

Dr. Ida P. Rolf, Founder of Structural Integration

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“Ida P. Rolf was a pioneering, original mind. She had always investigated what was new and was never afraid to take what she learned and use it,” said Rosemary Feitis, secretary and friend to Dr. Ida P. Rolf.

Born in 1896 into the family of a prosperous contractor in the Bronx of New York City, Ida’s father was supportive of his daughter’s higher education. He provided her with a background to develop her strong personality, self-confidence, and a capacity to succeed in a male dominated society.

She graduated from Barnard College during the middle of WWI and obtained a job at the Rockefeller Institute where she worked for twelve years in the Chemotherapy and Organic Chemistry departments.

In 1916, twenty-year old Ida Rolf had a life-changing event while at a campout in the Rockies. She was kicked by a horse, and severe fever and impaired breathing set in. Seeking medical help from a small Montana town doctor, she was referred to a local osteopath. After a simple spinal manipulation, her fever reduced immediately and her breathing became normal.

With that simple spinal adjustment, Ida realized that freeing obstructions between joints throughout the bony structure of the body could enhance the body’s overall function and wellbeing. She saw that vertical alignment of the head, rib cage, pelvis and legs affects health, behavior and consciousness. This began her understanding of how structure determines function.

While working at the Rockefeller Institute, Ida was allowed to continue her studies and earn a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Columbia University in 1920. This job also allowed her to go to Switzerland where she studied mathematics and atomic physics in Zurich and Homeopathic medicine in Geneva.

During her graduate studies in biochemistry, Dr. Rolf also began to study yoga with a tantric yogi in Nyack, New York. Dan Hanlon Johnson described the significance of her studies during this time that were forming the basis of all her future work when he stated, Ida “began to wonder about the connection between the osteopathic notion of vertical skeletal alignment and the ancient notion of the alignment of chakras. Eventually she synthesized ideas of Western biology and Eastern spirituality into the notion that access to the furthest reaches of human potential required removal of the muscular torsions and skeletal imbalances that impede the free flow of various energies such as oxygen, lymph, blood, and neural messages.”

With the death of her father in 1928 and a subsequent inheritance, Dr. Rolf began life-long travels where she studied various spiritual and physical disciplines. She also taught yoga and did hands-on healing work with people.

In 1942, Ida started a two-year period of work with Grace, a friend who had been crippled since childhood. “That day I started working with Grace,” said Ida, “was the day I really got Rolfing going. That was when the first principle of Rolfing was really born—moving the soft tissue toward the place where it really belongs.”

Ida developed original ideas regarding work with the human body. She noted how the body is comprised of segmented parts. She also knew the body could change because of the malleability of its connective tissues. And she realized the human body had a relationship with the gravitational field.

“Ida P. Rolf was not interested in curing symptoms, said Rosemary Feitis, Ida’s secretary and friend. “She wanted nothing less than to create new, better human beings. The ills would cure themselves; the symptoms would melt as the organisms became balanced.”

From 1965 to 1968, Dr. Rolf taught at Esalen Institute in northern California. She called her work Structural Integration, which she felt described the process of her work. At Esalen, the nickname “Rolfing” was first coined. In 1967, Dr. Rolf began writing her book, *Rolfing: The Integration of Human Structure*. It was completed in 1977. In the 1970s two major schools of her work emerged in Boulder, CO. They are the Guild for Structural Integration and the Rolf Institute.

Dr. Rolf died at the age of eighty-three in 1979.