

THE SKIN AS AN ELEMENT OF ROSEN METHOD BODYWORK

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INTRODUCTION

During my studies in Rosen Method Bodywork, I took part in many different exercises related to awareness of boundaries. We were studying our sensations and body reactions to the presence of other people. I learned to recognize precisely how I react with my muscles and emotions to the glance, presence or approach of another person. In my sessions with clients, I often observed how their breath and muscles reacted to my first touch or when waiting for my touch. For me, these boundary reactions have always been an interesting beginning of the session.

Observations of what is happening to a person in my presence at the beginning of the contact have always been of high practical value for me. My attention to these reactions helped me to find the fastest way of establishing the contact. During 20 years of my study and practice in Rosen Method Bodywork, I asked myself the question “how does the person react?” but I never asked the question “why does the person react this way?” until the following notable occasion.

From time to time, my friends invite me to the city of Taganrog in the South of Russia to give Rosen sessions. There I meet my close friend and a colleague Nikolai Ivanov, who is a Rosen Method intern, psychologist, Gestalt-therapist and a tango teacher. We often discuss cases from our practice, comparing methods of work in Gestalt-therapy and dance therapy. Nikolai supports our discussions with references to opinions of respected psychologists and his own vast experience with clients. This is very valuable for me, because my attention is focused more on the body. I am more focused on the practice of Rosen Method and I am not very attentive to different theories if they are not relevant to my practical work. Nikolai often shows me which way my practice is connected to theory.

This time, he told me that a woman he has been working with as a psychologist asked for a Rosen session with me. He was interested in my opinion about some strange reactions he observed in her body. He told me that during each session Rosen Method she had convulsive twitches in the diaphragm. I came back to his question during the session with this woman and asked myself what I could tell him. Our common interest in this issue made possible my further exploration about what I want to share with you: my observations of the importance of the skin as a boundary.

CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

Case 1: The skin as a boundary and opening

The young woman I described previously came to the session. She said that she was interested in self-development. She had already received some sessions in Rosen Method with different practitioners and she was interested in trying something new. She looked communicative, sociable, excitable, and her eyes were wide open and somewhat protruding. It seemed to me that we quickly established contact. Probably it was too fast and too close to be sufficient for the session. I had a feeling that she addressed me in a way as if we had met before and that we had shared interests in some areas.

The first thing that she said when she laid on the table: "Do not worry, please. I often twitch when I receive any work with my body." I became curious: what exactly were these "twitches." The promised reaction was not long in coming. My hand was lying on the lower back, just below the diaphragm, and after just a couple of minutes the contractions began to occur in the diaphragm area. They followed one after another, with different time intervals and different intensity. My hand gently lay on her back, and I listened to how the body was responding and what it wanted to tell her.

At one point, I felt like the diaphragm was trying to push my hand out. I asked if my presence in this place was too much and maybe I should put my hand on her shoulder or forearm. The client said that everything was fine and soon everything will pass. I said, "Maybe it is the usual way the body adapts itself to the presence of another person?" and suggested that if I "approach" the center from afar, it may be easier for her to get used to.

I put my palms on her hand and told her that I would remain here without moving further until I realized that it was relevant. At the beginning, the client looked like she was at a loss. It seemed that her readiness to go into the unconscious lost direction. The amplitude and frequency of her contractions became lower. The woman was puzzled and asked me how I would know that the location of the touch was relevant. We started talking about body reactions, how they can be felt, when the presence of the other person is too much and when it is enough. I asked her what signals her that the presence of the other person was too much. What exactly gave her this information? Exploring what is "far" or "close," what is tolerable, and what we have to endure, we came to the SKIN.

I offered to explore the skin on different parts of her body. Without negative response in the form of the diaphragm twitch, I started slowly moving my hands to the center of her body. I stopped every time when her diaphragm became tense. I asked her about the temperature, color, and thickness of the skin, asked her to describe what the skin felt like. In some places the skin seemed to her thin and translucent, in other places she could not feel and imagine her skin at all, as if it was absent. Together we were exploring different skin areas on her back and shoulders. Where we touched the skin with attention and with the help of my palms, the skin, according to the client, changed. She said it felt thicker and denser. I offered to touch the whole surface of the body, exploring the skin on her legs and hands, comparing the sensations of the back and the front parts of the body.

