

IMAGINARY MOVEMENT

Ideokinesis

By Richard Rosen

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a friend comes to you for some advice. She's noticed lately, when she looks in the mirror, that her posture's not good, and she's been dropping things and tripping over her own feet. She's not sleeping well, and so she's feeling a bit tired and depressed. Worse of all, her lower back has started to hurt and she's getting these awful headaches at work. What do you think she should do? As a dedicated yoga student, you have a ready answer: you have a wonderful teacher who's helped you and several other people you know with exactly the kinds of troubles your friend's describing, and you offer to take her to your next class. You're certain that after a few weeks working through the *asanas*, stretching here and strengthening there, re-adjusting the alignment of bones and muscles, all will be well with your friend.

It's natural for yogis, when addressing physical or emotional problems, either our own or a friend's or student's, to right away think about a suitable exercise regimen, assembled from various *asanas* and breathing exercises, that fosters an active pursuit of the remedy. And we're not the only ones who respond this way. I've reviewed a lot of audio and video tapes for *Yoga Journal* over the past nine years that map out systems of movement education or therapeutic exercise, and all have one thing in common: they ask us to *do* something, to *move around* in a prescribed manner, as a means to achieve their desired end. We all share an assumption, in other words, that movement is an indispensable element of body training or therapy, and tend to accept this without question.

IMAGINARY MOVEMENT

But what would you say about a system whose proponents challenge this basic supposition, who claim that movement itself, rather than solving a problem, can often be part of the problem, and that they can streamline your figure and improve your posture, increase your energy, flexibility, and sense of balance, help you sleep better, eliminate muscle pain and even emotional problems . . . help your imaginary friend with all of her afflictions, while requiring her to remain absolutely still, with *no movement whatsoever*? Impossible?

Not so. The system is simply, almost reverently, known among its followers as the Work, though formally it's named ideokinesis (the initial "i" is long, like "eye"). *Ideo* means idea or image, and *kinesis* means movement, so ideokinesis is a method of movement education and therapy based on the use of images and imagination. It originated in the work of Mabel Ellsworth Todd, who began teaching what she called "structural hygiene" sometime around the First World War, and published her classic study of human structure and movement, *The Thinking Body*, in 1937. Like a few other somatic pioneers of the twentieth century--F.M. Alexander and Elsa Gindler come to mind--Todd initially developed the guiding principles of her system through experiments on herself while searching for relief from a physical impairment, in her case a back injury that affected her walking. Her work was elaborated by two of her students, Barbara Clark, who added an playfully artistic element; and Lulu Sweigard, whose meticulous studies of posture and movement nearly 70 years ago scientifically substantiated Todd's approach.

I should point out, before we go on--and before your imaginary friend gets too excited about an exercise and self-improvement routine that involves no effort--that the intelligence acquired from the experience with imaginary movement must eventually be *applied* to the ways in which we hold and handle ourselves, whether in our daily lives or in formal movement disciplines, like dance or yoga. My mentor, Andre Bernard, one of the foremost contemporary teachers of ideokinesis, tells the story of an older student who in class one day, perhaps in frustration at his lack of progress with the Work, blurted out, "What's this for anyway?" Without any prompting, another student, a teenage girl, immediately replied, "It's for life!"

It's difficult to outline the Work briefly, as I must here, and yet at the same time relay its compelling logic and great potential for creativity, self-exploration, and self-transformation. These, however, are its fundamental premises.

The posture and movement repertoire of our muscles and bones is orchestrated and conducted by countless different patterns, stored in the circuitry of our brain and central nervous system (CNS). They are both part of our species inheritance and acquired through our unique encounter with the world (we'll focus only on these latter patterns). We start framing these patterns in childhood by watching and imitating significant others around us, like family members, friends and teachers; as we grow older, our play-acting becomes fixed behavior, and the patterns we've fabricated from bits and pieces picked up from others define, to a large extent, who we are and how we feel. While we can be aware of the influences they exert on how we stand and sit and walk, the patterns mostly operate subliminally, and so we spend much of our waking lives--except, of course, in yoga class--on automatic pilot, obeying their dictates unawares.

Now there's nothing *essentially* wrong with having such patterns; obviously, we don't want to think about every movement we make during the day. The problem is that many of our early models were less than ideal--one of our parents stood with a slouch, maybe, or our favorite uncle walked like Charlie Chaplin--or that many of the acquired patterns were not appropriate for our body; in either case, the enormous range of physical eloquence we were blessed with at birth, both as members of the human family and as distinctive individuals, is to some degree distorted, limited, even actively discouraged. One consequence of this, as your imaginary friend is unhappily experiencing, is dis-ease, not only physical but emotional as well: literally and figuratively "bent out of shape," she's assailed by aches and pains, awkwardness, and despondency.

