

Gyrotomics, Chinese Internal Exercises and Rolwing®

An interview with Beth Ullmann-Franzese

Bill: As I said before, the prevailing attitude of the founder of Rolwing® structural integration toward exercise was ambivalent and it seems that at least the senior faculty are not known for their vigorous exercise routines. And so that leaves this huge area of how exercise can effect structure and how it interacts with Rolwing that is basically unexplored. And that's why I'm doing this. You are someone who exercises and has thought about this and you figured some stuff out.

Beth: Well, I think I have. First of all I come from a background of being a dancer and martial artist. For most of my adult life I spent many hours a day using my body and it never totally penetrated me that Ida Rolf thought movement was bad. I couldn't quite take that in so I just ignored it. My own preference for movement has always been for doing a skill. Many years ago before I ever became a Rolfer, I taught exercise classes. I didn't really do the exercises on my own, I didn't need to. I was doing skills that gave me what I needed in my body. So teaching, to other people, is often not teaching them what I do, but teaching them things that I think are going to work for them.

Bill: Right.

Beth: I find exercise boring. But I look at the reality of my practice, and the needs are vastly different from

person to person. I do get a fair amount of clients who are already doing martial arts or who are dancers. I think I might attract them because they see my background. The issue may not be me teaching them movement but trying to find out if there is something they are doing that they could do in a way that's less

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detrimental. I see that a lot with Yoga people; I have Yoga teachers coming in with wrecked necks from doing Yoga. So obviously if their necks are a wreck their students' necks are going to be wrecked too.

Bill: Right.

Beth: Sometimes they don't want to hear what I have to say, like, "Some of these poses aren't good for you."

Bill: Like shoulder stands?

Beth: Shoulder stands, head stands... I think that some people who are in very good shape may be able to get away with it. Although I wouldn't specifically recommend them—doing poses where there's hyper-extension in the neck is bad. The whole act of arching the neck and lifting the head is usually done incorrectly. To get that feeling of lift you have to go out of line. If you really keep your cervical vertebrae in line with your thoracic vertebrae then you go into an arch. It's not going to be such an extreme arch, but its part of the same thing.

Bill: Right.

Beth: So that's a big issue. I've had some people who are very willing to listen because it has worked for them. Other people are convinced that I should figure out some way to do the pose without it hurting.

Bill: Have you come across a system of exercise that you think really furthers the goals of Rolwing? Of structural integrity and support and the principles?

Beth: Yes, I've come across a few things I think work really well with Rolwing. I take movements from the internal martial arts—the Chi Kung that exists within some of the martial arts like Pa Kua and Shing Yi and Aikido.

Bill: umhum.

Beth: Yet, unless I can convince somebody to switch what they are doing like stopping Tai Kwan Do and going to Shing Yi, that it hasn't been as helpful as I would like. There is another system of exercise that works very well with Rolwing; the Gyrotonics system.

Bill: Gyrotonics?

Beth: Gyrotonics was invented by Juliu Horvath. Juliu was a dancer, a swimmer, and a Yoga instructor. He was deeply involved in Yoga, not just on a physical level, but on an energetic level. And he, of course, had back trouble. In figuring out how to get himself out of back trouble he invented this system. He uses machines which are rather amazing looking. They are made out of wood and the exercises work on circular paths.

Bill: So every movement that you make is a circle.

Beth: Almost every movement is either a circle or a spiral. The machines work with resistance so you can add weight. One of the machines has some springs so you could add resistance there. You can increase the strengthening aspects of it as you go. But it's generally done with low weights. One of the mistakes I see some instructors do is to allow beginners add on an extra ten pounds. That's not the point; that's not the way I was taught. To me, one of the most fascinating parts of his system, is this machine (I'm going to have to send you a picture of it). In one instance you straddle a bench. At the end of the bench there's a cross piece that has a big wheel on each side—it's parallel to the ground with a handle on it. By using those handles you can do a horizontal circle with your arms while you're arching and curling your spine. Now in doing this exercise you're supporting your weight with your feet. There's a lot of

