

The Philosophy of Pain: A Most Persistent Teacher

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

I'm admittedly a slow reader.

I like to take my time with things I choose to read, and I've been working my way through a wonderful book by living yoga legend B.K.S. Iyengar called *Light on Life*. I'm not lying when I say I've been with this book for going on two years now.

The majority of each page is underlined, some sentences double underlined, some paragraphs have little stars by them because I was particularly moved. The pen marks are in different colors because I find I keep going back to certain passages, hoping to absorb as much as I can before moving on. Clearly, his gift for language has served him not only as a yoga teacher, but as a writer and life teacher.

Recently, I came to a section of the book that focused on pain. I found myself underlining, double underlining, and starring even more than usual. Something about this topic really had my attention!

"Pain," Iyengar writes, "Is a great philosopher. It thinks constantly how to get rid of itself and demands discipline."

He goes on to talk about how **pain focuses our attention, and can be a very persistent teacher.**

I work with many people who have pain, both at the hospital and in my private practice. One of my clients, a dancer, came to me with immense pain due to an injury. He tried using anything he could get his hands on to cope with the physical and emotional pain of not being able to do what he loves.

After several rounds of attempts to block out the pain using food, drugs, and even physically pushing himself beyond the limits of his body's current state, he finally realized his efforts were futile. He was not getting anywhere. Frightened, confused, and at the height of frustration, he finally came to the realization that he needed to **go into the pain.**

I'm often told by people who are curious about trying yoga that it hurts too much. They don't want to be in pain.

"It is not yoga that is causing all of this pain," Iyengar writes. "The pain is already there. It is hidden. We just live with it or have learned not to be aware of it. **It is as if your body is in a coma.**"

When I lead a meditation at the hospital, one of the things we work on is scanning the body and noticing where there is physical (or emotional) pain. And for that moment, make no attempts to exorcise it, but just become fully aware of its existence.

Acknowledge the pain. And then ask yourself what needs to happen to resolve it. This can take a great deal of time, patience, persistence, and careful listening. And this is where the practice of yoga can be very helpful.

This is not to advocate that most American of sentiments, "No pain, no gain." It is my belief that the intention of this statement, words I used to live by as a professional dancer, results in over-demand of the body and often results in injury, frustration, and burnout.

The Broader Perspective

Pain is a part of life. We all feel pain at any given time.

Ask yourself: Do you have any pain right now?

The question in yoga becomes, "What can I learn from the pain I experience? What is it trying to teach me?" In this way, we come to the precipice of pain with intelligence and respect during yoga practice. The mind and body come together in awareness, exceeding limitations, and ultimately cultivating a deeper relationship with ourselves.

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