# Rolf Movement®
# Faculty Perspectives

## Peripheral Stability through the Lens of Rolf Movement

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**ABSTRACT** *Dr. Ida P. Rolf's development of Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) implied but did not explicitly address the issue of stability and the relationship of psychological and physical stability in the manner that modern science makes possible. The tonic function model permits a re-examination of Rolf's Ten Series to make stability and security an explicit part of the offer. Peripheral stability summarizes key features of this re-examination and re-formulation.*

The field of structural integration promotes movement in which the body learns it can lengthen as it meets demand. The SI Ten Series uses fascial mobilization and body education to liberate the body from motor patterns based on effort and shortening. Rolf Movement is a specialization within SI that emphasizes forms of perceptive and coordinative education that help free us from effort and shortening, primarily by changing the way the body prepares to move – what's called 'pre-movement'. It turns out that how we prepare to move is a big part of how we can change movement patterns that resist earnest attempts to change them. Rolf Movement provides specific guidance for changing premovement. Changed pre-movement builds skills for peripheral stability. Peripheral stability is stability that offers an alternative to many currently popular approaches. Peripheral stability departs from what could be called 'centralized stability' or 'concentric stability'. Peripheral stability proposes a philosophy of stability in which elongation and eccentricity are built into the program.

### Differing Approaches to Stability

Stability is important. To stand or move with flow and ease, unconstrained by guarding or bracing, the body must feel secure. Dependable body security, in turn, is based on automatic motor patterns that 'run in the background'. Body stability, in traditional terms, translates as strength-training exercises to enhance muscle strength in the muscles that are believed to need toning or enlargement. Many of our clients report disappointing results from efforts to strengthen muscles. The

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trouble is that many forms of resistance training, designed to bolster stability and security, can also contribute to movement qualities that involve unnecessary shortening rather than lengthening, thus working at cross purposes to the goals of the program. Many forms of training increase 'early recruitment' of phasic muscles for stability. This often makes things like back pain worse.

To her credit, Dr. Rolf was skeptical about most forms of strengthening exercise. Typical stability programs intentionally or inadvertently promote centralized forms of stabilization. What's a better choice?

### Ingredients to Peripheral Stability

Peripheral stability says that attention to the hands and feet, the top of the head, and the tip of the coccyx is a good starting point. Together with imagined vectors emanating from bony landmarks – ones that suggest a direction into space – we begin to shift from a shortening approach to an elongating one. We call it 'peripheral' because in each instant that we look for stability, we connect the hands and feet and top and bottom ends of the spine in ways that elicit elongation responses in the front, back, and lateral lines of the spine. Elongation responses in the spine reduce compression in a general manner in bodily movement.

### Embodying a Differentiated Mapping of the Hands and Feet

What does it mean to engage the hands and feet and spine in the manner described? We start by making the hands and feet and head and tail 'smart'. Smart means 'well-mapped' in sensory receptivity and articular aliveness. The embodiment of feet and hands and head and tail requires learning to sustain attention to build a recognizable, rich, effective, and dependable response. It is this potency of experience in the extremities that underlies successful stabilization. Peripheral stability becomes natural and automatic after enough practice. It's part of our 'bundled software'. It likely replicates the movement of our ancient ancestors: they couldn't afford wasted calories and conflicted motor control.

### Integration: Linking Periphery to the Axis

To bring alive the experience of one's hands and feet creates integration as hand contact and foot contact is linked to eccentric movement in the spine. This movement learning begins during session time on the bodywork table; and then proceeds to application while seated and standing. Learning integrates best through a variety of contexts such as repeating the engagement of hands and feet and spine in a progressive sequence.

### Using the Foot Board for Table Work

Table work, which can offer an accessible 'way in' to the process, is immediately enhanced through the use of a 'foot board' at one end of the table (see Figure 1). Each session of an SI series affords opportunities for the hands and feet to engage the table or the board, as well as holding or pushing against objects (sticks, balls, etc.).

Picture the client's foot pressing against the board, while supine or sidelying. Movement of the spine initiates with foot contact on the board. Foot engagement begins with attention to the sensory experience in the skin of the foot. Receptivity to sensation opens the body to motor pattern adaptability – new patterns are possible because conscious attention to sensation in the skin of the feet allows the body to anchor itself, to ground, to find security and location in the present moment. Foot contact, with sensory receptivity, allows the 'tonic system' – the gravity response system – to orchestrate the movement. On the table, the movement involves elongating the front line, the back line, or the sideline of the trunk, all forms of elongation in the spine. We have clients first practice a movement while lying down that they will then do in an upright position, so when standing afterwards, the movement has been learned and practiced under optimized support/guidance.

Figure 1: Client presses on foot board with toes, in combination with reach of hand and eyes to space beyond head, to open the front line via shifted pre-movement.

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## Vectors and Somatic Imagination

Hands and feet provide anchor and support for optimized movement. Imagined vectors of direction provide additional forms of support. The body builds a refreshed matrix of 'action space' into which movement will flow, a matrix of space that enriches body security and location. The power of the imagined vector of directionality is proportional to the strength of one's imagination. We call this form of imagination 'somatic imagination' because it is imagination that frees the body's creativity and intelligence for movement; it frees the body from its conditioning.

Directionality can be imagined in many ways, emanating from all places in the body. However, what is easiest and most effective to anchor movement and free the body to move skillfully are vectors that project from bony landmarks that inspire directionality: the coccyx, the top of the head, the distal aspect of the femur, the posterior aspect of the calcaneus, the posterior aspect of the ischial tuberosity, the olecranon of the ulna, and the distal aspect of fingers are all good examples.

Body intelligence is thus evoked from sensory receptivity in the extremities, and vectors of directionality from bony landmarks. In turn, revived body intelligence quiets antagonist motor units and evokes nuanced use of those motor units that optimally guide the movement. To stabilize the spine, the body will use those motor units that are close to the spine and that encircle it – the story is familiar at this point.

## What about the Muscles?

Peripheral stability work has the intention to stimulate the anatomy that reflects the 'core' muscles: the transversus abdominus, the multifidi, the serratus anterior, and so on. We don't, however, want to think about those muscles because, inconveniently and ironically, thinking about them reduces and blocks body intelligence. Thinking about muscles is counterproductive for improved motor patterns. Sensing the skin of hands and feet, and imagining vectors hands the 'work' over to the sensory motor system which, in turn, skillfully selects the motor pattern that best meets the situation This approach can feel counterintuitive at first, however.

## Start Simply; Gradually Add Applications

To learn peripheral stability, it's good to start with easy steps that lead to early success. Easy steps and early success are important to avoid adding a new effort pattern; and we learn that a peripheral approach is worth the effort because it works.

First learned on the table, simple steps such as toe press and hand reach combine with tail and eye reach to open the front line; foot press and hand press on the table with forward tail reach open the back line. These elements, explored slowly, lead to shifts in gait and offer opportunities to teach self-care based on these foundations.

Peripheral stability is doable, and efficient. Just telling people how to do it has limited value both for client understanding or adoption. The Ten Series, however, creates a context so the peripheral stability theme can be demonstrated, experienced, and learned iteratively, but at the same time, mindfully. Each session is a lesson in the 'how to evoke body intelligence' course that, in turn, provides movement experiences that feel good, get work done more effectively, and lead to healthier stability and security to meet life's challenges.

For more information and writing on working with the Tonic Function model, visit: www.resourcesinmovement.com and use the article archive tab.

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