarifying some of the deeply existential life issues with which they might be grappling. These people may have a growing awareness that the true source of their discomfort is not so much the specific *content* of pain they may be experiencing as it is the entire *context* of disembodiment in which the pain is bred and nurtured. In working with people like this, an exclusively second-paradigm approach is not going to be wholly successful.

While I believe that we are much better in providing change and symptomatic relief than transformation (at least in the way I am defining it here), I also believe that Rolfing is inherently transformational work. This was certainly true for me when I was originally Rolfed. Through that initial work I began to experience the kinds of embodied awarenesses that I am speaking about in this article. The universal pattern of holding that I am referring to here is clearly embedded in the myofascia.

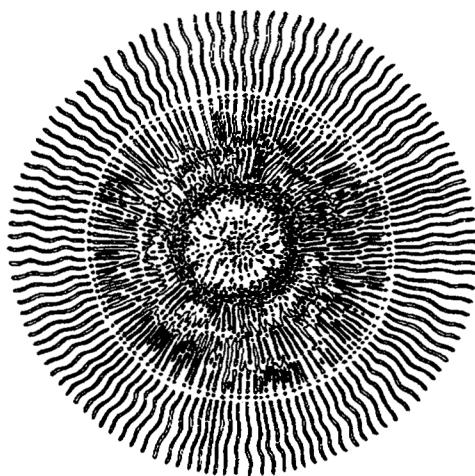


Therefore, even if our focus and ostensible goal is to relieve the more obvious individual patterns of holding that we perceive in our client's body, we are inevitably going to touch on this universal pattern as well. The situation is a bit like the fishing fleets in the Pacific ocean who set out their nets to catch tuna, but end up hauling in all the other varieties of fish that happen to be swimming in the neighborhood as well.

Having said that, I have also come to conclude that the traditional hands-on manipulations of Rolfing are not in and of themselves sufficient to bring this universal pattern of holding to resolution. The universal pattern of holding is ultimately more analogous to the kinds of functional holding patterns that the movement work so effectively addresses than it is to the structural holding patterns that the manipulation work speaks to.

In the interactive work that I have been developing to help people release this universal pattern I function much more as a guide than as a therapist. I don't manipulate people into the embodied state. Nor do I physically touch them. Rather, I help evoke this state in them simply through "giv-

ing them permission" to let the universal pattern drop away. This may seem like an unusual phrase to describe how I initiate this work, but it is the most accurate one that I have been able to come up with. Most of us intuitively know the embodied state even though we may rarely embrace it. Most of us know how to release the universal pattern that prevents its manifestation.



What people appear to need, more than anything, is someone simply telling them that it's okay to do so. The way in which I initially communicate this permission is by letting the universal pattern drop away from my system first. By entering into the embodied state myself, I create the only setting in which my client might feel comfortable enough to do the same.

The work proceeds by guiding the client to an awareness of what is actually transpiring in the present moment. We will spend time simply listening, acknowledging not only the obvious sounds but the extremely subtle ones as well. I guide the client to soften and broaden his or her vision; this enables the client to include an awareness of the whole of the visual field as a

unified phenomenon. Finally, attention is turned to stimulating the awareness of the tactile presence of the body, the sensory field with which we are quite literally the most out of touch. Once an awareness of this field has been satisfactorily stimulated, the work shifts to helping the client learn how to yield to the current of the life force that manifests through the tactile sensa-

tions of the body. Whatever issues serve to keep the embodied state suppressed in the client will inevitably be revealed, and these issues must be acknowledged and dealt with. Over time the client becomes familiar with the process by which the current of the life force keeps on altering the contents of experience from moment to moment.

Entrance into the embodied state can initially be accompanied by strong distortions to the visual and tactile fields. The awareness of subtle energetic patterns within the visual field can become increasingly commonplace. Opaque surfaces may begin to shimmer or glow. Outlines around objects can soften considerably. Colors or emanations of light may appear around objects. Objects may begin to look more like photographic negatives of themselves, rather than as the positive developed image with which we are more familiar. Familiarization with the embodied state makes it quite easy to "see" when a client is beginning to "hallucinate" in this way. At that point it is very important to acknowledge to the client that I can see what is happening and to affirm to them that their experience is



okay. Without this affirmation many people may become fearful and unconsciously reassert the universal pattern of holding so as to maintain the disembodied awareness, painful as it is, with which they are more familiar.

Transformation occurs through acceptance of our experience as it is, so ultimately it doesn't matter what we see, hear, or feel. We simply start from where we are and accept what we have. If the visual field becomes distorted, it needs to be accepted exactly as it appears, and the transformational process will continue. Once people become aware that this is okay, they begin to relax and settle into the process more, and the embodied condition begins to manifest even more palpably. Many people will speak of this initial manifestation as entering into an altered state of awareness. Once we have familiarized ourselves with the embodied state, however, we come to realize that it is not an altered state at all, but rather the natural state of a body that can relax into its sense of felt presence and accept itself as it truly is. Once the embodied perspective has been established, it is easy to see how the conventional disembodied

awareness that passes as normal is itself a literally altered state.