As she experienced the feeling of the skin growing thicker, the contractions in the diaphragm became smaller. At some point the client exclaimed, "I feel my skin is elastic!" There was a lot of surprise. We studied the skin on the legs, on the chest, on the head and the skin covering her eyes. The mere fact that the skin covers all the surface of her body caused curiosity and surprised the client. She noticed with curiosity

that different parts of the body have different temperature and perceived my hand in different ways: “warm skin and cool hands;” “cool skin and warm hands.” At some point a new sense of self appeared in her perception – a person covered in skin.

During the session I was full of curiosity and bewilderment. It seemed to me that I was about to understand something important, something that had slipped my understanding for years.

After the session, the woman looked somewhat surprised and peaceful. I observed that her gaze had become more inward, the muscle tension around her eyes had lessened and her eyes seemed less protruding. I also felt interest and satisfaction from my work. In the evening of the same day she said that she was very happy with the session and would like to come again.

When Nikolai accompanied me to the airport the next day, we went by car along a dark road passing small southern Russian towns and villages. At the time I had a feeling that something very important occurred to me, that was going to change my idea of Rosen work. We talked a lot about this session, about the skin as a border of the person. In what follows, I will describe other cases in which I had the opportunity to observe more about this skin boundary.

Case 2: “Covered with wool”

One young woman came to Rosen therapy with a whole bunch of problems: Bad sleep, difficulty falling asleep, difficulty building relationships, nervousness, neck pain, headaches, etc. She had a rather graceful physique and her muscles were similar to those of an athlete. They were tense, dense, and reacted to touch with very minor changes. She came to Rosen sessions for about six months. During this time, gradually, she was able to fall asleep without pills. Her headaches became less frequent. Even with all the positive results that she talked about, the muscles remained tense and solid. For her sessions, she came regularly, every week, not skipping any.

And then, at one of the sessions, the subject of the skin was raised. The client suddenly noticed that where I touched the skin, she felt as if it was “covered with wool.” When I asked her how she felt about such woolen skin, she answered with delight that it was so great! I felt that at the moment my hands were helping “to grow the wool.” I felt as if I was a gardener who carefully and with tenderness was growing a splendid lawn.

We walked all over the surface of the skin to feel it become completely “shaggy.” It was fun, obviously fun. After the session she left feeling very enthusiastic and in the evening I received the message “Natasha, all of my muscles ache, even the muscles in my fingers!” I was worried, so I wrote that she could take a hot bath or do soft exercises, but she replied that she was very good and she was completely happy with these changes. As we know from Rosen practice, muscles often ache as they begin to release. It means we are actually feeling them instead of holding so tightly.

In the next session, I found that her body was much softer. Perhaps her chronic muscle tension was an effort to create an additional density in the response to the perceived absence of the safe boundary – skin? Perhaps the wooly skin gave her a layer of protection that she needed in order to relax her muscles?

Since then, she has been coming to her sessions much less conscientiously, and often began to miss and postpone our meetings. She often began to say that everything that she had been worried about and

had caused emotional distress became somehow less important, that these worries no longer touched or affected her. I expect that very soon I will invite her to complete therapy or to come for a session only from time to time and not on a regular basis.

Now, I think that when she discovered the “wooly” border between herself and the world, she began to distinguish between what was happening outside that was not really her concern, and what was happening inside. At the time, I didn’t really make the connection between her feeling less distressed and more open and this particular session related to the skin. It seemed to me that our work has brought positive results, and at the time, I had not analyzed what exactly played a key role.

Case 3: In my own skin

All this thinking has led me to the idea of exploring how I perceive my own skin. Exploring my skin using my hands turned out to be not such a good idea because the hands have a familiar way of creating vivid sensations, more so than the surface of my body. So I used different objects: Cold and hard, soft and rough. It was curious, amusing and fun. My skin reacted with sensations similar to fright when I touched it with cold objects. Gradually fright changed into rapture. The touch of the soft fabric felt like tenderness.

