

## Teaching a Pilates Mat Class with an Alexander Agenda

by Diane Young Sussman

### The First-Best-Thing

Fitness and exercise have become wildly popular over the last 10 years, competing programs blossoming upon the health and wellness landscape as the “next-best-thing.” I believe the Alexander Technique is the “first-best-thing” and with proper advertising could easily dovetail with current exercise trends. Alexander teachers have a tremendous amount to offer the exercise world in “carrying out an activity against the habit of a lifetime.”

Yet speaking of the Alexander Technique in relationship to exercise calls to mind F.M. Alexander’s often quoted remark that we simply exercise our habits. New students of the Alexander Technique are taught the principles of inhibition and direction for reducing tension habits in all of their activities. Until they have attained some skill I generally do not recommend that they pursue exercise. After a few months of re-education, this new skill can then extend to all of their activities including exercise. However, there are many exercise students who are unaware of the Alexander Technique—but who could be introduced to the principles if they were taught as part of the workout.

The Alexander Technique is simply not comparable to exercise, but it is compatible with it. I see the Alexander Technique as a container that encompasses the whole of mind/body unity and exercising for fitness as just one activity that is found within that larger whole. Jogging or playing the violin would also be contained within that whole. One can use the Alexander Technique to learn to exercise in such a way that one’s whole self is engaged. This includes one’s intelligence, one’s expanded awareness, and one’s ability to choose how to do or how not to do the exercises.

Consider dancing: It is *how* you dance that infuses your dancing with elegance, ease, and pleasure. A beautiful dancer gives the illusion of floating effortlessly, but there is a skillful means underlying the dancer’s ease—if it is in fact authentic ease. The longevity of a dance career will be determined by many factors, but long-term tension habits have



*Diane Young Sussman working with Martha Rinehart*

an inevitable consequence; dancers often retire because of injury and not because of age. The same conditions apply to fitness training. The exercise student often overworks, becomes injured, and stops exercising. An Alexander teacher can see immediately whether the student is over-working simply by observing the manner and conditions of use. Indeed all of the student’s habitual tension patterns of misuse will be revealed through his responses to his instructor’s first verbal commands, and his performance will most likely reveal excessive habitual tension.

The exercise student is attempting to do something thought to be “good” for the body, but this kind of thinking contains an inherent body/mind split: the belief that the body needs to be acted upon in some way that is “good” for it. The underlying belief is that the student simply needs to master what that “good” is and act upon it harder and more persistently for it to pay off. Instead of using efficient means to achieve the goal, the exerciser aggressively pushes his body into a pre-imagined shape. I cannot

emphasize this enough. I have a great deal of concern about how contemporary exercisers, dancers, and athletes approach skill mastery through goal-oriented, aggressive means. F.M. Alexander’s insights consistently focused on the ill effects of this approach, but things seem only to have gotten more frenetic in the 100 years since his discoveries were made. Personal habit, belief and the cultural norm of aggressively going after the goal, result in interference with coordinated movement potential. Exercising could be a very pleasurable and efficient use of time, but pleasure usually gets lost in overwork.

The Alexander teacher can help the student understand this problem by teaching the basic principles of our work during the exercise class, focusing especially on how thinking affects the outcome of an activity. We know that if the quality of thinking changes, functioning changes and use changes. We must encourage an attitude of ease, expanded attention, focus, and efficient implementation of the requests for contraction, while asking the student to

inhibit and direct. We replace “work, force, and do” with “do less, allow, and notice.” In other words, we are called to teach the skill of Alexander thinking at the moment the exercise routine begins! The Alexander Technique becomes a tool for the student to monitor use while engaging in the activity of exercise.

### What Is Pilates?

What makes Pilates different from other forms of exercise? Joseph Pilates (1880–1967) developed a series of exercises based upon theories of healthy movement, adapting many modalities for his unique fitness program including classical fitness, ballet, and yoga. He was a sickly child who trained as an athlete in order to overcome physical weaknesses, and he continually experimented with new ideas.

