

Yoga and pain

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An epidemic of Masochism? Why people search for pain?

In the recent years I noticed a very strange tendency among many people in yoga classes and among those that book me for ayurvedic massage treatments, they… seem to look for pain! Sometimes they even say this openly, using expressions like “No pain, no gain” or “Lovely pain”.

At first I was very surprised. It was definitely not like that 15-20 years ago when I started working in this field. The idea at that time was to learn how to release tensions through some technique/exercises, so to feel better with a general feeling of harmony between mind and body. Yes, a minor level of pain can be beneficial in some cases, but it should never be uncomfortable.

Now though it seems like a new strange idea has penetrated our culture: pain is good! It is good to suffer!

From where this bizarre idea is coming?

I was reflecting upon that, to try to understand what it could be the reason of this new (at least to my knowledge) tendency.

When it comes to yoga the root of this tendency is probably coming from the so called Ashtanga Vinyasa school of Pattabhi Jois, where the body is considered an illusion and so it is believed to be fine to put the body in pain to learn (at least according to the specific view of that school) how to detach from the physical senses and from the world in general. The cases of injuries to knees, back, hips and neck are unfortunately very common among the people practising yoga according to the system of that school.

Other yoga schools have (at least in my view) a more balanced approach. They say, yes, the physical body and the material world in general belong to a relative dimension of the universe, they change according to time and space, so they are certainly not the objective, ultimate reality. But that doesn’t mean that they are just a total illusion either. They are an important aspect of life that we have to learn to use and to harmonise, when necessary. Once the “external world” is more in balance, it is easier to put in balance the internal world too, so, for example, once we made our body free from tensions we will be able to sit comfortably crossed legs in meditation, and we will be able to enter more deeply in contact with our internal world.

So, like I said, it might be that many yoga practitioners nowadays push themselves to very painful positions because they are influenced by an extreme interpretation of one philosophical idea.

But, when it comes to ayurveda and to massage therapy in general, why people search for pain? A good massage should heal the pain created by some muscle tension, surely not create even more pain.

So, from where it comes this strange idea? People that book a massage are not necessarily yogis that follow a philosophical principle, so the reason for this attitude must come from somewhere else.

Unless there is a sort of epidemic of masochism, I think that the reason for this need of pain can be traced in the fact that many people in our modern society tend to disassociate themselves from their feelings and sensations.

Most people are so unhappy with their work, environment, family, relationships that they probably try to anaesthetise what they feel. They don’t want to feel how they are.

This process in a long run makes them so insensitive and numb that after a while they must really long for some strong, intense feeling that can penetrate their thick, self-constructed shell. Something that makes them feel alive again.

And, perhaps, a very painful, intense massage can help them with that.

But, the big question is, how healthy is that?

It is safe to receive a massage that leaves you sore for a week?

According to some medical research, it is not.

A too intense massage can:

- directly cause new injuries (mostly quite minor, but not all, there are even cases of stroke)
- aggravate existing injuries and chronic pain problems
- distract patients from more appropriate care
- mildly stress the body

Personally, I recommend again a balanced approach.

In yoga, in massage, in life in general, pain is never the solution.

More on side effects of a too intense massage here .