

body talk

cracking the
code of
movement

BY HEIDI
DVORAK

i am standing on two scales, my right foot on one and my left on the other. Without revealing my weight (a very sensitive subject), I can tell you that one scale reads three pounds more than the other. How is that possible? Shouldn't my weight be evenly distributed? That tells instructor Viktor Uygan all he needs to know.

At ArtForm, his expansive, well-equipped Pilates and BodyCode studio in Mission Viejo, CA, Uygan is about to put me through a BodyCode work-in. Yes, you heard me right. Not a workout, but a work-in, based on a system developed by Italian ballet dancer and instructor Pino Carbone. The work-in concept is the backbone of the BodyCode system, which was founded on the philosophy that physical imbalance,



pro arch foot apparatus open and stretch toes, feet and ankles.

stress, trauma, bad habits and poor posture should not be corrected externally but internally. Carbone believes—and rightly so, which you know if you’ve ever worked out—that the “work-out” process results in an initial loss of strength. Your mind can’t relax while you exercise because you’re pushing so hard it creates unnecessary physical stress. If you “work-in,” you are learning how to become conscious of your body’s full potential, establishing a true mind-body connection. This can only happen when the student is taught how to “look inside.”

So I’m looking inside. I am immediately struck by my three-pound lopsided stance. I’ve always been cognizant about leaning into my right hip when I stand, and I’m keenly aware

that during yoga class I can easily master Tree pose when my weight is on my right foot, but I shake and shimmy when I attempt it on my left. And during a session at Pilates instructor Jillian Hessel’s studio in Beverly Hills, she immediately observed that my right foot was always an inch ahead of my left. But three pounds of weight shifting over to my right? I realize that this imbalance could cause serious problems for me in the future. I’m not a supermodel who strikes a come-hither look by suggestively shifting her hip. I’m a middle-aged woman who could need surgery one day if I keep reinforcing that stance. Already I’m thinking from within.

It’s all very logical. BodyCode is a therapeutic exercise method that teaches you how to move



**viktor uygan
demonstrates
balancing work
on the pegasus.**

correctly in a simple and effective way. It consists of two phases: decoding, which identifies individual movement characteristics and difficulties caused by trauma, compensatory habits and poor posture, followed by coding, or learning how to correct movement patterns through improved strength, coordination and flexibility.

To do that, BodyCode uses six specially designed pieces of equipment: the Pegasus, Geometrix, Sculptor, Master Stretch, Pro Arch and Elvis (I can't wait to get on him), all of which were created for rehabilitative and therapeutic use with dancers and athletes and with the general population.

if my body is askew and totally out of balance, since it seems that the majority of my weight is grounded into my left hip, leg and foot. But the pole is level, my body is balanced—which feels downright awkward—and so are the scales.

Uygan now has me step off the scales, and he takes away the pole. He tells me to get back on the scales. I do—and magically my weight is balanced evenly between them. My left side has learned that it needs to do its share of the work to keep my body in balance. And it doesn't feel natural because "natural" for me is burdening my right side with the majority of my weight. "The correction is now imprinted on your brain," says



a student works her pelvis on the versatile elvis.

I resume my stance on the scales, but this time Uygan hands me a long, heavy pole to hold with both hands. The pole immediately starts dipping to the left. "Keep it level," he instructs. He then points out that my right shoulder is up and rotating inward and my right ankle is rolling in. My body instinctively knows what to do: I ease up on my right foot and shift my weight to the left. I feel as

Uygan, "because all movement starts in the neurological system." It's hardly a quick fix. I know my balance issues will need much reinforcement. But I get the idea.

We move on to the Pegasus, which could look like a horse, depending on whether you've had a drink or two. I stand on a revolving disk, hinge forward at the hips and grab the front rails so that I am

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flat-backed. I'm instructed to swivel my hips to the right, then swivel to the left while Uygan eyes my range of swivel. Turns out my right swivel is much narrower than my left. On my right side I can feel my ribs cramp and my hamstring pull. Uygan keeps me on the Pegasus but has me transfer to a small step, where I let my right foot hang off while I grip the rail above me with my right hand. The entire right side of my body elongates—*ahhhh*—it feels wonderful. I step off and get back on the disk and swivel. My shoulder and side, all the way down to my hip bone, are released. Voilà! My right swivel is much improved. Again my mind directly connects to the years of tightness and stress I've put on my right side, possibly from the many years of carrying my handicapped son on my right hip. Whether you discover the reason for your compensatory habit doesn't matter. The important part is that you cognize you're doing it—and that you're going to work on it in the future.