Pilates particularly distinguished himself when he designed a piece of exercise equipment for soldiers too weak to get out of bed during World War I. This became the famed Reformer, still extensively used today. Pilates moved to New York City and opened a studio where those with back pain and specialized fitness needs came to work with him, as well as highly skilled professional dancers and choreographers. One can see the influence of ballet and yoga in both the Reformer and the floor exercises, demonstrating how Pilates continued to explore and incorporate various techniques into his fitness training.

The benefits of practicing Pilates mat work two to three times a week include developing strength, balance, and tone. There is minimal aerobic value from the workout, but this is offset by a significant and swift improvement in coordination and balance as well as visible toning and strengthening of the musculature, resulting in the long lithe body of which Pilates training boasts.

Since I am both a Pilates instructor and an Alexander Technique teacher, I am particularly interested in how the Alexander Technique can inform the Pilates experience. I am careful to distinguish for my students the difference between Pilates and the Alexander Technique. Pilates offers a form for toning, strengthening, and stretching the body in an efficient way. The Alexander Technique offers a means to achieve that end.

I have had positive experiences using the Alexander Technique with my Pilates students, particularly because Pilates involves a unique form of floor work that lends itself to Alexander thinking. For much of the routine, the student’s back is resting on the floor as in an Alexander table lesson. Suggestions of head leading the spine and legs releasing away make sense in the context of the Pilates workout. The student is able to support the back more easily, to inhibit, and direct during the Pilates routines.

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Exercise programs such as kick-boxing and treadmill walking do not offer the support the floor offers, and there tends to be more overall tightening of the body.

For exercises performed in the prone position, the student is still able to think the Alexander directions, and to work with oppositional forces. What makes Pilates different from Alexander Technique is the obvious “doing” of the exercise. There is either eccentric or concentric contraction of muscles going on continuously, as well as pushing against resistance. It is fine to exercise as long as one knows how to stop tightening the muscles after the exercise is completed. The value of the Alexander approach is to give the student the tools for when and how to work, and when and how to stop working, and what to think during both of these phases.

Pilates works by organizing a specific group of muscles to stabilize the pelvis and another group to stabilize the shoulder girdle. This is called “core stabilization.” Core stabilization involves contracting:

- the muscles of the pelvic floor;
- the large transverse abdominus (the deepest of the four abdominal muscles);
- the multifidi (spinal stabilizer muscles of the lumbar region in the back);
- the internal and external obliques (the two sets of abdominal muscles that together contribute to tone and mobility of the lumbar spine).

In addition, two muscle groups, the serratus anterior and the middle body of the trapezius, integrate the shoulder blades with the back musculature to stabilize the shoulder girdle.

The spine and pelvis are kept in a neutral position, and the student is cautioned not to over-straighten the spine or to pull the pelvis into “pelvic tilt.” Once the “core” is stabilized, a series of choreographed movements systematically work each of the muscle groups in the body. By the end of the workout, the entire muscular system has received attention.

Pilates exercises are designed to work and tone the entire body. The core, which is mostly supported by a contraction of the transverse abdominus muscle and the internal obliques, is always working in all of the exercises, but this does not have to create excess tension. The student learns to use exactly the necessary amount of physical contraction to work the muscle group, and no more. For example, I help the student engage pelvic floor muscles, then gently contract the transversus, and gently co-ordinate the back (lengthen and widen) in order to engage the multifidi muscles. Pilates requires the gradual strengthening of these three main muscles groups, while not straining to compensate for lack of strength. If the diaphragm, ribs, or thoracic spine become held, the student has done too much work and will necessarily overwork from that point on. The student needs to learn to sense kinesthetically whether the proper consecutive contractions are being performed, or whether the system has become overloaded. The build-up of automatic tension will be lessened if the student does not attempt to overdo.

Breathing “techniques” are taught during a Pilates workout, much like yogic breathing techniques. However, I disregard these formal breathing techniques and prefer to teach the whispered “ah” instead. Because core stabilization requires contraction of the transverse abdominus, which attaches onto the rib cage and over the diaphragm, learning to breathe well takes a lot of time and requires continuous attention. I spend a lot of time offering my students ways to contract the abdominals and simultaneously breathe.

Typically the student loses strength in the core muscles as soon as an exercise begins, so the teacher must be vigilant to help him maintain contraction while allowing the diaphragm to move; otherwise the student builds an over-straightening habit into the thoracic region, with a negative impact on use.

