

# Body as 'Portal'

## *An Exploration of Rolfing® SI and the Diamond Approach®*

**By Anne Hoff and Gregory Knight, Certified Advanced Rolfers™ and Diamond Approach® Teachers**

**Anne Hoff:** Greg, we are both Rolfers, and we are both students and teachers of the Diamond Approach, a modern spiritual path. I believe we have similar periods of time in each of these. Let's compare notes on what got each of us into each of these things and see if there are parallels in our trajectories, and flesh out a bit about these endeavors.

I became a Rolfer in the mid-1990s. I had first read about Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) in John Lilly's autobiographical book *The Center of the Cyclone* when I was a teenager. I was a little too young to be part of the 1960s human potential movement, but I was very impacted by how that wave moved through the culture. When I got a Rolfing series, what drew me was not pain or posture but embodiment. I knew that my embodiment lagged my development in other ways, emotional and 'spiritual' for lack of a better word. I was wanting to synchronize my clocks, so to speak, to land my development into my body. What about you? How did you come to Rolfing SI, and was it before or after finding the Diamond Approach?

**Gregory Knight:** It sounds like our trajectories have been very similar. I got certified as a Rolfer and Rolf Movement® Practitioner in 1994. I first heard of Rolfing SI during college. I went to the University of Chicago and studied philosophy and psychology, and was also exploring things like t'ai chi, yoga, and meditation. At some point in college I came across an article by Dr. Rolf and it occurred to me, "Here's a person who's got something interesting going on: interested in the body, its form and function, and at the same time interested in something more, in how our experience in our bodies says something about being human." And the fact that Dr. Rolf was a trained scientist, that she had a certain kind of intellectual rigor, was also very appealing.

Over the course of a few years, as other interests faded, Rolfing SI kept coming to the surface. I had my first Rolfing sessions in part to help with chronic pain from old injuries and holdings, and in part to see if I



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would like doing the work. I was interested in being a Rolfer because I wanted to help people resolve chronic pain and find more ease and openness in their bodies. And Rolfing SI also felt like a practice that I needed to be in, that I would learn something about my own inner nature that would come out of doing this particular kind of work.

**AH:** Now let's talk about the Diamond Approach (aka 'the Work'). For myself, I'd always been a 'seeker' and had explored various teachings and meditation traditions, but I'd never found a path or a teacher to whole-heartedly commit to. Then in 1995, in the midst of big life changes and shortly after finishing Unit I of Rolfing training, I heard about the Diamond Approach. By my second retreat, I knew I had found my path. The felt sense and image of that realization was "I've gotten on a train, and I'm both excited and terrified, because that train is going to take me places I want to go, and also places I could never go on my own." It was a deep and *felt* recognition of the Work as a living teaching that would move me to and beyond my edges. That has consistently proven true. What's your story with finding the Work?

**GK:** I had been doing Rolfing SI for two years when I learned about the Diamond Approach. I was getting mentoring from Paul Gordon, a longtime Rolfer in Boston. From some of my conversations with Paul, he thought I might find the

teachings of A.H. Almaas (the founder of the Diamond Approach) interesting. He gave me the name of one of Almaas' books, *Essence*, and the contact information for a teacher who was going to be leading a local retreat. I really enjoyed the book. It had a kind of intellectual curiosity that I saw lacking in other spiritual books I had read, and it resonated with some vague experiences I had had. I went to the retreat and loved the work. I found the teachings and the exercises we did to be psychologically rich, heartfelt, and personally impactful. Like you, I felt the work could take me to and beyond my edges.

What really touched me were the inquiry practices we did. On that first retreat, the teaching was on an aspect of our inner nature we call Personal Will. This is a sense of inner support that does not come out of efforting, judgment, or ego ideals but rather simply arises naturally. It is both a sense of steadfastness and of effortlessness. So we spent time doing explorations into our experiences of efforting, into ways we resist certain experiences, and into the experience of not having inner support. I loved how the inquiries had a sincerity and openness to them. They kept me directly engaged in my own personal experience, not trying to make something happen but rather exploring what is actually hidden within my direct experience.

