

Be Long and Belong

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

Some time ago I was taking a yoga class and we were practicing extended side angle pose (*Utthita Parsvakonasana*). Reaching fingertips strongly in one direction and feet in the opposite direction, my teacher instructed us to "Be Long", but what I heard was "Belong".

I don't know if his instruction was intended, but unbeknownst to me, this word "Belong" came to mind throughout the remainder of the practice and has stayed with me since.

When I tell someone I am a yoga teacher, I am often met with long explanations about how s/he would like to try yoga but doesn't belong, i.e. isn't flexible at all ("I can't even touch my toes!"), or recently, a nurse at one of the hospitals where I teach told me she went so far as to buy a Groupon and then didn't use it for lack of time.

I know these barriers, thinking you're not *something*- enough (insert flexible, strong, balanced, etc), or have too little time, are real. But it's worth asking yourself if this way of thinking is another form of resistance.

[Amy Weintraub](#), founding director of the LifeForce Yoga Healing Institute, writes, "Let your body be your first teacher."

In other words, taking a class or a private session in Yoga could be some place where you Belong if only because it comes down to you, your body, and your mat.

Weintraub writes further, "Yoga is not a competitive sport. Practicing with others in a class does not make you a member of a synchronized Yoga team. You are an individual with a different body, a different set of life experiences, injuries, and abilities."

All of this is to say that when you practice Hatha (physical) Yoga, you are in a place in that moment where you belong, learning about your tendencies, self-beliefs, and listening to your body.

The Broader Perspective

You may enjoy some of the known benefits of Yoga, like becoming stronger, more balanced, improving flexibility, and indeed, becoming longer.

You also might be surprised to find the very place where you Belong.

Phil Stanton, founder of Blue Man Group, puts it best when he says, "Something you find along the way--even by accident-- just might have the power to change your world."

If Yoga has touched your life in unexpected ways, drop me a line, I'd love to hear about it.



Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT, is a licensed social worker and certified yoga teacher. She provides private yoga instruction, individual cognitive focused counseling, and integrative mind-body work. Additionally, she facilitates mind-body workshops and educational seminars on reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Alena's approach takes into account negative thought patterns, eating habits, sleep hygiene, and body image. She currently provides mind-body counseling in an outpatient wellness center at NYU Langone Medical Center to women with physical disabilities, and yoga therapy on inpatient surgical and oncology units at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. She teaches alignment focused Hatha Yoga, inspired by the teachings of BKS Iyengar, at Zomoti Yoga Center. For more information, visit www.yogalenatherapeutics.com