

Sensei Says

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"Don't give up!" my teacher barked during an exceptionally brutal training session. "The pain is not yours! Your pain belongs to me!" he shouted. "And I'm not ready to quit!"

Oh, what a liberating feeling! To forget about the pain – to just let it go. To let it be someone else's problem. "My pain is not mine!" I thought, "It belongs to him!"

Instantly my mind focused on my technique. The pain slowly dissolved into the technique; then it became merely one of the many details in the technique. Suddenly the pain disappeared completely from my awareness. A great void formed where the intense pain had been. The void filled with an overwhelming feeling of unconquerable confidence and strength.

In that instant my martial art was changed forever.

Nothing had changed to make my training easier, yet I was suddenly stronger and full of energy. I was training harder than before, and finding joy in it. The only thing that changed was my perception of what I was doing. It became easier to do more because I wasn't carrying any unnecessary burdens. I was simply doing the technique. Nothing more, nothing less.

It made me wonder what a person could accomplish in life if the fear of pain and hardship was removed from the path – if only the positive strength existed, with no self-doubt. It also made me wonder why I had spent so many years holding onto my pain, when it was so easy to let go.

For centuries warriors have trained to ignore the distraction of pain so they could survive in battle. Great swordsmen of Japan turned to the Zen masters for guidance in these matters. What they learned has been handed down from teacher to student through the ages. The study of a martial art is not just the practice of fighting techniques; it is a personal journey into the Self. There is no shortcut on this road. It is filled with hardship and, yes, pain.

Not all pain is the same, so I like to differentiate between "good" pain and "bad" pain. If continuing through the pain will positively benefit me (good pain), then I try to ignore the pain and work through it. If, however, it appears that continuation of an activity will do more damage than good (bad pain), I stop immediately. For example, most people will allow a doctor to slice open their body to do a lifesaving surgery, but hopping on a sprained ankle is not usually advisable. The decision to continue or not is generally up to the individual.

As an uchideshi (apprentice) my situation was different.

Imagine going up to a Master painter, handing the Master a blank canvas, and requesting a painting. If the Master honored you and agreed to paint you a masterpiece you wouldn't decide how it should be painted. He (or she) would make all of the decisions regarding the painting.

When a student is accepted as an uchideshi the student becomes the canvas. The master makes all decisions regarding the best way to create a master martial artist out of the student. All decisions are made by the Master about when, where and how the student trains; where and when the student eats and sleeps; even where the student lives. The uchideshi belongs to the Master to do with as he thinks best.

So, in my case, my pain really did belong to him. I thank him for taking care of it for a while, so I could learn I really didn't need it after all.

- Alan Best