

# An Introduction to Ideokinesis

by  
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What has come to be known as Ideokinesis is a discipline which employs the use of images as a means of improving muscle patterns. It is one of the oldest of the mind-body training techniques. The work was developed by Mabel E. Todd, a voice teacher from upstate New York who taught voice improvement in Boston near the time of the first world war. Some time between 1900 and 1906, when she was in high school, she is reputed to have injured her back which impaired her walking ability. As she moved on to college she was constantly searching for a means of improving her condition. The doctors had told her that her walking ability would be impaired for life, but Todd was a very determined and feisty person and she continued to search and experiment with ways to correct her condition even as she was teaching voice. The information she gathered in her search to find a way to improve her walking form the basis of ideokinesis.

Todd did correct her condition and learned to walk again very well. She was noted for her ability to climb and descend stairs with extraordinary grace for the rest of her life. As her condition improved she discontinued teaching voice and established a studio in Boston where she taught others with movement and postural difficulties to improve their own conditions. Toward the end of the 1920's she moved from Boston to New York City to teach this work at Teacher's College, Columbia University. Her first book, *The Thinking Body*, was published in 1937, although some claim that an earlier edition came out in 1934. Prior to that, she had written short pamphlets, articles for the New England Journal of Medicine, and a syllabus for her students at Columbia University. She also gave lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Asked why she had waited so long to publish her first book, Todd replied

that since she was creating a new discipline, she wanted time to test its validity before publishing a book on it. Todd continued to teach into the 1950's and published her second book, *The Hidden You*, in 1953. She died in 1956.

Another pioneer in this work was Dr. Lulu Sweigard who had been a student of Todd's in the late 1920's at Columbia University. Dr. Sweigard taught the work at New York University from the mid 30's through the mid 50's when she retired. After leaving New York University she went on to teach at the Juilliard School of Dance where she continued teaching until her death. Dr. Sweigard's only book, *Human Movement Potential*, was published in 1974, shortly after her death.

The third major pioneer in the development of Ideokinesis was Barbara Clark. Clark was a registered nurse who had come to Todd in the early 20's with a problem in her locomotion. Having been ill with poliomyelitis when a child, Clark had much difficulty in her walking. Todd was able to help Clark correct that condition so that she was able to walk again very skillfully. Clark was so impressed with Todd's work that she studied the work further and became one of Todd's teachers at Todd's Boston studio. (By the early 20's Todd had established a studio and employed several teachers to assist her with her clients.) While in Boston Clark specialized in teaching children. She left Boston in 1949 and came to New York where she taught privately. She also assisted Dr. Sweigard at New York University. Instead of writing a book on Ideokinesis, she wrote several "manuals", as she called them. These have been She also assisted Dr. Sweigard at New York University. Instead of writing a book on Ideokinesis, she wrote several "manuals", as she called them. These have been reprinted in the book, *A Kinesthetic Legacy: The Life and Works of Barbara Clark*, by Pamela Matt. Clark moved to Urbana, Ill, in 1972, where she died in 1982 at the age of 95.

Todd, Clark, and Sweigard are the major early pioneers in the development of ideokinesis although there were others who made significant contributions. Many teachers of this work who are of the younger generation are also contributing to its

further development. Some of these will appear in the bibliography and list of teachers at the end of this article.

Ideokinesis has many faces, many dimensions. In order to give you a wider understanding of its scope, here is a list of some of the identifying labels which have been used for the work: neuro-muscular education, psychophysical education, psychophysiological education, psychomotor education, ideomotor education, structural hygiene, body mechanics, and psychophilosophical training.

The label ideokinesis was coined by the American piano teacher Bonpensiere who was popular in the 1920's and 30's. Bonpensiere used imagery in his piano teaching and invented the word ideokinesis from two Greek words, *ideo* (idea or thought) and *kinesis* (movement) to describe his piano teaching method. Sweigard borrowed the word from Bonpensiere to describe the methodology of her teaching. Ideokinesis can be translated roughly as "the image or thought as facilitator of the movement". Ideokinesis began to be used as a label for the work after the publication in 1974 of Sweigard's book *Human Movement Potential* in which she used the word.