Fear is what keeps the majesty of the embodied state contained. In fact, I have come to view the fearful resistance to yield to the current of the life force as the source cause of all pain that ultimately manifests at the level of the physical body. By learning to yield to the current of the life force, we can effectively dismantle the universal pattern of holding and resolve the pain that it creates. The carrot that I would like to hold out to each and every one of you (one that is designed to offset any potential reaction from the disembodied mind that might like to discount what I've been saying here!) is that the embodied state also ultimately creates a condition of bodily comfort so remarkable that it simply needs to be experienced to be believed. These are strong words and are meant to be. Once the universal pattern is released and the life force can be felt to move freely through the conduit of the body, an extraordinary awareness of naturalness, authenticity, and comfort are generated. The most common response that I have found to occur in people entering into the embodied state

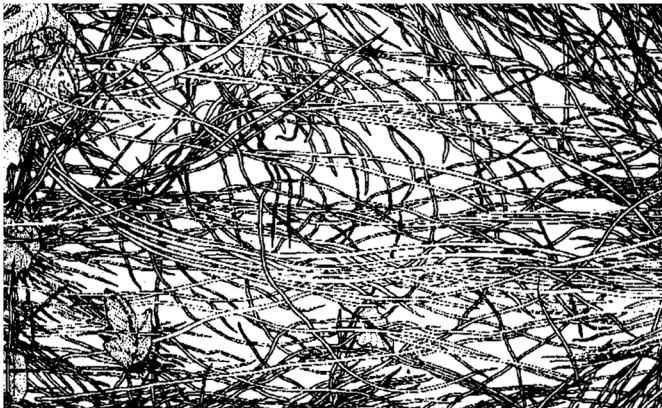
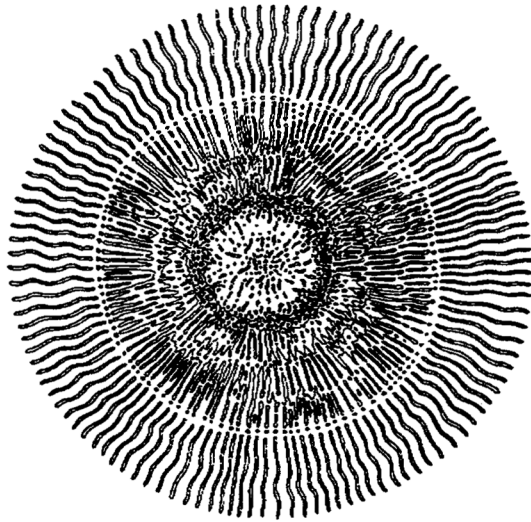
for the first time is the release of copious tears of gratitude at the recognition of "coming home at last." It is, furthermore, truly liberating for people to experience that to rekindle the vitality that they so seek all they need to do is to accept themselves deeply as they are, that their fundamental nature is okay. They don't need to manipulate or change their fundamental nature.

As Rolfers our work is to help people become more comfortable in their bodies. What I am presenting here is a strategy that I believe helps lead us back to a condition where, as human animals, we most want to reside. It's where we're truly comfortable. In light of this I would hope that many of us will choose to continue exploring the dimensions of transformational experience I am speaking of here and to learn the skills that allow us to interact with clients in this way when we see that such interaction appropriately addresses their needs. My dream and commitment are to train a cadre of practitioners who are able to function as effective and compassionate guides as they help their clients learn to release the universal pattern of myofascial holding and embrace the embodied state.

Physiological Afterword

During the writing of this article I had a couple of very fascinating phone conversations with Tom Myers and Jim Oschman. I wanted to see if I could gain a more accurate physiological explanation for what these minute, spark-like sensations actually are and, more importantly, how they are felt. My assumption has always been that the sensations are somehow able to self-reflect, that they don't require the interposition of a brain to "know themselves." I have further assumed that the speed at which they appear and disappear is far too fast to be processed by the central nervous system. But if this information is not conveyed through the nervous system, then how are we aware of it?

Jim Oschman confirmed this assumption in speaking of the connective tissue as constituting a much more ancient and primitive medium through which information can be conveyed than the more recently developed central nervous system whose speed at processing information is tortoise-like in comparison. He called the minute tactile sensations "electrets," natural occurring com-



ponents within the electrical field of the body.

Our conversation reminded me a great deal of Valerie Hunt's morning presentation during the 1994 Annual Meeting, specifically her assertion that "the mind is the field." I have been clear that the field that Valerie Hunt is referring to is identical to what I call "the felt energetic presence of the body." The apparently logical conclusion that I draw from this, then, is that "mind" and the felt awareness of the body are the same thing! If this is so, then an increased awareness of the felt presence of the body would logically create greater awareness of the dimensions of the mind. Much like Jim, Valerie Hunt also spoke about the speed at which information is conveyed through the field as being "instantaneous." Furthermore, she spoke of the process of healing as occurring through the "transaction of two fields," the field of the healer and the person being healed. This honestly feels to be an accurate description of what occurs when I am working with a client to release the universal pattern. We both enter into the embodied state together. It genuinely feels as though our two formerly separate ener-

getic fields begin to interact with and influence each other in an entirely salutary way as the universal pattern melts away. Anatomy and physiology are not my strongest suit as a Rolfer, and I very much appreciate the efforts of those of us within our community who are pursuing these questions and are amassing a body of data and observations capable of supporting a physiological vision that may prove to be revolutionary in the way we understand the body to work.

Will Johnson is a Certified Rolfer and the director of The Institute for Embodiment Training, a teaching school exploring the role of the body in spiritual practice. He is the author of Balance of Body, Balance of Mind: A Rolfer's Vision of Buddhist Practice in the West (Humanics, 1993) and The Posture of Meditation (available through Shambhala Publications in the fall of 1996).