attention paid to the support in your legs and your pelvis and because you also get the support from your arms you're able to articulate every vertebrae. For me this was the exercise that moved my back in a way that Rolwing seemed to hit a dead end. There were areas where my vertebrae weren't articulating individually. It wasn't causing me a great deal of problem, but it was there. And after doing this for awhile a couple of people worked on me that had worked on me before. They weren't necessarily aware of the Gyrotonics and would just take me by the skull and feel the movement going all the way down my spine. That was very nice, because I was getting some independent confirmation that what I felt happening to my body, was.

I've had many clients who aren't ready to do this whole system. It's a time commitment and a lot of concentration so sometimes I'll just say, "Try this exercise," or, "Try this set of exercises for six or eight times." Sometimes I can even use this as a breakthrough tool for people who are not ready to start it as a practice.

Bill: So, the format of the exercise is that someone takes you through each of the machines. I assume there's more than one.

Beth: I have one two-piece machine, which one could work on for years without running out of things to do. Juliu has some other machines too. One in particular is very good for rehabilitating knee problems. They are expensive and they take up a lot of space and I don't have enough people to warrant that. If I have someone who really needs to work on one of the other machines I send them to Juliu's studio.

Bill: So this is a system that's not really wide spread.

Beth: It's not.

Bill: It's not getting all the great press that Pilates is getting these days.

Beth: Well, the reason for that is because it's a little less accessible than Pilates. Now, I'm not an expert on Pilates. My personal experiences with Pilates happened years ago and they weren't very positive. It seems to me that what I was mostly doing was tightening up my abdominals and my hip flexors. On the other hand, I did some Rolwing sessions this year with a Pilates instructor and her understanding of the body was wonderful. She sends her students to me. I'm impressed with her work because all of them have function that is better than their structures. I love Rolwing them; it's like so much junk has already been let go. They respond really quickly and deeply.

The Gyrotonics is mostly popular with dancers. My idea is to try and bring it to people who are not dancers, who are not such skilled movers, because they have so much to gain from this. There is that dilemma, though: How do I keep in shape now that I've received a Rolwing series? Do I go back to aerobics class? Well, I certainly hope not! Some people do (I have people that do all kinds of things that I might not think are the best for their bodies) but I can't tell everybody what to do all the time.

Bill: Right. So your general attitude towards your clients' exercise is to encourage them to do whatever they're going to do or . . .

Beth: Well, I try to be supportive even if I see somebody doing something like aerobics classes. I'm very critical of aerobics classes. Most, even when a class is taught well, never enough take time to make corrections. I know that because I was an aerobic dance teacher. I was a total failure because I would stop the class all the time to say, "Stop turning your knees in," and the students would

yell at me because I was keeping them from sweating. So I quit.

Bill: At least conceptually, in the universe, there must be an aerobics teacher who can do both...who can pay some attention to how they are doing it and...

Beth: It's very hard, though. If you have structured levels where you have a beginners class you can teach people the skill without them trying to jump around and burn off five pounds in an hour. Then you work them up to the point where you don't have to constantly correct their execution. I think it's possible but I don't think anybody could do it if you have people arbitrarily walking into class without preparation.

I actually suggest to people that they do aerobic machines if they need to do something aerobic because I think it's more controllable for somebody, especially if they are doing a circuit. If they try and work on mechanics on the stair machine or exercise on a tread mill they can pay attention to what they are doing. Then I see if we can figure out a way to do the exercise with less damage. I've seen some success with that. One of the things that I've been experimenting with, and also found is wonderful for my body, is Middle Eastern dancing.

Bill: So belly dancing and...

Beth: Right. And, having found a good school where the teachers correct well, I've tried to steer some of my clients towards that. When they say, "I want to do something new, I want to dance," I suggest this. It's very natural movement and it's very symmetrical movement. So I steer people there.

Bill: Men and women?

Beth: There actually is a male teacher who has a mixed class of men and women.

