

# Power up your practice with Pilates

By Sally Parkes BSc

As a teacher of both astanga yoga and the Pilates Method, I am often asked “Which is more beneficial, yoga or Pilates?” There is no straightforward answer to this question, as it often depends on what students want to gain from their practice and how often they are willing to practice. I often suggest that they try both and decide for themselves, and if they enjoy both, then do both. In my personal practice I have found that regular Pilates classes have helped enormously with my yoga practice. My core strength has increased, allowing my balance to improve – which has, in turn, I believe, protected me from injury. That is not to say that a regular practice of astanga yoga alone will not increase your core strength effectively, but an increase in core work and postural awareness may propel your practice into new realms.

Joseph Pilates devised his exercise system in the early 20th century in an attempt to strengthen his frail body after suffering from rickets and asthma as a child. When he was interned in the First World War, Pilates taught the system, which he later named “Contrology”, to fellow internees, and successfully helped to maintain their health during the deadly influenza epidemic in 1918. Following this Joseph Pilates served as a hospital orderly on the Isle of Man. He worked alongside medical staff with amputee patients, and noticed a remarkable improvement in their strength and overall well-being. In 1926 Pilates emigrated to the US, where he opened the first studio in New York. It was very successful and in a short time he developed a client list of, among others, actors and dancers.

Joseph Pilates believed that in order to achieve happiness, it is essential to gain mastery of your body. The system, which can be done on a mat or with the use of specially-designed equipment, aims to increase breath awareness, to strengthen and lengthen the muscles, and improve posture and core stability. In the same way that astanga yoga works on eight basic yogic principles, or limbs, as they are traditionally known, so does Pilates. These include concentration, control, breath awareness, precision, integration, tuition, fluidity and centering or core contraction. Apart from other obvious similarities such as the control of the breath and concentration, it is the emphasis on the contraction of the core that mostly unifies these two systems. It is believed by both Pilates and astanga yoga practitioners alike that we must gain our control of our core muscle before we can gain the most benefit from our practice.

In some forms of hatha yoga we work strongly with the limbs, as though we are sending energy into our centre, or core area, whereas in both Pilates and astanga yoga we work from our centre and send the ener-

gy outwards to our periphery. This helps to generate heat within the body and strengthen our foundation on which all movement should be built – the core.

On a general level, our core muscles are our transverse abdominus, which is the deepest layer of our abdomen and wraps around our lower torso, acting like a corset; and our pelvic floor or perineum, which also acts as a support system. The obliques and lower back muscles are also part of our core and also add to the stabilization of our torso.

In astanga yoga, a system which is deeply rooted in ancient tradition, the core is known as the bandhas; whereas in Pilates it is often referred to as the “power-house” or more simply our “centre”. The contraction of the bandhas has been experimentally shown to decrease heart rate, respiration and blood pressure and instil a general sense of relaxation and wellbeing. In the yogic text, *Moola Bandha, the Master Key*, it is stated: “Mastery of the bandhas, therefore, leads to the fullest realisation of our potential.”

The word *bandha*, according to the Sanskrit language, can be defined in many ways, including “to bind, catch, shut or close, or to lock”. The latter is the most commonly-used translation and refers to the locking in of our subtle energy or prana.

The bandhas are comprised of jalandhara bandha,

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uddiyana bandha and moola bandha. Jalandhara bandha refers to the compression of the throat. By stretching the neck in this way, it is believed that the pituitary, pineal glands are subtly affected, whilst the forward flexion compresses and thus stimulates the thyroid, parathyroid and thymus gland. This gives an overall improvement in the functioning of our nervous system. Uddiyana banda has a more obvious link to Pilates in that it refers to the abdominal contraction, and therefore will directly increase our core strength and stability. On a more subtle level, it also compresses the digestive organ, adrenal glands, kidneys and solar plexus. A flow of energy is then generated in the abdomen and chest as a result. The use of moola bandha also has a clear link to Pilates as it refers to the perineum or pelvic floor contraction and acts as the inner muscular support system for the lower digestive organs. It also helps to seal in our prana for uddiyana bandha to then send upwards to our energy channels, or nadis, as they are also known.

It is clear then that astanga yoga, although a very powerful and challenging practice, works to increase our flow of prana very subtly, using asanas, breath and bandha as a way to access this subtle energy that is within all of us. Pilates, on the other hand, whilst still working to increase our energy, emphasises physical control to gain improved posture and core stability.

