



The companion guide to Classical Pilates Technique DVDs

Discovering Pure Classical Pilates

*Theory and Practice as Joseph Pilates Intended
The Traditional Method vs. The Lies for Sale*

Excerpt from book:

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Joseph Pilates' Universal Reformer or Mat apparatus and the psychoanalyst's couch demand that students lie down. In the discipline of psychology, reclining in a horizontal position simply allows clients to listen to themselves without distraction, to relax, to travel back in time, and to freely associate thoughts and ideas. Analogously, in Classical Pilates, students generally begin in flat-back, supine position to enable them to focus their attention inward, to listen and connect with their bodies, and to associate with the necessary muscles.

In flat-back, supine position, we do not have a localized gravity force pulling the weight of the head and torso downward into hip joints, knee joints, ankles joints and feet, as we do in vertical standing position. In the horizontal position, with the ground as a tactile cue, there is an opportunity to practice placement, alignment and muscular articulation with gravity's force being more equally distributed through the length of our body.

Flat-back supine position also provides the student with important tactile feedback from the Mat, Reformer, Cadillac or Barrels, because they support the back and, in some cases, the entire body. Supine position encourages psychological regression, which can actually facilitate psychological growth and progression. Psychoanalysts call this process "active regression in service of the ego" or ARISE. It is likely that Joseph Pilates intended for us to carefully consider our alignment, placement, length, energetic intensity and muscular stabilization in a slightly regressive emotional state—yet more focused mental state—in order to prepare us for learning the complexity of his system. In the traditional method, complexity expands quickly as we progress from flat-back supine to sitting, to kneeling and standing positions with ever increasing movement vocabulary.

When a traditional instructor observes certain emotions communicated through a student's body (for example, disappointment, anxiety, anger or depression), it can be appropriate to suggest ways of working through these feelings. In other cases, students may manifest threads of frustration that unconsciously deflect from feeling unconscious self-criticism. Students may alternately come for help in actualizing their idealized self. In this case, if someone feels an inner drive to transform qualities or attributes into an idealized state, we can gradually help these individuals move from idealistic aspirations to self-acceptance. These students, with our guidance, may shift from working toward an impractical outcome and move toward appreciating the process and journey toward healing.

Again, our work as traditional instructors often includes assisting students in experiencing their true, authentic selves, helping them work with constructive trends toward growth and fulfillment. During this process, students may have to work through their own self-criticism, and even shame. Both psychologists and traditional instructors also assess the kind and degree to which students rely upon imaginary, unrealistic ways of perceiving themselves. The more a student identifies with exaggerated ego and pride, the more motivation there is to repress unconscious disturbance, thus staying put in an emotionally crippling, fantasy-constructed world. Attitudes and perceptions that comprise ir-

rational or faulty beliefs are powerfully ingrained because they were created a long time ago during early childhood and young adulthood. They develop under the duress of basic anxiety and are used strategically to cope with the dissonance.

Another shared goal of traditional instructors and psychologists is to assist students in becoming aware of inner blockages toward growth and fulfillment. Over time, it is possible for students to gain understanding of how their faulty beliefs can impede overall health and well-being. As teachers, we begin working with students from the “outside” then move “inward,” because we must focus on the conscious before we attempt to tackle the subconscious.

Individuals often demonstrate a degree of awareness of their problematic emotional conflicts. For example, some students do not feel good about themselves due to a lack of adequate physical conditioning or inadequate mental focus; as a result, they feel uncoordinated or unable to achieve certain exercises. After becoming more familiar with a particular student and establishing a good working rapport, traditional instructors gradually introduce stage-appropriate combinations of stability and instability to assist students’ growth, both physically and emotionally.

Sometimes students seek a traditional instructor or psychologist when they are in a state of psychological deflation. Certain individuals have emotional or physical injuries and, as a result, may experience undercurrents of self-criticism, even failure. From the beginning, we need to be aware of the student’s wounded pride and hurt. Yet, we should hold firm to the structure and definitions of our professional role. By doing so, traditional instructors and psychologists enable students to work at creating deep constructive personal change, while they grow beyond disturbed feelings, conflicts or problematic character trends.

As we assist students to increase their self-awareness, they begin working through and then resolving areas of inner struggle and conflict. Only then is it possible to develop higher levels of emotional-conceptual organization into a healthier equilibrium of selfhood. Sometimes, when a student is experiencing inner disturbance, there is increased motivation to constructively change behavior and problematic attitudes. This student is often more open and more able to reduce conflict and work towards improvement.

When students embark upon their first psychotherapy session or Classical Pilates lesson, they sometimes want immediate relief from pain or a solution to an untenable situation. Both psychologists and instructors, however, help students reclaim themselves in a larger, more general, way. Although we attend to specific problems as professionals, we also acknowledge our students’ positive attributes, their inherent abilities and natural endurance, in spite of all the difficulties. Naturally, we reinforce these strengths, while attending to specific, contextual and immediate concerns. This approach was directly paralleled by Joseph Pilates himself in his original New York City studio. When teaching students, first he reinforced a student’s healthy physical aptitudes to strengthen the entire body, while simultaneously protecting the negative or injured part of the body from worsening symptoms. Then Joseph Pilates gave stage-appropriate attention in treating someone’s particular injury or physical limitation.

