

Moving Past the Knots:

The Yoga of Relationships

BY DIANA ALSTAD

“Instead of more detachment, humanity needs better forms of attachment.” - Diana

One cannot “Know thyself” fully in isolation – as social animals, it must include how one relates. Like physical tightness and blocks in hatha yoga, conflicts and differences are relational “edges” to explore using awareness and feedback, bringing new insights and openings. A viable, realistic framework that allows people to deal with the unavoidable issues of control, power and self-centeredness with more awareness and ease can be an on-going source of discovery, transformation and creativity. The Yoga of Relationship provides an evolutionary framework and tools to help people break out of limiting patterns, unravel relational “knots,” and create a true meeting of minds that can allow intimacy and growth to flourish over time.

Yoga aims at opening and strengthening the mind and body, giving more flexibility and possibilities in meeting what life offers while getting to know oneself with greater depth. Throughout this process one confronts blocks, tight spots and various limitations – some genetic, but many a product of physical and mental conditioning. If approached as a process of self-exploration, Yoga can be a means to opening one’s consciousness and life as well as one’s body.

In many traditions the maxim “Know thyself” is presented as a totally inward activity that often involves separating from others. But one cannot get to know oneself fully in isolation for relationships uniquely ignite and reveal many aspects of the self. Approaching relationships as a yoga explores those conditionings that can only be discovered in relationships. Much conditioning occurs as a person relates to others and to the environment. Relational conditioning involves the networks and patterns built by habit, continued by mutual needs and reinforced by worldviews that define roles and rules for how people are to interact. Becoming more aware of how relational patterns work and how one works within them expands consciousness and one’s relational repertoire. This can eliminate many binds that occur in relationships and open people to on-going trans-

formation with each other.

I first encountered Joel Kramer’s evolutionary vision of physical and mental yoga in 1972.¹ When Joel and I began our life partnership in 1974, I had long been concerned with transforming gender and power patterns, both intimate and social. Another more recent interest had been synthesiz-



ing Eastern spiritual and Western psychological frameworks. I saw that as a holistic, feedback-based process of self-exploration, Joel’s approach to yoga offered a framework and principles that could be applied to other aspects of life. After joining Joel I focused on extending his perspectives on yoga to intimacy and the interpersonal arena.² Using Joel’s approach to self-inquiry with each other³, we created new ways of aligning differences and resolving the conflicts, tensions and resentments that erode passion, allowing it instead to flourish over time.

Joel’s basic teaching in all of yoga is geared at fostering independence. So too is the Yoga of Relationship. It aids people in using intelligence, awareness and mutual feedback to explore and resolve issues with each other. Similar to playing one’s edges of tightness and restriction in physical and mental yoga, relational conflict, stuck places and polarizations are edges to be played and explored to create new openings in relationships and

1. Joel Kramer’s foundational *Yoga Journal* articles “Yoga as Self-Transformation” (1980) and “A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind & Body” (1980) modernize yoga by freeing it from its authoritarian roots.

2. “Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga” (Diana Alstad – *Yoga Journal*, 1979) applies Joel Kramer’s yogic approach to the social realm, laying the foundation for the Yoga of Relationship.

3. “A New Look at Yoga” introduces mental yoga; it is further described in the interviews “Mind in Asana” (*Yoga Journal*, 1986) and “A Yoga Legend Returns: Joel Kramer and the Yoga of Mind” (*Yogi Times*, 2006). Joel’s book *The Passionate Mind* (1974 – edited talks on the nature of the mind and its filters) guide listeners to experience the Yoga of Mind.

in oneself. The challenge is how to bring growth and evolution into long-term relationships, where habits, patterns of power and resentments usually accumulate over time. Passion thrives with newness, openness and growth. In fact, open communication can bring a meeting of minds – one of the great unsung aphrodisiacs.

Relational “knots” or polarizations occur when two parties are locked in opposing positions, where no movement occurs no matter how much they discuss it. An example of an intimate knot that takes many different forms is: “If you *really* loved me, you’d change to meet more of my needs” versus “If you really loved *me*, you’d accept me the way I *am*.” Knots are usually resolvable through a better understanding of the total picture and bringing in more objectivity and empathy. Through transcending subjectivity in the living moment some knots can suddenly and surprisingly unravel, resolving themselves.

Impasses on the other hand, tend to be unresolvable because they stem more from core differences than knots. Examples of impasses include opposing deep desires around having or not having a child, or the impossibility of a religious fundamentalist reaching agreement with others around differing worldviews.

A couple that grows personally and together over time, synthesizing differences, can be a microcosm of evolution. When oppositions occur, joining in mutual exploration by shifting from judgment to curiosity reveals blind spots and brings more objectivity. This raises the level of discourse, shifting it into process and away from content – positions and values – where emotions usually get triggered. This allows even couples locked in conflict to join hands in exploring their differences and can help free them from conditioned patterns, both internal and relational.

