



April 2008 Contemplation Theme

What Are the Differences?

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

You hear this question often, "What are the differences between your two sides?" There are many reasons your Svaroopa® yoga teacher asks this question, as she or he guides you through your class. Some of the reasons are about your body and some are not. While the question is about your body, much more is hidden within it.

I recently led an Advanced Teacher Training with 20 deeply committed teachers. When I asked what got them started in yoga, 19 answered that they wanted help with physical pain or problems. One had a completely different reason, saying, "I wanted more out of life and thought yoga might offer it." That meant 95% of them started because of pain, but I think the true percentage is actually higher. Most new yogis need and want specific physical changes, which Svaroopa® yoga easily provides.

It's easy to make changes in your body through our core opening yoga practice. It works so well because it addresses your problems directly — most of the problems that get people started in yoga are actually caused by core tension. Unfortunately, most exercise programs and yoga styles increase this spinal tension in the name of "core strengthening," which actually increases the spinal compression and muscle tension that causes most people's pain.

It's amazingly easy to get the needed changes, which is surprising for most new yogis, because you don't have to work hard to get results. In fact, you get more benefit when you are not pushing yourself. Efforting creates a type of internal tension that sabotages the result you want to get. This is true in your body — it is also true in your life. Every athlete knows this. Every musician knows this. Every mother knows this.

Some new yogis don't actually feel the improvement in their body unless we pause between the two sides of a spinal release pose and ask, "What are the differences between your two sides?" There are a number of reasons for this difficulty. Firstly, when your body is tight, you cannot feel it. Tight muscles compress arteries and veins, cutting down on circulation to the area. Not only do the muscles themselves have diminished blood supply, but so do the adjacent bones, tendons, organs, glands and nerves. This means that your nerves in the areas of tension don't work at full capacity; thus you cannot feel that part of your body. This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that you cannot feel how much tension is there — if you could, your pain level would be much higher. The bad news is that you cannot feel when you are getting improvement.

When you do a pose that releases your core tensions, blood flows in there again, which enables your nerves to begin doing their job. Now you can feel your body, and you can report on the differences. Your teacher asks you about the differences to help you find that part of your body — literally like you are moving into an area that you had vacated long ago. If you don't stop and feel the new openness, your body will soon revert to the old familiar tensions, which means the old familiar pains return. We call it relapse. When you do pause between the two sides of the pose so you can feel the openness in your body, you discover a whole new way for your body to be. It's like you are getting your body back; some people say they feel like they are getting a whole new body. In this way, the question, "What are the differences between your two sides?" is an anatomy lesson.

It is also a training in perception. This question helps you awaken your sense perceptions. As your body opens up and your nerves begin to report your physical condition to you, you are more able to feel. Your sense of touch opens up, your ability to feel physical sensations is increased. Additionally, your hearing improves. Your peripheral vision expands. Your experience of taste and smell also improve. You perceive more of your life. You are literally becoming more alive. Ultimately yoga is about being able to perceive, with you beginning by perceiving your own body. This ability to perceive is vitally important.

Life is about your perceptions. The quality of your life is based on what you perceive and how you feel. If you win a race or get a promotion, but you harm your body or your relationships in the process, it's not worth it. If you don't feel happy, even the most beautiful home can be a prison. The quality of life is measured by your perceptions, not in the quantity of anything that can be counted or measured. Yoga is the science of perception, also known as the science of consciousness.

When you notice the differences between your two sides, you are *noticing*. You are perceiving. You began with working on your body, but now you are working on your mind. You are training your mind to perceive internal sensations, many of which are quite new. The depth of internal perception continues to expand as you deepen your practice. Your external perception also expands, for it is in direct proportion to the depth of your inner perception. Your ability to see and understand your life and the world is completely dependent on your ability to perceive the multiple levels within you. Your body is merely the outermost layer of the multi-dimensional reality that is you.

Yogic science offers beautiful descriptions of one level of inner perceptions in a detailed map of energy channels (*nadis*) and energy centers (*chakras*). You may have seen a drawing of different colored lotuses strung along a spine, depicting the energetics of the human body. While it is all true, unfortunately it is often blown way out of proportion. It's a bit like the flashing neon lights at a casino, which seem to be promising you will win millions of dollars. You already know enough to disbelieve those advertisements, but you don't know enough about chakras and nadis to avoid similar traps. In fact, genuine and complete information is hard to find, so you can get caught up in chasing glitz and glamour.

I recognize that you may be reading all of this with a healthy dose of skepticism, thinking, "Energy channels, energy centers, energetics of the human body... Sure, and I've got an old bridge I can sell you..." For a quick reality check, please remember that acupuncture is based on these energy channels and energy centers. Additionally, the physicists have proven that all physical matter is made of moving energy, including your body. The yogis perceived these energies and mapped their flows thousands of years ago.

Of the 72,000,000 nadis that make up your body, three are primary. They are the central channel through your spine plus one on each side, which crisscross at periodic intervals. All the other nadis branch off from the central one, which is easily understandable because your nervous system is structured the same way, with all the nerves branching off from your spinal cord. Wherever nadis cross, you get whirlpools (*chakras*). It's similar to two rivers meeting — the differing currents create whirlpools.

With 72,000,000 nadis, there is a lot of crisscrossing, so your body has millions of chakras. The three primary nadis crisscross several times, creating the primary chakras along your spine. The concentration of energy is powerful in each of these locations, and can be open or closed, balanced or imbalanced. These are expressed in your life in many areas: your financial condition, your health, your relationships, your digestion, your breathing, your emotional state, your ability to communicate, and your understanding of life and of yourself. Many books have been published on this subject, though few actually report the yogic teachings accurately. The amount of misinformation on the subject is frightening! So, what do you need to know?

Chakras are not important. There are many people who would love to balance your chakras for you, but the chakras are not what need the work. The reason is that the chakras depend on the nadis. When the energy is flowing smoothly and fully through the nadis, the chakras will be fully open and balanced. Remember, a chakra is a whirlpool, made of swirling energy that comes from two or more nadis meeting at that point. If one of the nadis is not flowing properly, the chakra cannot be open or balanced. Even if someone opens or balances the chakra, without a reliable energy supply from the nadi, it will simply shut down again.

Every *Svaroopā*[®] yoga class is a full chakra balancing treatment. When you begin at the tailbone, you open the first chakra. As you sequence your spine, you track through each of the chakras in turn. But more importantly, you open up your nadis, especially the primary one along your spine. With your life energy flowing smoothly through all your nadis, your chakras will stay open and balanced — for as long as your nadis stay open. Of course, relapse happens — but at least you have the tools to open up your nadis and chakras for yourself; you don't have to rely on someone else to do it for you.

Ultimately, yoga isn't about nadis any more than it is about curing your aches and pains — as important as both of these are. Yoga is actually about a deeper level of perception. The most important benefit of the core opening of *Svaroopā*[®] yoga is that it opens up a deeper experience for you. As seductive as chakras and nadis are, they are still superficial compared to what is accessible within you. They are like the waves churning on the surface of the ocean, but yoga is about exploring the depths. When you open your spine, you find your own inner essence, *svaroopā*, and cultivate your ability to live in it all the time: while you drive and work, while you eat and play, while you continue with your relationships and your life. Basing yourself in your own Self — this is the goal. For that, you must be able to perceive the progressively more subtle levels of your own being, by cultivating your ability to perceive. Do more yoga!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the signature is a small heart symbol containing the number "31".

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