



January 2009 Contemplation Theme

Empowering Perception

by Rama Berch

I thought I would be cold as I stepped off the plane into the jet-way and walked through the 20° tunnel to the airport building. Having just come from 85° in south India, I dreaded that walk, expecting the cold to be bone chilling, hand numbing cold. I followed my fellow passengers down the aisle between the airplane seats. As I turned the corner toward the door, I felt a gust of brisk air hit my face – it felt so fresh and alive! I stepped through the door into the cold and delighted in the feel of it against my skin. My only thought was, “How beautiful!”

The coconut palms and banana trees from the day before were also beautiful. I had taken a pole-boat ride on my last afternoon. My boatman timed it so that we came out of the corridor of palm trees to the flat open beach right at sunset, with the iridescent colors playing across the sky and water at the same time. How beautiful! They are so different, and they are each so beautiful.

Life is not about good weather versus bad weather or tropical versus snow. Life is about your perception. When you perceive things as they are, without overlaying your opinions and reactions on them, your experience is consistent joy. This is incredibly important because your experience determines the quality of your life. When you are having a good experience, you have a good life. When you are having a bad experience, it's somebody else's fault.

Yoga is the science of maximizing human experience – to the fullest and most expanded possibility. Yoga does this by cultivating your perception. You hear a familiar phrase at the beginning of every *Svaroopa*® yoga class, “Become aware of your toes...” A student once asked me how to be aware of his toes, saying that he remembered seeing his toes early that morning when he put his socks on. He wanted to know if he was supposed to remember his toes that way; did that count as being aware of his toes? I said yes – become aware of your toes in whatever way you find easiest. And, after you have done this a few more times, you will realize that you are able to be aware of your toes in a different way. It's like your toes become more real or more alive somehow, even though your toes haven't really changed. It is your awareness that is changing.

The Guided Awareness in *Shavasana* is training in awareness. It is not a Guided Relaxation. We don't say, “Relax your toes.” While you do become deeply relaxed, it happens because relaxation is the first stage of bliss – and the path to bliss is awareness. Awareness is perception, from the most externalized and superficial level to the deepest levels within. Awareness includes the activity of your mind, but awareness-itself is much more subtle and much more powerful than your mind. At the sweetest and deepest levels, you are aware without using your mind at all.

You have already begun the process of empowering your perception and you make strides every time you become aware of your toes. As your ability to be aware expands, you begin to perceive things you hadn't perceived before, even though they were right in front of you. It really isn't about your toes. It's all about perception.

Sometimes you perceive beautiful things that were there all along. I was walking a path in the woods behind my home and looked down to find crystals imbedded in the earth. I pulled out a few, and marveled that there are natural crystals on my home property. How long have they been there, while I didn't see them? Perception!

Sometimes you perceive painful things that were there all along. The deep spinal release of *Svaroopa*® yoga can open up areas with hidden problems, and you may even need medical care as you heal these previously unknown things – but they were there all along. Perception. Some might say, “What you don't know can't hurt you,” but that isn't true. The reason that medicine recommends those over 50 get a colonoscopy is so that they can find any hidden problems early. Perception is the key.

The mystery of perception is that it extends only as far outside as inside. When you shut down your body, emotions, memories, breath, or your own sense of aliveness and joy on the inside, you also lose the ability to perceive the fullness of what is going on around you. You get easily confused by your life. you are knocked down by every storm that comes along. But when you open up the inner space within your body, breath, mind, heart and self – everything in the world is less confusing. It makes sense even when it doesn't make sense. You see all the hidden angles and implications; you can easily make decisions and follow through with effective actions. It's so easy, once you see what is there. It's all about perception.

Thirty-three of us have just returned from Master Yoga's first group trip to India. In the mornings, I taught about God – outside and inside. I presented yoga's teachings on the form and the formless, as well as how it applies to the

discovery of your own divinity. In the afternoon, I taught about the cultural environment and how it shaped yoga's teachings, as well as how our own cultural background can make it hard to understand yoga's true message as well as translate it into our lives in our own culture. I watched as everyone began to lose their "Western eyes," the fear and judgment that meets anything that is different, and the aversion to anything dirty, noisy or crowded. Perception. The last day, each person shared a story from their retreat. Half of them spoke movingly of the Indian people, rather than the pre-dawn chant and meditation or the after-dinner two-hour asana class. They spoke of their hearts being opened by the sincere and loving smiles coming from everyone, smiles that seem to come from a place inside that we Westerners seldom visit.

Now everyone has returned home, but they see home differently. It will be months before anyone really understands what has happened – just as it will be a process for me once I complete my upcoming *sannyasa* initiation. As the blinders fall away, we perceive more of what is really here – inside and outside. That is yoga's specialty – to empower your perception until you can no longer hide from yourself.

Still, that's not the whole story! Perception is a tangible experience, reaching far beyond the object that you are perceiving. Yoga describes the three-fold nature of the world as being (1) perceiver, (2) the object (which is being perceived) and (3) perception itself. The perceiver is you yourself – the you that is perceiving; the object being perceived could be a rock, a person, or even one of your own thoughts or memories; perception is seeing, hearing, tasting, etc. While any of these are a yogic pathway to meditation, perception itself is the most powerful pathway and has the fewest detours to get lost in.

When you focus on an object you are perceiving, you usually get lost in your reactions to it. When you focus on yourself as the perceiver, you usually get lost in your idea of who you are or your efforts to manipulate your image. Many yogic techniques address your tendency to get stuck in these detours, but they require years of preparation and practice to be really effective. It is perception itself that is easiest to work with.

Right now, as you read this, take a moment to focus on the fact that you are holding a paper or reading a computer screen – turn your full attention to the page. It was almost fully there already, so it takes only a little shift to invest yourself completely in the page – the object you are perceiving. The page that you are reading is the important thing, the thing to focus on.

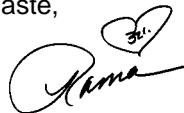
Now give yourself a long slow breath or two.

Keep your eyes open and continue looking at the page, but shift your awareness to the one who is reading the page – the perceiver. Even your visual field will change as you shift your perception to perceive that you are the perceiver. You can see that you are analyzing things as you read, maybe breathing or maybe not, sitting in a good yogic pose (or not) – and you can keep reading while you keep your focus on yourself.

Now become aware of your seeing itself. In order to read, you are seeing the page. The process of seeing is perception. Keep your eyes open as you shift your awareness to perception itself. You are being aware of perceiving, which means you are being aware of awareness itself – which is your own Self. Stay with being aware that you are aware, even while you breathe. Continue to be aware of the process of perception even while you turn your eyes elsewhere. You can see any object, and still be focused on the perception itself, rather than the object.

This is perception. It is awareness-itself. It is consciousness-itself. You are That. And you are learning how to perceive in every *Shavasana*. In every pose, when you notice the difference between the two sides, you are empowering your perception – until you discover the full power of perception itself. How do you get there? Do more yoga..

Namaste,



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