



Pilates is not Yoga!



Jon Burras

In recent years, a flurry of new exercise practices has crept upon us. As Westerners struggle to keep their weight down and maintain harmony in their bodies many have adopted a system called “Pilates” as their exercise regiment. While often practiced at yoga studios and frequently compared to be “just like yoga”, there are many distinctions that set these two systems apart.

While yoga has been practiced for over five thousand years Pilates is relatively new on the scene. Yoga began in India and traversed to the Western world over the last fifty years. Through this transition the yoga practice has been adopted by Western culture and modified to fit into a Western ideology. While more Western in approach the core principles of yoga still remain the same.

Pilates emerged over 50 years ago and was created by Joseph Pilates. Yoga was one of the disciplines that Pilates had studied in order to create his system. The Pilates method was first utilized to rehabilitate injured dancers. While disappearing into obscurity for decades Pilates has recently emerged as a popular exercise routine.

Pilates and yoga are two entirely different ways of moving and perceiving the world and should not be confused. The underlying philosophies and goals are worlds apart in their approach. The message is completely unique for each system. Most highly trained yoga teachers have a different world view than that of Pilates teachers. Just like oil and water, these two systems will be in conflict if you try to mix them.

It is important to know the differences between these two systems before one lumps them both together. The primary differences are outlined in the following pages.

1. Health or Fitness

Yoga is primarily a health practice. Pilates is primarily a fitness practice. While often confused and labeled together health is completely different than fitness. In order to comprehend these terms it is important to have a working definition of both.

Health is about opening up the many rivers of flow throughout the body so all systems can work efficiently. This might include the digestive system, lymphatic system, and emotional system. Once these rivers of flow are opened up and maintained open the body is more likely to experience optimal health. (For more information on the topic of the body’s health systems go to; [JonBurras.com/articles/The Thirteen Body Rivers](http://JonBurras.com/articles/The%20Thirteen%20Body%20Rivers).)

Fitness is primarily concerned with shaping the body to look a certain way. Cosmetic changes, like a flat abdomen or toned buttocks, are more important than the functioning of the body. Pilates mostly adheres to the rules of fitness as it attempts to seek cosmetic changes throughout. For more information on this topic see; ([JonBurras.com/articles/ Health or Fitness](http://JonBurras.com/articles/Health%20or%20Fitness)).

When one begins a particular routine it is important to gather as much information as possible and ask yourself some important questions. Are you more interested in how you look or how healthy your body functions? What will you be like many years from

now if you continue this practice? What role models can you find to emulate if this is right for you? Where does this particular discipline come from and how long has it been practiced?

Because of the emphasis on health rather than fitness as people age they will have more positive health experiences if practicing yoga rather than Pilates. Pilates will tend to block the flow of rivers that determine health and consequently help to speed up the aging process. When your primary emphasis is to bring cosmetic changes to your body your health often suffers as a result.

2. Hardening the Core or Freeing the Core

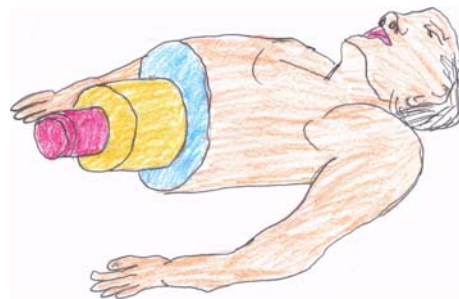
The core is located at the center of the body and is a physical place consisting of muscles, bones, nerves, and connective tissue, as well as an energetic pathway for “Chi” energy. “Chi” is a universal force that flows through all matter, including human tissue. It can be somewhat compared to electricity.

Throughout thousands of years the yoga tradition has cultivated this idea that a very powerful and central energy source resides in the human core. This has become known as “Kundalini”, or serpent energy. This energy source is a fundamental power that both serves our physical health as well as our spiritual development. One could compare this source of energy to be like that of a tube of light through the core of the body.

The yoga practice helps one to unblock this energy pathway so that greater freedom and spiritual insights can be achieved. Through expansive movements, energized breath, and directed thoughts the core is allowed to flow freely. As this energy center that arises from the core begins to open and expand waves of joy and clear focus often become apparent. This energetic core is like the center of a tree that carries the nutrients through it to other areas. The center of our body is an energetic garden of health and knowledge. As the yoga practice deepens the core is allowed to open and blockages are removed.



