

Joel Kramer & Modern Yoga

*“Tradition is important just as history is important—
not as a vice to squeeze the present into, but rather as a stepping stone to grow from.”*
— Joel in “A New Look at Yoga”

*“I have had to distill the truths of the East that make sense for my life and culture.
Yoga is remarkable in its capacity to transcend the beliefs and attitudes of its origins.”*
— Joel in “The 3rd Perspective & Yoga”

Joel Kramer is an internationally prominent author, teacher, yoga innovator and adept. His influence is legendary as many consider him the father of modern American yoga for his early seminal contributions to the revitalization and re-visioning of yoga in the West. His groundbreaking approach to yoga as an evolutionary process is foundational for many of today’s leading yoga teachers. Joel’s aim has always been to free yoga and spirituality from its authoritarian roots, helping people become their own authority. His major concern is to foster personal and social evolution to meet the great challenges of these tumultuous times.

He began teaching his original approach to yoga, consciousness, and spirituality at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California where he was on the resident faculty from 1968-70. His seminars dealt, then as now, with the basic concerns of living and included the nature and evolution of awareness. From 1970 on he taught throughout North America, in Europe and Asia until he withdrew from teaching in 1982.

Teachers of many types of yoga have incorporated Joel’s perspectives, having either read his writings, or studied with him or with those who had. His seminal articles were published in the *Yoga Journal* in the ‘70s and ‘80s. “**A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind & Body**” (1977) and the foundational “**Yoga as Self-Transformation**” (1980) describe his mind/body yoga. The latter has been extremely influential as it gives the most complete treatment of his innovative approach and has long been included in many teacher training manuals. Since Joel’s articles can deepen almost any type of yoga, they have been widely shared throughout the years and to this day by teachers of all persuasions. Many of his principles such as

“playing the edge,” “yoga as self-exploration,” “creating lines of energy,” and “using internal feedback as one’s teacher” have taken on a life of their own and become an integral part of modern yoga.

Erich Schiffmann’s highly acclaimed book *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness* (Pocket Books, 1996) is based on Joel’s approach to physical yoga and Erich’s to meditation. Erich, his book, and many other prominent teachers brought Joel’s perspectives to the attention of a new generation of teachers and students.

Joel’s approach to yoga involves exploring the edge or frontiers of the self both mentally and physically as a living energy system. He views the essence of yoga as transformative and sees yoga as a remarkable tool to help people open up to themselves, enhance their lives and discover new directions. “Everyone’s mind and body are unique instruments that can be honed and tuned through yoga to touch into the body’s deep wisdom and reservoirs. For me, the key to yoga is awareness—getting in touch with one’s own feedback systems, breath, edges, and rhythm, which helps develop one’s own practice.”

Joel began formally teaching once again in 2006, largely because he felt that the volatile world situation calls for new ways of thinking and problem-solving. He views spirituality, values, and the very meaning of the challenges humanity is facing as part of the evolutionary process. This not only opens the door to realistic hope, but is a framework that can restructure the ways people treat each other and the planet that supports us all.

BACKGROUND

After studying for doctorates in philosophy and psychology at Columbia, NYU, and the University of Florida, Joel moved to California in 1963 and became part of the burgeoning counterculture. This led him to an exploration of Eastern perspectives, particularly Hindu *Advaitist* thought (Oneness), yoga, and Buddhism. *Advaita* is the branch of Hinduism that postulates that reality is one entity and that separate people or things are the “dance of *Maya*” (illusion). This Hindu philosophical worldview has influenced Buddhism and the West.

Before practicing physical yoga, Joel was deeply influenced by J. Krishnamurti’s innovative methodology for looking within. Thus Joel’s initial contact with yoga was with Yoga of the Mind (*jnana* yoga). As a trained philosopher, he saw beyond the traditional verbiage and overlays, and grasped the potential of *jnana* yoga as a methodology for turning thought upon itself to “stretch” its edges, limits and conditioning through observing its own nature and processes. This brings an awareness to daily life that can spring one out of thought’s mechanical conditioning patterns in the living moment, fostering growth. Approaching the mind as a yoga makes it more flexible. This involves seeing it build structures and habits, as does the body, which can loosen the mind’s mechanical aspects.

Joel’s book *The Passionate Mind: A Manual for Living Creatively with One’s Self* (1974) is edited transcripts of his early seminar talks demonstrating the structure of thought and how thought works. The book, like the talks, enables people to experience the Yoga of Mind through following Joel as he examines inner mental processes that are common to all of us. This brings greater clarity not only to the inner workings of one’s mind, but also in the process of living.