I noticed that skin sensations always caused a reaction in the area of the diaphragm. I experience my skin sensations with my diaphragm. I also observed that I was used to “extinguishing” the “disturbance” in the diaphragm with the tension in the area of the diaphragm and solar plexus. I was interested how long I was able to experience sensations in my diaphragm, what my attitude to them is, why they frighten me and my body interprets them as intolerable. Are they really intolerable?

These very questions changed my sensations. Once I asked the question and was listening for the answer, I felt movements in muscles with tension, sensations came to the places where they had been absent. Paying attention to the sensations, I felt that the story was unfolding inside of me. Perhaps it is the way that will lead me to work with oneself, which is close to the way I work as a Rosen practitioner.

When I went outside on the street after doing the study with the objects, I suddenly realized that the feelings wandering on the surface of my skin changed my perception of the world around me. The world seemed to become lighter and did not look as disturbing. This new awareness of my skin helped me to realize how accustomed I was to the fear of the world around me. It’s not something big – more like a fear that something will be too loud, sudden or abrupt. When the world began to feel softer and more welcoming, the tension within me also became softer, and the mood better. I caught myself walking and smiling quietly to myself.

Case 4: Another layer of protection

Another day, I gave a session to a woman who has been coming to the sessions for a long time, regularly, but with long breaks. In these past sessions, she often mentioned the strange feeling of being “turned inside out.” I, inspired by previous sessions about the skin, decided to check whether it makes sense for her to bring awareness to the skin, and whether my guess about the connection of skin issues to the feeling of “being turned inside out” might be confirmed. I started as usual, listening to the breath in the body, touching her while still covered with a sheet.

Then I opened the sheet in the back area and put my hands directly on the skin. I began to observe a more attentive reaction in her body, doing nothing. The client began a little to move her legs, and her voice took on a capricious, childish intonation. I had a vague feeling of the formality of what was happening. I asked her how it felt to have my hands on her body. She did not reply immediately, and then only vaguely, as if her attention had been shut down by the question. For a while, we were slowly moving towards accepting the fact that I, a very different person, a very specific person, was touching her body.

I had a feeling that I had to be reminded that I was not merely serving a function, I was a real person called Natasha. I lived through the sensations of bewilderment and embarrassment. A part of me wanted to keep this professional function, hiding my sensitive part behind the image of being a practitioner. We were both looking for the way to connect with our humanness.

When she recognized that I was a real person, then the realization came that she was not pleased that she was being touched. I offered to cover her with the sheet and continue touching through the sheet. The covered body was clearly less anxiously responsive to touch, and she acknowledged that this was better, calmer. I said, if you want, I can cover you also with a blanket or you can put on some clothes and we can continue. The blanket was enough. A deep sigh of relief confirmed this.

Then I worked very gently, connecting my attention and hands, through the blanket and sheet, with the skin and subcutaneous tissues. Now the client could answer questions about the sensitivity of the skin. We compared the sensitivity of different parts of the body, and how her feelings changed after being touched in different places. It seems that this distance, the additional protection in the form of two layers of fabric, gave enough security for the client to pay attention to the sensations. Almost the entire session her attention remained with the felt bodily experiences, those that do not pop up in the head as thinking, an experience that was not typical for her.

When we reached her knees and my touch began to rise higher on her thighs, an alarm was raised again. In her childhood history as a young girl there was sexual molestation, and she worked a lot with this theme, including during our previous sessions. Based on this previous knowing I had about her, this time I thought that it would be important to say my intentions out loud: Simple, clear words, spoken quietly and "not charged" with any emotional intonations.

While remaining in the knee area with my hands, I talked about the existence of an intimate zone, to which other people can touch only with her permission and that I will comply with this rule. I was saying some very simple, clear things about touching, about the feelings that can happen when people touch each other, that sex and sexual intentions are different from other kinds of touch, and that she can tell the difference. I also said that sometimes people cheat by hiding their real intentions and that can be confusing and alarming. It seemed that these simple direct words gave rise to one after another sighs of relief. It was like the electrified skin calmed down and the tension in the body subsided.

We carefully searched for the border of the intimate zone and, finding it together, I assured her that I would not cross this border without permission. After that, the client noticed that in the area that we had designated as intimate, where there had been initially numbness, there began to appear some sensitivity which had not previously been there. At the end of the session, before working on her face, I asked if she wanted me to cover her face with a sheet before touching. This opportunity was also met with a sigh of relief. I ended the session with the words that everyone has the right to have secrets, private internal space, and the opportunity to hide and not be visible to everyone and always.

