

# The Strength of Stretch

Find your power core through yoga and Pilates.

Story by Aleta Raphael-Brock • Photos by Todd Cooper

**C**limbing machines just don't do it for me. Something about stair-stepping my way to nowhere, literally nowhere seeing as the only muscle I end up working is my butt, which is big enough as is, drives me away from the gym. Not to mention the fluorescent lights and the sterile air that tingles the back of my throat. Exercise should be relaxing, not stressful — and exciting, not boring. After a good workout your muscles should feel energized and your tendons flexible, not exhausted and hard with knots.

In a city where alternatives to everything are becoming mainstream, yoga and Pilates are two workout options that are easy to come by, plus they leave your body and mind feeling refreshed. They both focus on strengthening and lengthening the core muscle groups and maintaining proper alignment, but the two are very different practices. Yoga has a spiritual base and often includes breathing and meditation poses while Pilates is essentially physical, although it is a blend of Eastern and Western exercise.

Amy Hopkins and Darlene Muller practice Bikram yoga at Bikram Yoga College of India.

## Yoga

I have always been athletic but I didn't know a thorough workout until I started attending Jean Nelson's Ashtanga yoga classes at the UO. I would leave class feeling like I had awoken from a dream in which I had run a marathon through pillowy blankets of clouds while tiny fairies massaged my shoulders and helped carry my legs from one step to the next. I noticed results after only a few classes and not just in my physical appearance. I slept better and craved healthy foods (not normal). I had more energy throughout the day and my stress levels decreased. The connection of breath patterns to the difficult movements is physically challenging enough to get your heart beating and sweat pouring

while activating the mind as well. Nelson, also an instructor at Four Winds Yoga, would talk us through the series of postures reminding us to lengthen through the spine and engage our calf and thigh muscles.

My most recent experience with yoga was at Bikram Yoga College of India. In a room heated to 105° I was lead through several poses that systematically worked, stretched and relaxed every part of my body. Not only was it a great workout, but the heat also warmed and cleansed me from the inside out. Instructors Amy Hopkins and Darlene Muller say the heat is good for detoxification and relaxation of tight muscles. It is not uncommon to get dizzy during the first few sessions, and don't let the sweat

scare you.

While lying in *savasana*, or corpse pose, at the end of the session, the heat built up in my head and my body was overwhelmed by emotion, perhaps because of the overflow of sensations. "You want to be ready to work through whatever comes up," says Hopkins, explaining that yoga is challenging mentally, emotionally, and psychologically.

Muller describes Bikram as a healing style of yoga. "We teach from a place to address problems in the body," she explains. "This is that time to pay attention and take care of yourself." The intensity of the practice is self-modified. You have the freedom to go only as far as you feel comfortable into a posture. "You don't have to be all the way

in the posture to be in the posture," says Muller.

As I left my second Bikram class, I realized that yoga was really an exercise of the mind.

Traditionally practiced as a preparation for meditation the many forms of yoga share a common goal: to break down the barriers between spirit, mind, and body and thus free the soul from attachments on the physical plane. Finding the right kind of yoga for you can be challenging. Hatha yoga can vary depending on the instructor and the specifications of the class. Ashtanga and Bikram yoga are specific series of postures that are more physically demanding, and Iyengar centers on precise alignment.

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