Joel developed his approach to physical yoga through applying his understanding of mental conditioning to the body. Emphasizing self-exploration through building sensitivity to one’s breath, and physical and mental feedbacks connects the mind and body into an integrated system. For Joel, this stretching, playing, and expanding one’s physical and mental edges awarely is the core of yoga.

Joel’s inquiry led him to reexamine his worldview and its relation to living and to the state of the world. Through exploring his own mind, body, and the world around him, he eventually came to question the Eastern Oneness (*Advaita*) framework of a unity of existence that makes separation, boundaries, and life on Earth either illusory or at best, less real. This questioning radically transformed his view of Eastern spirituality, including the concepts of enlightenment, ego-loss and selflessness, and ideals of purity. This led him in the mid-’70s to formulate a “third perspective” synthesizing the perspectives of the One and the Many (unity and diversity).

While Eastern mysticism promulgates the idea of an overriding unity, Western monotheism is based on the separation of God and God’s creation. In contrast to making unity the ultimate reality, monotheism attributes reality to the commonplace experience of separation and everyday life. The perspective of the Many is also tacitly part of most scientific and secular frameworks.

In “**The Third Perspective & Yoga: Bringing East & West Together**” (*Yoga Journal*, 1981) Joel integrates what he finds pertinent in both worldviews, as each puts forth “truths” that are incomplete in themselves. He also contrasts the benefits, lacks and pitfalls of Eastern and Western approaches to knowledge: “looking within” (including traditional meditation) and “looking without” (understanding through external routes).

Bringing together the perspectives of the One and the Many, unity and diversity, individuation and merging, provides a foundation for a more viable, non-authoritarian and evolutionary view of spirituality. An evolutionary yoga cannot thrive in the context of authoritarian roles, rules, and self-renouncing ideals that the Oneness and monotheistic worldviews both promulgate. This third worldview creates a context for broadening the yogic approach into new domains. Acknowledging the reality of self, others, boundaries, and the external world makes a Yoga of Relationship possible. It also extends Yoga of the Mind into new arenas by examining the interaction and repercussions of mind and society on each other.

JOEL KRAMER & DIANA ALSTAD

Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer met in 1972 and began their life partnership in 1974. It has proved to be an on-going creative synthesis of perspectives and a source of transformation for both. Diana regularly led seminars with Joel introducing new concerns and insights. She brought a social, political, and relational awareness to his more philosophical perspectives. This involved extending spiritual frameworks into daily life, relationships, social issues and evolution. Her deep perceptions and concrete examples often served as a bridge that made abstract concepts richer, more accessible, and more obviously relevant to living.

Diana had long been concerned with transforming power and gender patterns, both intimate and social when she met Joel. Her article “**Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga**” (*Yoga Journal*, 1979) created a foundation for the Yoga of Relationship by applying to the personal and social arena Joel’s approach to yoga. Together they created new ways of dealing with the differences and patterns that erode passion. Her incentive led them to develop and teach the Yoga of Relationship. Now Joel and Diana are teaching together again, and the Yoga of Relationship has become one of their most popular topics.

Joel and Diana co-authored *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (1993). This time it was Diana who took the lead by giving talks on the book and its many facets. By

continuing to examine how thought works and is affected by worldviews and values, *The Guru Papers* brings the social and cultural domain into the inquiry. It reveals the more socially derived authoritarianism embedded and hidden in our minds, and camouflaged in ideologies, outmoded moralities, and in what is often taken for granted—such as the seemingly impeccable, but unlivable, absolute ideals such as selflessness and unconditional love.

The Guru Papers is relevant to anyone interested in the workings of power and control. This would include those involved in yoga and any form of traditional spirituality. It extends the Yoga of Mind into new arenas by helping free people from internalized, disguised, and pervasive mental authoritarianism. The book as a whole, and particularly the chapter “**Love and Control: The Conditions Underlying Unconditional Love,**” is also pertinent to the Yoga of Relationship by exposing the manipulations of fear and desire and the dysfunctional ideals that sabotage relationships.

Joel and Diana now talk both individually and together on an array of topics, from the philosophic and spiritual to the political, social and psychological, aimed at fostering personal and social evolution. Talk descriptions are posted on the “Workshop Descriptions” page of their Web site.

www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com