Fortunately for us it's never too late to change, to "shape up." Though deeply etched in our brain and CNS, our detrimental patterns can be re-programmed or completely erased and replaced with new patterns that intelligently nourish and cultivate the natural wisdom of our body. We often try to do this, as I've already suggested, through some kind of active exercise program. But these exercises, whatever their make-up and intent, are necessarily swayed by the same patterns we're trying to alter or un-learn; and since the existing patterns have a powerful hold on our brain and its nervous branchings, and crave both exhibition *and* survival, they necessarily manifest and re-inforce themselves to some degree in and through the exercises. *Physical* exercise often tricks us into believing that we're doing something positive to re-model ourselves, when in fact we're merely exacerbating the problem.

How do we then re-do or un-do without doing? The resolution to this dilemma is to only *pretend* we're doing, to imagine or rehearse but not actually *engage* in the

movement of muscles and bones (the imaginary movements aren't random, as we'll see below, but conform to specific demands of body structure and dynamics). This way, we circumvent entrenched patterns and communicate new patterns to the brain and CNS; this imagination of a physical movement, in turn, as various researchers have demonstrated, stimulates the associated muscles a minuscule amount, and so the imaginer develops a "muscle memory" based on the new pattern. As we repeat these communications daily, the entire nervous complex is, so to speak, "brainwashed" by the new patterns, and gradually persuaded to substitute them for the old ones.

Our single conscious role is to address and decide the *what* of movement: "You can set a goal for movement," says Sweigard, "you can voluntarily start and stop movement; you can speed it up, slow it down, or change its force and direction; and, finally, you can voluntarily imagine or visualize it but here your control ends." The *how* of movement, its planning and execution, is left, as it should be, to the CNS, the "thinking body."

THE NINE ESSENTIAL LINES OF MOVEMENT

The nucleus of all the myriad imaginary movements of ideokinesis is a group of nine "essential lines of movement," which Sweigard singled out from her studies of human posture. These lines, which criss-cross the body from the feet to the head, are "essential" to the balance of muscles and bones and the alignment of the body around its central axis. They also, it seems to me, reveal something essential about our human-ness, especially the two complementary lines that follow the spine down its back (along the tips of the vertebral processes) and up its front (along the vertebral bodies; see more below). They embody our two most deep-seated urges (which we also express through our yoga practice): to move toward the Earth, to incarnate, to descend "into flesh," and to transcend our earthly existence, to "climb beyond," along the central axis of our being.

Each of the lines-of-movement is an abstraction, a "theoretical force moving along an imaginary straight line," as Sweigard says. Most people, she thought, would not be able to make direct use of these lines; rather, the lines are best used as blueprints for movement images. The ennead of lines are:

1. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT FROM THE BIG TOE TO THE HEEL centers the weight of the body at the ankle joint, reduces the tendency to collapse onto the inner arch of the foot, and shortens the inside length of the foot. Clark mentions this line brings deeper flexion at the front of your ankle and "signals the achilles tendon to lengthen and drop the heel," so that we can "regain sensory awareness of action at the center of the foot . . . [and] relate the toes to the ankle."

2. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT FROM THE CENTER OF THE KNEE TO THE CENTER OF THE HIP JOINT balances the muscles around the thigh bone (femur), especially by releasing tension in muscles of the outer hip, properly aligns the hinge-like knee joint, and promotes primary control of the leg close to the pelvis.

3. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO WIDEN ACROSS THE BACK OF THE PELVIS releases tension in muscles of the buttocks and outer hips, increasing flexibility of the hips, and balances the pelvis on the heads of the femurs. This widening action can be continued all the way up the back of the torso to the base of the skull.

4. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO NARROW ACROSS THE FRONT OF THE PELVIS

activates muscles of the inner thigh, especially the ilio-psoas pair, and like its companion line-of-movement above, balances the pelvis on the heads of the femurs. The narrowing, which also buttresses the lines-of-movement 5, 8 and 9 below, can be continued up the mid-front of the abdomen to the lower tip of the sternum.

5. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO SHORTEN THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE MID FRONT OF THE PELVIS (AT THE PUBIS) AND THE LOWEST OR TWELFTH THORACIC VERTEBRA (T12) lifts the front of the pelvis, releases the often tense muscles that parallel the spine, and contributes to more efficient weight support of the torso and head. Sweigard notes that this line, of all the nine, is the “most difficult to achieve, yet it is the most important for balance of the central skeletal structures and for freedom of movement of the lower extremities.”

6. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT FROM THE TOP OF THE STERNUM (BREAST BONE) TO THE TOP OF THE SPINE (IN THE CENTER OF THE HEAD) balances the head on the top of the spine, releasing tension in the muscles of the shoulders and neck, and lengthens the spine, increasing the overall height of the body.

7. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO NARROW THE RIB CASE releases tension in the muscles of the rib case and shoulder girdle, and so helps improve breathing.

8. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO LENGTHEN THE (BACK) SPINE DOWNWARD releases tension in the back muscles, especially those in the lower back (lumbar).

9. A LINE-OF-MOVEMENT TO LENGTHEN THE CENTRAL AXIS OF THE TORSO (i.e. FRONT SPINE) UPWARD encourages a variety of changes in the torso, especially in the alignment of the spine and the position of the head. It also helps, says Sweigard, the “concept of centered control of both the balance and the movement of the body as a whole.” Clark reminds us that this lengthening of the spine should be “combined with everything you do in movement walking, sitting down, or going up and down the stairs. . . . **Down into the roots--up into the sunlight**, is the law for all axial bodies. It is the pattern for breath, communication and movement.”

CONSTRUCTIVE REST POSITION

Imaginary movement is practiced while reclining in a kind of bent-knee Corpse (*shavasana*) that Sweigard calls “Constructive Rest Position” (henceforth abbreviated CRP). CRP is actually a combination of action and non-action: our imagination is intensely occupied with the image while our body is, as much as is possible, entirely quiescent. You could say that in CRP we take a “rest” from our everyday way of doing things and “construct” new patterns of posture and behavior.

CRP has at least one advantage over other positions, like sitting or standing, for working with images. It gives you a feeling of being securely supported, which pacifies the CNS and its established postural and movement patterns; this, in turn, prepares us to more readily accept the new patterns cast in the images.

1. Lie supine on a hard, flat surface, like the floor (not a bed), which may be padded with a rug or blanket, eyes closed. The floor is your “frame of reference”: you can track changes in your body by monitoring how its contact with the floor shifts both during a single practice and over a longer period of time.

2. Arrange yourself on the “median plane,” which cuts perpendicularly through the

spine (and its imaginary continuations upward through the head and downward between the legs) and halves the body into right and left. Physical balance, like reclining, has a soothing effect on the CNS, and is a crucial and commonly overlooked component of true rest. Pretend that the back of your torso is the beam of a very wide, but very short seesaw, with the spine as its fulcrum: rock slowly side to side, gradually diminishing the seeing and sawing, until the sides of the beam, from the base of the skull to the tail bone (coccyx), are resting equally on the floor.

3. Angle the knees at 90 degrees, so that the golf ball-shaped heads of the femurs weigh down heavily on their cup-shaped sockets; this helps to release tension in the hips and lower back and lengthen the spine. Remember, though, that the bent-knee position should soften the muscles along the spine, and not *flatten* the normal inward curve of your lumbar. The feet and knees should be in line with the thigh joints, and the balls of the feet can be lifted a few inches off the floor. If the knees flop apart, bind the lower thighs with a strap.

Weigh the arms down on the shoulder joints by crossing them over the front of the torso, as if you're hugging yourself (though not by grabbing onto the sides of the torso or opposite arm). If they tend to slide off the torso, you can tie them together with a strap just above the elbows. If you find this arrangement disagreeable, as I do, just lay your arms out to the sides, as you would in Corpse.

4. Most people need some cushion, such as folded blanket, underneath their head, to relieve strain in the neck and throat. As a rule, raise the head until the back of the neck is long and the underside of the chin perpendicular to the floor. I like a small, firm pillow under my neck, though Sweigard insists that only the head be supported, and the neck left free.

5. Sweigard recommends twice-daily practices, in the morning and evening, each for a minimum of 20 minutes and a maximum of 45. Both of these numbers seem too high to me, and I would rather do several shorter practices than one or two long ones. I usually begin my *asana* and *pranayama* practices with 10 to 12 minutes in CRP: first I quickly scan my body, surveying its surface area (with my hands if needed), its contact with the floor, and its inner spaces. Then I play with an image or two, which sets the theme for my practice.

CRP can also be used as a tune-up for or a cool-down from any strenuous activity. Always roll to one side and push off the floor to come out of CRP, with the head trailing the torso; never kick up from your back.