There are other more obvious differences between the two disciplines in that yogis will generally perform each posture once. This is in contrast to Pilates where each move is performed in repetition in a rhythmical fashion, resulting in a controlled flow of movement. By working our bodies in this way we can also create greater symmetry between our left and right side and help to balance any weaknesses, leading to greater functional fitness.

Furthermore, by varying your routine, the risk of injury is sig-

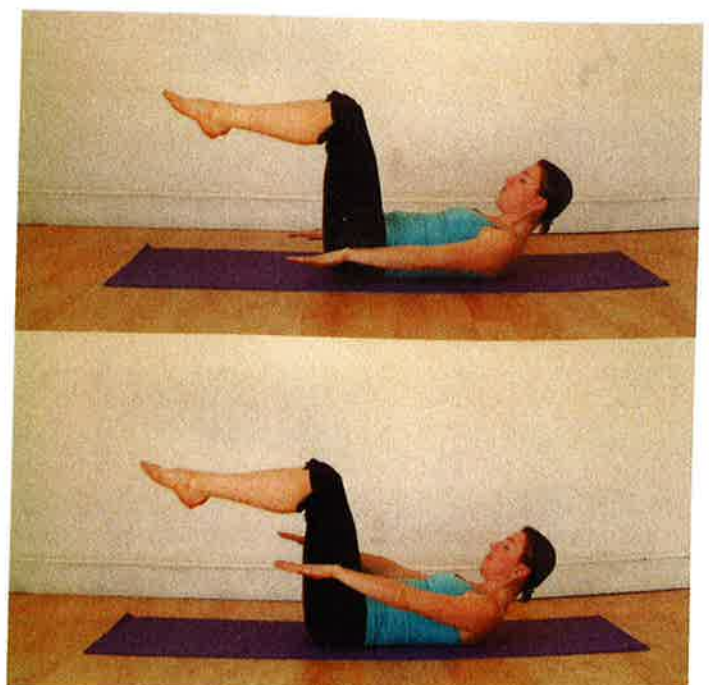
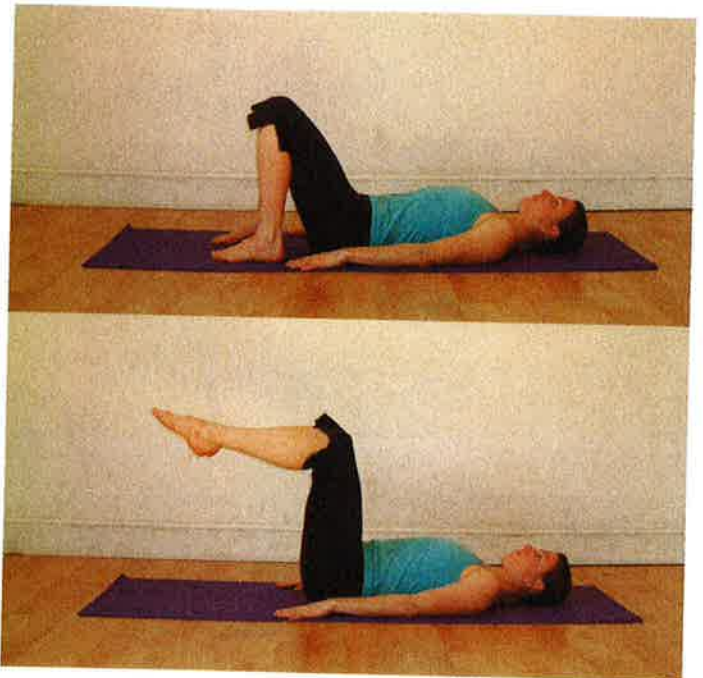
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nificantly decreased, as you will be training your muscles in a different way as well as rotating the muscle groups, allowing for more effective rest and therefore improved recovery. If you do suffer an injury from your yoga practice, however, Pilates can again be a very effective way of keeping up your practice, as it will maintain your core strength without placing strain the injured area.

Joseph Pilates stated that "Physical fitness is the first requisite of happiness", and believed that if your body is supple and strong, then you can enjoy physical freedom. Whilst this may also be a belief of many yogis, I believe that Pilates is a useful tool in which to propel our physical practice of yoga asana as it can assist us in finding greater calm within our yoga practice. This becomes more evident when we no longer feel unsteady in our headstand or wish we had better balance in revolved triangle, for example. We can then move our minds onto the greater task of becoming calm mentally, which in turn will lead to a both outer and inner freedom, both physically and spiritually.