This is how the client described the changes within her during the following couple of weeks after the session: "I could differentiate my own interests from others' interests. I experienced more desires that belonged to me. Earlier, I found it frightening to hold other people responsible for their own actions because I was afraid to experience their feelings of discomfort inside myself. I gained the feeling of self-confidence and human rights. I liked my reflection in the mirror. I found it easier to perceive my image in videos. I can say 'no' and maintain distance in a relationship. I do not suffer from others' disappointment and I can express my own. There was space between me and others that allows more time to think over and consider my reactions. I feel more satisfaction in being inside my body."

When I came home after this session, I remembered one of the strongest sessions in my own experience as a client. During a Rosen workshop, a fellow student worked with me without opening the sheet, never lifting it. I remember how much it meant to me. It was as if I discovered and let in such concepts as respect, chastity, care, tenderness, and personal space. I was very quietly crying then, tears flowing from my eyes, and within there were enormous waves of discoveries and surprise that I could be treated with respect and that I could be such a person who deserved to be treated in this way. Not a single word was said during the whole session, the colleague never touched my skin. It was the deepest session. And I'm still full of gratitude to this man. The enormity of this session was felt even by those who worked at the neighboring tables. Some students asked, "What was going on there?"

A research study published in this journal (Lavesson, 2013) reported on the effects of receiving a modified Rosen Method Bodywork session, a session that lasted only 30 minutes and in which clients remained with their clothes on and under a blanket. The author of this study wrote:

"No participant wrote anything about (or had comments on) having clothes and blanket on, except one who experienced another way of being met than the ordinary way: "Less demanding when clothes are on." The answers suggest that the clothes and the blanket did not "impede" the ability to experience contact with barriers and holding" (p. 10).

Confirming my own experience and that of my client, it seems that some people in fact feel safer with the additional boundary of clothing or a blanket. Only one person in this study mentioned a positive benefit of the clothes and blanket, so this approach is clearly not meant for all clients.

Case 5: The skin is not always important

There was a completely different experience when I, having already received enough evidence of the importance of working with the skin, confidently offered to explore the skin with a client who had convulsive contractions in the diaphragm area. My suggestion in this case was not helpful. The client's body did not respond in any way to my proposals to explore the boundaries with the help of skin sensations. It turned out to be quite irrelevant for him, and I quickly abandoned my plan and returned to the usual way to follow the story that unfolds in the body. And by observing, I discovered that this person's muscles, through repeated contractions, are his habitual way of trying to get rid of tension. And that's a different story.

Finally, I would like to mention two more examples of the way in which I observed the importance of the skin during Rosen Method Bodywork sessions.

Case 6: Color changes in the skin

In one case, the skin in the perception of the client had a color, but in the places where I touched, the skin changed and seemed to become thin and transparent. I asked how she felt my hands, when the skin felt thinner. She answered that my hands felt closer to her, their presence was important to her and she did not want to let go of that feeling of intimate presence. As I touched her, the woman said that she has a need for closer and intimate relationships with people; that superficial "easy" relationships do not bring her satisfaction. We talked about relationships at different ages, about the importance of close contact with the mother in infancy and how gradually this distance becomes further, and the person becomes more autonomous.

This topic turned out to be interesting for me as well. I only discovered the possibility of relations that do not have the form of a merger, by observing in myself when people seem to come into contact with me and I go into the past, causing a reaction inside and leaving an imprint of earlier experiences. I explore the possibility of experiencing the value and depth of their relationship to me from a casual smile, a fleeting glance. I used to try to slow my reaction, afraid to be trapped in my own agonizing need for intimacy. Now something has changed and I do not need to extinguish this need but rather take the opportunity to enjoy it. I now see, based on my own experiences and also with this client, that my explorations of my skin sensations and diaphragm reactions, described earlier, are somehow part of developing my ability to accept intimacy.