Integrating the opposing Eastern and Western worldviews of the One and the Many provides a philosophical foundation for a different view of spirituality, as well as for the Yoga of Relationship.⁴ This third perspective sees that the frameworks of the One (derived from mysticism) and the Many (derived from common experience) falsely polarize individuation and merging, which are

4. See “The Third Perspective and Yoga: Bringing East and West Together” (Joel Kramer, *Yoga Journal*, 1981).

actually embedded in each other – intertwined, not separate. For as evolved social animals, people have an inbuilt need to both individuate and bond with others. In love for example, you lose yourself transcending isolation, and yet the feelings are fulfilling and gratifying to the self.

Just as totally losing oneself in another and rigid self-protective boundaries are both imbalanced, so too, Eastern “looking within” and Western “looking without” need counterbalancing. They each contain limits and pitfalls when taken to an extreme. To counter the projections of subjectivity, self-protective “non-attachment” and self-absorption that the “looking within” orientation can bring, a person needs the feedback, mirroring and learning offered by the external world, especially within an aware intimacy. Otherwise one easily gets lost in the myriad self-delusions of self-interest, projections and wishful thinking. Similarly, “looking without” needs the inner awareness that comes through self-reflection.

Power dynamics and gender differences also affect sexual attraction and “courtship.” Awareness of them can help free people from their more mechanical aspects. Looking through the lens of power helps explain why people are attracted to those who aren’t good for them. Double messages and cultural blind spots are rife between women and men. Nowadays many women want men to be more open and vulnerable – but if they appear too weak, women might be less interested in them romantically. Men want women to be stronger and more independent – but deep down may still want a woman to center her life around him and associate that with being truly loved.⁵

Morality is the glue holding social orders together, like an internalized “operating system” that gives guidelines for relationships. Unmasking authoritarianism culturally implanted in people’s minds – in their morality, worldviews and ideals – expands the Yoga of Relationship into the

5. See “Transforming Sexuality: Changing the Context of Conquest” – A Dialogue between Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad” (*New Age Magazine*, 1978).

broader societal arena by exposing internalized, outmoded, non-viable, and thus harmful unexamined cultural conditioning. This not only helps

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free people, but expands the realm of possibility within relationships.⁶

Relationships at all levels are the major problem on the planet. A modern evolutionary framework of values – one more in accord with human reality and possibility – is necessary for human evolution and survival. Joel and I developed a framework that can help foster social evolution.⁷ It helps prevent love from dissipating over time and reveals why intimacy is commonly laden with conflict – because often the loftiest ideals of love mask a hidden authoritarianism that can undermine love and sabotage relationships. Lofty but unlivable, unrealistic ideals that seem beneficial – or at least benign – are actually dysfunctional and at times treacherous. Instead of providing useful guidelines for dealing with the inevitable conflicts within intimacy around control, they are at best an added and unnecessary handicap. Many breakups stem from unresolved control issues and unaware ways of dealing with power.

A more conscious, caring and enjoyable way of dealing with the unavoidable long-term issues of power, control and self-centeredness is both necessary and possible – one that minimizes conflict and allows love and growth to flourish over time. This involves freeing oneself from unlivable ideals, like purity, selflessness and unconditional love

6. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad, 1993) reveals cultural authoritarianism hidden in belief and value systems, religion and spirituality, including in some of the highest ideals such as selflessness, ego-loss and unconditional love.

7. The chapter “Love and Control: The Conditions Underlying Unconditional Love” in *The Guru Papers* presents aspects of this framework related to intimacy.

– ideals that sound impeccable but in actuality set one up for failure, and possibly even abuse and tragedy. By offering more realistic, viable and “user-friendly” values and new ways of viewing key issues such as trust, commitment, boundaries, forgiveness, imbalances, measuring, and expectations, this framework creates greater possibility and ease for long-term intimacy.

Love and control in intimacy are not opposites as notions of purity would have it, but rather are embedded in each other – which create more possibility for connection and growth. It’s only natural to want some influence on those you love who affect you deeply, including your children. The very human need for some control in one’s life and influence on others need not be a source of conflict. If dealt with awarely, it can be an on-going source of discovery, mutual transformation and even play. With effective ways of communicating and cutting through conflict, being in a couple need not involve complacency, forced compromise or a seemingly endless working out of differences. In fact, in between life’s major shifts (having a baby, moving), unexpected challenges (loss, illness) or tragedies, it’s possible for a couple to live in harmony and joy, if not forever, for years at a time.

LA YOGA

Diana Alstad created a foundation for the Yoga of Relationship in “Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga” (Yoga Journal, 1979) by extending Joel Kramer’s yogic approach to the social arena. She received a Ph.D. from Yale, created the first Women’s Studies courses at Yale and Duke, and trained in various psychological frameworks. She and Joel Kramer are co-authors of The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power. They teach the Yoga of Relationship and lecture together and separately on wide variety of issues. Most articles referred to are posted at www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com. “Transforming Sexuality” is at www.whitelotus.org in Library. Contact info@www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com.

Yoga Journal articles posted at
www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com:

Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga (Diana Alstad, 1979)

A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind and Body (Joel Kramer, 1977)

Yoga as Self-Transformation (Joel Kramer, 1980)

Mind in Asana: An Interview with Joel Kramer (Jeanne Cameron, 1986)

The Third Perspective and Yoga: Bringing East and West Together (Joel Kramer, 1981)

The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad
(North Atlantic Books -- also published in German and Russian)

The Passionate Mind by Joel Kramer (North Atlantic Books)