

Yoga and Pilates: What's the difference?

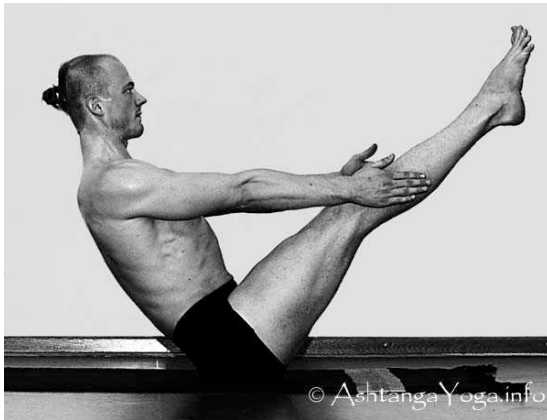
By Sherri R. Betz, PT, GCS, PMA®-CPT

Have you ever wondered... “What are the differences between Yoga and Pilates?”

Someone jokingly said, “The difference between Pilates and Yoga is that in Yoga you close your eyes and think about god and in Pilates you keep your eyes open and think about your abs!”

One guru said the purpose of Yoga is to become more flexible so that you could sit comfortably to meditate. Yoga certainly is more than that.

I write this in trepidation of offending the beautiful Yoga and Pilates practitioners around the world. I hope to distill some of the information about Yoga and Pilates looking at some of the differences and similarities between them to help practitioners understand these popular forms of movement. My yoga practice began in Louisiana (when no one did yoga there!) at about the age of 15. At the local library, I happened to pick up *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga* and started trying out some of the poses and breathing. Actually, I skipped the breathing and avoided it for many years until I did my Pilates training and was forced to learn to breathe! Now I am devoted to my Ashtanga/Vinyasa Yoga practice and my Pilates work to keep my body in shape and to add a spiritual component to my life. It has been very interesting to compare a movement practice that has been around for 2000 years with one that has been around for only about 80 years.



Yoga: Navasana (Boat Pose)



Pilates: Teaser

Common Forms of Yoga Practice in the United States:

Yoga was brought to us by Hindus practicing in India. Hatha Yoga is the broad term that can be used interchangeably with Yoga. Astanga Yoga is the term given by the philosopher/sage Patanjali, about 2,000 years ago to describe eight limbs of a path toward union of the Atman (individual soul) with Brahman (universal soul). The practice of asana and pranayama (breathing practice) are just two aspects of the eight limbs of Astanga Yoga. The other six steps are: Yama (social ethics); Niyama (personal discipline); Pratyahara (sensory withdrawal); Dharana (concentration); Dhyana

(meditation); and Samadhi (bliss). BKS Iyengar website
<http://www.iyngaus.org/IyengarYoga/Patanjali/astanga.aspx>

Hatha: Even though Hatha is considered the broad term for most of the Yoga styles in the U.S., if you see a class described as Hatha, it will likely be a slow-paced stretching class with some simple breathing exercises and perhaps seated meditation. This might be a good place to learn basic poses, relaxation techniques, and become comfortable with Yoga.

Vinyasa is a term, like Hatha, that covers a broad range of Yoga classes. Vinyasa, which means “breath-synchronized movement”, tends to be a more vigorous style based on the performance of a series of 12 poses called [Sun Salutations](#), in which movement is matched to the breath. A Vinyasa class will typically start with a number of Sun Salutations to warm up the body for more intense stretching that's done at the end of class. In other words, the teacher will instruct you to move from one pose to the next on an inhale or an exhale. This technique is sometimes also called Vinyasa Flow, or just Flow because of the smooth way that the poses run together and become like a dance. Vinyasa style of Yoga is probably the most similar to the way Pilates mat is meant to be practiced.