Bill: That's outrageous.

Beth: He's outrageous.

Bill: I'm sure. You can do anything in New York.

Beth: The Gyrotonic system is about lengthening and developing strength in your infinite range. To support this one of the parts of the machine has pulleys that will rotate wherever you put them. So if you're doing arm

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circles you're doing *your* arm circles, you're doing *your* range. I always end up doing Continuum on it. But that's hard to teach people quickly and simply. In my practice, realistically, there are not a lot of people who are going to strengthen their body that much doing Continuum.

Bill: Right.

Beth: They are not going to get through their whole body, they're not going to really work on those difficult areas. So, if I can give them something that's a little more codified like, "Do these leg circles and these arm circles and do this work with your back,"...

Bill: Do you actually watch them on the machine? I can't imagine that that would be an economic thing for you to do.

Beth: I have somebody who works with me. I particularly picked someone who was not a dancer but from an internal martial artist background. I wanted to try and get away from one of the things that I don't always like about the Gyrotonics work. It can get very stylized and externally rotated and a little too dancer-like, a little too looks-oriented. I don't want to say that's what it's supposed to be because when I studied with Juliu there was nothing of that, it was totally internal. It was like studying Chi Kung with a master. His response to my question was the kind of response I'd expect from a Rolwing teacher not from a dance teacher. Most of the other teachers in Gyrotonics were dancers and their whole orientation, their whole way of asking questions, was completely different. From Julio I saw that depth was there in the system. But I really wanted to make a little departure there and take away that dance look. Someone I knew and have worked with from Aikido, has now been trained in Gyrotonics and works with me now. Often I'll do the program design for clients. So, unless someone has a severe physical problem, like Harrington rods in their spine, was in a car accident or has an active disc, I will come in and supervise at least their first session. I'll usually design their program and hand them over to Peter. I also find that I don't have the patience to stand there and watch somebody do something fifty times. If I am, I'll be correcting them in such great detail that I'll probably drive them out of their mind, unless they have been doing it for awhile. I like to come in and check people out and see how they are doing. It works as an intervention to come in and be a little hypercritical.

The other thing that I find very important when you're working with a machine is to get your client

standing up and working with gravity. When people work with Juliu I know he does this on his own, but my experience in working with other teachers was that they either didn't know how to do it or just don't do it. I'll have people get up and then I'll insert some of the Chi Kung exercises or some Pa Kua exercises to make sure that they can translate the exercise work into their function and structure.

Bill: I know something about Chi Kung, I've done four or five small courses in it and had a little practice that eventually petered out. But I don't know of these other internal forms that you mention.

Beth: Okay. Well first of all the Chi Kung that I use most is the system called 5 Elements which I learned along with Pa Kua and Shing Yi. It incorporates a lot of movement in the upper body. The feet stay stationary but there are constant rotations of different types in the shoulders and the hips. I was drawn to that because I think that it is not only energetically sound but structurally it has more to offer than the any of the others that I've used. It's great for people with shoulder and lower back problems. In Shing Yi and Pa Kua there's a lot of work with hip rotation to get power. For example, you might start from a very turned-in stance and spring into external rotation. There's a coiling and uncoiling exercise where you articulate your hip socket with the leg supported. A lot attention is paid to the positioning of the ankle, the knee and the hip. It's also very dynamic. There's a walk in Pa Kua that travels in a circular pattern where you go in one direction and then you reverse it and add a variety of different arm positions. The walking itself drives energy down through the legs and I found that very beneficial for hip problems and sometimes knee and ankle problems.

Bill: Is there a video that you would recommend on this stuff?

Beth: Unfortunately, there is no video.

Bill: Well, can one actually learn anything from reading a book? And is there a book that you would recommend?

