



SNAKE EYES: Developing a Powerful Personal Practice: Day 1

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Mat

The best teacher is within each of us and the knowledge is gained through personal practice. Students often lament that they were at their Pilates best during their training which required hard study and the sweat needed to graduate. When receiving diplomas, new teachers are told that this is only the beginning. The new graduate is eager to teach clients and maybe run a studio. This focus can slowly become a focus on others. The original joy of doing personal practice can be lost. Without time for ourselves, teaching to become theoretical rather than experiential. When does the teacher gift themselves time for recovery of a personal practice? How does one begin to do this? In the beginning, Joe Pilates' passion was to create an exercise regimen that would build the physical body so that all could enjoy a vigorous lifestyle. If Joe were here, he might have said to all who teach his work to get onto the mat or reformer and "just do it".

Introduction:

"You cannot teach people anything. You can only help them to discover it within themselves." -Galileo Galilei.

"Practice your exercises diligently with the fixed and unalterable determination that you will permit nothing else to sway you from keeping faith with yourself". Joe Pilates

"You need to know it in your bones to be able to teach others" Ron Fletcher

Let's begin!

Practice Joe's work on a schedule that is realistic for you:

- Best time of the day.
- Days of the week.
- Schedule with flexibility.
- Expect what is realistic in terms of time.
- Choose your method of program whether equipment, mat or both.
- Practice Joe's work for the intrinsic value that he endorsed.

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- Monitor your practice to invigorate and inform your teaching.
- Adapt exercises to include recommendations from professionals and mentors.
- Utilize information of how to build new habits and routines.
- Modify exercises when appropriate.
- Challenge your body without judgement.

My Pilates experience over 40 years:

- Introduction to Pilates was a reformer class in 1984.
- Sought more information by hosting Bruce King who taught me mat work in 1988.
- Traveled to Santa Fe to take Kathy Grant's Wunda Chair workshop in 1992.
- Found Ron Fletcher who became my mentor and later his assistant in 1995.
- Owned and managed Pat Guyton Pilates studio 2005 – 2022.
- Mentored other teachers and developed a passion for sharing information that had been gifted to me.
- Taught and traveled extensively and began to ignore my personal practice.
- Research and curiosity lead to continuing education courses which were invaluable but not Pilates practice.
- Integration of this knowledge with purpose to enhance Pilates without changing the work.
- Pursuit of excellence and personal practice has made me a better teacher.

Pat's Personal Mat Practice:

My New Year's Resolution on 2024 was to do the entire mat list in order every day for the year. I succeeded under many unusual circumstances. I chose Mat because I could take it wherever I am located.

Things that I consider in planning my Mat program:

- The Pilates Mat List in Order.
- Modifications due to my physical limitations.
- Directives from my doctors, PT's and mentors.
- Whole body workout including all spinal mechanics with focus from the center outward to the extremities.
- Listen and honor each day.
- Continuity of the practice with additions or changes with intention.
- The Pilates Principles.
- Laugh when performance is less than desired.
- Continue to move through list when motivation is lacking.
- Utilize Pilates practice when there are challenges in life and feeling sad invites lack of motivation.

Pilates Principles:

There are many different lists of Pilates principles. Eight are included as they are the most common to all systems. It may be impossible to have a complete list because there are infinite pathways within the method. Each principle is a door into the understanding of another. Included in this handout are some definitions of each principle. The concept beneath each principle is expansive but it is helpful to start from one aspect and build upon understanding. Applying the principles to each exercise is discovery and builds a personal practice that works for you.

**AWARENESS – BALANCE – BREATHING – CONTROL – CONCENTRATION – CENTERING –
PRECISION - FLOWING MOTION**

AWARENESS:

What is the moral of the story "The Blind man and the Elephant"?

This story represents how we can begin to focus on one element of the elephant because we are blind to the other parts. That single focus becomes our reality. The elephant story teaches us that what we perceive to be true may have other elements yet to be seen. The Pilates principles are really the whole experience of embodiment through practice. Each principle is part of Contrology. We embody them through the experience of application. It can be challenging to try to do all at one time.

When practicing Pilates, it is often good to approach your workout with the principle that most resonates with you. Each principle will lead to the understanding of another principle. As we grow in daily practice, it is easy to manifest more principles within each exercise. This is the goal of regular practice, and it changes continually.

One Leg Circle:

- Examine neutral pelvis position to be able to hold space.
- Compare neutral ribcage for contralateral balance as the leg moves to right and left.
- Initiate the movement from the hip joint.
- Maintain the connection of the hip joint on the mat to the end of the foot.
- Check for neck and shoulder girdle tension.

