

Evolving Together

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad share their love of yoga and how to keep passion alive

by Lisa Maria

When Joel Kramer, the “father of American yoga,” and Diana Alstad, the “mother of the yoga of relationships,” stopped teaching yoga 24 years ago, they didn’t realize that Kramer was going to become a legend. Well, Kramer’s back, better than ever—with Alstad, his powerhouse partner of 32 years, by his side.

Part provocative and part pussycat, Kramer, through his writings and teachings, has helped shape yoga in the United States for four decades. His seminal article, “Yoga as Self-Transformation,” published in 1980, has been distributed widely as part of teacher-training manuals; his 1974 book, *The Passionate Mind*, drew fans like Alan Watts and Anaïs Nin, giving Kramer a unique place as one of the first American philosopher yogis. Senior teachers Ana Forrest, Bryan Kest, Sarah Powers, Tracey Rich, Ganga White, Erich Schiffmann, Lisa Walford, and others refer to him with profound respect, admiration, and gratitude.

Alstad stands on sturdy footing in our cultural landscape as well. A brilliant scholar and pioneer of modern feminism in America, her peers include Kate Millet and Gloria Steinem. Alstad received her PhD from Yale University in 1971, is a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, and taught the first Women’s Studies classes at both Yale and Duke Universities. She too has authored numerous papers and magazine articles on the yoga of relationships.

Over the course of their three decades together, Kramer and Alstad have encountered many of the common problems that surface in coupledness—power, control, jealousy, freedom, selfishness—and they’ve emerged with more clarity, understanding, and compassion. Tenacious truth-seekers, they complement each other in their quest for conscious evolution, both in their personal daily dynamics as well as their calling to share the wisdom they’ve gained with the world through their teaching and writing. Their greatest inspiration? Each other.

Looking back

We sit at their round dining room table, drinking water from amber wine glasses that look like they were purchased circa 1970. Sunlight pours in through wall-sized windows, offering a catch-your-breath view of the Pacific Ocean stretching out into



Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer teach workshops around the country.

infinity. Kramer’s comfortably dressed in a black velour shirt and black pants; Alstad’s elegantly casual in a silk blouse with beige pants and cozy Ugg boots. They’re delightful—warm, pleasant, inquisitive and funny—and a bit like twins, finishing each other’s sentences and supplying elusive words. When Kramer speaks, his graveled voice, cultured with precise enunciation, caresses his words like a film star from the ‘40s. “Some people had considered me the first American yoga master,” he says. “Being a master is such a misnomer because you can only master something that is masterable—that has an end. You can’t master anything that is open-ended!”

Born in Coney Island in 1937, Kramer studied for doctoral degrees in both philosophy and psychology at Columbia, New York University, and the University of Florida but then decided against being an academic. This was in 1963, when the political, social, and cultural upheaval of that decade was just starting to ferment, especially in the West. Wondering what all the fuss was about, Kramer caravanned with a group of people from New York to California and settled in Berkeley. With his intellectual acumen and voracious appetite for philosophical exploration, Kramer was soon cresting on the 1960s counterculture wave along with contemporaries Timothy Leary, Fritz Perls, Ralph Metzner, and Ken Kesey. “It [the ‘60s] began to open up vistas of understanding that I didn’t have previously,” he says.

Kramer discovered the teachings of J. Krishnamurti. He was impressed with Krishnamurti’s ability to see through the machinations of the mind and intrigued by his methodology. “This was really fascinating and quite different from anything I had ever seen in the Western sphere,” he says. “One of the things it taught

me was that even though I had a mind that was very rigorously trained, it was a highly conditioned mind, a very predictable mind—a mind that had its own boxes.”

Kramer quickly realized his body was just as highly conditioned as his mind and began practicing yoga in 1967 on his 30th birthday. In his maverick style, he learned most of it on his own. “I used books around me, I talked to people, I knew people who did it, I watched classes, and I gathered as much information as I could,” he explains. “I really got a feeling for how you do physical yoga. I did find there was some real connection between the energy, the mind, and the body.”

Loving the quality of energy and the momentum yoga gave his life, “I became a yoga addict,” Kramer says, and he has practiced regularly since. Though he began with a stiff body, he soon mastered complex postures. Within a year, he became the resident yoga teacher at Esalen Institute, a position he held for two years.

