

Life in Balance

Pilates – the Intersection of Mind and Body

by Sharon Vaughn-Lahman

My journey with Pilates has brought to my life an enrichment so fulfilling that I feel compelled to bring you with me.

I'm a professional business woman—one you might find in a suit and heels—at a convention or trade show. In years prior, you might have run into me in quirky areas of San Francisco teaching people about the Internet, long before it became a household word. Today, I make my living as a marketing director for a boutique investment firm. But my lifelong passion has always been ballet.

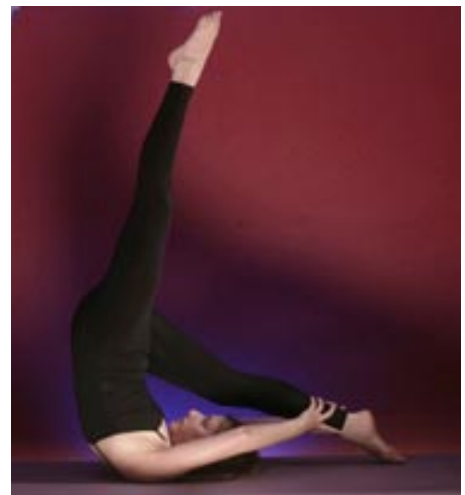
I did not have the opportunity to study when I was growing up, but I dove head first into ballet in my twenties and mastered the syllabus of London's Royal Academy of Dance, passing my professional level qualifying exams.

Unfortunately, in the process I suffered “over use” injuries with tears throughout my Achilles tendon, knees and feet that eventually required surgery. The opinion from the medical profession was clear—give up dancing.

People can't understand how I could walk away from something I loved so dearly, but when every step I took was throbbing with pain, I made a choice that was critical to my livelihood and well-being. I'd heard of Pilates and read about its benefits for injured dancers, but due to overwhelming job commitments and long commute hours, I did not follow the advice of one of my colleagues and fellow ballet dancers to spend our lunch hour at the local Pilates studio.

Like many, I joined a gym close to my home and spent endless, not to mention mindless, hours on the treadmills and stationary bikes. It was boring, but I felt I was doing something good for my body despite the increasing pain in my knees. Eventually I connected with a flamenco class and began to dance with abandon. I loved it. I still do, but the staccato footwork kept me awake at night with aching feet.

It wasn't until 9/11 that I discovered Pilates. My husband, a photojournalist, was leaving for Afghanistan to document the chaos and unfolding war. My days and nights were long without him, filled with worry. Although I heard from him on occasion by satellite phone, I needed to find a constructive way to occupy my evenings and de-stress. My solution? Mat classes at the Pilates studio near my home. I learned to focus my attention using my mind to control my body. It brought a sense of tranquility, peace, and accomplishment.



Control Balance

It wasn't long until I was asked if I would like to teach at the studio. I never had any intention of teaching Pilates, but it was such an *honor* to be sought out and I looked forward to the challenge. I was told that my quick study of Pilates and my movement awareness were the reasons I was asked to join the staff. The fact that I'd also worked as a substitute ballet teacher helped secure my position. I enrolled in the PhysicalMind Institute's mat certification program and began a happy second career teaching mat classes several days a week after my full-time job.

I was always intrigued with those impressive Pilates machines in the other parts of the studio. When I was able, I scheduled private Pilates equipment sessions for myself. Many of my mat clients had indicated that they also wanted to study equipment work under my tutelage, but first I had to learn it myself!

Not long after, I enrolled in the PhysicalMind's apparatus training certification. Due to the many hours of study and apprenticeship involved, I took a partial leave of absence from my full-time job. It was difficult juggling the responsibilities of my job with reduced hours, commuting long hours to and from the Pilates certifying studio, and finding the time to study, workout, and student teach. But, I knew in the long run that the time would be well spent. After I received my certification I continued to work part-time teaching mat and equipment at the Pilates studio where I took my first class, and eventually moved on to open my own studio, **Pointe Pilates**, in Aptos, California.

Pilates is a part of my life—a very critical part of my life—but nonetheless

just one of the many components that makes me who I am. I spend long hours at my marketing job, direct and teach children's ballet, and intersperse all of this with Pilates. Pilates has kept me on an *even keel*, has given me the knowledge and correct biomechanics to return to dancing, and most importantly, it has given me the chance to *positively* touch the lives of my clients.



When I began teaching Pilates mat classes my focus was on perfecting physical excellence. As I transitioned my practice toward private sessions, I learned that clients were drawn to me for reasons far more compelling than physical exertion and invigoration. Through focused instruction, careful cueing, patience, and caring, I have fostered a sense of calm and spirituality in my practice.

I continue to train high-achiever athletes, but through referrals draw an increasing number of people with physical challenges like those facing chronic debilitating diseases. I

teach them how best to *preserve* their current quality of life. For example, the ability for a client to maintain bladder control, despite the odds, is *incredibly* powerful.

A morbidly obese client embarked on a journey of self rediscovery following her weight-loss surgery. Through modified equipment routines to assure early success and to foster more, I was able to help her improve her strength and overall body tone. The true blessing was creating an environment in which she was able to gain a positive body image and a new lease on life. While working with me for a year, she lost over 125 pounds and countless dress sizes. It was an emotional re-awakening as much as physical. Since then she has returned to her home in India. Each time she comes back to the States, she studies Pilates with me to give her the power and encouragement she needs to maintain a healthier lifestyle.

Others feel the healing from the *inside* first. One client remarked that walking into my studio was on a par with the nurturing effects of a spa retreat at the Miraval Resort. She confessed to me that Pilates was the only time in her life when someone devoted their full attention and gave 100% of themselves to her and only to her. Now, I've never been lucky enough to have the spa experience that she has, but the fact that she equated the two was very meaningful. Since she is an advertising executive, we formed a bond on a professional level, knowing the toll that endless computer hours can take on one's body. But, it's more than the release of cramped shoulders and a knotted spine that keep her coming back for more. It's the *healing powers* that Pilates provides. Her session with me is for her and about her.

My goal for all of my clients is to *restore emotional balance*, calm, and clear headedness through physical control and awareness. Only then are we able to face the challenges of the day.

Strength comes in many forms. Emotional well-being can be achieved through physical control. Pilates is the healing art I truly believe in.