Core of a Tree



Human Energetic Core

Yoga also teaches us about a fundamental pathway of energy residing in the core called the “Chakra System”. This primary pathway of energy is often described as a series of colored circles throughout the trunk, throat, head, and above the crown. When spinning and open this core system helps lead to optimal health and deeper spiritual insights. When blocked with hardness and stagnation illness and disease often become more probable.



Chakra System

The Pilates practice teaches that one should learn to tighten and harden the core. This fitness based mentality only blocks this powerful central energy and often leads to energy stagnation, and possibly disease. When vanity is the prime concern while hardening the core your Kundalini energy will suffer. Over time, a committed Pilates practice might lead to a reduction or death to the vital energy of the core. (For more information on the core go to [JonBurras.com/articles/The Core Myth.](http://JonBurras.com/articles/The%20Core%20Myth.))

This fundamental approach to understanding the core is what sets these two systems apart. The scientific/fitness world has turned the core into a place that needs to be hardened in order to stabilize the trunk of the body. This method not only cannot guarantee the stability of the body but deadens the energetic core. This often leads to other complications down the road. A tight core does not lead to a healthy body.

3. War or Relaxation

Deep within the brain and spinal cord lies a reflex response called the “**Fight or Flight System**” or “**Stress Response**”. This system engages in the “on” position when we feel a threat to our survival, whether real or imagined. When this system is turned “off” we experience a sense of safety or relaxation.

Yoga is a system that attempts to bring one out of the Fight or Flight Response (Stress) and deep into relaxation (Relaxation Response). The Hatha yoga practice attempts to create an “unwinding affect” with a relaxed breath that begins to calm the mind and bring one into a sense of relaxation. In fact, most yoga classes end with a quiet period where the practitioner will lie down, be still, and allow the **Relaxation Response** to take affect.

Pilates, however, is generally considered a war practice as it stimulates the nervous system and engages the stress response. This only makes stress worse. One of the aspects of stress is that the body will tighten and harden when one is under stress. A fitness practice like Pilates is based on tightening and hardening the body. When engaged in a fitness practice you are doing exactly the same thing that stress is doing- tightening and hardening the body. You are actually magnifying the affects of stress when practicing Pilates.

Fitness began nearly two thousand years ago during the first Olympics in Greece. City states would create mock battles with each for prizes. In order to be a better competitor or warrior one needed to train for war. The fitness model today is doing the exact same thing as training for war. The war might not actually be real but your nervous system does not know the difference.

Pilates also keeps the mind agitated and in a war state. There is little sense of relaxation here. The core is tightened and contracted. The breath is rapid and reduced. The emphasis is on performance and completing your instructed repetitions. **Could it be that those who practice Pilates regularly find it most difficult to relax because they are just practicing more stress when they come to class?**

4. Contractive or Expansive Movement

Yoga is a practice that is called an “expansive” system. Pilates is a practice referred to as a “contractive” system. These two experiences are entirely different in the manner in which they address the body.

Yoga attempts to warm the soft tissue of the body, (muscles, and connective tissue), and then lengthen it. This lengthening consists of directed poses that are held for a specific duration of time. As one comes out of the pose the tissues remain longer and

there is more space between the joints. Over time, a yoga body is more open, expansive, and freer in mobility.

Yoga relies on a phenomenon called **Thixotropy**. This process occurs when heat is applied to muscle and connective tissue. In yoga the muscle activity helps to create the heat. The connective tissue holding the muscle in place begins to liquefy and soften. This can be similar to gelatin that begins to melt when heated. Thus, a new and longer form is created when the muscle comes back to its relaxed shape.

Pilates is primarily a contractive experience. The goal is to tighten and harden muscles. Whether by machines or floor exercises it does not much matter. The basic concept of Pilates follows the fitness model of hardening and contracting the body's tissues. Over time this leads to stiffer joints, harder tissues, and reduced vitality in the body. A tight body is not a healthy body as many have been taught to believe.

Hard muscles and connective tissue lose their elasticity and energy. As the tissue hardens it bonds together (**Hydrogen Bonding**), causing adhesions and a gluing affect. This process causes the soft tissue to dry out and become more brittle. This is hardly the sign of health.

5. Breath or No Breath

The yoga practice places strong emphasis on the breath. In fact, the breath is at least half of the yoga experience when practicing Hatha yoga. With the emphasis on a slow and deep breath the mind will calm and the body achieves a deeper sense of relaxation.

The breath is also a source of "Chi" or energy to the body. As Chi is cultivated and allowed to be expressed deeper openings may occur. Retaining the breath for longer periods allows the Chi energy to circulate from deep within.