Try these basic Pilates moves to get you started and boost your core power:

**The Hundred:** This is a classic Pilates move and is an effective warm up. Lie on your back with your arms by your side, palms facing down. As you inhale press your lower back into the floor, contract your core muscles and exhaling, lift up one leg at a time up so they are both at right angles with the knees lined up over the hips. At the same time, lift the head and shoulders up from the floor and lift the arms so the hands are just lower than the hip bones. Take a deep inhale, and as you exhale start to pump the arms up and down vigorously 5 times, and then again for 5 repetitions on the inhale. Aim to work through ten breaths and then exhale and lower your head, arms and legs back down to the floor.



Caution: If you are prone to lower-back pain, place one foot on the floor so that only one leg is placed at a right angle. This will decrease any strain placed on the lumbar spine. Repeat on the other side.

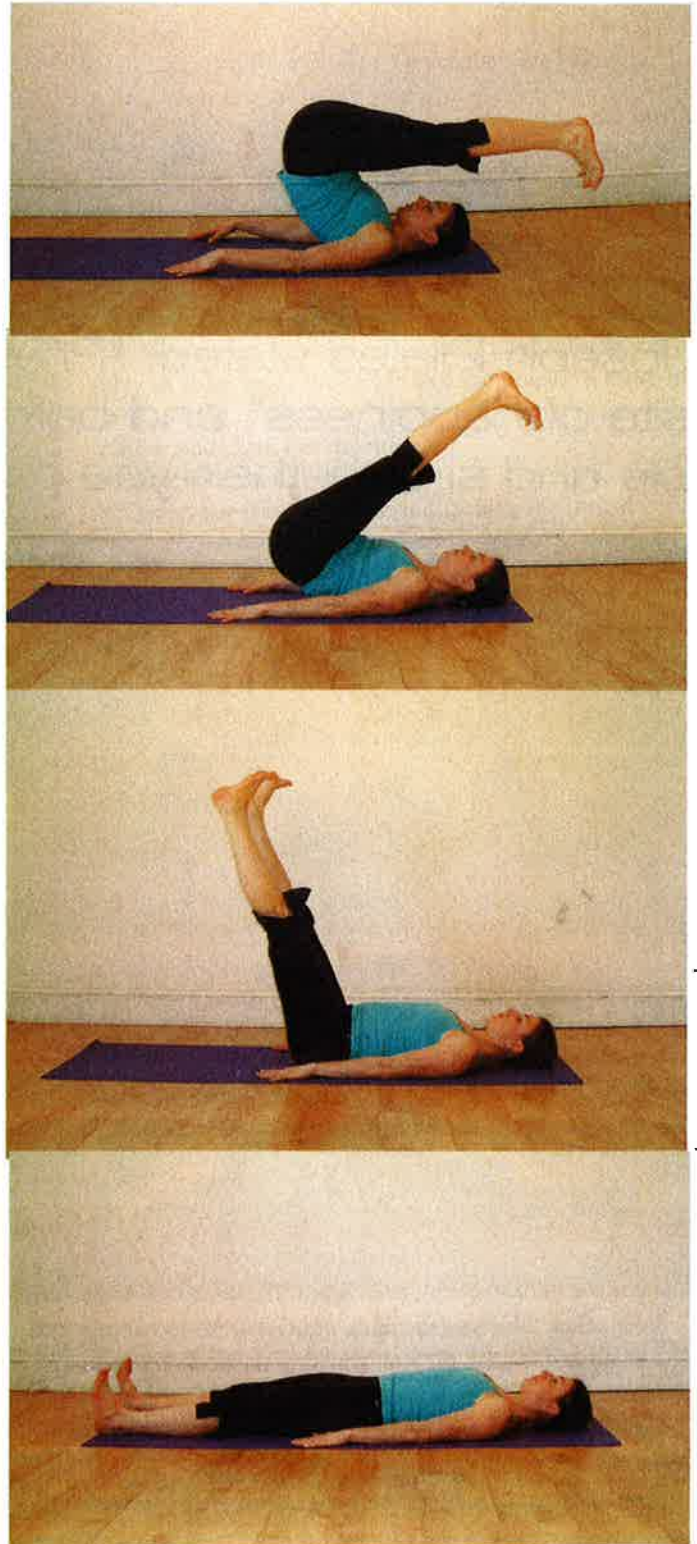
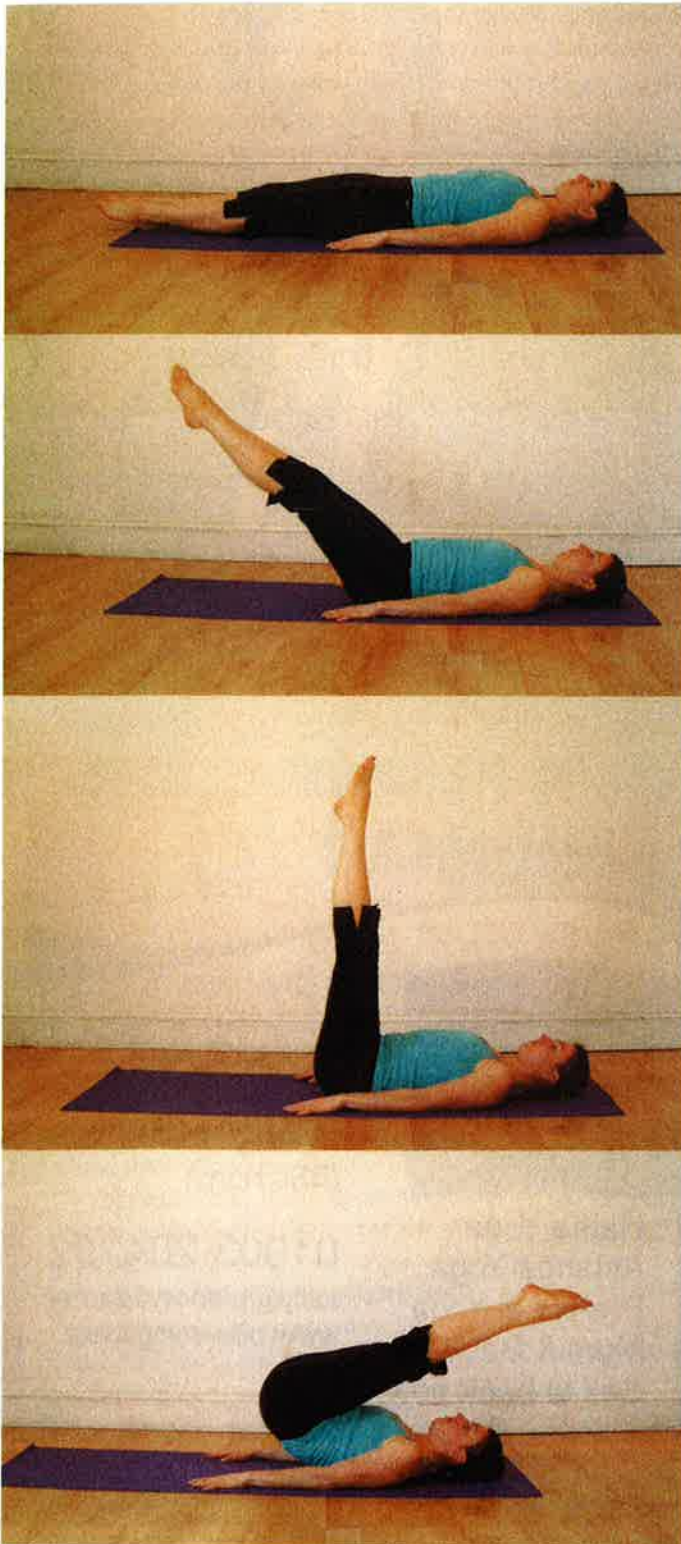
**The Roll Over:** This move is great for increasing mobility in the middle spine and for increasing core strength.