In order to understand why imagery is used as a means of changing muscle patterns, one must understand what movement is. Movement may be defined as a neuro-musculo-skeletal event. This means that in order for movement to take place, all three of the systems alluded to in this definition, nervous, muscular and skeletal, must be involved. Each system has its own specific role to play; the nervous system is all three of the systems alluded to in this definition, nervous, muscular and skeletal, must be involved. Each system has its own specific role to play; the nervous system is the messenger, i.e., it transmits impulses or messages to the muscles to contract or release; the muscle system is the workhorse or the motor system; the skeletal system is the support system which is moved by the muscle work.

The critical point to be aware of in order to understand how the image can change the muscle pattern is this: the nervous system is more than just a simple messenger. It also organizes the muscle pattern and it does this on a sub-cortical level, that is, the level below consciousness. Let us also be clear about what the

muscle pattern is. It is the complex of muscles that perform a desired movement; organizing the muscle pattern is a highly complex and sophisticated task. It is fortunate that the nervous system does this for us below the level of consciousness. Not only do we not have to organize the muscle pattern consciously, but we should not attempt to do so because this will interfere with the process. Our conscious role in movement is to focus on the movement, because the nervous system in organizing the muscle pattern is responding to the clarity of one's concept of what the movement is. If the movement is not done well, it means the muscle pattern is poor and the muscle pattern is poor because the "wrong" message (faulty concept of the movement) has been sent to the muscles. This wrong message is the result of a lack of clarity of what the movement is or due to a previously established poor muscle pattern associated with the movement. The objective is to change the message, that is, to rethink the movement in order to change the poor muscle pattern. This rethinking the movement is formed into an image and used as a means to change the muscle pattern.

The lesson in a class is usually divided into two parts: lecture and laboratory. In the lecture part basic concepts of anatomy, physiology and body mechanics are discussed. The images used in the laboratory part of the class are based upon this discussion. In the laboratory part of the class the students pair off, one partner gives assistance to the other mostly in the form of "tactile aid". Tactile aid is a light touch on the part of the body which is to be imaged. The touch can be stationary or moving. Its assistance to the other mostly in the form of "tactile aid". Tactile aid is a light touch on the part of the body which is to be imaged. The touch can be stationary or moving. Its purpose is to clarify where the image is taking place and the direction in which the image is moving. For this work, the image must always be in a state of movement. In the beginning classes, the student receives tactile aid in the "constructive rest position". The constructive rest position, or CRP, is one in which the student is lying on his or her back on a firm surface such as a floor or a table with a pad underneath. The legs are flexed so that the angle at the knee joints is about 90 degrees. A small pillow or piece of foam rubber is placed under the base of the skull and the balls of the feet,

the arms are folded softly over the body, and a tie is tied slightly above the knees to prevent the legs from falling outward. While working in CRP the student must not engage in voluntary movement, only imagined movement is done. This process takes about 20-30 minutes. When the process is completed the partners reverse roles. The students are expected to practice CRP each day. At the next lesson (usually a week later) new images will be discussed and given to practice in CRP. When practicing away from class, it is not necessary to receive tactile aid. In later lessons when the student has become proficient in the CRP, imagery will be used in sitting, standing, walking and other simple movements.

Ideokinesis is not a quick fix. It is a thorough long term educational process which not only helps improve the neuromuscular system but also all the other systems of one's being. It leads towards the condition called homeostasis which is a stable state of equilibrium between the different but interdependent elements and subsystems of the entire organism. This is experienced in a person as a general feeling of well being, less fatigue from the day's activities and a dynamic relaxation which gives one greater freedom in movement and unleashes one's creative powers.