The diaphragm, the primary mover of the breath, is allowed to be stretched and awakened to foster a deeper breath. The sides, upper lungs, and the back are also used to cultivate a deeper and more thorough breath. As the muscles of respiration remain open and flexible the lungs are better able to expand and contract.

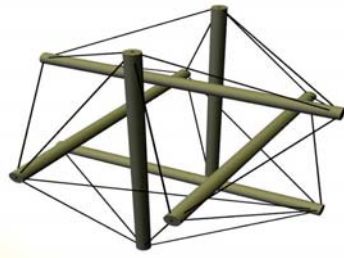
Pilates has adopted the fitness concept of breath. This entails short and chaotic breathing. This panting breath is a breath of stress. Taking place from primarily the upper chest this type of breath only further engages the body's Stress Response. Upper respiratory breathing is often referred to as "Type A" breathing. This rapid and short breath is symbolic of those who find it difficult to relax. The exercise breath as we have come to know it is exemplary of "Type A" breathing.

The diaphragm is also negated and locked into place while practicing Pilates. As one continually tightens and hardens the core the diaphragm is held firmly by rigid abdominal muscles and contracted core muscles, (like the psoas). The psoas muscle, located deep within the core, is also attached to the diaphragm by way of the connective tissue matrix surrounding it. As this muscle becomes tightened and shortened it pulls on the diaphragm, preventing deep breaths from occurring. As the breath shortens less oxygen is allowed to move into the body. As the breath continues to diminish so too is the Chi flow throughout the body.

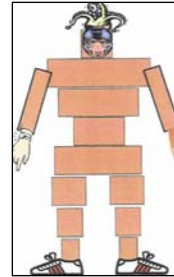
6. Tensegrity or Column Theory

There is an old belief that the body is designed like a column and the bones are building blocks that are stacked on top of each other. Unfortunately, while still taught in nearly all aspects of anatomy training, this is far from the truth. The reality is that the bones are merely spacers for the muscles and connective tissue to anchor onto. The body

is actually made up of a cable and pulley system that lifts the bones away from each other by means of the muscles and connective tissue.



Tensegrity Model



Column Model

This old column theory is what fitness and Pilates are based on. This theory states that the structure needs to be tightened down in order to perform well and achieve stability and balance. This is one of the founding principles of Pilates-to tighten and harden the core and surrounding structures. Joseph Pilates called this his theory of “Controlology”. This approach adds neither health nor stability to the body. All one is doing is tightening down the cable system, pulling the bones closer together, and creating less freedom of movement. Not to mention the underlying organs and glands are now less able to perform their tasks effectively as they are being squeezed tightly.

Yoga is based on a system called **Tensegrity**. This mechanical system states that there is a pulley system that supports all sides. If you tug on one side another part will feel the strain as well. When practicing yoga one is lengthening the muscles and connective tissue. This allows for more space and freedom in the joints and internal body cavities. Stability is gained by lengthening the cable and pulley system.

Tensegrity teaches us that a structure, like the body, is held upright by the pull from the cables, not from blocks stacked one on top of another. Tensegrity could be compared to a tent. It is not the center pole that holds up a tent but the directional pull downward by the cables that lift the tent upward. Columns do not move freely, (as seen in most buildings). Tensegrity structures are freely flowing units, as seen in a water balloon.

Ultimately, by continuing to lengthen the cable system of the body you will have achieved a pain free body as well as a more optimum vessel of health. By tightening the supposed blocks down in this structure only leads to more malfunctions later on.

7. Consciousness or Unconsciousness

Yoga is a practice designed to make one more conscious of his body and his inner mind that controls the body. Pilates is a system, based on the fitness model, designed to deaden the body and thus bring less inner consciousness.

Yoga attempts to place a practitioner in a pose where he can examine his relationship to himself while he is in such a pose. What is the breath like? Where are you holding tension? Is there an emotion that arises while you are here? All in all yoga poses attempt to cultivate awareness on many levels.

As we glide in and out of yoga poses we become more aware of ourselves. The yoga mat becomes a metaphor for our lives. Do you run away when you experience adversity? If you can't do things well do you just give up and not try at all? Do you force yourself through places that you might have been better backing off from? All these mind games and points of awareness come to our attention when practicing yoga.

Pilates is a practice that favors bringing less consciousness to the body and even less to the mind. The amount of repetitions becomes the chore at hand, measuring one's

worth on how many sets one can perform. Pilates becomes a performance and you feel as if you are still getting a grade on how you move your body, (like in physical education classes in grammar school). One is encouraged to push through levels of uncomfortableness in order to achieve ego goals. How many can you do? Can you feel the burn? Are you better than the person next to you? Pilates is a performance based system that tends to make one less internally conscious in the long run.

