



Andrew Rosenstock

The Philosophical Touch

Embodied Awareness

By Andrew Rosenstock, Certified Rolfer™

ABSTRACT *Rolfer™, podcaster, and author Andrew Rosenstock continues his exploration into philosophy and touch by contrasting phenomenology and somatic bodywork. The body is not merely a biomechanical structure, but an active medium shaping our lived experience. Through touch, movement, and guided inquiry, practitioners help clients develop embodied awareness, shifting from seeing their body as an object to experiencing it as an integrated whole.*

This second Philosophical Touch column, in honor of the late Advanced Rolfin[®] Instructor Jeffrey Maitland, PhD (1943-2023), delves into the intersectionality between phenomenology and somatic bodywork, exploring how somatic practices like Rolfin[®] Structural Integration

and Rolf Movement[®] resonate with the principles of phenomenology, particularly through the works of Austrian-German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the principal founder of phenomenology, and French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).

From *Mind Body Zen: Wake Up to Your Life* (2010, 177)

By Hokaku Jeffrey Maitland

"Imagine that you are looking at a flower.

You can distinguish two sides to this situation: your consciousness and the flower.

If you are studying the flower as a botanist, the flower becomes an object to be classified or analyzed, and your consciousness is in the reflective mode.

If you are just lost in the beauty of the flower, then the flower is no longer an object, but a wondrous bursting forth of color and life in which you are participating and your consciousness is in the pre-reflective mode."

Bridging Phenomenology and Somatic Bodywork

In modern life, a society dominated by speed, efficiency, and disconnection, a quiet revolution is taking place – one that calls us back to our bodies and the essence of our lived experience. This revolution is grounded in two profound disciplines: phenomenology and somatic bodywork. Phenomenology, a philosophical exploration of consciousness and experience, and somatic bodywork, a therapeutic approach centered on the body, converge to offer a pathway back to presence and wholeness.

Phenomenology, established by Husserl in the early twentieth century, focuses on describing experiences as they are perceived, returning to what he called 'the things themselves', in German as *die Sachen selbst* (Husserl 1913). Merleau-Ponty later expanded phenomenology's scope to include the body as central to perception and being, introducing the concept of the 'lived body', *corps vécu* (1945).

In Rolfing® Structural Integration and other somatic practices, the body is similarly viewed as more than a biomechanical structure – it is a medium through which we perceive, interact with, and understand the world. Rolfers™ can not only work with the structure of the body but also with its movement and functional patterns. Through the Ten Series, a systematic approach to aligning the body with gravity, the client is invited to a deeper awareness of how they inhabit

and move through space. This integration of structural and somatic understanding extends beyond biomechanics; it embraces a philosophical dimension, inviting us to explore how the body shapes – and is shaped by – our lived experience and interaction with the world.

"Rolfers make a life study of relating bodies and their fields to the earth and its gravity field, and we so organize the body that the gravity field can reinforce the body's energy field. This is our primary concept."

– Ida P. Rolf, PhD in *Rolfing and Physical Reality* (1978), page 86.

In this sense, somatic practices encourage us to perceive the body not merely as a physical entity but as a dynamic medium for understanding and engaging with life. These practices emphasize the lived experience of the body, mirroring phenomenology's commitment to examining existence from the first-person perspective.

Merleau-Ponty's assertion that *the body is the vehicle of being in the world* resonates deeply with somatic approaches (1968). Both disciplines invite us to shift from seeing the body as an object to experiencing it as a dynamic, perceptive, and integrated

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whole. The body is then not just merely a vessel but an active participant in how we perceive, move through, and make sense of our world. It is a bridge between our internal experiences and the external world, shaping both how we engage with life and how life engages with us. The body is a living expression of our relationship with gravity, space, and the rhythms of existence.

"We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the 'object' and to the order of the 'subject' reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other." (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137.)

The Lived Experience of the Body

Rolf Movement®, a gentle somatic approach to reorganizing movement and body awareness, illustrates the connection between phenomenology and somatic bodywork. Practitioners guide clients to explore their own sensations and alignment, facilitating changes in posture, movement, and overall well-being.

These inquiries are not meant to impose meaning but to foster direct engagement with the client's lived experience.

A typical session begins with the practitioner observing the client's patterns of alignment, movement, and tension as they stand, walk, breathe, or move naturally. This observation is most effective when it arises not from a place of analysis or intellectual judgement but from an embodied state of sensing – one that exists prior to conceptual thought. The practitioner feels in and attunes to the subtle qualities of the client's movements and posture, sensing shifts in tone, rhythm, and balance.

