

# Ideokinesis

**G Hoffman Soto, M. ED., RMT**



*Soto, a master teacher at the Tamalpa Institute in California, USA, set up by Anna Halprin in 1974, is not a dance therapist, but his approach to somatic awareness and performance improvisation is deeply rooted in the same earth from which dance therapy has emerged. His work with movement and somatics, which he has used in various fields of expressive arts, training and therapy around the world, extends the possibilities for personal growth.*

*He works in Europe, presents workshops for the Gestalt Therapy Institute in Germany, runs performance laboratories and individual coaching sessions as well as being a well known performing artist himself in Germany and the USA.*

*There is a direct relationship between Soto's work and dance therapy in his experience in holding participants' stories and supporting them to express themselves through movement and voice. This is highlighted in "An interview with G. Hoffman Soto" ('Moving On' Quarterly 3, number 4). The illustrations provided are from the manual, Ideokinesis – Bodymind Integrity and Integration, also written by Soto.*

Ideokinesis is a process of visualizing or imaging movement to train the nervous system to produce new neuromuscular patterns. When we imagine, or intend a movement in the body, although not actually doing the movement, we can change the habitual patterns of messages, or impulses, being sent from the brain, through the nerve passageways, to the muscles. When visualizing a movement pattern we are initiating nerve impulses along certain neurological pathways to the various muscles, and inhibiting impulses to other muscles, to bring about a desired movement. Visualizing a particular sequence of images excites the appropriate muscles to produce the desired movement.

When this improved new pattern is activated during movement, stress is decreased and the new pattern promotes a more balanced alignment of skeletal parts. Regular and attentive use of this new neuromuscular pattern will allow the body to begin organizing around this change. Habitually overused and tense muscles will begin to release and gain flexibility, while flaccid underused muscles begin to develop tone and strength.

## **NeuroMuscular Patterns and The Nervous System**

All movement begins in the nervous system, not the muscles. Intention starts a movement. The nervous system initiates, regulates, and monitors all movement by and within the body. This organization takes place on the sub cortical (below conscious) plane.

*"There can be no movement, neither free nor limited, without muscular activity: there can be no muscular activity without neural stimulation; and the specific quality of every muscular action, its timing, duration, style, effectiveness, is a summation of all the activities of both the central and peripheral nervous systems at that moment."*[1]

Muscles receive stimulation from the nervous system and supply force to move the skeletal structure. All three components, the nervous system, muscles, and bones are essential for any effective and efficient movement.

Every volitional movement is composed of two parts, that which is willed or cortically controlled, which is limited to and includes starting, stopping, direction, speed, force quality and range, and that

which is controlled in the sub-cortex, or below our conscious awareness; the movement patterns, the how of movement. We do have control over the goal of movement, but not the choice of muscles that will achieve the goal, the neuromuscular patterns. These neuromuscular patterns, that form our intentional movements, cannot be willed or directed, and most of these patterns occur without recognition or awareness by the individual. We can stop and redirect our movements if the goal of the movement is not being met, but we cannot voluntarily control our neuromuscular patterns and coordination. This is the task of the involuntary nervous system. This implies that a desired movement is initiated in the thinking center of the brain (conscious) and that its successful performance is a function of activity in the nervous system below the thinking level (unconscious).

The nervous system, the messenger if you will, responds to the clarity and intensity of the intention of one's movement. If the intention is clear and strong, then the results will be clear and strong. If the intention is weak and unclear, then the results will reflect that. When the neuromuscular pattern is poor, the message is in error. The work of Ideokinesis is to change the image held in the mind, to clarify and intensify the intention of action that is being asked of the neuromuscular system.

The synergetic responses in movement that both stabilize and equalize the efforts, and which do not manifest themselves in visible motion, play the most important part in locomotor performance. A movement, to be successful (i.e. efficient and effective) is dependent on a host of reflex actions that have been established in the individual development of the neuromuscular system, as well as the development and evolution of the human species. These reflexes are the greater part of all movement, they cannot be willed or directed, and most occur without recognition or consciousness by the individual. They are the part of our voluntary movement patterns that happen spontaneously and below our conscious control.