### Alexander and Pilates

I use the time at the very beginning of the Pilates class hour to help the student develop more accurate sensory awareness. I call it the pre-Pilates time. I acclimate the student to the Alexander concepts, including understanding the principles of the Alexander Technique. I begin by teaching the student to refuse the first habitual response in order to attain a more neutral, quiet state of being. I teach the student to say the Alexander directions, to then sense the natural oppositional forces that are already in operation. I remind the student not to engage muscles as if the battalion had just been called into battle! I coach the student to do less work at first. This translates into willingness to be softer and gentler in performing the action, which affects both the physical and the emotional landscape. Then the student still performs the appropriate muscular contractions, but with more direction and less effort.

We need to coach our Pilates students to look forward to the positive long-term effects of working this way. The effects of good use slowly emerge, and then it is no longer the *doing*, but the *sensing*, that leads to accomplishing the activity through proper means. My wish is to bring *non-doing* into *doing* while engaging in activity, a revolutionary concept for most students. My goal is to help the student recognize misuse during the exercises. The student must continually be encouraged to make decisions based on ease while learning improved use. As the kinesthetic sense becomes more accurate and co-ordination enhanced, greater pleasure in the experience of exercising will be achieved and the student will not be exaggerating inefficient movement habits.

To this end I take time to prepare the student for the exercises. I remind the student that the floor is the support for the exercise, so the exercise can be performed more simply while using that support. I give instructions for stabilizing the pelvis

and shoulder girdle, and then offer small movements in which the student can still give the guiding orders. My intention is to offer a “means-whereby” for releasing layers of excess muscular holding, leading eventually to performing proper, specific muscular contractions in order to accomplish the goal.

For example, when I begin the class with core stabilization, I first have the student rest in semi-supine position with some kind of support under the head and the feet placed a little less widely apart than hip width. Pilates foot position is

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traditionally closer together than I like, because the student inevitably tightens the inner thigh muscles to keep the legs in place. It is easier to direct legs away with the wider placement of the feet. I suggest to the student, “On your next exhalation, contract the pelvic floor (while not going into pelvic tilt), then pull the belly toward the spine, bring the lower ribs slightly together, and nod your head to lift it off the mat, continuing to allow the head to lead out and away from the body. Do not pull your legs in.” Next I give instructions for stabilizing the shoulder blades: “Allow the shoulders to widen and the shoulder blades to release down the back.” The stabilization work is always the same but the form of each exercise changes. For example, sometimes the student is on his back and sometimes on his side, so just as in sitting up after lying down during a lesson, the student must rediscover how to find the up-flow along the spine.

The practice, then, is to do less work and not to go for the goal. But given the culture in which we live, the instructor must be aware of the universal tendency to work too hard, and instead guide the student to make decisions that will benefit ease. For example, after the muscles of the shoulder girdle and pelvic floor are stabilized, the student is instructed to nod the head and lift it off the mat using the strength from the “core” musculature. This is an extremely

difficult request, which usually creates undue neck tension. So my instruction is for the student to continue thinking that the head is leading away from the body and the body following. If this cannot be managed without difficulty, I ask that the head be lowered back onto the mat (or head rest, a practice that I have taken up in all of my classes). I then explain that the abdominal strength is not yet at a level to support the load, and that we do not wish for the neck muscles to take over the work. Hopefully the new experience of doing less will be convincing as the avenue to achieving more. Eventually the student brings about the desired effects of strength and tone, but has not compromised ease and freedom of movement.

When I use Pilates mat work as an activity in which to explore Alexander Technique principles, I am confident that my student’s functioning will improve systematically. Muscle groups become toned, strengthened and more pliable. Breathing co-ordination evolves as a pleasurable, efficient component of the Pilates work bringing oxygen-rich blood to working muscles. The Pilates student increases the level of difficulty while experiencing easy, free-moving joints. After class the student continues to go through the day in a balanced and free way, having learned that tightening to be upright for standing, walking, and reaching to the highest shelf is unnecessary. Free movement is continually available, unencumbered by interference.

The Alexander Technique is a tool to help the student stop interfering with natural functioning, and the Pilates class offers an endlessly rich context within which to explore the use of the self.

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