Through light, intentional touch, and carefully chosen verbal cues that respond to the client's state in the here and now, the practitioner invites the client to notice subtle sensations in their body. They may ask, "What do you sense in your shoulders as you lift your arms?" Or, "Can you feel

how your weight shifts as you soften your knees?" These inquiries are not meant to impose meaning but to foster direct engagement with the client's lived experience.

The practitioner's touch is guided by a felt sense of the client's body rather than by preconceived outcomes, creating a collaborative exploration of movement and sensation. Small, mindful adjustments often reveal new *pathways of ease*, allowing the client to experience greater fluidity and balance. Clients frequently report a heightened sense of presence in their body, feeling grounded yet spacious, and connected to themselves and their surroundings.

This process aligns with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *body schema*, the pre-



A common response I hear from clients at the end of a session is an awareness of something new – whether it is about how they now stand, sit, move, talk, breathe, occupy space, sense the space around them, or even perceive their reality. What they're describing is a clearer, more embodied understanding of their body schema: how their body moves, holds tension, and interacts with its surroundings. (Image by molchanovdmity on istockphoto.com.)



The Line is not an idea or a goal but a field of being, experienced directly through alignment, balance, and presence. (Image by Beli_photos on istockphoto.com.)

reflective sense of one's body that enables coordinated action (Gallagher 2005). Through somatic practices, clients often experience a profound shift in their embodied awareness, reporting that their movements feel more purposeful and natural.

Such changes are not merely mechanical but existential. When clients integrate their body schema, they discover a deeper connection to their environment and themselves. Their way of being in the world shifts, allowing for greater ease, presence, and authenticity. A common response I hear from clients at the end of a session is an awareness of something new – whether it is about how they now stand, sit, move, talk, breathe, occupy space, sense the space around them, or even perceive their reality. What they're

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Insights from Practice

Somatic practitioners frequently describe moments when clients connect with their bodies in transformative ways. One practitioner noted, "It's like they inhabit their body for the first time." This echoes phenomenology's emphasis on returning to the immediacy of perception – experiencing the body directly, without preconceptions.

Clients, too, share profound reflections on their experiences. Beyond reduced pain or improved flexibility, many describe feeling more present in their lives.

One client remarked, "For years, I felt like I was watching my life from the sidelines. Now, I feel like I'm standing in it, fully present."

These insights highlight the therapeutic potential of somatic bodywork, viewed through the lens of phenomenology. This work reveals how the body, once sidelined by habits and disconnections that originally served as responses to past lived experiences, can transform into a profound gateway for fully engaging with oneself and the world.

Challenges in Integration

Despite their profound parallels, integrating phenomenology and somatic bodywork presents challenges. Phenomenology's abstract nature can make it seem removed from the hands-on practices of somatic therapy. Translating concepts like 'intentionality' or the 'lived body' into practical applications requires effort and skill.

Moreover, the empirical demands of modern science often prioritize measurable outcomes over qualitative, lived experiences. The challenge for practitioners and researchers lies in bridging this gap – articulating the value of somatic practices in ways that honor both their philosophical depth and practical impact.

Somatic Practices as Embodied Phenomenology

To truly integrate phenomenology and somatic bodywork, practitioners must embody the principles they seek to teach. This means cultivating their own awareness of gravity, which Rolf called organizing around gravity's vertical 'Line', this concept in Rolfing® Structural

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Integration parallels Merleau-Ponty's lived body. The Line is not an idea or a goal but a field of being, experienced directly through alignment, balance, and presence.

Practitioners can foster this integration by:

1 Grounding in Presence:
Feeling the Line within their own bodies as they work, ensuring their touch is connected and authentic.

2 Honoring the Client's Experience:
Encouraging clients to explore their own sensations rather than imposing external frameworks.

3 Bridging Language and Experience:
Offering practical insights through accessible language, grounded in a profound awareness of how language and culture are embodied and understood in lived experience.

Conclusion

Phenomenology and somatic bodywork share a foundational commitment to the lived experience of the body. Together, they offer a way of understanding and transforming not just physical structures but the very nature of being-in-the-world.

In a world increasingly shaped by cultures of disconnection and disembodiment – driven by the dominance of technology, the pace of modern life, and a growing disassociation from the physical and communal aspects of being. The integration of these disciplines represents a profound opportunity to reclaim our humanity. By returning to the body – the ground of all experience – we rediscover not only health and wellness but also a deeper engagement with life itself.

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Keywords

phenomenology; somatic bodywork; embodied awareness; Rolfing Structural Integration; Rolf Movement; lived body (corps vécu); body schema; pre-reflective consciousness; gravity line; embodied experience; Edmund Husserl; Maurice Merleau-Ponty. ■