BALANCE:

There are three kinds of balance that should be considered in Pilates mat.

1. In fitness programs a uniform muscle development includes a balance of the muscular of the planes in the body. These include the sagittal, coronal and transverse planes. Joe provided a balanced workout in the Mat series. The whole body is included within the sequence. Attention may be directed to an area within the series, but the specific spot does not consume the whole workout.
2. The ability to maintain a position in relationship with gravity while holding still or moving. Many of the mat exercises require holding a position while moving another part such as the Hundred or the Leg Pull.
3. Standing balance exercises as a beginning or at the end of the series.
4. This definition of the balance was a surprise: ~~APA~~ balanced personality is harmoniously integrated physically, emotionally and mentally with a sense of spirit. The following quote of Joe certainly speaks of the balanced life resulting from practice of his work:

"Pilates is complete coordination of body, mind and spirit". Joe Pilates

Planks:

Planks are included in this section of balance because they are considered essential for all ages and can be adapted. There are planks within the Pilates work, but the exercises are often too difficult for a beginner, clients who need recovery from injury or the aging population. Planks provide isometric strength and control of the lower back and entire core. They are a good preparation for building the strength required for the full Mat series. Planks also build gravitational balance challenge which is necessary as the body ages.

Steps for plank:

1. 30 to 60 seconds is the recommendation for holding the plank position.
2. Correct form should be a primary skill developed while holding the plank.
3. Advanced progression is 2 to 3 minutes.
4. Pilates mat exercises have additional challenges with gravity and balance while holding the plank with the additional movement of a leg, arm or neck and head.

Shoulder Bridge:

- Beginning exercise for plank position that can be modified for challenge.
- Modifications and Progressions:
 - Articulation to bridge position.
 - Hold one leg for 30 – 60 seconds.
 - Leg lower/lift - hip joint range of motion can be increased.
 - Feet flat or heels lifted for balance and lower leg and ankle strength.
 - Leg circles in bridge position.

Leg Pull Front:

- Modifications and progressions:
 - Focus on metatarsal flexion within functional range of motion.
 - Monitor the scapular glide as the plank moves forward and backward.
 - Modify with both feet on the mat.
 - Modify with forearm on mat.
 - Progress with hip joint extension.

Side Bend:

- Modifications and Progressions:
 - Practice side plank with extended arm or on forearm for 30 – 60 seconds before proceeding into the exercise.
 - Full side bend with head and neck is advanced.
 - Side Bend with forearm is a modification.
 - Modification of forearm side bend can make this exercise challenging.
 - Twist.
 - Side Kick

BREATHING:

“Above all else teach breathing first.” Joe Pilates

Breathing is hard to teach. It is not enough to tell someone to inhale or exhale. It is not enough to talk about the mechanics of diaphragmatic breathing. There is often client resistance because they want to move. Teachers must explain that breathing with conscious control is a primary reason Pilates works. Each client will require some guidance where the teacher selects exercises that lend themselves to breathing. Gradually, the breathing will become integrated into all movement. Cuing an inhale and an exhale with care and patience will enhance all exercises and improve health. This is such an obvious skill, and it is so difficult to teach and practice.

Steps for teaching breathing:

1. 3-D breathing warm up for beginners.
2. Avoid absolutes or prescriptive breathing when another pattern works best when starting a new exercise.
3. Consider choices of breathing cues for bone, muscle and organ function.
4. Build steps to introduce the prescribed breath pattern with the movement as ability improves.
5. Rhythm and speed of breathing should adapt within each exercise and for each client.
6. Above all else, get the client to breathe and move in harmony. The teacher must be adaptable.

The Swan Dive:

- Use of diaphragm, lungs and air to facilitate a desired result.
- Lift on inhale is like a balloon filling up the chest and lifting upward.
- Exhale on lift creates concentric muscle contraction of the abdominals to support the low back.
- On full Swan Dive, which works best for your body?

CONTROL:

Joe called his work Contrology. Control in exercise is the ability to exert conscious power to direct a movement for a specific gain. This also includes incorporation of a correction from self-observation or from a mentor.

The Seal

- Articulation to form a curve on which to roll.
- Self-determination for how the exercise should be performed.
- Challenge through execution and self-assessment.
- Ability to release the habitual patterns and focus on goals.
- Patience and persistence without judgement and a bit of humor.