**The nervous system, of course, is not limited in its function to movement. In fact, it pervades our existence. We cannot have a thought, idea, feeling, memory, or emotion outside of the nervous system. There is no consciousness without it.**

### **Ideokinesis Pioneers**

Mabel Ellsworth Todd, who is recognized as the innovator of this approach to body re-education based on the use of visualizations, originally introduced the work in the 1930's in two books, *The*

*Hidden You* and the classic *The Thinking Body*. *The Thinking Body* has become a must read for body workers, dancers, actors, and others involved in some way with the movement arts. She referred to the work as psychophysical, psychomotor, ideomotor, structural hygiene, body mechanics and imagined action. One of the major principles of *The Thinking Body* is the relationship between the musculoskeletal system and our mental states. Todd said how you move influences how you feel and how you feel influences how you move. She referred to this as body attitudes.

*“Of particular impact on me was Todd's emphasis on the psychological aspects of movement. Statements such as ‘we sit and walk as we think’, ‘for every stimulus there is a motor response’, and ‘man's whole body records his emotional thinking’ abound throughout the book. Whatever the explanation of how emotional and bodily changes are linked, it is as profoundly true that we are as much affected in our thinking by our bodily attitudes as our bodily attitudes are affected in the reflection of our mental states.”*[2]

Todd's students, Lulu Sweigard and Barbara Clark, further developed Todd's work. Clark has three small publications on her perspective of the work, *How to Live in Your Axis*, *Body Proportions Needs Depth*, and *How to Enjoy Sitting, Standing, and Walking*. Clark's student and colleague, Andre Bernard, collaborated on the *How to Live in your Axis* pamphlet. Andre died two years ago and until his death was by far the most influential teacher and practitioner of this work in the past 20 years. He had a tremendous influence on a whole generation of teachers of this work.

Lulu Sweigard, herself a prominent movement educator, developed a large body of Ideokinesis work. In her book, *Human Movement Potential: Its Ideokinetic Facilitation*, she popularized the name of Ideokinesis. The word brings together the two fundamental elements of this process: “Ideo”, implying idea or thought, as facilitator, and “kinesis”, meaning movement. Hence she described Ideokinesis as “*visualized movement with no conscious voluntary effort.*”[3]

Sweigard is acknowledged as forming the work into a dynamic and workable system. She spent several years working with students in her “postural laboratory” at both New York University and the dance department of the Julliard School of the Arts. She arrived at her understanding by incorporating

various observational techniques, of which before and after X-rays was one, to analyze changes in the bony structure of her students. This led her to formulate two principles that are the foundation of the work. The first being to bring the weight of the appendicular (appendages) skeleton as close and as comfortably as possible to the line of gravity, central axis (the central axis is an imaginary line running through the center of the body) and the second, to lower the center of gravity. (The center of gravity is that point where gravity is acting equally on all parts of an object, or in this case the human organism. Generally it is accepted to be located in the area below the navel and above the pubic bones and a couple inches inside the body. It should be understood that various factors influence the location of the center of weight and this is not a static phenomenon.) Realization of these two goals serves to minimize the overall muscle activity required to maintain a person in the upright position.

*“If the true mark of the human being is the uprightedness of his body, then the character of man must be expressed by an intentional actualization of this posture.”[4]*

Sweigard went on to develop the idea of balancing the muscle action around the joints so that the individual has the option of movement in any desired direction and in an efficient manner. She observed the tendencies for deviation from these ideals and developed a formula to meet these objectives which she called the *The Nine Lines of Movement*. A line of movement is a visualized, or imagined line, moving along a set path. Sweigard believed that if you concentrate on the image of the movement, the central nervous system can “choose the most efficient neuromuscular coordination for its performance...”[5]

Later the Nine Lines of Movement were expanded. So today there is a much larger vocabulary of lines and images that make up the Ideokinesis repertoire.