I kept going on retreats, began working one on one with a teacher, and over time got deeper into the teachings. About eight years ago, I began the teacher training (the teacher training is seven years long with ongoing continuing training after the 'core' teaching) and am now an ordained teacher.

**AH:** Yes, interestingly you and I met in the Diamond Approach teacher training, rather than through Rolfing SI, maybe because we live on opposite coasts. We became Rolfers about the same time, and we became Diamond Approach teachers about the same time. How would you describe the Diamond Approach?

**GK:** The Diamond Approach is a psychologically informed spiritual path: modern psychological knowledge is integral to the teaching, while the teaching leads us to inner experience that psychological knowledge doesn't conceptualize. The primary practice is *inquiry*, a practice of exploring our immediate experience in such a way that we naturally discover

what's more true within ourselves. Inquiry includes precise questioning, psychological discernment, breath work, and body-sensing practices. And primarily it is an open-ended exploration, finding out *what* we are, fueled by a love for the truth.

The Diamond Approach is unique in part because of its distinctive understanding of how our essential nature manifests in various forms – like joy, compassion, personalness, peace, courage, emptiness, boundlessness, etc. – and how each relates to specific, universal psychological fixations.

The Diamond Approach has grown quite organically over the past forty years. Like Rolfing SI, the Diamond Approach emerged in this culture, during our modern time. A.H. Almaas is the primary person who has given voice to the Diamond Approach, and there are many books now about the teaching.

**AH:** That's a great description. I'd add a couple of things. The Diamond Approach is not transpersonal psychology, and it's not psychology mixed with spirituality. Rather, it's a mystical path of self-realization, and within the teaching there arose an understanding of how psychological issues directly relate to spiritual issues. For example, it's so common for people today to feel a sense of emptiness, or meaninglessness, a feeling they are not authentic or not living a *real* life. The Diamond Approach understands that from a psychological perspective, but also understands it primarily as a spiritual concern – that it expresses how our conventional 'growing up' process is incomplete until there is an awakening to essence that completes the maturation of the human being. This is why the Diamond Approach is a 'work school' – we don't just receive teachings or meditate, we actively work our inner material, as in the breath work and inquiry process, to allow the opening to essence and guidance.

**GK:** Yes, the Diamond Approach emphasizes exploring the mystery of our inner nature while living fully in the world. Awareness of and curiosity about our direct, personal experience is the doorway to our deepest inner nature. This includes attention to our bodily experience, making use of different kinds of sensing practices and breath work to awaken our awareness and presence.

**AH:** I think that inclusion of the body is emblematic of the Diamond Approach



Figure 1: The Ridhwan 'Hu' symbol represents the inner, absolute ground that we, as human beings, express in the world. "That innermost nature doesn't see itself as innermost nature. It is the 'All' and the 'Everything'. It is the fact that is always there in us, that is the seed in us, moving us toward itself" (Almaas 1987, 30).

work. It's very embodied and palpable while also being spiritual in nature. I'd like to share an experience that illustrates how I feel there is a cross-pollination between our work as Rolfers and our work as Diamond Approach teachers. When I was in Unit II, Pedro Prado led us in an exercise of gradually finding our bodies on the 'Line'. It was deep sensing, slow and meditative. As my body came to the Line, I felt this incredible updraft of energy, so strong that it almost made me nauseous. So of course I had to get off my Line! What I've understood since then is that the Line is a catalyst for beginning to sense the body as energy or space – a *portal* for the experience and expression of *being* rather than merely a physical structure. In Rolfing sessions we are removing some of the structural impediments to this opening to the body as a portal to the experience of true nature. This is why I've always been interested in Rolfing Will Johnson's writings, he has a similar take: that the tension patterns in the body are egoic patterns, and that as the tension patterns release and the body is on its Line, we can begin to experience the body as a shimmering field, part of the ground of being.