We switch to the Geometrix, a wooden module with springs that can be adjusted into three different positions. Today it's set up like a wide, upside-down V. I stand to the left of it and place my right knee and leg on a sliding surface. As I shift my right leg in reverse—like a deep backward lunge—it heads uphill, opening my hip flexor as never before. Clearly, another way to open my tight, overtaxed right side. I'm sold on BodyCode as a way to be more conscious of how to self-correct. But why this and not Pilates? Is one better than another?

For Uygan, it all started at age 17, when he was an apprentice ballet dancer for the Ankara State Opera in Turkey. Around that time he was diagnosed with a herniated disk, and doctors recommended that he stop dancing and undergo surgery—or risk

paralysis. Undaunted, he accepted a place at the Scola de Danca in Italy, where he met Pino Carbone, who owned a Gyrotonic studio and was a pioneer in bringing this movement system to Europe.

Carbone, however, did not limit his teachings solely to Gyrotonic. Like Joseph Pilates, he was always experimenting with movement, pushing the envelope to make a direct connection between the mind and the body.

Although Carbone primarily worked with dancers and athletes, in the early '90s he began collaborating with orthopedists, neurosurgeons and other specialists to reach the sedentary population, who weren't as in touch with kinetic movement. From his research he developed highly specialized body feedback equipment that was versatile enough to communicate to all clients by providing immediate feedback. By not only assessing anatomy and physiology but also motor action, Carbone could decode an individual's movement patterns, which helped both teacher and student look inside. Once a student developed an awareness of what his or her body was doing, that knowledge could directly affect the way he or she went about correcting movement, not only in the studio but also in daily activities.

Now Carbone's system is taught in educational programs worldwide. He is always expanding his program, and he's in the process of designing new equipment from his two Florentine centers and continues working with dancers from the Aurinko Ballet in Finland, the Finnish National Ballet, Hong Kong City Contemporary Dance Company, Gho Ballet in Canada, Ballet Hispanico of New York and Balletto di Venezia in Italy. He holds patents for no fewer than 12 equipment designs.

“For the first time, through Pino’s teachings, I began to understand my own body and take charge of it,” says Uygan. After working with Carbone, he went on to pursue a successful dance career with the Hartford Ballet in Connecticut. While there, he met fellow dancer Kelly Leonardi. The two married, settled in Southern California and became certified instructors in Pilates and BodyCode, opening their own double-system studio in 2002 called ArtForm.

Their partnership—marriage and businesswise—is proving to be a success. “BodyCode is very much like Pilates, in that it’s mind-body work that focuses on strengthening and stabilizing,” says Uygan. “We work on people’s weaknesses instead of on their strengths. When people are good at something, it usually is because they are compensating for a weakness. We challenge that weakness so they can learn about how to apply their thought process to how they will work with their body.”

BodyCode, like Pilates, is about accurately executed movement, the end result being an expanded awareness of proper biomechanical functioning that will ultimately enable you to manage your own body. You’ll learn to sit, stand and walk in a way that makes you aware of incorrect movement and teaches you to self-correct by learning how to lengthen and strengthen muscles with the use of gravity as a counterforce. Like Pilates, these are not skills that are achieved overnight but are slowly ingrained in you as you move and think about what you’re doing. To use a more technical term, it improves proprioception, or the body’s awareness of position, balance and movement.

But how does an instructor decide when a client should be on a Pilates apparatus as opposed to a BodyCode one? “Both can achieve similar goals,” says

Uygan, “but there are design differences in each. Depending on the client’s weakness, I might be able to better access a weakness on the Geometrix than on a Reformer. Or vice versa. One is not better than the other. They are just different environments. We use whatever piece of equipment is in the client’s best interest.”

Uygan has promised me a ride on the Elvis, and he delivers. Elvis looks like a canvas bicycle seat, albeit much wider. I get on and am instructed to perform simple crunches on it, maintaining a C-curve in my back. As I begin my crunches, Elvis rocks and rolls. To execute even one proper crunch, I must tighten my glutes to the max and connect deep into the abdominals. I break into a sweat after three. The device’s instability makes my abs work like never before. Long live the King!

While Pilates purists might balk at BodyCode’s philosophy, Uygan just smiles and scoffs. “The principle behind BodyCode is not very different than Pilates and evolved from it. I believe that if Joseph Pilates were alive today, he would approve,” he says. “He would never have stopped building different apparatus and experimenting with new ways of movement. He was always looking for new ways to help his clients. It’s another great tool.”

The session over, I thank Uygan and hop into my Honda. I start the car and assume my usual position, left hand on the wheel and right elbow digging into the armrest. In a flash, I retract the armrest, sit up straight and redistribute my weight evenly on the seat. I’m looking inside, and I like what I see.

Heidi Dvorak is the executive editor of 'Pilates Style.'

The BodyCode system is taught worldwide. For more information, visit artformstudio.com and artform.it.com.

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