#### **Four Factors Necessary for a Successful Ideokinetic Experience**

There are four factors that need to be present that allow the images to work:

- 1) the image has a specific location in the body,
- 2) there is a specific direction of movement,
- 3) the image moves, and
- 4) there can be no voluntary movement. The nervous system, which is the messenger in our scheme, gives the message through the image, to the muscles. The muscles, of course, only do what they are enervated to do, to contract and move the bones, or to release and lengthen. The matter of doing no voluntary

movement is critical. Simply see the image and let the image work for you. It is the unconscious mind that is being addressed. The images give the sub-cortex, or unconscious, pictures, or suggestions, to be sent to the musculature for desirable structural changes. Often the conscious rational mind gets in the way from judgements, tries too hard, wants to make sense of the images and this effort inhibits the new neuromuscular pattern from taking effect. (Often the images are quite abstract and in reality don't make sense to the rational mind.) Our life experiences are contained in our unconscious, what the Ideokinesis experience is attempting, is to get past the conscious mind so the unconscious can reorganize its resources into a more constructive and appropriate framework.

#### ***To lengthen the spine downward:***

*This line of movement releases tightness in the lower back, especially affecting the muscles of the lower back, and the erector spinae muscle group to develop a sense of hanging down.*

#### ***Image:***

*Imagine the coccyx lengthening down and becoming a long, full and bushy tail. One needs to see this tail as well as feel its weight. Allow the tail to hang down between the legs. This can be imaged while standing or walking. If working with a partner gentle touch down the sacrum and coccyx assists the mind location and letting the tail hang loose.*

A key element in this Ideokinetic process is the BodyMind's ability to respond to, and then organize around, the image. This neuromuscular skeletal phenomenon is shaped and organized around the image. The image, or picture, is created to address the sub-cortex; the unconscious, to bring about the desired result. Neuromuscular patterning exists in the sub-cortical area of the brain and is not a function of our conscious mind. We control the goal of movement, the time, space, and dynamics of the movement but not the how of the movement. We do not control what muscles actually do what movement. This is patterned in and below our normal conscious functioning.

If you want to change a pattern, often the pivotal first step is to neutralize the old pattern. If not, the organism will do what is known, in this case the old familiar pattern. In his book, *Somatics*, Thomas Hanna talks about sensory-motor amnesia.

*“...the relentless repetition guarantees that the muscular contractions of the reflex will be constant and habitual. The action response is so steady that, eventually, we cease to notice it. It becomes*

*automatic, fading into oblivion.”[6]*

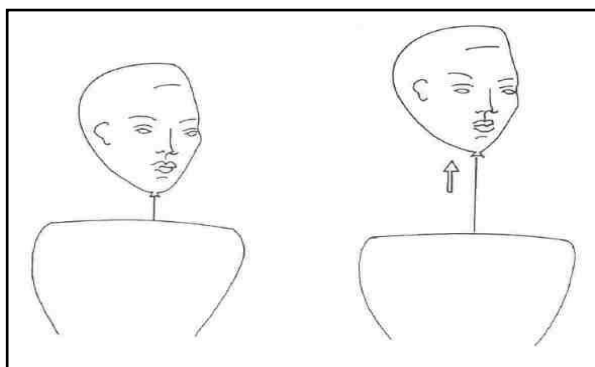
To reverse this neuromuscular amnesia one must begin with awareness. We can't begin to change and create new possibilities until we know there is something to change. Then we have to give a new possibility, or pattern, for the organism to access. Without this new possibility the system will go back to what it knows. It can't do something that it doesn't have access to. Establishing a new pattern gives the system another choice. By repetition of the new pattern, or possibility, you eventually create a stronger impulse for the new pattern than the old one.

***To lengthen from the top of the sternum to the top of the spine:***

*The head is designed to sit balanced and centered on the top of the spine at the atlas vertebra. When poised in this balanced position the unnecessary action of holding the head off center is freed. This relationship of head balanced on top of the spine, over the rib cage, and in turn centered over the pelvis, is essential to a well integrated structure. When balanced the head is centered over the sit bones or ischial tuberosities. This is a dynamic and flexible relationship. It is not necessary to try and hold the position, it is a direction to move toward but not to fix.*

***Image:***

*Imagine the head is a balloon filled with helium gas which, being lighter than air, rises. Be sure not to try and stretch the neck up, simply see the image and the movement of the balloon floating up without doing anything. This can be seen while sitting, standing or walking. A partner can gently brush up the back of the neck and head or very gently lift a tuft of hair on the back of the head.*



The more support one can give the organism by repetition, then the further one goes in creating a new pattern. When the organism has a choice, it will choose, in its innate wisdom, the pattern most correct and beneficial to the system, unless the conscious mind overrides it. As the new pathway is used over and over the old neurological pathway will fade from lack of use. It will remain as a shadow memory.

