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Seeking Serenity

by Karryn Miller

The complementary mind-body disciplines of Pilates and yoga can help you stay strong when the winds of life threaten to knock you down.

The Japanese have long known the importance of a person's core — the point just below the navel known as the *hara*. Though this word ordinarily translates as “stomach” or “belly,” it also signifies the physical and spiritual hub from which a master in aikido or other martial arts draws his or her strength and where Buddhist monks keep their focus during meditation. Yogis believe that a person's energy is centered here, at what they refer to as the navel chakra (a point of physical or spiritual energy within the body).

In the West, yoga poses are often thought of as the core of this ancient tradition, but the asanas (postures) play a supporting role in a much larger system. Their original function was to help loosen the body and slow down a racing mind in preparation for lengthy meditation sessions. These days, an asana practice is a starting point for people new to yoga, and this then leads to the discovery of how yoga connects the physical with the mental — with positive results. “Synchronizing breath and movement in the rhythmic flows, or sequences of poses, began a wondrous healing process for my body and mind,” recalls Japan-based holistic health counselor Em Bettinger.

For those attracted to yoga to tone up and get fit, an asana practice is a healthy lifelong exercise option. “The physical practice of different postures primarily works on boosting the nervous system and circulation, toning and stretching muscles, as well as promoting healthy functioning of all major joint complexes,” explains Patrick Oancia, director of Tokyo-based yoga studio Yogajaya. “Unlike ordinary physical exercise, yoga practice can be comprehensively sustained long into old age.”

The broader structure of yoga includes meditation, breathing techniques and moral codes of conduct. “Now that the physical practice has taken root, there's a move beyond this into the deeper philosophical and spiritual elements of yoga: serving one's community, honoring the environment, practicing compassion and charity,” says Leza Lowitz, owner of the Sun and Moon Yoga studio in Tokyo.

In her workshops, yoga instructor Hikaru Tanaka has seen a shift towards the spiritual content of yoga among her students. “Two years ago, most students said that

what they wanted out of yoga practice was related to a physical topic like wanting to lose weight or become more physically flexible,” says Tanaka. “But this year, 90 percent of students said they wanted something like achieving inner peace or being able to appreciate where they were.”

The Western practice of Pilates often resonates well with yoga students, and as it also places importance on the *hara* it neatly ties in with Japanese tradition. Pilates was born out of the rehabilitation program that Joseph Pilates designed for bedridden soldiers in the First World War. The modern form of this exercise system involves toning exercises done on a mat or on specialized equipment. Mat classes focus on core strengthening through repetitive, precise movements. Once you have learned the basics, the mat routines can be

New Trends in Yoga and Pilates

- Japan-based Pilates studios now offer their version of Bikram (hot yoga). Hot Pilates classes are conducted at a temperature of 38°–39°C.
- Some Pilates classes in Japan now focus on specific props, such as the Magic Circle (rubber or metal ring used for resistance), ball and Arc Barrel (lightweight half barrel).
- After a visit from laughter yoga founder Madan Kataria in 2009, the University of Osaka began researching the benefits of this practice, which combines laughing with gentle stretches.

done anywhere. In an equipment class, Pilates machines utilize pulleys and straps to create resistance and support to help improve flexibility, tone and strengthen the whole body. Like in yoga, people benefit from an improved posture and a leaner figure, though Pilates does lack the underlying philosophy of its ancient counterpart.

“When yoga or Pilates students become deeper in their practice, they often start looking into other disciplines to help them improve and complement what they have learned,” explains instructor Santiago Lautz of Hello

Pilates. “In my case, I found more and more yogis coming to my classes attracted by the ‘core training’ approach. The numerous common points between yoga and Pilates make the transition easy between them and improve the understanding in both cases.

Joseph Pilates was a yoga practitioner in his youth, and he took inspiration from several yoga asanas to develop his technique. We can therefore find many exercises with almost the same form but with a different approach.” ☉

