

Moving Toward The Core

By Tanya Roland

A couple of months ago I attended a yoga retreat led by JJ Gormley, founder of Sun and Moon Yoga Studio in Moab, Utah. I've studied and practiced with a number of teachers over the years, including JJ. As described in the last Sun and Moon newsletter, I had somewhat of a revelation regarding what and how JJ is teaching now. The experience had such an impact that I asked JJ if we could do an interview. So one day in early May, we sat down at her house in Boston, Virginia and had a conversation. The following is a glimpse into that discussion. The follow-up to this interview will appear in the next newsletter.

Part One: Chakras and the spine.

TR JJ, how would you describe the essence of what you're teaching now?

JJ My teaching in the past involved a lot of instruction for how the arms and legs, feet and hands should be in particular poses as well as the spine, of course. But now, I'm letting go of any instruction that speaks to the periphery of the body and doing my best to speak only to the core, or the spinal column. Basically there are a lot of instructions out there for all parts of the body in the asana world, and generally it's specific to a particular pose. For example, we hear "when in this particular pose move these bones/muscles this way and when in this other pose, move the bones and muscles this way." I think this can be confusing. Also, I believe that we as teachers need to be giving less alignment instructions for the arms/legs or anything further away from the core or spine of the body and really focusing our language to speak to the core. For example, asking students to roll the thighs

in or out can torque the knees especially since this instruction is so misunderstood by the general yoga student. The more we can learn to move from the core of the body and not the outer or peripheral, the more we strengthen our core. The more we strengthen our core, the more we come into connection with our true spirit. This is the deeper magic of yoga.

So I've filtered alignment instructions that I've picked up on over the years through the chakra areas on the body. These are basic areas along the spinal column or the core of our being. As I see it, it comes down to two basic opposing movements at each chakra center on the body. Being mindful of these two movements at each center in every pose can bring the body into alignment, move us toward the core and hence, bring us into balance. And, the periphery of the body naturally follows and aligns itself to support how you've moved your core. That's it in a nutshell.

TR Can you talk a bit more about the word "chakra" and what it means?

JJ If you look at the spine it has these particular curves. At each curve there's a chakra. It's just like the curves of a river as it flows - it sets off a little whirlpool or eddy. Although the whirlpools may just be in the subtle or energetic body, it can be affected by the alignment of the body at each of these curves, at each of these sites, these chakra centers. In other words, movements in the physical body influence the subtle energetic body.

TR Ok, but what does this mean to us as individuals in our yoga practice?

JJ As we've habitually moved our bodies for x number of years, we've gotten the alignment of our spines a little out of kilter so to speak. With our current cultural habit of sitting at computers, for example, everybody's got their heads forward, so there's this misalignment of the spine and its integrity has been compromised. These cues, or movements, help to pull the spine back to good alignment. We need to be able to recognize our particular habit that we've created in our body at each of these centers, and bring it back into balance by doing its opposite. In general, these movements

direct energy toward the core of the body so you begin to strengthen the core. You let go of what the peripheral body is doing. It doesn't matter really so much what your arms and legs are doing. The real focus is on moving toward the core and making the core body, the spine, be in proper alignment. We then let the legs and arms do whatever they want to help support the core. A good teacher can look at someone's peripheral body and know what their core is doing. Rather than making the correction at the periphery and saying, "press your big toe down," the correction should come at the placement of the pelvis to move the pubic bone back, for example.

TR What are some of the effects of poor spinal, or chakral alignment?

JJ You mean besides muscle aches, pains, strains, and tight muscles or other physical symptoms?

TR Is that it? Are those basically the signs?

JJ That's it but then think of when your body has these aches and pains and tight muscles - the body is affected in the area of the pain yet also your mental and sometimes emotional ability to operate is affected. People who are in pain tend to be a little more irritable and a little more stressed out so it affects you more than just physically.

If you have poor posture (JJ hunches her shoulders and collapses her chest in) you're heading down like this toward fatigue and depression. Or perhaps it's like the chicken and the egg, which came first? Did fatigue and depression come first, or was your poor posture affecting the energies of the body and that's what led to the depression?

TR So you're saying that it affects not only the physical body but the mental body and the emotional body as well?

JJ You bet. I've seen so many times how yoga can help heal not only the physical body where pain is alleviated, but also mental and emotional outlook. I really believe that aligning our bodies correctly

with the big Nature (capital N) out there will have a tremendous effect on our small self and how we are able to deal with the little things each day.