

Layers of Life and Yoga: How time and experience heal

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

When I was 16 years old, my first boyfriend broke up with me at a rock concert. We weren't together long, even by teenage standards, and it wasn't exactly a serious relationship, but my heart was nonetheless broken. I imagine many of us recall the unique sting of a first-time heartbreak, and for me I remember swearing off that rock band *forever*.

Well, last week I was walking down the street in New York City (how many great stories start off that way?) listening to a 90s mix my husband put on my ipod. Suddenly that band from my childhood...that SONG (at least as I remember it) from my first teen heartbreak moment 20 years ago was filling my head. Not only was it a *great* song, but it actually *brought a smile to my face and added a bounce to my step*. How I enjoyed it!

This got me thinking about the way in which the *layers of experiences and of life can soothe, comfort, and heal over time*. That night as I practiced yoga, I thought about when I was just beginning my practice. So unpleasant were many of the *asanas* (physical postures), I wondered why people keep coming back to do this AGAIN, sometimes every day!

But in spite of the perceived pain in the moment, somehow I always felt better in the end. Many yogis *come to discern over time the difference between "pain" and "sensation"*. As you get to know your body, you will learn what sensations might be actually doing harm (pain), and those that are not so painful as they are intense.

If you've begun a yoga practice and you're wondering what all the fuss is about, consider *turning your attention during your practice to how you are actually feeling in your body, and in your thoughts*. For instance, one day I noticed that every time I jumped my feet forward during a sun salutation, my face grimaced (actually to be fair, my teacher noticed this habit). I was unhappy that I wasn't able to fully complete the action, and the grimace on my face indicated my displeasure with my performance.

In practicing this way, my tendency to be hard on myself and strive for perfection was becoming even more deeply engrained. Yoga teacher Amy Weintraub writes, "It is easy to practice Yoga as though it were exercise, moving from posture to posture, with little awareness of the sensations in your body or your feeling state. This is unconscious Yoga, and though you will feel good afterward and will receive many physiological and psychological benefits from your practice, you run the risk of energetically reinforcing old patterns and habits of mind."

In essence, every time I jumped forward, that grimace *became* part of my practice. So my focus became letting go of judging myself harshly when I jumped forward. This then translated into a greater awareness of when I judged myself harshly in other areas of life "off the mat".

The key is to observe your practice, how you feel in your body and in your emotions. Over time you will layer new experiences and begin to leave the painful ones behind.

The Broader Concept

These are important ideas to keep in mind especially if you are just starting a practice. Many basic beginning poses get right to the heart of the matter, and can feel very intense! See if you can acknowledge these new sensations for what they are, fleeting and will soon pass.

Just as I now recall my first teen heartache and the music that signifies it with comfort, I now re-visit those basic (but no less significant) poses with pleasure, recalling how at one time they were so uncomfortable. So what keeps people coming back for more? *Just as time and the layers in life soothe and comfort, so they do in Yoga.*

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