Lie on your back with your arms on the floor by your sides, palms facing down. Draw your navel in towards your spine and exhaling, lift both legs to 90 degrees and gently squeeze the legs together and point the toes. Inhaling, start to lift your legs over your head, squeezing your abdomen all the way through. Lifting your pelvis off the floor and let your legs travel all the way over

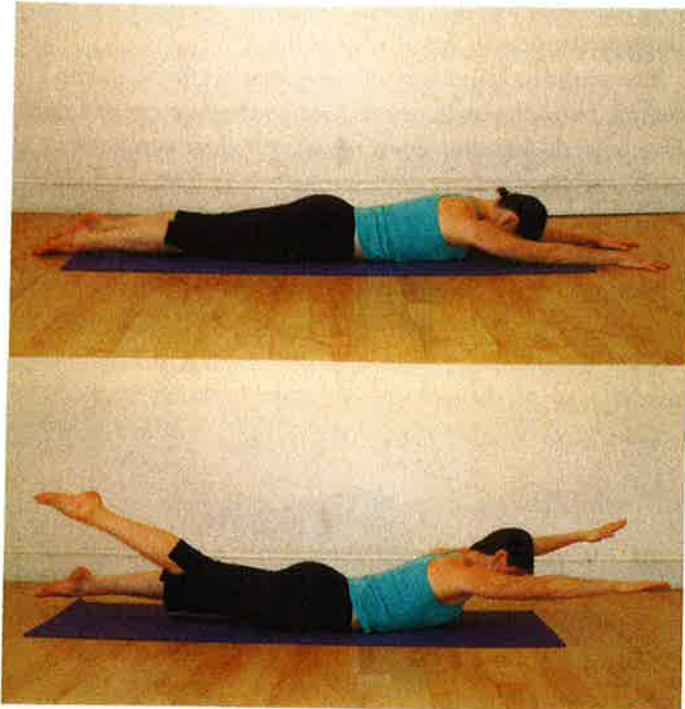
your head until they are parallel to the floor. Now flex the feet and separate them so they are hip width.

Start to exhale and slowly roll down towards the floor with control, feel each vertebra come down to the floor one at a time. Do not let the legs drop down towards the chest as you lower them, and avoid arching your lower back away from the floor. Stop when you reach the starting position. Bring the feet back together and gently point the toes. Repeat 5-10 times.

Caution: If your lower back is vulnerable or you have a history of lower back pain, bend the knees to limit the movement of the lumbar spine.



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forwards. Inhale and draw the navel in towards the lower spine so you can feel a contraction in the lower abdominal area. Now lift the arms, legs and upper torso away from the floor and lengthen all the way through the body, as though you are being pulled by your hands and your feet.

On your next inhale, move the arms and legs as though you are swimming but do not touch the floor with the arms or legs. Move your right arm and left leg up, and your left arm and your right leg downwards and then exhale and reverse the action. Keep breathing deeply and focus on your core contraction. Repeat at least ten times, inhaling and exhaling slowly and focusing on lengthening through the spine, arms and legs.

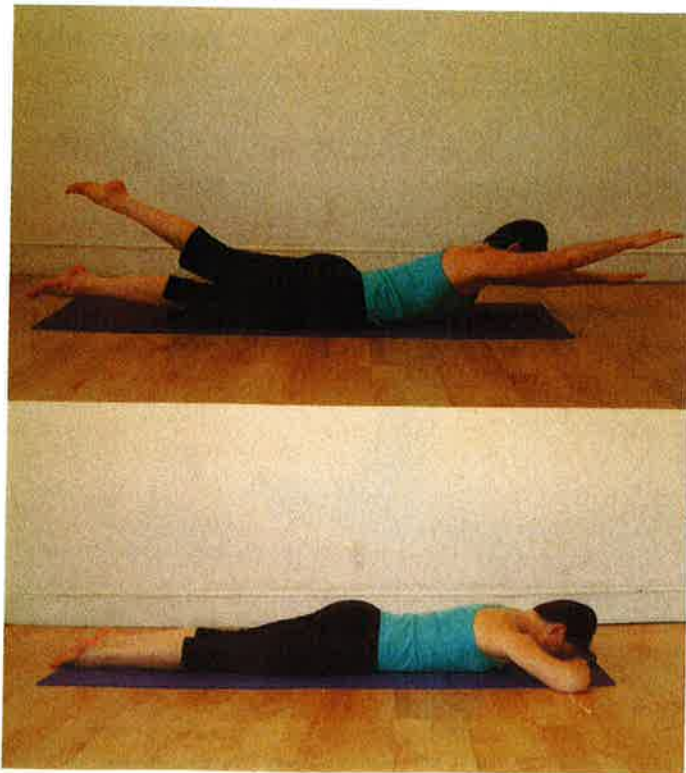
Caution: If you have any neck problems, rest your forehead onto a yoga block so there is no strain on the neck.

#### References:

Stiler B, (2000) *The Pilates Body*. 1st Ed, Michael Joseph, London.

Buddhananda S, (1996), *Moola Bandha, The Master Key*, 7th Ed, Bihar School of Yoga, India.

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**Swimming:** This uses the same muscles as for locust pose (*salabhasana*) and is great for strengthening the back, buttocks and hamstrings.

Lie face down on the floor with your arms extended out in front of you and with the feet hip distance apart.

Keep the neck long by keeping the crown of the head pointing

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