Case 7: "Bristled with needles"

Another time, a client learned about my interest to the issues of the skin. She asked to have a session with me, focused on the skin. During this session, I felt her skin rough, hard, covered in goosebumps, it seemed that her skin "bristled with needles." The touch seemed to allow her skin to calm down and really become softer and smoother. During this session, the client found inside herself a background aggressive-excited feeling that she realized accompanied her constantly with varying degrees of intensity. This seemed to be related to the feeling of "needles" on her skin and we worked with that issue.

A few days later she wrote, "on the day after the session, I experienced a very pleasant feeling in the legs when walking. From how the muscles rolled when walking, the feeling was like sexual pleasure, but of a different kind." Trying to understand what she meant, I found an analogy in my own experience. The physical pleasure of movement in muscles which used to be frozen. As I remember, long walks for me in childhood were painful. I believed that I was simply born like that. Now I get an amazing pleasure from walking. I like the process of walking; this really feels like some kind of erotic pleasure in the muscles.

It is difficult for me right now to understand why the work with the skin led to the relaxation of the client's leg muscles. At the beginning, the skin tried to frighten me with "bristles" and then calmed down. Her "aggression," including sexual, that she talked about, did not frighten, surprise or disgust me. Maybe it was my positive attitude that allowed the client to believe that she is a beautiful, nice girl who was "allowed" to experience all of her sensations?

CONCLUSIONS

As I have worked with the different experiences reported above, I have gotten familiar with an inner marker of an important change: when in my perception of reality appears as some kind of thrill, as if the angle of vision changes and I start seeing the world livelier and breathing. It feels like it becomes stereoscopic instead of being flat. I like living in this stereoscopic world, it is so “delicious.” The experiences related to the skin that began on the shore of the Taganrog Gulf made my world stereoscopic, changed the focus of my attention.

I began to notice such nuances as, for example, how inflamed, reddish skin pales and calms down when I touch it with conscious attention. I began to pay attention to what the skin says when I touch it, to what kind of reaction is present. “Bristly” skin means the client is in trouble. Smooth and soothing skin means there is enough warmth and attention. I am learning to talk to the skin with my hands and not to hurry to go deeper.

During the session I am the world that touches the client. The person feels my intention and my attitude towards him or her through the skin. After that, the person’s muscles will react to what the skin feels. We meet each other at the border or the skin. I am on this side of my skin, the client is on that side of his or her skin. We touch each other and learn a lot about each other. I can feel the reaction of the skin and the muscles to my absence of attention.

In sessions, I rarely paid attention to the skin before. If I did, it was perhaps only to gather information about blood circulation, muscle condition of the client, it mattered if the skin was bright, reddened or pale, cold or hot. My focus always used to be deeper, paying attention mostly to what I felt underneath the skin.

I became more aware of my own boundary and the boundary of the other person. This allowed me to feel at ease during my work. The time at the beginning of the session that I give to myself to interact with the skin gives me pleasure. I feel more natural and yet simple during sessions. When Nikolai suggested to me that I should write about this, I did not know that it would lead to such changes for myself.

It is a great pleasure to be clearly aware of oneself and the other person on different sides of the skin. Everything that is happening to the client I feel outside my own skin and inside his or her skin. Everything that occurs to me I feel inside my own skin. There is more lightness in my presence in the session, there is less drama in the processes of clients. Stories and feelings of clients frighten me less often.

Now I understand that the person’s reaction with muscles to other people is based on his or her notion about themselves. The skin can tell us how this person perceives and sees oneself. Depending on this, he or she builds their behavior strategy with other people, that we observe in muscular and emotional tensions. Perhaps the parent’s attitude and the attitude of other important people made the person create a certain image of oneself.

Skin in particular is one way we can tell about the self-image the person believes in, the image he or she interiorized. The work with skin can heal the image the person identifies with. To my belief, working with the skin is a more precise and delicate work compared to the work with muscular reactions. It is very likely that this skin work is suitable and beneficial only for some clients and only for some sessions. I personally was very interested in my explorations. They led me to these discoveries that I wanted to share with you, my colleagues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Alan Fogel, who was my editor, and Olga Perekhodtseva, who was my translator for this article. Their respectful, careful and sensitive attitude to me and to my words taught me to treat my discoveries with great respect. My thoughts and feelings would have remained with me and would not have found expression without the participation of Alan and Olga. Thank you! I would like to put a smiley heart in this place :-)

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