Because most people have rivulets of mild self-criticism, one of our important roles is to help students practice self-compassion, appreciation and love. In order for more self-compassion to emerge, it is necessary for the person to become aware of disturbing or painful feelings. With respect to Classical Pilates, obsessive feelings are sometimes associatively connected with compulsive movements, no matter how subtle or obvious. Students can gradually learn how they are emotionally driven—to one extent or another—by unconscious compulsions to assuage basic anxiety; how we are propelled to “live up to” unrealistic expectations of the idealized self; or how we strategize to avoid painful realities of the rejected self. Either explicitly in the psychologist’s office or implicitly in the Classical Pilates studio, helping students become aware of unconscious compulsive feelings is a useful task with beneficial results. Addressing this issue, George Weinberg writes:

Often our purpose must be to help patients convert situational goals, which they present to us, into personal ones. Success is not to be equated with

material comfort or even celebrity. The patient may pursue whatever worldly advantage pleases him, but what it will ultimately afford him is persona, and we must think in personal terms. A young man, not so bright, says he wants to become a congressman. 'What would that give you?' 'I'd be rich and famous.' 'What then?' 'I'd change the laws and give minority groups a chance, and they'd love me and appreciate me' (The Heart of Psychotherapy, p. 114).

As professionals, we help students understand that some goals can be unreasonable—or reasonable, depending upon the situation—but it is the unconscious strategies to achieve certain goals that comprise the sources of inner conflict. Weinberg says, "...we must think in terms of organic goals, of flesh-and-blood ones. They indicate a shorter and surer route to the persona's satisfactions than the one he has in mind"(p. 114). Notice Weinberg's comment describes "organic goals" as related to "flesh-and-blood ones." His point illustrates the intimate connection between our body and emotions.

Traditional instructors and psychologists should give students room to express themselves, either emotionally or physically. By allowing students more space, without interpretation or correction, they are in a better position to experience more self-compassion. Therefore they can recognize more of their positive aptitudes and strengths. This approach allows students psychological "opportunities" to gradually gain perspective and continue forward on the road of healing, change and positive growth.

Instructors should be aware of their profound influence, however, and exercise restraint when stepping outside the framework of their roles. A single comment or correction can have a lasting effect upon a student's life, like dropping a stone into the stillness of a High Sierra mountain lake: many ripples of meaning expand within the student's conscious and unconscious mind, as well as within her body.

Both psychologists and traditional instructors should avoid getting caught up in the internal-unconscious dramas of a student's life. Because the psychological complications and motivations of students are incredibly complex, it is wise to respect proper ethical standards in the working relationship. There should be a balance of perspective and compassion, as Weinberg describes:

Ultimately, there can be no replacement for showing we care. Not just the patient is precious but every human being, every center of human consciousness, is indispensable. There is nothing conditional about our patient's importance. We convey continually, 'You are the central figure. Your journey, which began even before you had power to reflect on it, is a magnificent one. It doesn't matter where you came from. In the chaos you made millions of decisions, learning, interpreting life as you saw it, furthering as best you could that single conscious being which is you. You were perhaps sidetracked and alone, or defeated yourself. Or you labored pointlessly in the wrong relationship, seemed almost buried alive. But your aspirations, like your heart, kept beating somewhere. Every stage of that journey was precious, and I admire that' (The Heart of Psychotherapy, p. 126).

Our work as traditional instructors strives toward assisting students with their strengths and struggles toward improved health. Yet, the work of sustaining and improving well-being can be periodically disillusioning. During the course of instruction, some emotional or physical symptoms begin to resolve, while others take center stage. In Karen Horney's view, some aspects of technique develop in relation to—and can source from—new and evolving understanding of an individual. Both psychotherapeutic technique and traditional Pilates instruction evolve from fluctuations in the kind and degree of someone's emotional difficulties and psychological makeup.

On a parallel track, Romana would sometimes say, "The method is right in front of you," when teaching a particular student—a particular body—meaning that we can discern deeper understanding of Joseph Pilates' traditional method from the uniqueness of each individual. So, there is a sense that instructors increase their own knowledge of Joseph Pilates' traditional system by drawing upon an individual's distinctive physical, emotional and mental characteristics.

Another purpose of both traditional instructors and psychologists is to help our students develop more inner freedom to open unconscious "doors" and discover varied aspects of themselves, gaining self-knowledge. In the case of psychotherapy, this process takes place through verbalization of feelings and examination of emotional or behavioral response patterns. In the case of traditional Pilates, this process happens through physicalizing feeling into form. As a result, both disciplines assist students to gain more patience, tolerance and an appreciation for their life's journey. It is less important for us to find out exactly what is behind those doors than for students to simply develop their own natural propensity toward self-reflection, growth and fulfillment.