Astanga or Ashtanga: Astanga means “8 limbs” in Sanskrit and is generally a fast-paced intense style of Yoga where a set series of poses is performed, always in the same order. This style of Yoga involves a very difficult series of postures that involve intense end range positions in rotation, sidebending and flexion of the spine and strength poses that require a tremendous amount of upper body strength in its fullest form. The Astanga method stresses daily practice of constant movement from one pose to the next using ujjayi breathing, jalandhara bandha, mula bandha, uddiyana bandha, (bandhas to be discussed later) and drishti (eye gaze or point of focus). I had the opportunity to meet **Sri K. Pattabhi Jois**, who brought this form of Yoga to the US in 1975, when I attended a series of Ashtanga Yoga classes that he taught in California in 2001. In a crossed-leg seated twisting posture (Marichyasana D) he pressed my knee down until the small coronary ligament tore. I was already at end-range of my hip and knee motion, and probably many other joints in my body and was surprised by the correction with over-pressure! The **Mysore** style of Astanga came from Jois’ studies in Mysore, India as a youth and is usually self-led at the students own pace with the teacher walking around and giving assistance to students. Astanga is also the inspiration for what is often called **Power Yoga**. If a class is described as **Power Yoga**, it will be based on the flowing style of Astanga, but not necessarily kept strictly to the set Astanga series of poses. Looking over the Astanga Primary Series charts [Ashtanga Yoga Primary Series](#) would be helpful in seeing the postures with their Sanskrit names in their original form.
<http://www.ashtanga.com/> and <http://ashtangayoga.info>

Iyengar: This form of Yoga gets its name from the founder, BKS Iyengar. Iyengar focuses on precise Yoga postures with emphasis on alignment and use of props to assist students in achieving correct positions. Poses are held for minutes at a time vs. flowing from one pose to the next. There are 200 postures and 14 different types of breath

practices documented in this practice. This is a good style for clients to begin their yoga practice and it is easily adapted to rehabilitation. <http://www.iyanaus.org>

Bikram: Bikram or “Hot Yoga” is a series of 26 specific poses and 2 breathing exercises developed by Bikram Choudhury performed in a “hot room” 95-105°. This wildly popular style of Yoga is very dogmatic in that no (or very few) modifications are allowed. I do not recommend this style for clients who are still in acute phases of rehabilitation. http://www.yoga-108.net/bikram_postures.htm
<http://www.bikramyoga.com/>

Yin: Yin Yoga holds poses in gentle stretched non-painful positions for at least 1 minute and up to 20 minutes at a time. The yin essence is “yielding” and allowing muscles, tendons and ligaments to lengthen over time. This form of Yoga is good for clients who have ligamentous or capsular restrictions and might be a good compliment to manual therapy techniques if the client is guided gently and carefully into the prolonged stretches. <http://www.yinyoga.com/>

Sivananda: Traditionally, Sivananda Yogis practice the sun salutations, before the Asanas (postures). There is also an interesting supine relaxation pose between poses “to let the benefits of the pose integrate” that is not found in many other Yoga practices. Personally, I felt that this building of energy and sudden stopping to lie down had my heartrate going up and down and my body heating up and cooling down many times throughout the class.

Sivananda Yoga is based upon five principles: 1. Proper exercise (Asana), focusing on 12 poses in particular 2. Proper breathing (Pranayama) 3. Proper relaxation (Savasana) 4. Proper diet (Vegetarian) 5. Positive thinking and meditation (Dhyana)
<http://www.sivananda.org/>

The Sivanda 12 Basic Postures from which all other postures come are:

1. Headstand (Sirshasana)
2. Shoulderstand (Sarvangasana)
3. Plough (Halasana)
4. Fish (Matsyasana)
5. Forward bend (Paschimothanasana)
6. Cobra (Bhujangasana)
7. Locust (Shalabhasana)
8. Bow (Dhanurasana)
9. Spinal twist (Ardha Matsyendrasana)
10. Crow pose (Kakasana) or Peacock pose (Mayurasana)
11. Standing forward bend (Pada Hasthasana)
12. Triangle (Trikonasana)

At the end of the session one must do a deeper, final relaxation (Savasana). Sitting postures for meditation and Pranayama include the lotus pose (crossed leg sitting with feet on top of shins)

Jivamukti: This style of Yoga emerged from one of New York's popular Yoga studios. Jivamukti founders David Life and Sharon Gannon take inspiration from Astanga (like Power Yoga) and emphasize chanting, meditation, and spiritual teachings, often accompanied by trendy music. <http://www.jivamuktivyoga.com/>

