

YOGA OR PILATES?

Which One's for You?

When Rudyard Kipling wrote the immortal words, 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', he obviously hadn't had the benefit of experiencing a Yoga or a Pilates class, because, if he had, he might not have come to this conclusion.

Although Yoga and Pilates originated and have developed from vastly different cultures and philosophies, they share many characteristics and benefits. To a degree, both follow an holistic path to a healthy lifestyle. Neither are competitive, and both encourage a social approach to exercise. Novices to exercise also tend to find Yoga and Pilates classes less intimidating than the traditional gym 'scene' of mechanical weight training and ear-piercing cardio workouts.

Physiologically, both work muscles from origin to insertion, which in layman's terms means that you will begin to develop slim, strong lines, not bulky, cumbersome limbs. Both practices are unique in that they also encourage flexibility, coordination, balance and posture.

So, what are the differences?

Although there are striking similarities between Pilates and Yoga, there are, nevertheless, some fundamental differences. And to help us understand these subtle nuances, we brought in two experts - Nicole Walsh from Bikram's Yoga College of India, and Pilates practitioner, Julie Galbraith from Pilates International. We asked Nicole and Julie each to go along to one of their opposite number's classes and report back to us.

First up, we have our Yoga expert, Nicole, talking about her first Pilates class...

"The main difference I noticed with Pilates was the fact that you isolate and work one part of the body at a time, mainly the abdominal muscles. It was quite difficult - I was actually surprised at how hard I found the exercises, and definitely made me aware that certain parts of my body are not as strong as I thought!

"The breathing was very different to yoga, and it took me a while to get used to exhaling from my mouth - in yoga we mainly use the nose to breathe.

"After the session I didn't feel as though I'd had as strong a physical workout as with some yoga classes. However, I felt that my abdominals and lower back felt a lot stronger. I liked the one-to-one approach that the studio gives and the instructors are very knowledgeable. I was impressed with the initial consultation in which they assess your body and your needs as an individual - not in the "this is what you need

to do to lose weight" sense, but rather picking postural and structural alignment issues and looking to correct them. Overall it was a good experience, very challenging.

"It is something I could see myself doing as a complement to practicing yoga. For me though, yoga is more than an exercise class - it encompasses a much broader experience, set of values and way of life."

Now the roles were reversed, and it was Julie's turn to be the student...

"The first thing I noticed was that the breathing was different. In Pilates we breathe in through and out through the mouth in order to facilitate the deep abdominal correction

"With around 20 people in the class, there wasn't a lot of 'demonstration', which meant I had to follow the person in front of me... which was a little hard. With Pilates, because we work with a maximum of four students to one instructor, there is more time for personal supervision and feedback. I enjoyed the feeling of the postures and stretches, although I would have liked to have held them for longer and been told how my body was being affected by them.

"It was interesting to experience the different ways of working the body, ie. Lifting the shoulder girdle really high, bringing the shoulders right up to the ears, as opposed to Pilates where we train the opposite movement to de-emphasise the upper trapezius muscles and lengthen the mid to lower back for postural reasons. In Pilates we focus more on stabilising joints and isolating moving body parts in order to create more functional movement.

"All in all, I enjoyed my Yoga experience. However, being an ancient spiritual practice, I was a little disappointed not to experience some form of meditation or guided relaxation."

So... Which One Should I Do?

In reality, this more a philosophical question than a physiological question, as both offer similar results of improved flexibility and a build up of overall body strength without bulk.

Pilates is new and different, and is a more dynamic exercise system that focuses on posture, alignment and specific body parts. In comparison, Yoga has deep established roots and many facets that encompasses the 'whole' rather than the part, thus offering a more holistic experience.

The simple answer is that it doesn't have to be an either/or decision. You should try both, and then decide.