WORKING WITH IMAGES: HINTS AND CAUTIONS

It's important, in the initial stage of the Work, to remain still, just watching the imaginary show with "choiceless awareness," eschewing self-judgment, end-gaining, even all concern about whether or not you're doing the practice right. Never struggle with an image, says Clark, but try find something you can do easily and stay with it, patiently and persistently, for as long as necessary. CRP trains the CNS in the new patterns; when you're more experienced in the Work, you can run the images in a variety of positions or situations--in your *asana* practice, standing in line at the grocery store, or sauntering down the street--and integrate these patterns into the muscles.

Though you may spend time refining one or two of the essential lines, remember that no one line can operate in isolation from the others, and that the rewards of

imaginary movement are only realized through a joint application of *all* the lines together.

In the list below, the name in parentheses following the image is its creator, whether Todd, Sweigard, or Bernard.

1. *IMAGINE* one end of a string tied around the base of your big toe. Spool it back along the inner edge of your foot, loop it under your ankle, like a pulley, then thread it up through the lower leg, deep under the calf muscles. Tug on the free end of the string and watch it pull the toe back toward the heel (but without “curling” the toe, as Todd cautions).

2. *IMAGINE* a broomstick between the knee and hip socket. Draw the lower end of the stick inward, toward the pubis, then suck it straight into the center of the socket. *IMAGINE*, at the level of your knee, a heavy rubber ring surrounding the stick. Watch this ring slip inch by inch down the stick and sink deep into your thigh socket (adapted from Sweigard).

3 & 4. *IMAGINE* that you’re wearing blue jeans with a pair of pockets on the backside. Slip your hands into these pockets, fingers down, palms against the buttocks, then fan the hands away from each other (and push down toward the coccyx), stretching the two pockets (and the back of the pants) evenly away from the vertical seam (Bernard). *IMAGINE* further that the jeans have shrunk in the wash and are too small for you. Gamely try anyway to close the zipper. Watch the two sides on the front of the pants pulled inward toward the zipper (Sweigard).

5. We’ll start with an exercise to locate T12. Lie in CRP with a blanket or towel rolled under your lumbar. The roll should comfortably bolster the upward arch of the spine, but not push it up higher than normal. Just above this roll, about where the lumbar curve meets the the thoracic spine, is T12. You might also want to poke around with your fingertips and find your pubis: it’s right between your inner thighs six or so inches below your navel. Stay for a few minutes to fix these spots in your awareness. Then remove the roll.

IMAGINE now another string, this time stretched diagonally through your torso between the pubis and T12, with a small bead at each end. Watch the beads slide slowly toward each other, toward the middle of the string . . . though the beads never touch, but are always, everlastingly in transit (Bernard).

6. The top of the sternum is right at the hollow at the base of your throat. The top of your spine (at the atlas) naturally supports the base of your skull. Poke your index fingers into those tiny recesses just behind the head of your jawbone, underneath your ears, and draw an imaginary line between the two points. Slightly nod your head, “yes, yes, yes,” a few times, with this line as an axis of rotation: the top of your spine is right at the line’s mid-point.

IMAGINE the circle of the first rib pair (from the top of the sternum in front to the top of the thoracic spine in back) is a large ring surrounding the base of your neck. Watch the front of this ring (at the sternum) swing upward toward the top of the spine, while the back of the ring (at the spine) scrubs down your back (adapted from Sweigard).

7. Here I’ll include a breathing exercise used extensively as a preparation for

imaginary movement. Cross your forearms lightly over your chest and press each hand against the opposite side ribs, under the armpits. Inhale normally through your nose as you resist the side ribs and soften the armpits; on the exhale, press the tip of your tongue against your lower teeth, and sibilate a long hiss, like a snake or steaming tea kettle, through your teeth, lips relaxed. Do this two or three times, then breathe normally.

Todd notes that hissing (among other things) increases the vertical depth of the thorax and lengthens the spine (reinforcing lines 7 through 9 below), frees the diaphragm and activates the lower accessory breathing muscles (which she calls the "power apparatus," including the diaphragm, and muscles of the abdomen and pelvis, and inner thighs), and lowers the center of gravity of the body.

IMAGINE that your rib case is a bird cage with a horizontal perch that's too short for the diameter of the cage. From inside, pull the wires of the cage closer to attach the perch (adapted from Todd). Again, hiss through your teeth two or three times, then breathe normally. Hissing with this line-of-movement, whether in CRP or seated, is a good preliminary exercise for *pranayama*.

8. & 9. We can readily palpate the little bony knobs (the tips of the vertebral processes) at the back of our spine. Many people, focused on these superficial landmarks, don't fully realize that the *front* of our spine (along the vertebral bodies), especially in the lumbar, is deep within our torso.

