



**Tuning  
Into Your Breath**

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## Aims and Objectives

The aim of this workshop is to offer Pilates/Movement practitioners alternative methods of incorporating the use of a natural and deeper sense of breath into a Pilates session with a client and optimising an effortless breathing rhythm. This workshop will explore the effects of insufficient and ineffective breathing on movement quality and will teach participants how to recognise and improve disturbances in breathing patterns, including not breathing fully.

I would like to introduce a variety of ways in which one can assist clients to enhance their kinaesthetic awareness and state of mind through breath before starting to move. Although the workshop will be using mat-based Pilates exercises to demonstrate various breathing choices, one could also use them when teaching equipment based repertoire or simply for relaxation. The workshop will start with a 1.5 Hour practical movement class which will give practitioners the opportunity to experience the various breathing tools within their own bodies before commencing with the theory content.

The following topics will be covered:

- The importance of breath
- Controlled breath versus tuning into your breath
- How to get in touch with your own breath
- Possible reasons for disturbed breathing patterns or not breathing fully
- Guided examples to explore different ways of breathing during Pilates based mat work repertoire

## Introduction

Joseph Pilates wrote in *Return to Life Through Contrology* that “Breathing is the first act of life and the last. Our very life depends on it.”

The way we breathe affects our general health and wellbeing; it influences the way we feel, our emotions, movement patterns and habits. Often stress levels and other challenges in our lives lead to disturbances in breathing patterns without us even being aware of it. Impaired breathing affects the body on all levels and leads to, among other things, discomfort, tension and pain.

I regularly meet clients who come to me for Pilates or rehabilitation in order to improve their posture or to help with a particular injury-related issue. Tuning into my clients' breath is always my starting point for a session - it gives me feedback of the state of mind they are in at that particular time, and I find that it helps them to create an awareness shift to the present moment. My main goal when working with clients is not necessarily to try and change their posture or to alleviate their pain. Instead, I want to re-awaken their connection with their bodies for enhanced kinaesthetic awareness, thereby allowing change to happen naturally by itself. Once a client is able to feel sensation through a movement, the improvement in quality and flow of the movement can be dramatic.

Through my experience in teaching workshops and classes to Pilates practitioners in South Africa, I have noted that most Pilates practitioners teach breathing because it is a Pilates principle and that it is being taught strictly by the book. Usually, breathing in Pilates is being taught separately from the movement and then a client is expected to add the Pilates breath to an exercise. This often causes confusion and additional tension. Also, the client is then so focused on the breathing, that the actual aim of the movement is lost.

The Pilates way of breathing focuses more on “Lateral Breathing” where the client is required to breathe into the sides and back of the ribcage. “Lateral Breathing” is often taught by letting the client place the hands on the sides of the ribs or using a thera-band wrapped around the ribcage, and then to breathe into the ribs until the expansion of the ribcage sideways and across the back is felt. Often this lateral expansion is exaggerated by the client – this promotes undesired thoracic flexion and can, in turn, lead to neck and shoulder tension and/or the lower back arching or straining.

I am proposing a way to help a client to experience a deeper, internal physical understanding of the use of breath during movement. In my own teaching I use many different ways to bring my clients in touch with their breath i.e. through hands on techniques, Feldenkrais-inspired movements or imagery. I strive to enable my clients to create a sense of awareness through the front and back of the body.

In this workshop I aim to show Pilates practitioners how to enhance a client's kinaesthetic awareness of the natural process of breathing, and that one can do a movement by breathing normally and comfortably. I would like to introduce some ways which will enable clients to connect with the feeling and sensation of their breath and how this can influence the quality of that specific movement. The clearer you are about the intent of a movement, the easier it is for the

neuromuscular system to function properly. This results in an ease of movement that is astonishing because it is so simple. An enforced breath can often be counter-productive to the aim of an exercise, whereas comfortable breathing equals comfortable movement.

In the course of my professional career I quickly learnt the constant need for flexibility and adaptability in the teaching approach. There is no right or wrong way for an instructor to make the work come alive for a client.

What is good for one person may not necessarily be optimal for another.

A committed Pilates practitioner will always be in search of further images and ideas to add to the tool box!

## Topics covered

### 3.1 The importance of breath

Why is breathing important to you?