**Emotions and Ideokinesis**

*“...traditionally psychotherapy involves an exploration of conditions*

*(emotional and mental phenomena) and hasn't included the body, which, of course, needs to be included with the experience of people's mental and emotional life. The emotional life really is a bodily experience. Evolution toward awakening is a full body experience...It (working with the body) emphasizes the need to experience the here and now. Working with the body grounds the practice of psychotherapy.”*

(Interview with Robert Hall, co-founder of the Lomi School and Tomales School of Psychotherapy, at the American Humanistic Psychology conference, October 1989.)

Ideokinesis asks the individual to bring their attention to specific areas of the body. These areas are often located deep in the structure and tissue of the body. Our emotional history lives in our body; in our tissues. When we release an area of the body that is holding unexpressed or repressed emotions, the memory, pain, fear, hurt, sadness, or anger associated with the emotion potentially can surface. Wilhelm Reich, one of the fathers of the somatic psychology movement, in *Functions of the Orgasm* states:

*“Every muscular rigidity contains history and the meaning of its origin. Its dissolution not only liberates energy...but also brings back into memory that very infantile situation in which repression had taken place.”[7]*

If one makes changes in the muscular tissue this change will reflect in the whole individual. The magnitude of muscular rigidity will determine the depth and degree of response to the released energy. At times it may be necessary to refer a student/client to a psychotherapist, or for them to join a group dealing with emotional concerns. However, students/clients can also release emotions, during an Ideokinesis session, by allowing the tears, fears, pain, sadness or anger to occur. Martha Myers, a dancer/writer, wrote in *Dance Magazine* an article on *Body Therapies and the Modern Dancer* about her experience of Ideokinesis,

*“Often in lessons, as muscles released through the chest or neck, I would find myself in tears, with fragments of childhood memories flashing through my mind; and I realized that more than muscular tension was being dissolved as I lay folded quietly on the floor.”[8]*

The Ideokinetic approach to the emotions offers a slightly different model than the one used in some of the traditional somatic psychologies such as Reichian Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, or Bioenergetics. In these therapies the premise is that emotional trauma has crystallized in the body in specific habitual postures. Releasing these held or blocked emotions or movements will set the stage for improved BodyMind flexibility and adaptability. Martha R. Herbert in her article *Ecofeminist Science and the Physiology of the Living Body* states that

*“Reichians and others in that tradition generally feel that a release of the capacity for emotion and feeling is a prerequisite for improved body flexibility and adaption.”*[9]

Ideokinesis (I would also include Feldenkrais, Rolfing, F.M. Alexander’s work, Gerta Alexander’s Eutony and others) takes the position that improved structure and function reflects in all areas of an individual’s life, including the emotional. Feldenkrais states,

*“A fundamental change in the motor basis within any single integration pattern will break up the cohesion of the whole and thereby leave thought and feeling without anchorage in the patterns of their established routines. In this condition it is much easier to effect changes in thinking and feeling, for the muscular part through which thinking and feeling reach our awareness has changed and no longer expresses the patterns previously familiar to us. Habit has lost its chief support, that of the muscles, and has become more amendable to change.”*[10]

I believe it is important to understand that these two positions are not an either/or situation. Psychotherapy and Ideokinesis (and the structural and functional body disciplines) are actually complementary, and not exclusive to each other. Both the Somatic psychological traditions and the structural and functional body disciplines move toward the same aim: an adjusted, flexible, and actualized human being.