In addition, as soft tissue continues to harden it begins to deaden. We often cut off sensation to areas as we build less feeling there. This is often seen in performance based athletics where athletes are able to go to extraordinary distances in their pursuits because they have deadened their bodies to sensation. Pilates is a system that encourages this deadening as well.

8. Life or Death to the Body

Energy moves through the connective tissue like a river in a forest. While not being able to be measured scientifically this energy is a vital part of our human existence. Almost every culture except Western culture has a name for this force. In India it is “Prana”, China it is “Chi”, Japan it is called “Ki”, and in Hawaiian it is “Mana”.

Yoga practice warms the muscles and connective tissue. This in turn releases blocks of frozen energy that have hardened in the dense and hard tissues. As the energy is free to move through the body more life and vitality is brought forth. One of the key components of yoga is the opening of these energy blockages that have created stagnation in the body. By practicing stretches that are held and breathed into the connective tissue begins to soften and release long held patterns of holding. One could make an argument that yoga is primarily an energy practice and secondarily a physical exercise.

Removing these blocks and allowing the Chi to flow freely helps to create a dynamic and healthy body. Organs and glands are energized. Muscles and body systems are softly opened. The energetic body is brought deeper into a sense of balance and health through the practice of yoga.

Pilates, based on the fitness model, attempts to harden muscles and subsequently the connective tissue as well. When this happens it leads to dense and fibrous dried out tissues which have difficulty transporting Chi through them. When the connective tissue is healthy it is like sending an electrical current through a copper wire. The electricity flows freely. As the connective tissue hardens it is like trying to send this same electrical current through a rubber tire. The current will not flow as the rubber is not a good conduit.

As muscles harden the energy has a more difficult time passing through those areas. Blockages or “energy cysts” develop. Over time, these energy blockages often result in physical manifestations. Joints become stiff. Range of motion is lost. One begins to feel old. A continuous fitness practice like Pilates only weakens and deadens the body over time.

Contrary to popular belief a hard body is not necessarily a healthy body. Hardness means that there is lack of movement and subsequently dried out tissue. This leads to poor energy flow. While yoga primarily emphasizes opening the energy body Pilates primarily emphasizes reducing it.

8. Gym Mentality or Spirit Mentality

A basic belief exists to guide us in our movements. The core yoga belief is instilled with a sense of spirituality and compassion. Pilates, being part of the fitness model, is more inclined to competition and training for war.

A yoga student is more inclined to stay after class and want to sip tea and talk with fellow students. A Pilates student is more apt to want to rush out the door after class with a caffeine-laden energy drink in one hand and a cell phone in the other. Off to perform the next task for the day.

There are fundamental differences in the make-up of each. Yoga is more than just the physical poses. This may include pranayama or breath training. You might find meditation or quieting the mind to be part of a yoga experience. Pilates is more attuned to working out at a gym. The focus is more on achieving a goal and pushing oneself.

As noted, there are many fundamental differences. These differences can be profound. Ever notice what happens when a long time aerobics instructor takes a weekend yoga training and begins to teach yoga at a gym? Not surprisingly, it is still a lot like aerobics. Ever notice what it is like when a celebrity fitness trainer tries to combine yoga with a workout video? It is still a lot like a gym workout.

When we just focus on the workout part we lose a lot of the core value of yoga. Pilates attempts to place most of its emphasis on the workout part and little or no emphasis on the spirit part. Yoga offers us a more reflective world view as we are encouraged to continue our practice once we leave the yoga class.

Conclusion

Most people are not aware of why they do a particular practice. They are bombarded by ill-informed media personalities and follow what the crowd is doing. Without questioning the root of your actions you may be doing more harm than good.

Yoga studios that combine Pilates with yoga classes are doing a disservice to their students. These studios are tarnishing the founding principles of yoga and bringing in more unconsciousness. While there is a place for fitness and Pilates it ought to be left for the gym and not the yoga studio. Yoga studios were once thought of as islands of peace amidst a stressful and crazy world. Once considered places of refuge, yoga studios are now becoming no different than the neighborhood gym.

You would not eat dinner in the bathroom every evening would you? You would not park your car in the living room of your home? There are appropriate places for each endeavor. Why would you combine a relaxation practice with a war practice?

I do not blame this blending of yoga and Pilates on someone's ill will or spiteful intent. It is only through ignorance and lack of information that has carried things this far. When it comes to the differences between yoga and Pilates there are many. Whatever choice you make be sure that it is an informed choice. Only you can decide what is right for you.

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