So in Rolfing SI we are working with physical structure that potentially opens the door to more than physical reality. Then in the Diamond Approach we are also working with structure, but particularly how *consciousness* is structured. This happens through normal developmental

processes (the neonate developing into a child who gradually develops a sense of self and other and world) and also through trauma and deficiencies in the environment. The result is a person (soul) convinced that she is a bounded 'entity', a self separate from nature, separate from spiritual reality. And who firmly believes she is defined as a particular sort of person, an identity. As we work with these structures in the Diamond Approach, both in retreats and in private sessions with a teacher, we can begin to dissolve the sense of entity, which leads to nondual spiritual experience, and dissolve the sense of identity based on personal history, which leads to experiences of essential states and also to what would classically be called 'self-realization'.

**GK:** Yes, for me there was a natural progression from exploring my experience of Rolfing SI to exploring my experience through the Diamond Approach. That sense of inner space and support you get in Rolfing is a great door to exploring inner nature. And then my work in the Diamond Approach has had impacts on my Rolfing practice. For example, about five years into my Rolfing practice, and three years into the Diamond Approach, I realized how unclear I was about what I was touching. I had my vague notions of what I was palpating, but it began to dawn on me that my sensing was filtered through so many ideas about what I 'should' be feeling, transference of my own history, and countertransference with the client.

In spite of doing many trainings, knowing anatomy, and having sophisticated models for understanding the body, we often don't learn tools to progressively clarify our touch, so our work ends up being filtered through our ideas of what is happening rather than our direct experience. I wanted my touch to be more precise, to know truly what was happening, and the Diamond Approach gave me the tools to really clarify what was occluding my touch. Since that time, when I've mentored other Rolfers and bodyworkers or taught classes, I've used these lessons from my own experience along with some of the teachings of the Diamond Approach to help people really get to the point of what is actually obscuring their ability to sense clearly.

I think it's also important to say that the Diamond Approach emphasizes that inner exploration is an adventure of continuous discovery. As you explore and realize more about your inner nature, you find all aspects

of your life becoming more fascinating, full of wonder and curiosity. This creates a rich platform for learning while working with Roling clients.

**AH:** As Diamond Approach teachers, we both work with ‘students’ doing spiritual inquiry sessions – part of the work that over time connects individuals to their own inner unfolding and guidance, the “adventure of continuous discovery” that you mention. In these sessions, we work with the content of the moment that the student brings in, whether, e.g., an expanded experience or insight, or being furious about something that happened to them at work earlier that day. We then see where the exploration of that content leads in terms of insight into the student’s personal history or essential nature or reality. An important part of the sessions is a unique form of breath work done on a mat, to bring awareness to the body – perhaps highlighting tension patterns, revealing inner ‘structures’, or opening access to various dimensions of essence and being – as just a few examples. So I’m wondering what cross-pollination you are seeing between your work with Roling clients, and your work with your Diamond Approach students?

**GK:** Having been doing Roling SI for twenty two years has certainly had an impact on my work as a Diamond Approach teacher. Spending so many hours looking at clients’ bodies through different lenses, different taxonomies – structural, functional, energetic, emotional, etc. – has given me a wide base of information to gather from when working with a Diamond Approach student. Also, I have enjoyed playing with the Roling Principles of Intervention – holism, support, adaptability, palintonicity, closure – in the Diamond Approach work, seeing how they are sometimes helpful to determining if a student is ready to inquire into something.

From the Diamond Approach perspective, the one-on-one work we do with students – the work we do with body, breath, and inquiry – really shows how any attachment to historical conditioning or set of beliefs, any ego identification, includes a bodily contraction. It’s very useful to be able to tell the difference between that kind of holding in the body and tensions that are rooted in something more physical, e.g. an old injury, when working with a Roling client.