As a practitioner of Ideokinesis I must be aware and responsive to emotional issues. Emotions are a normal and healthy part of the life process. Life is a gestalt; the range of our experience includes the emotional body. It is possible to create a context in Ideokinesis where the individual can go through emotional release that does not require doing psychotherapy. As an individual begins transforming

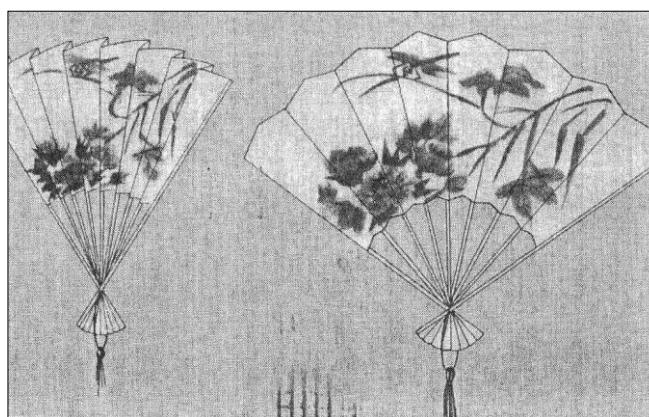
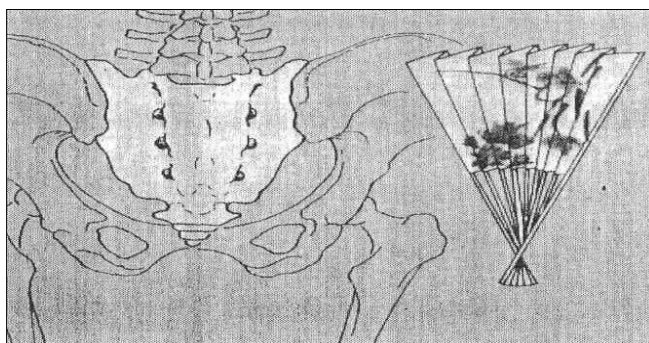
in his/her BodyMind; softening, opening, and coming more into line with the forces of gravity, many of their physical and emotional problems will fall to the side because there is no longer support in the BodyMind to hold and anchor the problem. Of course those individuals with severe emotional issues need to have psychotherapeutic support available and lead into the process with caution and respect.

**Widen across the back of the Pelvis.**

*This line of movement releases tightness in the muscles along the back of the pelvis allowing flexion in the hip joint to be more centered. Often in a backward tilt of the spine we are holding the lower tip of our spine up and away from the ground ..... Frequently gripping with our gluteal muscles as well as the deeper layer of pelvic muscles ..... This prevents the weight from passing through the pelvic arches.....holding the weight pulls the head of the femur out and away from the acetabulum so that it is no longer centered in the joint. Initiation of leg movement will tend to be more forward and lateral, rather from the center of the joint. As the femur centers it frees up the surrounding musculature and allows more ease of motion in the pelvic area.*

**Image**

*Imagine a Japanese or Chinese fan sitting closed on the sacrum with a tassel hanging down from the bottom of the fan. See the fan opening and spreading across the back of the pelvis while the tassel lengthens down. It strengthens the response to the image if you see the fan having colour and perhaps a picture; perhaps a horse, flower, or dragon. So as the fan opens see the picture and colours coming into view. Tactile assistance can be given by placing the tip of the fingers at the sides of the sacrum. A very gentle suggestion of the fingers drawing towards the sides of the pelvis is given and then a light stroking around the sides of the pelvis to the symphysis pubis.*



**Empowerment**

An important, necessary, and common ingredient to all the human potential strategies is the issue of self

empowerment. This means transferring to the individual the resources for their active and responsible involvement in their own process, growth, and development.

Ideokinesis offers a dynamic and exciting model of a BodyMind discipline that creates the context for the individual to take responsibility for their own development. Bringing my attention inside my body and seeing the images and desired movement is dependent on me doing the visualization; if not, then this process will simply not work. Nobody can do it for me. There are people who can share information and direct me in this process, but they cannot do the visualizing. The responsibility is on me. The development and practice of Ideokinesis draws the practitioner into a subtle, and yet powerful, BodyMind discipline that creates a vehicle to ride to empowerment.