Her story

While teaching at Duke University in North Carolina in 1972, Alstad was drawn to parapsychology and explored the intersection of eastern spirituality and western psychology. She took some Kundalini yoga classes, went to Gestalt workshops, and attended a Transcendental Meditation seminar where she received a mantra.

Curious about the meaning of enlightenment, Alstad took a leave of absence from teaching that summer and traveled west with a Guide to Intentional Spiritual Communities in hand. She spent two months at an ashram, where she discovered that sexism was alive and well, even in spiritual communities. Disenchanted, Alstad planned to return home... until a stranger encouraged her to attend a weekend yoga workshop at Kramer’s home in Bolinas, California. He told her Kramer was “modern, intelligent, different, really interesting.” So, she went. Alstad tilts her head to the side, her silver bob framing her smiling face. “I had gotten interested in enlightenment, reincarnation—all these Eastern frameworks—and wanted to find a teacher or somebody who could tell me what was going on,” she remembers. “And he did. And none of it was what I wanted to hear!” They both laugh.

Though she felt an instant connection to Kramer’s teachings, Alstad didn’t consider that their relationship would evolve into anything else. After returning home, she struggled between the security of her academic life and the uncertainties of a new life of yoga. She feared being thought of as a flake—especially since, as a woman, she had broken through multiple societal barriers and had received numerous accolades. It soon became clear that her course lay with Jñāna Yoga, the path of knowledge. Six months later, she quit teaching. Alstad shrugs her shoulders, opening her palms in a gesture of surrender. “I just thought, ‘Hey, this is a sinking ship,’” she says. “I’m going to get off it right away.” Shortly afterward, a friend convinced Alstad to move to California and become Kramer’s business manager. Their relationship evolved slowly into romance.

Alstad’s Yoga of Relationship grew out of their personal struggles. She applied Kramer’s yoga techniques to their process

of relating. Seeing how many world problems could be traced to the difficulties in relationships, Alstad and Kramer developed classes, workshops, and articles to share their techniques.

Today, it continues to be one of their most popular workshops. Says Alstad, “If you temporarily stop focusing on changing the other, or being right, or winning, or getting back at—any of those things that are temptations in handling conflict—you can join hands and explore together. Even if you’re polarized. Once you make that shift, you can go into these ideas that Joel had in “Yoga as Self-Transformation”—edge-playing, breath, pushing and relaxing, feedback—and you can, almost on your own, see how they apply. For example, if you’re in the heat of anger, stop and take some deep breaths and use the breath to focus and just calm down.”


Transformations

“A fitting relationship is about transformation,” says Kramer. “It’s about the people transforming it into something new, something living. I’ve heard a lot of people say ‘I want to be accepted as I am, for who I am.’ Well, who you are is changing. How are you going to let the intelligence of your partner be a part of your being as you move forward?”

Kramer withdrew from teaching in 1982 for several reasons: He didn’t want to compete with large classes and domineering teachers. He taught small classes, with the intention and hope his students would become their own teachers. He was also tired of traveling and wanted to stay home with Alstad and his two daughters (from a previous relationship). And he was ready to return to full-time writing. During this break, Kramer and Alstad published their groundbreaking book, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (North Atlantic Books, 1993).

When Kramer was urged by Danny Paradise and David Swenson to resume teaching, Alstad made a few calls. She takes a sip of water, her star ruby ring sparkling in the sunlight. “Any place I called wanted him—Joel was a legend!” Kramer wrinkles his forehead. “I had no idea that I had any cachet left...really no idea,” he says.

Inigorated by the enthusiastic reception they’ve received around the country and at various yoga conferences for their workshops on the Yoga of Relationships, the Heart of Asanas, Yoga for Modern Living, and more, Kramer and Alstad plan to continue teaching and to complete their book, *Spirituality for Atheists*.

“We see the yoga of body, mind, and relationship as an evolutionary activity,” says Alstad. “You can evolve together. Passion thrives with newness and with interest. Instead of building up resentments and expectations, unresolved issues, and patterns, if you can keep your relationship growing and transforming in a way that feels good, that helps passion stay alive.” 

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Writer, editor, and yoga teacher, **Lisa Maria** is an ambassador for *Lululemon Athletica* and the yoga expert for The EcoMom Alliance. lisa-maria.com