Beth: No! There may be books out there but I've learned all this from an

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instructor. And because it's one of those lineage things I can't make a video. My teacher's teacher told him he could make a video but he never did. It would be nice to have a video. On the other hand, I've seen people who learn things from videos and I cringe when I think of what people might come up with if they tried to learn this from video. I've found, to backtrack a little bit, the Chi Kung and Pa Kua disciplines are really wonderful for helping people to work with their posture. If you've done some Chi Kung you are probably familiar with the standing posture of holding the arms in a circle.

Bill: Yeah.

Beth: And even that if you really correct someone's posture it can be a

wonderful exercise for them.

Bill: Yes. And you mention Shing Yi.

Beth: Shing Yi and Pa Kua are sister arts. They say Shing Yi is linear and Pa Kua is circular. Actually Shing Yi uses small and efficient circles which compliment each other. If you look at something like Aikido—it has movements of Shing Yi, Pa Kua and Tai-Chi.

Bill: Umhum.

Beth: Different kinds of circles different directions. In the Chinese systems they are more broken down: one style characteristically moves one way, and another style characteristically moves the other way. So, from Shing Yi there are certain exercises, movement exercises, that I think help people to achieve the same kinds of goals we're doing with Rolwing such as loosening up the rib cage, getting the feeling of strength with extension or moving with the body in a very integrated manner.

Bill: So again, that's also something that you have to learn from a teacher in New York, right?

Beth: Actually you can probably find Pa Kua and Shing Yi in a lot of big cities. There are slightly different styles but I'm sure that there are also some Tai-Chi teachers who can convey some of the same experiences. I've had a lot of terrible experiences with both teachers and students who are doing Tai-Chi with horrible posture, or have a very closed mind towards changing anything. I've worked with a number of people from different schools. In one case five people from a Tai-Chi school, all of whom had backaches, collapsed chests and posterior pelvises, would get up from my session looking better. I'd ask, "How do feel?" They'd look at me, get back into their old stance and say, "I feel exactly as when I came in."

Bill: Ha!

Beth: Can you imagine a system where they had been totally brain washed?

Bill: Yeah, and that collapsed chest, head way forward and posterior pelvis is—I mean, it seems that many of the Tai-Chi masters that I've come across all have that. And then their students emulate that.

Beth: Yes, but have you ever looked at pictures of Chin Man Ching?

Bill: Umhum.

Beth: He's not really that far out.

Bill: No, he's not so bad.

Beth: Especially if you take into account the fact that he has one of those really straight spines to start with. I studied once with one of his second generation students, someone who had been around when he was very, very young, and his posture was excellent. So I felt I could study with him. I studied Tai-Chi with two teachers who didn't drive me crazy with their alignment; one was from China. Neither of them ever told me to tip my pelvis too far or had me move my head somewhere where I didn't want it.

Bill: Umhum.

Beth: But still. . .most of these students seem to be picking up the more traditional stance of flat back, depressed chest and forward head anyway. It's easier, much easier, to just try and take all of the curves out of your spine than trying to get an appropriate amount. It's either one extreme or the other.

Bill: Right.

Beth: I tend not to recommend Tai-Chi for therapeutic purposes for that reason. One of my strategies has been when I see someone who's got that kind of very collapsed posture I send them to Yoga and if I see somebody

who's really hyper-extended, I send them to Tai-Chi. But usually that's not what they want to do.

Bill: Right, right. People love those things that they...

Beth: "Oh, I can do this and now they are telling me that what I've been doing for years is right." There are people in my practice who will never be anywhere near the level of sophistication in their movement to want to do any of these things that we are talking about. And I try to be able to scale myself to the needs. If I have a client who comes in and he's been doing push ups and sit ups for thirty years, he's not going to stop. I don't say, "Well, I'm not going to Rolf you."

Bill: Right.

Beth: So, I try and get him to do back extensions. I try and get him to do some neck exercises and some stretches. If he's going to do quad lifts I work his hamstrings.

Bill: Umhum.

Beth: And I would say that I've had some success with people that way. If I try to get them to do what I would really like them to do, they would have totally ignored me and just done exactly what they've been doing all these years. I feel good about being able to be appropriate for their needs and not be totally idealistic. □