

# An Introduction to Ideokinesis

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What has come to be known as ideokinesis is a discipline that employs the use of images as a means of improving muscle patterns. It is one of the oldest 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. Sometime between 1900 and 1906, while she was in high school, she reportedly 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 for and experiment with ways to correct her condition as she was teaching voice. The information she gathered in her search to find a way to improve her walking forms the basis of ideokinesis.

Todd not only corrected her condition but 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 1920s she moved

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from Boston to New York City to teach this work at Teachers 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 1950s 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 1920s at Columbia University. Dr. Sweigard taught the work at New York University from the mid 1930s through the mid 1950s when she retired. After leaving NYU 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 came to Todd in the early 1920s with a locomotion problem. Having had poliomyelitis as a child, Clark had a lot of difficulty with 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 the teachers at Todd's Boston studio.

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 reprinted in the book *A Kinesthetic Legacy: The Life*

and *Works of Barbara Clark*, by Pamela Matt. Clark moved to Urbana, Illinois, in 1972, where she died in 1982 at the age of ninety-five.

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.

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 that have been used for the work: neuromuscular education, psychophysical education, psychophysiological education, psychomotor education, ideomotor education, structural hygiene, body mechanics, and physiophilosophical training.

The label *ideokinesis* was coined by the American piano teacher Bonpensière, who was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Bonpensière, who used imagery in his piano teaching, 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 Bonpensière to describe her methodology. *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 neuromusculoskeletal 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 the messenger, that is, it transmits impulses or messages to the muscles to

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contract or release; the muscle system is the workhorse or the motor system; the skeletal system is the support system that is moved by the work of the muscles.

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 (a faulty concept of the movement) has been sent to the muscles. This wrong message is the result of either a lack of clarity about what the movement is or 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.