



April-May 2006 Contemplation Theme

Describing the Difference

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., R.Y.T.

You hear this question in every class, “What is the difference?” *Svaroopa* yoga teachers ask you to notice changes in your body and to report on them. The underlying reason for this is to empower your perception, to make you able to perceive what was previously unknown. Ultimately this is the goal of yoga, to perceive what was hidden – to know the unknown inner reality of your own self as Consciousness-Itself. However, along the way there are many stages to this inner discovery.

At first, this question is an invitation for you to live in your body. You may already realize that you live mostly in the past (memories), in your hoped-for future (desires), or in the future you wish to avoid (worries). It is truly rare for anyone to be present in the physical location where their body is actually located. Still, even that is not a complete experience from yoga’s perspective. You can be present in the location where you are, right now, but still be lost in the events going on there: the environment, the other people, the activities around you, or your liking or disliking of it all. It is much more rare to actually be present in your own body. If you are intrigued but still unsure about what this means, then you need to do more yoga. Yoga’s promise is that you will become fully present, in your body and in yourself.

You may be avoiding being present in your body specifically so you don’t have to feel what is really going on in it. Fortunately, most body problems are very easy to change with *Svaroopa* yoga. The spinal release makes an immediate change in how your whole body feels. As your body opens up, it becomes more comfortable, ultimately even blissful. Core opening relieves spinal tensions that cause most physical pains and problems. What you have already experienced of this is merely a hint of what is yet to come.

I like to ask about the differences after doing one side of a pose like Seated Side Stretch or Jathara Parivrttanāsana (Rotated Stomach Pose). Often a student will say something like, “My left side feels compressed.” Then I respond with another question, “And how does your right side feel?” It usually takes a few seconds for the student to think about the question, to go looking for their other side, and then to report. They often sound surprised at their own response, “It feels alive,” or some other answer. I love this whole process! First, I love it because their response usually is not the opposite of the first answer – one side feels “compressed,” but the other side is not “lengthened” or “open.” This means that they are really feeling the other side, not just using their mind to come up with a word that means the opposite. They have gotten beyond thinking that they have to give the teacher the “right answer,” and are using the question as it was meant – as a way of getting you to experience your own body.

I am also delighted by their answer because they are so genuinely surprised. It is as though they had never felt their body unless it was hurting. If you started yoga to get help with pain, consider how your body will feel when it doesn’t hurt. If you don’t feel your body unless it is hurting, then being pain-free would be having no sensations – like not having a body at all. This is not yoga. Your body can actually feel GOOD! Beyond merely feeling good, yoga promises genuine physical bliss.

The first stage of bliss is familiar, profound relaxation like in Shavasana, though it gets much better. It doesn’t even take long to get this result. Simply doing one tailbone pose begins a domino effect both down through your legs and feet as well as up through your torso, arms, neck and head. In fact, one of the reasons for the question, “What do you notice?” is so you will recognize what the yoga pose has done for you. When you recognize what each pose does for you, it is easy to figure out what to do for your own practice. You can always figure out what to do by simply sequencing your spine from your tail to the top, or by doing the Magic Four or another sequence, it is even better to be able to choose which pose will “hit the spot”.

This question is also designed to help you with your mind. When you pause to notice the differences in your body, you let the opening spread through your mind. This is especially true when you describe the difference aloud. You learn from your own words, like with journaling or when you talk with a good friend. You even discover things from other people's reports, which can help you realize you have gotten a similar release. This question helps your mind learn from your body, learning how to expand into the interior space that you have opened up. When you notice this, and especially when you describe it out loud, your mind and emotions are more deeply affected by the inner opening. You learn how to live in this openness, even when you are not doing a yoga pose.

You need to learn how to use your mind without you having to tighten up again. When you describe the differences, you activate your mind while you are in a state of openness. The most important thing *Svaroop*a yoga gives you is this profound inner opening. If you never use words to describe your experience, then words will always take you away from the experience. This is called *Matrka Shakti*, the power of words. You need to change your relationship with words. You can unlock the power of words in the same way you unlock your spine, to discover something more powerful hidden within.

The amount of words you give to a subject is virtually a measurement of how important it is to you. Your conversations focus on the things that matter to you the most. If they didn't, you wouldn't be interested in the conversation. Thus, it is important to talk about your experience in yoga, so you have the chance to describe it. Yet the reality is that very few people actually understand – only other *Svaroop*is really understand what you are talking about. If you don't talk about the differences with your teacher and classmates, who would even believe you? Plus, when you do put words to your experience, you are practicing how to tell the other people in your life, those people who matter to you even though they don't yet understand what yoga is doing for you.

This process of describing the difference affects you on many levels. It also helps you get out of "the pairs of opposites." You can spend lifetimes in the trap called "the pairs of opposites:" right/wrong, good/bad, happy/sad, etc. You might have even brought this tendency with you to your yoga practice, constantly judging yourself or comparing your body to everyone else's. When everyone does the same pose and one person says they got the change on the left, and you say that you got it on the right, it becomes clear that this is not about right and wrong. When one person gets a change in their neck, and you can feel it in your tailbone, this is not about good and bad. This is about your experience, whatever it is. Different people have different experiences. You soon discover that what happened in this pose last week might be completely different this week. You are learning to recognize your own experience and to validate it. You are learning to trust your own experience, which is a very big deal!

Ultimately, the fullest potential of human life becomes available through trusting yourself by exploring this inner opening, specifically through the opening of your spine. The inner experiences that open up are vast and profound, but you cannot explore them until you know how to look inward. You must be able to notice and savor your own experience. This is why the most important reason to notice the difference is to empower your perception. The inward expansion of your awareness makes you able to perceive what was previously unknown. This is the goal of yoga, to perceive the hidden dimensions of your own being. Describing the differences along the way is part of the stages you are already discovering. You will learn new words, new sensations, and a new way of being. Do more yoga!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". The signature is stylized with a heart shape above the letter 'a'.

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