
Imagery, Movement, and the Dynamic Dance of Life

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Movement is human. Unlike the static structural balance of trees, our balance and alignment are dynamic and ever changing. We possess the freedom to walk, run, bend, stand, and sit at the cost of continual small muscular corrections. Beneath the gross volitional control of our movements and balance flow the neuromuscular patterns that we long ago learned and practiced until they became unconscious parts of us.

Without such patterns, we would have to consciously control every nuance of muscle activation and coordination. We might benefit from such control by never carrying unconscious tension in a muscle, thereby obviating many benefits of massage. More likely, our early ancestors would have been so slow in responding to attacking bears and the like that they would have become part of some food chain. We need our ability to learn and use neuromuscular patterns in order to balance and move quickly and effectively.

Some of the patterns we originally learned by imitation and trial may not have been optimal. Beyond that, physical or emotional traumas may have degraded our original patterns. When even a single muscle or ligament is injured, the whole body learns to compensate for its temporary weakness. One set of muscles may become chronically tense, pulling us out of our delicate balance with gravity. Instead of balancing on the support from the levers of our bony structure, we chronically overwork our muscles. Conscious efforts to straighten ourselves only activate more muscles, further increasing our pain and tension. This is an old problem.

Between 1929 and 1931, dance movement educator Lulu Sweigard studied the ability of mental imagery to reprogram neuromuscular coordination and produce measurable improvements in skeletal alignment. She called the techniques that grew out of this research *ideokinesis*, literally “the repeated ideation of a movement, without volitional physical effort.” Sweigard’s research demonstrated that voluntary movements activate existing neuromuscular patterns. In contrast, when a person imagines a movement without voluntary muscular effort, an optimal reorganization can occur subcortically. This observation opened the door to using the imagination to effortlessly deactivate hypertonic muscles.

Irene Dowd, a student and assistant of Sweigard’s at the Juilliard School, illustrates how powerfully our images affect us physically. “Suppose someone is standing with weight evenly distributed over both legs. If that person simply imagines shifting his or her pelvis to the left, I will

be able to feel some change in the activity of the muscles on the outside of the person’s left hip,” she observes. With the deep tissue classes I teach, I use this simple exercise to increase kinesthetic awareness and palpation skills. My students are always intrigued that perceptible muscle responses are triggered so subtly. I believe that this exercise reveals much about the constant ripples and waves of neuromuscular activity that surge within us in response to our daily cycles of emotions and stresses.

Dancer and choreographer Eric Franklin has studied and trained with some of the top movement specialists around the world. He notes that an image can be visual, kinesthetic-tactile, or auditory. All of these modes can be invoked either consciously or by the subtle olfactory input of aromatherapy. Images can also be direct or indirect. A direct image is a nonverbal representation of an actual movement. An indirect image may invoke a bodily transformation into a symbol of the flexibility or quality we seek. Franklin suggests, for example, that in reenforcing our pelvis as a structure of support and stability we envision it as Roman arches with our sacrum the keystone.

Changes in motor patterns are often discontinuous. There are times that nothing appears to be happening, yet our body is preparing for a leap forward. When changes do start occurring, there is often a state of sensory confusion or disorientation as the rewiring takes place. I reassure my massage students that, as they learn new techniques and new tempos, it is common that what they had learned before will feel less familiar and smooth. This is a temporary stage of learning and integrating new motor skills.

Turning now to the practical aspects of ideokinesis, a basic body position used for imagery is the *Constructive Rest Position (CRP)* shown in Figure 1. Lying in this supine position, the floor supports the large surfaces of our body, helping to release tension. In the CRP, we are feeding your body pure imagery signals with the goal of creating improved alignment. While standing or sitting, there is always strong competition from the old patterns.

We live and move within the field of gravity. Our structural parts push down against the structures below them, being supported by the upward forces provided in return — an intimate application of Newton’s 3rd law of force. To increase our proprioception of floating comfortably and securely on our supports, Eric Franklin suggests visualizing the heads of our femurs as floating buoys supporting our

