From Jujutsu to Gyrotokinesis And Back Again

By Tom Lang

I began studying jujutsu in the fall of 1971, when I entered the California State University, Chico, as a junior. For much of the next 30 years I suffered from low back pain. Massage, physical therapy, spinal manipulation, acupuncture, saunas, Jacuzzis, medications, rest-nothing really worked or worked for long. Imagine my surprise, then, when I was introduced to a new set of exercises that relieved my pain in a week and that have kept me pain free for more than a year. I can now take falls all weekend long at a jujutsu seminar-and walk of the mat at the end of the day.

The new set of exercises is called Gyrokinesis(tm). These exercises have been developed over the past 20 years by Juliu Horvath, a world-renown Romanian ballet dancer. After an injury ended his professional career as a dancer, he looked for ways to rehabilitate himself from the injury. The result is a unique set of exercises that combines movements from yoga, tai chi, classical dance, modern calisthenics, and other movement disciplines. In general, the exercises are easy to do and require only the strength, flexibility, and endurance that one wants to exert.

In this article, I describe the origins and principles of Gyrokinesis and show how these exercises can be incorporated into jujutsu training.

The Origin of Gyrokinesis

Horvath continued to develop his exercises after rehabilitating himself from his injuries. Still active in the professional dance world, he began to teach his exercises to his dancers. As a world-class dancer who trained world-class dancers, Horvath knew that the exercises he developed for his dancers had to keep them challenged for some time. Such dancers must maintain themselves in top condition and get bored easily. Thus, he created what is still called "yoga for dancers," which is the ultimate form of Gyrokinesis. Designed for double-jointed, Gumby-like expert dancers, yoga for dancers is not for the rest of us. (Trust me on this.)

In response to the popularity of yoga for dancers, he eventually created Gyrokinesis, which is accessible to just about anyone. In addition, he created the Gyrotonic Expansion System(r) in which Gyrokinesis exercises are performed primarily on two pieces of equipment, called the combined tower and bench unit. The equipment provides mild resistance to the movements and assists in doing them correctly. Several other pieces of equipment are also in various stages of development.

Gyrokinesis exercises are be done seated, standing, and on a mat. They address virtually all joints and motions. About the only motion that is not emphasized is the uncontrolled arching of the low back. The back is arched, but only when the abdominals provide a counter tension to help stabilize the low spine.

How Gyrokinesis Exercises May Work

A physical therapist introduced me to Gyrokinesis and told me why she thinks the exercises are effective. A cross-section of the chest reveals three layers of muscle. The outermost layer consists of the large muscles that move the arms and shoulders. These are the muscles we build in the weight room: the latissimus, trapezius, rhomboids, pectorals, and so on. The middle layer consists of the muscles used for breathing. These muscles include the internal and external intercostales, the levator costarum longus and brevis, and the superior and inferior serratus posterior. They help to lift the rib cage during inspiration and to contract it during expiration.

The innermost layer consists of the small muscles that stabilize the spine and help maintain balance. This is the layer that most anatomy classes never get to: the muscles are small, deep, and the last to be encountered during the semester. They include the multifidus, rotator brevis and longus, and semispinalis thoracis and cervicis. These are not the muscles we try to develop in the weight room. However, Gyrokinesis exercises specifically isolate, strengthen, and tone these muscles.

Principles of Movement Underlying Gyrokinesis

At first glance, the Gyrokinesis exercises appear to be self-evident; watch them, then do them. However, they are a lot like yawara techniques, in that there is more than meets the eye. They can still be learned rather quickly, however. For example, in my Gyrokinesis and Gyrotonic instructor training, I learned how to touch my toes. I thought I already knew how, having done so several thousand times over the years. However, there is a right and a wrong way to do so in Gyro. Try this: stand, then reach down and touch your toes as usual. Now, while bent over, think of stretching your kidneys UP to the ceiling and bend even lower! I can get an additional inch of stretch when I do this.

In my estimation, Gyrokinesis consistently illustrates five principles of movement, all of which are applicable to any movement, including those in jujutsu.

Principle 1. Breath when you move. Nothing new here. Moving while holding your breath reduces your body's flexibility and resilience. Abdominal breathing (expanding your abdomen when inhaling and compressing it when exhaling) is preferred to thoracic breathing (lifting your chest when inhaling and compressing it when exhaling), just as it is in the martial arts.

Principle 2. All movement begins at the base of the spine. In the martial arts, we often here that movement "begins at the center." I won't speak to the thought that the center is the source of ki or chi, but I will say that movements that begin at the base of the spine and that stay "connected" with the base of the spine, are mechanically stronger and provide a larger range of spinal motion.

Principle 3. "Lengthen" your spine before arching, curling,

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