Also being a Diamond Approach teacher includes learning to be aware of and track

presence in oneself and a student in a session. And presence is not emotional energy, chakra energy, *chi*, or fluid circulation. It is the ontological *being-ness* of a person that is dynamic and expresses itself in various forms. Learning to be aware of true presence, I can now see when that is arising in a Roling client, appreciate its importance, and can bring the client’s awareness to it.

What do you find?

**AH:** Presence is key – to tracking what is going on, whether with a Diamond Approach student or with a Roling client. How explicit or verbal the cross-pollination is depends on the Roling client. Someone coming to me for pain relief may have no interest in consciousness or in other factors that could be influencing their structure. So it’s looking for an opening to subtly point to something and see if there’s uptake to, for example, how their identity or some attachment to something might be feeding into their structural issues. Other clients already have some organic sense of inquiry into their bodies and processes, and with them I can be a bit more explicit. So it’s really client-driven. I don’t ‘mix’ Roling work and the Diamond Approach, but there are definitely useful elements I can bring into the person’s field.

One that’s sometimes important to point out to a client is what we call the ‘super ego’ in the Diamond Approach – what is often called the ‘inner critic’ or the ‘judge’. The Diamond Approach has a quite unique understanding of and methodology for working with this critical voice until it loses its hold over us. With Roling clients, I often see it as a rejection of their body or their experience. It’s hard to get change in the body when the person is not holding his experience with kindness, or is driven to try to fix something out of a negative judging of his current state. So I do try to point out the harshness of the self-critique and encourage the person to be more welcoming to the body as it is.

**GK:** That’s a great point about having a way to engage Roling clients when they have a lot of judgment about what their body is ‘supposed’ to be. That makes me think of something similar. In the Diamond Approach we spend a lot of time realizing various essential qualities of our nature (what are sometimes called the *lataif* in Sufi teachings), like, Joy, Peace, Will, etc. When I finally began to understand what

compassion and kindness is – not trying to fix pain, but a loving presence that brings sensitivity so the pain can be understood and metabolized – my touch changed. When a body is touched with kindness – and likewise with clarity, inner stillness, or gentle curiosity – the body armor that holds the inner critic softens. It’s a change that is happening through the physical contact rather than through dialogue.

Are there any challenges for you in keeping the two modalities separate from each other?

**AH:** I’ve had a couple of clients where a more explicit inquiry process has come into their Roling sessions. I wanted more clarity about this, out of respect for each modality, so I did a supervision session with Linda Krier, a senior Diamond Approach teacher and an Aston Patterning® practitioner. She still practices bodywork, so it was interesting to get her perspective. I got clear for myself that inquiry in a Roling session was not ‘mixing’ provided it was organically arising from the client’s own sensate experience and not something imposed from outside. But for the most part I find that Roling clients and Diamond Approach students are coming in for different things, so it’s not a challenge to keep them separate. What about for you, any challenges?

**GK:** In my first couple of years of Roling SI and the Diamond Approach, it was sometimes hard for me to keep the views separate, and I would invite a Roling client into an inquiry rather than, as you say, letting it arise from his or her own experience. So there was a learning process. It’s not difficult now to keep things distinct. Going through it, in hindsight I feel appreciation for the process and the learning, and I am compassionate for all of us as we learn to integrate new experiences and understandings.

This does lead to the question, though, about when a person who is a student of the Diamond Approach might want to check out Roling SI, and vice versa. One benefit of bodywork is that it makes your body more receptive to subtle experiences like those that can occur in spiritual work. If you have bindings in your body, it’s hard to sense certain dimensions of reality, or your experience will be split, with a kind of schizoid experience. Even when a spiritual path teaches that the body is an expression of one’s true nature, people still hold subtle

beliefs about their body as somehow a separate 'thing'. Getting great bodywork can get past a lot of those beliefs, sometimes in a way that sitting on a cushion or doing inquiry for hours doesn't.

What would you add to this?