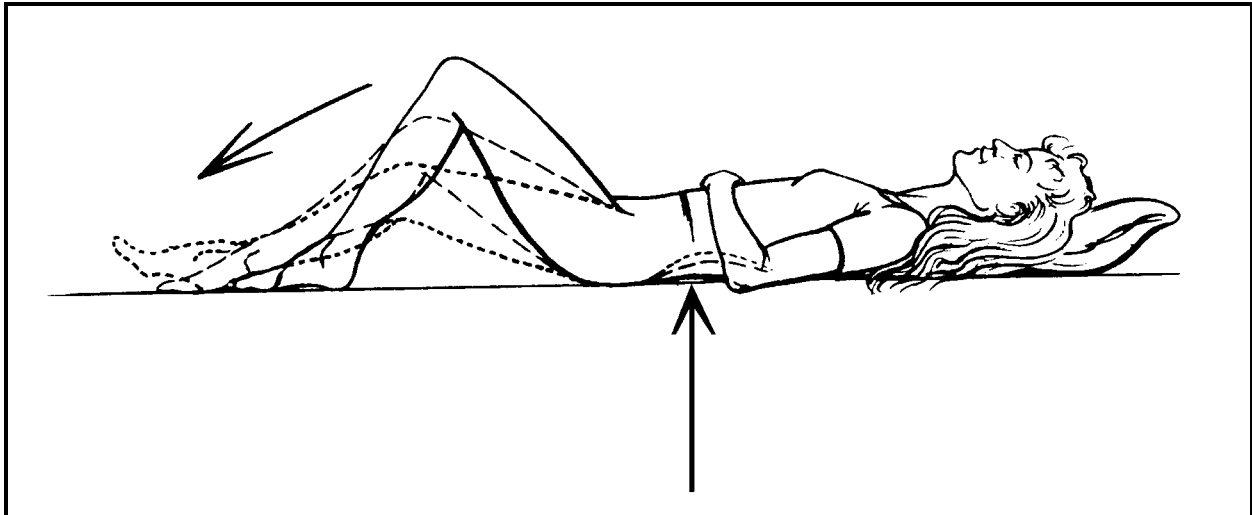


Figure 1: Imagining in the Constructive Rest Position; supine with the knees flexed. When the legs are outstretched, their weight tends to pull the pelvis forward, curving the spine and increasing lumbar lordosis. When the knees are flexed, the lumbar curve is relaxed and the back is supported by the underlying surface. Reprinted by permission from Eric Franklin, 1996, *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery* (Champaign, IL; Human Kinetics Publishers), p. 59.

pelvis (Figure 2). Let the buoys initiate your movements, as the water on which they float moves up or down in slow waves. The bends of the knee, hip, and ankle joints all respond to the changing level of the water as it pushes upward against the buoys. Visualizing equal movement on both sides, can help correct a habitual, nonstructural lateral tilt of the pelvis.

In discussing the benefits of imagery, Franklin emphasizes that “for any improvement in alignment to be permanent, the changes need to become part of your body image — the new alignment pattern needs to become part of your identity, or you will always slip back into old habits.” Using imagery is a very direct method to achieve a repatterning of body and body image. Again, imagery extends beyond the visual to the tactile/kinesthetic and auditory modes. I believe that this realization is one key to understanding the effectiveness and sometime failures of massage in initiating somatic changes. When we work on someone, we act to increase the ease and comfort with which they can inhabit their body. Amid the gentle stretching of fascia and facilitation of muscles, we send countless sensory signals throughout their nervous system. We focus intently on them, pacing, nurturing, and supporting their emotional needs. We can surmise that in this process, we provide many clients with a new sense of themselves as embodied human beings. Yet ultimately, we can only act as the handmaidens of change; the actual neuromuscular transformations lie deeply within the client’s self-imagery and self-responsibility.

References

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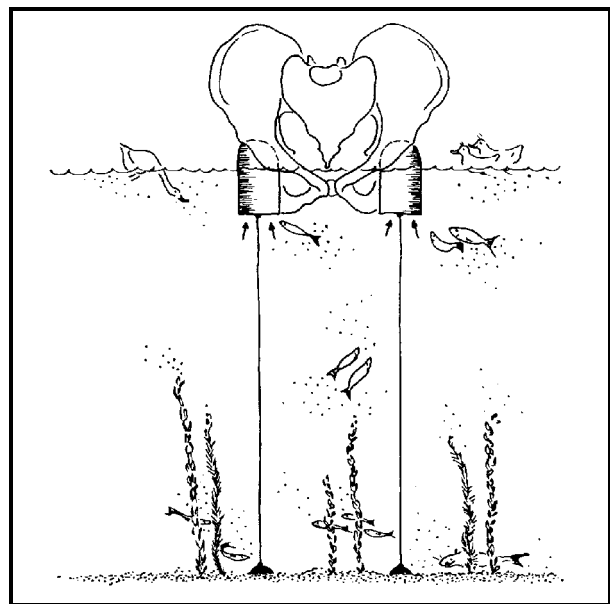


Figure 2: Imagining the femur heads as buoys supporting the pelvis. Reprinted by permission from Eric Franklin, *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery* (Champaign, IL; Human Kinetics Publishers), p. 82.

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