



TriYoga® Center of Philadelphia at Mind-Body Services

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"MIRROR NEURONS AND YOGA" BY BETH (BASHANTI) PHILLIPS

After the hustle and bustle of the Center's Third Birthday celebrations came to a close, the waves of blissful feelings continue to generate an inner calm. Among the many gifts and benefits coming from the weekend and its related projects, I had the marvelous opportunity to observe Citrini in a Level 4 Flow. While I've seen her spontaneously flow and also demonstrate flows, this particular experience had a deep rippling effect on me.

Following filming of the Flow demonstration, came time for Tuesday night class. During class, I noticed how deeply and easily I stepped into the Flow river. The Flow manifested in the tiniest details (like the difference between leaping from Cat into Pyramid from the tops of feet rather than from tucked toes). I noticed how some things felt different in the body, more open and surrendered in some postures that are generally a complete challenge (such as Tortoise), while in other postures, I felt a stability where usually there's wobbling and a fear of falling (which can, of course, contribute to not going beyond what I think are limitations). I also noticed how continuing in Victory Breath was effortless in some new way. It was like a poem streaming through, a smooth merge onto the highway of consciousness in a beautifully-tuned vehicle, maintaining the right speed and finding the sweet spot all the way through the drive.

What's different, I wondered: why were the hips lower, not needing so many props? Where did the extension and stability and rootedness come from in Extended Runner? This was a fuller Hanuman bow than I've experienced before. Oooh, how did the Chest get so expansive? How did the feet know when to root into earth and how deep to go and when to lighten in leaping?

The only major difference between that and every other Tuesday night class with the same teacher was the pre-class observation of the Flow demonstration. Is it possible that my own expanded opening in the class was a gift or beneficial side effect from observing? According to recent research on a kind of brain cells called mirror neurons, this could not only be possible, but is highly likely. Also called "monkey-see, monkey-do" neurons (no coincidence that Hanuman plays a bigger role than I could have thought in this), these are the cells that help us connect deeply when watching others do something and doing it ourselves. (For more information, see a clip of the Nova program at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/mirror-neurons.html>) Mirror neurons are the same cells that support the benefits of visualization, (i.e., the reason a skater, skier or other athlete goes over her/his run or routine pre-competition). And these are the cells that create culture through imitation, a group expression of mirror neurons. These are cells that show us how to be more human.

While I don't know enough about either brain research or physics (both branches of science which are involved in this experience) to understand, let alone explain the functioning or effects of mirror neurons to another person, I do ponder the effects of two popular theories: (1) the Butterfly Effect, derived from Chaos Theory, describes the way a butterfly wing's flapping in one place could lead to a big weather event such as a hurricane far away, and (2) the Hundredth Monkey theory posits that a learned behavior can spread instantaneously from one group of monkeys to all related monkeys when a critical number has been reached. Whether or not those theories are at work, I cannot argue with the indescribable sense of warmth, love and well-being that fills the room when Kaliji or Swamiji are nearby, the strongest experiential evidence I have had of mirror neurons at work.

So the next time I have a reason to think that not going to class is the best option or easiest option, I want to remember that it's possible to receive the deep, nourishing benefits of practice just from being in the room and observing or breathing or sitting quietly or staying in Child. Like so many other lessons from the yoga mat, what else could be possible off the mat when we simply and receptively observe with mirror neurons firing?



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