CONCENTRATION:

The ability to focus attention on the exercise and to remain engaged throughout the movement. This ability can lead to frustration if the teacher or client knows what to do but cannot perform the movement. Often this awareness is a call to persistence. Practice and be aware of what you can do. Adapt, modify and practice patience. The Boomerang is a concentration marathon. Concentration is required to know the choreography. Concentration is required to know the exercise skills within the choreography.

"It is not enough to know what you are doing, you have to know what is coming next."

Kathy Grant

The Boomerang:**Steps for concentration within Boomerang – required exercises:**

1. The Spine Stretch
2. The Roll Over
3. The Teaser
4. Rowing Back (Arms) on Reformer)

Concentration in Boomerang:

- Know the steps.
- Know the rhythm of each step.
- Ability to hold space of Roll Over while crossing legs.
- Ability to hold space of Teaser while moving arms.
- Control to return softly to begin again.
- Ability to continue when things are not perfect.

CENTERING:

Pilates exercise is directed from the core. In truth all exercises must include the center because it is part of the body. The difference with Pilates performance is the deliberate attention to the connection of the whole body from the center outward.

1. The simplest definition is to place something in the middle. In Pilates we move direct movement from the center or core of the body.
2. We also align our body positions so that we are centered. A Roll Up is performed along the central axis.
3. Centering is commonly used in groups to quiet and calm the mind for the purpose of spiritual awakening. Although Pilates is not a spiritual practice, it can be noted that Joe used the word spirit when discussing his work. For many, Pilates is more than exercise. It is a mindful meditation.

The Hundred:

- Goal is to move into the position from the center in one breath.
- Hold the body position from the core.
- Hold the body along the central axis.
- Monitor the weight from right the left side on the mat.
- Move the arms rhythmically in coordination with the breath.

PRECISION:

Precision is the constant striving to do our best to achieve excellence. Desire for precision is a requirement for achieving a higher level of practice. It can become easy to perform on automatic. It is not enough to go through the list. Remaining alert and demanding our personal best is part of the daily experience. These are definitions for precision:

1. Consistency of performance so that the first Roll Up and the last Roll Up have equal value. Joe did not want his exercises to be performed to exhaustion. He wanted us to improve within the daily opportunity of practice.
2. Improvement of the skill level by building on the repetition of each movement.
3. Accuracy is another definition that should be addressed for self-evaluation and teaching. There is no bad Roll Up. There is a Roll Up that is improving.

Roll Up:

- Articulation of the spine is a necessary skill.
- Articulation usually requires some introduction exercises or a warm-up for the client to be able to focus and notice fluid motion.
- Articulation requires mobility, strength and flexibility of the spinal articulations.
- Tight quadriceps are usually not the primary limitation.

FLOWING MOTION – Transitions:

Flowing motion is like a stream. The stream has eddies, swirls, rushes, meanders, pools and drops as waterfalls. Flowing motion in Pilates does not mean that movement is done to a metronome. Flow must adapt to rhythmic changes and kinetic changes within motion.

- Rhythmic timing adjusts the effort needed to achieve an exercise goal. Spine Stretch is an example where rounding and reaching might require adapting speed and breath to reach maximum potential.
- Kinetic rhythm is when a movement is defined by gravity or springs and the body must follow. In mat, the rolling exercises move in coordination with body weight, size and gravity. It is not unusual in class to see that not everyone takes the same time to perform Rolling Back. You cannot ask people to roll faster or slower to keep us with the group. You can slow the movement at the top to create a group pause.
- Transitions are a great place to experience changes in rhythm.
 - Transitions keep the movement focused and lead the class into each exercise in a seamless sequential manner.
 - Transitions can be simple, complicated, but always fun.
 - Transitions often allow for preparation for the next exercise.
 - Transitions can offer modifications for a beginning class.
 - In personal practice, transitions allow for observation time and opportunities to change.

Pat's Favorite Transitions in Mat:

Spine Stretch to Saw:

1. Spine Stretch with round and extend.
2. Open Leg Rocker with both legs lifting like Joe.
3. Open Leg and Closed Leg Rocker alternation.
4. End in Teaser and roll downward and roll over to Corkscrew.
5. Finish Corkscrew and roll to Teaser and open legs and lower with control to Saw

The Double Kick to Neck Pull:

1. Finish The Double Kick
2. Circle the arms back and forward while holding the extension.
3. Long Back Stretch
4. Thigh Stretch
5. Reverse Windmill Arms
6. Russian to sit.
7. Neck Pull

What are your favorite transitions?

What motivations will you employ to maintain your personal practice?

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