Forrest: Developed by Ana Forrest, headquartered in Santa Monica, California, Forrest Yoga is gaining popularity around the U.S. The performance of vigorous asana sequences is intended to strengthen and purify the body and release pent-up emotions and pain so that healing can begin. Expect an intense workout with an emphasis on abdominal strengthening and deep breathing. <http://www.forrestyoga.com/>

Integral: Integral Yoga follows the teachings of Sri Swami Sachidananda, who came to the U.S. in the 1960s and eventually founded many Integral Yoga Institutes and the famed Yogaville Ashram in Virginia. Integral is a gentle hatha practice, and classes often include breathing exercises, chanting, kriyas (exercises and breathing techniques intended to purify and cleanse the body's energy channels), and meditation. <http://www.yogaville.org/>

Anusara: Founded in 1997 by John Friend, Anusara (meaning flowing with grace) is a Hatha Yoga system that combines a strong emphasis on physical alignment with a positive philosophy derived from Tantra. The philosophy's premise is belief in the intrinsic goodness of all beings. Anusara classes are usually light-hearted and accessible to students of differing abilities. Poses are taught in a way that opens the heart, both physically and mentally, and props are often used. <http://www.anusara.com/>

Kundalini: Kundalini is one of the more spiritual types of Yoga. It goes beyond the physical performance of poses with its emphasis on breathing, meditation, and chanting. However, the Kundalini sequences are very physically intense. This type of Yoga appeals to those who are up for both mental and physical challenges. The Kundalini is untapped energy (prana) at the base of the spine that can be drawn up through the body awakening each of the seven chakras. Full enlightenment is said to occur when this energy reaches the Crown Chakra. Kundalini energy is often represented as a snake coiled at the base of the spine. The emphasis in Kundalini is on the breath in conjunction with physical movement, with the purpose of freeing energy in the lower body and allowing it to move upwards. All asana practices make use of controlling the breath, but in Kundalini, the exploration of the effects of the breath, also called prana, on the postures is essential. Kundalini uses rapid, repetitive movements rather than poses held for a long time, and the teacher will often lead the class in call and response chanting. <http://www.kundaliniyoga.com/>

Breathing Practices in Pilates and Yoga:

Most Yoga practices utilize a diaphragmatic breath during their postures and sequences resulting in lower belly distention with each breath. This does not imply that Pilates breathing does not use the diaphragm. With an inhale, the diaphragm will descend no matter whether the belly is allowed to distend or remain contracted. In Pilates, the client is asked to maintain the deep abdominal contraction so that the ribcage expands laterally.

This style of breathing is referred to as costal breathing. Pilates also utilizes percussive breathing or pulsed breathing on occasion with some exercises such as the Hundred.

A more specific yogic breath is the **Ujjayi** breath, “created by gently constricting the opening of the throat to create some resistance to the passage of air. Gently pulling the breath in on inhalation and gently pushing the breath out on exhalation against this resistance creates a well-modulated and soothing sound—something like the sound of ocean waves rolling in and out.” *Tim Miller in Yoga Journal*

<http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/768>

Ujjayi is a diaphragmatic breath, which first fills the lower belly activating the first and second chakras, rises to the lower rib cage (the third and fourth chakras), and finally moves into the upper chest and throat.

Both Pilates and Yoga use breath coordinated with movement resulting in inhalation and exhalation during particular phases of exercises. There are many variations between the styles of Yoga and Pilates as to when to inhale and when to exhale. There are many opinions as to when to inhale and exhale in the various styles of Yoga and Pilates.

Yoga Bandhas:

Yoga Bandhas often are forgotten pieces of Hatha Yoga practices. Ironically, these are more often utilized and trained in Pilates than in Yoga. The bandhas are meant to be used to prevent prana (life force energy) from escaping the body. **Jalandhara Bandha** is the Throat Chakra Lock which prevents prana from escaping the upper body. **Uddiyana Bandha** is the Sexual Chakra or Abdominal Lock and **Mula Bandha** is the Root Chakra Lock-preventing prana escaping from the lower body. This energy-trapping technique is facilitated by drawing in or contracting the deep neck flexors, the transversus abdominus and the pelvic floor. These structures are key components in core control. The bandhas can facilitate better core, head, neck and trunk control during challenging Yoga poses; especially long-lever arm movements at end range.