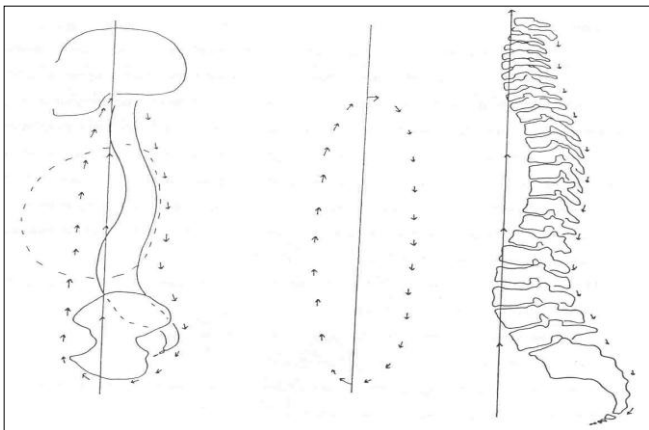
The practice of Ideokinesis compels the individual to take responsibility for their development. If one chooses to practice then the process and results will reflect that commitment. The practice of Ideokinesis empowers the individual in their everyday life with awareness, choices, and self-respect.

#### ***Ideokinetic Images and Breathing***

*The images accompanying breathing are designed to facilitate the breathing apparatus in accomplishing its task, that is to nourish and support the organism. The images also help to deepen the action of the diaphragm which acts indirectly to massage the heart, stomach and intestines (circulatory and digestive systems). When fully exhaling this begins to soften the musculature and fascia surrounding the breathing structure. The images assist in creating more a flexible shoulder girdle and ribs with clear separation and differentiation between them.*

#### ***Image***

*Imagine a river running up the front and down the back of the vertebra. This action is to be coordinated with the breathing. On inhalation see the river flow up the front of the spine to the top spine where it rolls over and flows down the back of the spine on exhalation.*



#### **Conclusion**

To be an effective BodyMind discipline, the practice of Ideokinesis needs to apply to daily life. All the

benefits need to lead to greater awareness, openness, and grace of being beyond the classroom or lesson. The practice needs to contribute to our development as human beings.

Change is a constant in the universe and in our lives. The ability to accept and manage change is the difference between being a healthy, happy, and adjusted individual, or being a sick, unhappy, and maladjusted one. Practicing Ideokinesis helps to develop an awareness of the internal environment of movement, sensations, and experiences. Additionally, our nervous system gains flexibility as it acquires choices in neuromuscular patterns.

Part of the practice is the sharing and communication of our experience, both on and off the table. This is another aspect of flexibility; being able to talk about and share our experience of who we are to those around us. The ability to go inside and experience oneself, and then communicate this experience while keeping the communication grounded in the body, is the beginning of developing another important link in flexibility of the BodyMind. (And I do not want to imply that this communication is limited to words, communication can take the shape of a poem, a drawing, a song or dance.) The ability to communicate who we are to the world around us is a desirable quality. Ideokinesis gives us an arena to practice this ability.

There are other aspects in the Ideokinetic experience that have direct influences on how we conduct our lives. The ability to relax and release tension in the BodyMind, developing the facility of concentration, learning how to learn, awareness, establishing a center, grounding and a greater understanding of our self are to name a few.

We are born into the world whole. Growing up in our modern society fractures this wholeness. We become a body separate from the mind, an intellect cut off from our experience, and a spirit separated from our body. The responsibility we face is to heal these splits and to regain our wholeness. As we contact and deepen our sense of self through the practice of Ideokinesis, we move toward fulfilling the maturation process; of once again becoming whole.

#### **Footnotes**

- 1. Juhan, Deane** *Job's Body*. Barrytown New York: Station Hill Press, Inc. 1987 (p.xxiv)
- 2. Sweigard, Lulu** *Human Movement Potential: Its Ideokinetic Facilitation*. New York, N.Y., Harper & Row, 1974\*
- 3. Sweigard, Lulu** *Human Movement Potential*. New York, N.Y., Harper & Row\*

4. **Sato, Tsuji** The Teaching of the Human Body. Taken from Hara: *The Vital Center of Man*. Karlfried Graf Durckheim, London, England: Unwin Hyman Limited, 1962 (p. 191)

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6. **Hanna, Thomas** *Somatics*. Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Inc., 1988 (p.66)

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