**AH:** I've actually done Roling sessions on a lot of Diamond Approach students because I take my table to retreats and offer sessions in the time off. One simple thing is that Diamond Approach retreats, and many other spiritual paths, involve a lot of sitting, so people have the usual body issues that come up from that. Then, like you say, there's the other dimension of getting bodywork to help open the body to more subtle experiences, which can be really useful in retreat settings, as well as on an ongoing basis.

But there's also the flip side. People's egoic patterns and ways of operating come into the Roling room, whether a Diamond Approach student or not. A primary tenet of the Diamond Approach is to be with your experience, not to try to force change, yet sometimes a student will approach a situation with his or her body from a viewpoint of 'make it go away' – particularly if it's pain. So if the person on my table is a Diamond Approach student, I may suggest he or she consider whether the body issue is simply from sitting a lot at a retreat, or whatever the surface idea is, or whether the material of the retreat or the person's process is landing in such a way that it's bringing a physical manifestation to awareness.

And sometimes a student at a retreat comes in primed for a really powerful session because he or she is already deep in an unfolding line of inquiry and teaching, as I am, and we are in a potent field – at the largest teachings, there may be 500 students in the hall. This setting can bring a very exciting co-creation between the student's inquiry drawing out the full and creative repertoire of my skills in bodywork and my presence and guidance to allow a very multidimensional session that is much more than a physical session although fully grounded in fascial work and resolving structural patterns.

**GK:** What is your experience of Roling clients becoming interested in the Diamond Approach work?

**AH:** I've had some ask me a lot of questions, because they get curious when I mention

going out of town for a retreat. But I think only a few of my Roling clients have actually been interested in a referral to a book or a teacher or group. However, when some of our Seminary colleagues were looking for students in the training phase, I did put the word out to local Rolfers in their area and apparently a few found students that way. Because of the confidentiality, I don't know if those who became students were Rolfers or friends of those Rolfers or clients of those Rolfers, but my announcement about the opportunity sparked an interest. I was happy to facilitate those connections because I do see a continuum between the transformative power of Roling sessions and the transformative power of the Diamond Approach. The Roling community has always had many 'seekers' in it.

What about you? Have any of your Roling clients become interested in the Diamond Approach?

**GK:** I've had a few Roling clients want to explore the Diamond Approach work. We talk about what that would mean, which includes wrapping up our work together doing Roling and having a clear break from that. That can be a difficult for some clients because they love coming for that work. There's a transition, a kind of mourning of an old relationship, but also a beginning of a new one, one of teacher to student.

It's been great to work with these folks. With people I have known for years and thought I knew well, of course I only knew a certain side of them. As Diamond Approach students, it's opened up a whole new terrain. It's wonderful to see them touch into their hearts, their soul and being, challenge themselves to be with what's most intimate and real in their experience – maybe seeing a way they distance themselves from their own presence with judgment and how painful that is and seeing what underlies that. As they open to their real, essential nature there's a grounding and enlivening they discover. It's like the experience of ground and space that comes from Roling SI and yet completely different. And their Roling experience can prepare them to inhabit essential experience.

I'm quite curious about the relationship between body awareness and essential or inner realization. I think this will be a contemplation for me for awhile: how do somatic practices contribute to a spiritual practice that focuses on the embodiment

of spiritual awakening? How to keep the streams of different teachings separate so they retain their unique understanding and clarity, and at the same time allow for influence between them?

**AH:** Yes, it is an ongoing inquiry. Interestingly, this dialogue, which began a while ago, is finishing while we are both at a Diamond Approach retreat on the Phenomenology of Realization – about how realization of various spiritual states is experienced in one's subjectivity, one's interiority, which includes the body. It's very appropriately on topic.

*If readers would like to speak to either of us about the Diamond Approach, we would be happy to share information on books, web resources, retreat groups, and private-session work. Anne can be reached at [annehoff@mac.com](mailto:annehoff@mac.com) and Greg at [greg@gregoryknight.net](mailto:greg@gregoryknight.net).*

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