Bandhas:	Yoga Definition	Pilates Equivalent
Jalandhara Bandha	Throat Chakra Lock	Deep Neck Flexors
Uddiyana Bandha	Sexual Chakra Lock	Transversus Abdominus
Mula Bandha	Root Chakra Lock	Pelvic Floor

About Pilates: Pilates is a system of exercise developed by Joseph and Clara Pilates from 1925-1967. Originally called Contrology by its creator, Pilates consists of mat or floor exercises progressing from small or mid-range movements to large end-range movements with flowing quality and correct biomechanical alignment. Positions are not generally held for long periods of time, rather, the student moves into and out of positions slowly at first progressing to a rapid but controlled pace. Mat exercises are complemented with special large and small apparatus to either assist movement or to resist movement. The large apparatus utilizes springs for assisting the rehabilitation patient or for challenging the experienced mover. Costal breathing with transversus abdominus facilitation is the preferred breathing style. The original method is largely dominated by spinal flexion or forward bending movements possibly due to Joseph

Pilates idea that “the spine should be flat like a newborn baby. There are several styles of Pilates taught currently today. **Classical or Original Pilates** indicates that the teacher will be teaching the exercises exactly as Joseph taught them as well as in a particular order. Evolved or more modern Pilates means that the teacher or physical therapist might modify a particular exercise or select a group of exercises based on an initial assessment and gradually progress them to more advanced choreography.

www.pilatesmethodalliance.org

One of the main differences between contemporary Pilates and Yoga is that Pilates begins with small range of motion and progresses toward end range joint movement while Yoga tends to hold postures at end range of joint motion and muscle length. This tends to make Yoga postures more risky for the beginner or injured student. There seems to be an easy fix to this dilemma in that the teacher might suggest to the Yoga student to go to 75% of their range of motion and hold there. This would build strength in the musculature that supports the joints, protect joint structures such as capsules and ligaments from getting overstretched, thus, reduce the risk for injury.

Another interesting difference between Pilates Mat and Yoga Classes is that Yoga begins often with the Sun Salutation series that includes standing poses and push-ups while Pilates Mat classes are meant to end with the 34th exercise, The Push-Up. (*Pilates, JH 1945, pp 92-93*) Yoga warms up with standing postures and ends lying down and Pilates begins in supine positions and ends standing up.

In regard to personal hygiene and self-care practices, most Yoga styles recommend bathing before class, eating a vegetarian diet, avoiding eating at least 2 hours before class and drinking plenty of water. Joseph Pilates made many recommendations for personal hygiene in his books *Return to Life and Your Health*. John Steele, a former client, friend and attorney of Joseph Pilates stated in a lecture at the PMA Conference in Orlando, FL Nov 3, 2007, “Joe was a strong advocate for personal hygiene-he actually got into the shower with clients to teach them how to exfoliate their bodies with a hard bristle brush!” (Showering was not a common practice back then-most people took baths.) An archival video actually exists of Joseph demonstrating hard bristle brush exfoliation, nostril water cleansing and rough towel drying!

We certainly know that Yoga stemmed from the Hindu religion and drove many of the physical Yoga practices we see today. Yoga practices usually incorporate a form of meditation or spiritual reflection for the purposes of achieving enlightenment. In contrast, not much is known about Joseph Pilates spiritual or religious beliefs other than he felt that his Contrology method was “the complete coordination of mind, body and spirit.” He stated that the “trinity” (mind, body and spirit) with the adoption of the principles of Contrology was necessary to achieve spiritual peace and everlasting happiness. (*Pilates, JH 1945, pp 23-24*) Most of his statements about the benefits and goals of Pilates centered around mental clarity, zest for life and better concentration. In most Pilates classes and teacher training programs, this trinity, as a way to achieve spiritual peace is rarely mentioned.

So when a friend tells you that they are practicing Yoga, you might just ask them what type since there are a wide variety of styles! Going over photos of the readily available Yoga postures might help your teacher to modify the poses for your condition. It is important to practice beneficial postures and to avoid postures that may increase your risk for injury.

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