Breathing is the first thing we do when we are born, it signifies that we are alive. The act of breathing is to inhale and to exhale; we inhale to take in oxygen and when we breathe out we expel waste gases from our bodies.

Life in general creates tension for us where often the breath is held due to stress and having to push ourselves through daily challenges whether they are work related or in our private life. Can you think of a specific time where you felt pushed to achieve something or had to live up to someone else's expectation?

Thinking back to my childhood, I can remember how I felt pressured by my dance teachers at ballet school. I was constantly being told that I am not showing any expression when I dance and that I had to smile more. Smiling to me did not feel like it was appropriate expression and even if I did smile it felt more that I was putting on a fake mask which to me meant being pretentious. Dancing behind this false mask felt very uncomfortable and I could feel how tense it made my body. At the time I was very young and did not know how to access my feelings and find a more natural way of expressing myself. Now, I have learnt through the help of psychotherapy, postural integration, Feldenkrais and other movement forms that expression comes from accessing feelings from within. I will never forget how often in my dance career I experienced panic, anxiety and fear purely from my dance teachers screaming at me "Smile Monja" or "don't forget to smile". These feelings of panic, fear and anxiety showed in the way I moved, which was very stiff and rigid. I think that unconsciously one learns from a very young age how to meet the pressure or expectations from others and not realizing the impact it could have on the physical (Body) or metaphysical body (Body/ Mind).

How often as an adult are you experiencing panic, anxiety and fear from pressure of your job, relationships, family etc.? How do you deal with it? Are you dealing with it? Do these feelings of panic, anxiety and fear have an impact on your posture or perhaps how you move?

I think if we can learn how to breathe more effortlessly and similarly moving more effortlessly we could improve our quality of life.

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### 3.3 How to get in touch with your breath

There are many different ways how one can get in touch with one's breath. Take a moment to notice your breathing rhythm. Asking questions with no right or wrong answer as mentioned earlier is a good place to start.

Here are some examples of questions you could ask your client:

- What do you notice about your inhalation and exhalation?
- Do you inhale through the nose and exhale through your mouth?
- Do you inhale through your nose and exhale also through your nose?
- Do you inhale and exhale through your mouth?
- Do you inhale through your mouth and exhale through your nose?
- Which breath is longer, the inhalation or the exhalation?
- Bring your attention to your rib cage. Are your lower ribs touching the floor or are they lifted? Are you resting more heavily on one side of your rib cage than the other? Can you feel the contact of your shoulder blades with the floor?
- Where in your torso can you sense movement when you breathe?
- What part is moving more, your belly or your chest?

Simply noticing the breath and paying attention to where in the body you sense the breath is another way.

Here are some examples of practical explorations:

- a) Find a particular place in your body where you experience tension or find a specific place in your body where you feel your breathing is restricted. Place a hand or a finger there; if it is a place where you can't reach or touch then visualize a hand or finger there. Direct your breath into that particular place and see if you could soften that area with the use of your breath. Tension tends to manifest itself in one's musculature which could result in blocking of feelings, or holding on to thoughts and beliefs. Notice where in your body do you sense tension, could you breathe into that area? Are you able to let go as you breathe into that specific place?
- b) Tighten your abdominal muscles, try to keep them tense and continue to breathe. What does this feel like? Are you perhaps experiencing tension in your hips, back, neck and shoulders?

Relax the abdomen and take another breath, this time keeping the abdominal wall soft and continue to breathe. What does this feel like in comparison to holding your abdominal wall tight?