How do you contact the front of the spine? In your imagination, of course. *IMAGINE* that your torso is a cylinder (it's really a truncated cone) and rock, in CRP with your arms crossed over your chest, from side to side to get a feel for this shape. Then lie still. *IMAGINE* the central axis of this cylinder, a long line from the perineum (at the bottom of the pelvis near the coccyx) to the top of the spine (at the center of the head), which is equivalent to the front of the spine.

IMAGINE that there's a bicycle sprocket at either end of this line, with a bicycle chain linked around them. Watch this chain go around and around, turning up the front of your spine and down the back (Bernard).

HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN IMAGES

I've given you several established images to kick your practice off, but much of the fun of the Work is making up your own images. Beginning students should get their images from experienced practitioners of ideokinesis, but once you've acquired some skill, you can be creative and let your imagination run wild. Always be on the lookout for new images. As you become accustomed to an image, it will tend to lose its flavor and so its effectiveness.

Here are a three GUIDELINES for creating your own images:

1. The image must be vivid, it should engage as many of your senses as possible, and involve things or situations you're familiar with. Bernard compares the image to bait, and the imagination to a fish: to attract the fish's attention, the lure should have some color, an eye-catching flourish, a tantalizing contour.
2. The image must be moving and have a specific direction and location.
3. The words that describe the image should be in the present tense, that is, the

imagined movement should be in the process of happening.

IMAGE AND ASANA

One way to bring the images to life in your *asana* practice is with what Sweigard called "tactile aid": contacting the two end points of the moving line on your body, or stroking your body along the route of the image (if possible) with your hands. I like to hold the contact for a minute or two, or repeat the stroking three or four times.

Stand in Mountain (*tadasana*) with your feet hip-width apart, exhale, and fold into standing forward bend (*uttanasana*). If you can't comfortably reach the floor with your fingertips, or if your back protests, bend your knees until you can touch or until your back shushes.

Press your thumbs against the mounds of the big toes, then stroke back along your inner feet to your heels. Next hook your thumbs under the knobs of the inner ankles and, as you continue to push the mounds of the big toes into the floor, pull up on the inner ankles, then stroke your hands along the inseam to inner groins. Slide your hands up your shins to the knees and cup their caps (patella) with your palms. Again pull up briefly, then again stroke up along your inner thighs to the hip joints (just to either side of the pubis).

Inhale and return to Mountain. Now press your thumbs into those little dimples on the back of your pelvis (that mark the boundaries of the top of the sacrum), and stretch your fingers around to the hip points in front. Pull the dimples apart, spreading the back of the pelvis, and squeeze the hip points together.

Press a fingertip of one hand against your pubis and a fingertip of the other hand against T12. Draw an imaginary line between these two points and watch it shorten, pulling up from below on the pubis, and down from above on T12.

Next touch a fingertip of one hand to the top of your sternum, and a fingertip of the other hand to the base of your skull in back (right at that small bony knob called theinion). Push up against the fingertip at the top of the sternum, lifting it along a line that passes across the top of the spine to the base of the skull.

Then relax your arms and hands to your sides. Imagine again, as you did above, the cylindrical shape of your torso, and begin to leisurely twist from side to side, swirling your arms around you like a pair of long streamers. Watch how the surface of the solid spins back and forth about its central axis--the front spine--and gradually slow to a stop.

Softly inhale, through your nose, up along the length of your central axis, from the coccyx to the top of the spine. Keep the side ribs close, expand the cylinder from front to back, then hiss through your teeth on the exhale and direct the breath down the back spine and out along the coccyx. Repeat three or four times. Remain in Mountain for a few minutes, equably watching the nine lines streaming around and through your body. Finally move into your *asana* practice, re-inforcing these streams in Mountain whenever necessary.

CONCLUSION

Through the kinetic images I experience my body not as a "state," massive and opaque, but rather as a "process," fluid and light--in the sense of both "weightless" and "illuminated"--ceaselessly open to new possibilities and courses of action.

Because they're concrete formulations of an integrated psycho-physical philosophy, not random notions, the images help me clarify, organize and consolidate the manifold, often bickering constituents and levels of my body-mind. And because the philosophy is universal in scope, comprising principles that refer not only to my body-mind, but to the body-mind of the world I inhabit, over time the images mature into an encompassing reality, in which I am "put together"--the literal meaning of the word *samadhi*--with the self and its creation, so there is no longer any separation between the knower, the known and the knowing. Or at least that's what I like to imagine.