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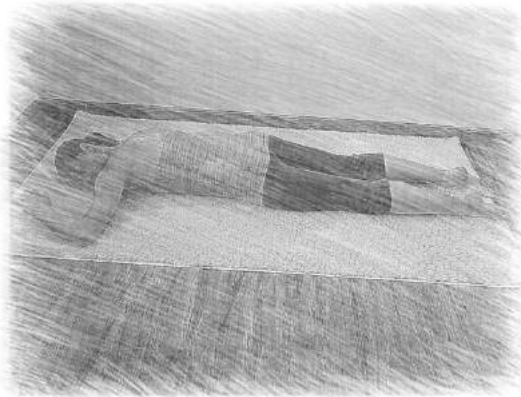
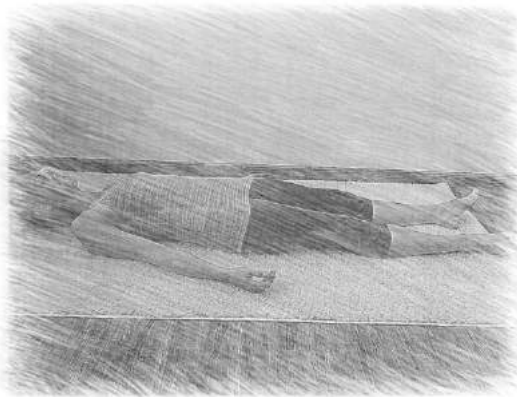




## Guided examples exploring different ways of breathing

### Practical Examples

1. Breathing in different positions





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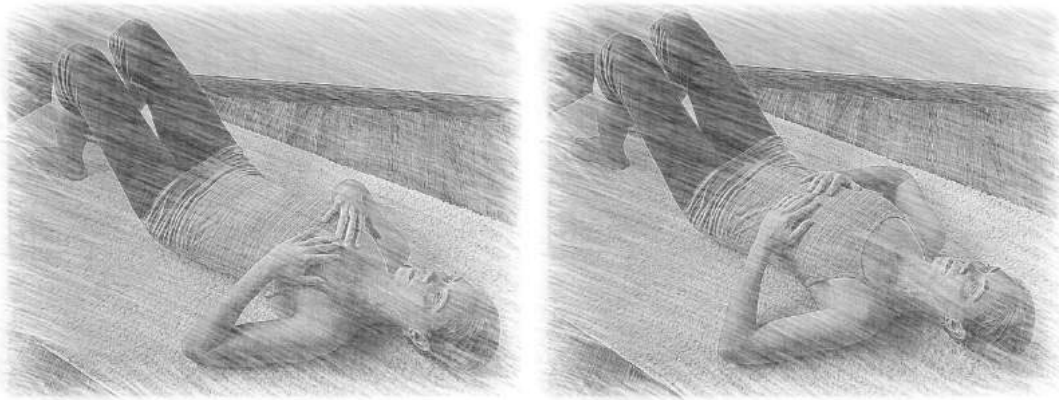
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2. Body scan of own breath pattern



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3. Supine Breathing visualizations



a) Visualization: Lungs and Ribcage

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b) Visualization: Lungs and Diaphragm

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c) Visualization: Tonus of Diaphragm

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4. Pelvic floor coordination with arm reaches

a) Variation: Arms reach to ceiling



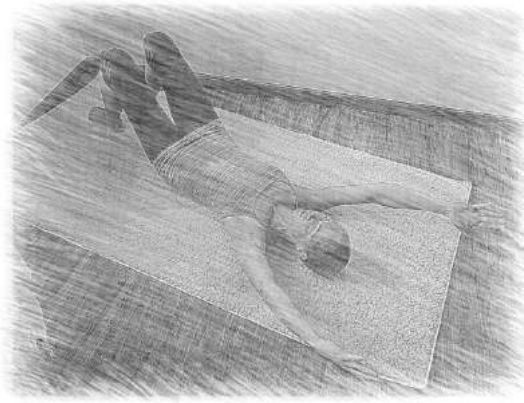
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b) Variation: Arms reach over head



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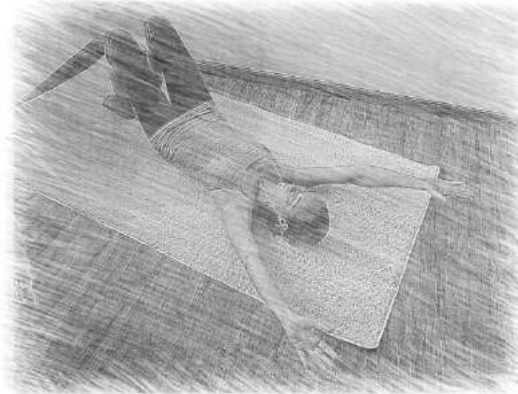
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c) Variation: Arms side reach



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d) Variation: Arm circles

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5. Shell stretch

a) Variation: Head & Tail connection



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