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a yoga legend returns

by ted mcdonald

joel kramer and the yoga of mind

A modern luminary and highly respected yoga teacher, Joel Kramer has resurfaced with urgency after 24 years. His famous article “Yoga as Self-Transformation,” which outlined many of the fundamentals of modern yoga, was included in my first yoga teacher training and is given to most students as they embark on their journey as yoga teachers. Kramer has studied for doctorates in philosophy and psychology. He also wrote *The Passionate Mind*, which covers significant internal methodologies for the yoga of mind, and together with his partner of 32 years, Diana Alstad, co-authored *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*, which helps free the mind from external implants of authoritarian control, an important adjunct for the yoga of mind. Their book-in-progress is tentatively titled *Spirituality for Atheists, Agnostics & Inquirers: An Evolutionary Foundation for Values*.

Yogi Times: After 24 years of not teaching, what propelled you to begin your public reappearance?

Joel Kramer: The challenges facing the world and its relation to our minds. Thought has done extraordinary things, both good and harmful, having an enormous amount of impact. It has constructed this room, and allows us to be together. Yet it’s also thought that got us into the mess we’re in, and it’s thought that will have to get us out of it. To do this, it must be utilized better. Most traditional spiritual worldviews villainize or trivialize

thought – which, ironically, is just thought judging itself. But instead, we need to use our miraculous instrument – our mind – to deal with the far-reaching consequences of our newfound ways of leveraging power.

There is an inexact but pertinent analogy between physical yoga and the yoga of mind. For me, physical yoga is a process for getting in touch with where the blocks, limitations and tight spots are, and where energy is stifled. The mind, like the body, also has conditionings with blocks and rigidities in the way it processes information. I am attempting to show how people can get in touch internally with how their mind filters information so they can use their minds better.

YT: Through asanas, as with your body?

JK: The mind is more devious and trickier, and it doesn’t have physical postures that you can utilize to open it up. Instead one can use the mind’s self-reflexive capacity to open and explore it. You can really observe your mind’s filters, which let information in and out, and interpret it. The mind has many types of filters. Fear and desire are filters, as are the memories of pleasure and pain. Identity is a huge filter, and so are the differing worldviews that the mind builds both consciously and unconsciously through conditioning, culture, and the way one is treated. Historically – and to a great degree still – authoritarianism has been the main way information is transmitted, received and acted upon. It is not

only one of the biggest filters, it has been the basis of all the religious worldviews. If you begin to see how the filtering systems of your own mind work, this begins to open the mind, broaden and increase awareness, enabling you to be more flexible in responding to our world of accelerated change. This opens possibilities for different modes of perception and thinking.

Many traditions and religions single out ego or self-centeredness as the big villain. This view comes from creating separate spheres of the spiritual and the mundane, with the “spiritual” path being defined as moving toward selflessness. This sets up ideals that are not only unlivable, but are also one of the great causes of dysfunctional behavior, as people hide their so-called “dark side” behind images that justify self-interest and even violence or abuse. Diana and I are attempting to reframe spirituality from a more evolutionary perspective – a spirituality that is embedded in the world we live in, which includes how people treat each other and the ecosystems that we are part of.

YT: How do you propose to actually do that?

JK: The problem is that the mind is more amorphous, and it can circumvent any formula to change it. An old adage is “Know thyself.” Of course, then a whole agenda is laid out on how you should go about doing that. One of the traditional methods is by negation, or *neti neti* in Sanskrit: “I’m not my thoughts; I’m not this; I’m not that...” I turn this around and say if you want to learn how some of your mental filters work, begin to ask “What am I?” and examine how you view yourself. “I’m a Jew, a Catholic, an American. I’m the father of, the brother of, the mother of... I’m white, black, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual,”... and so forth. The mind builds identities. Watch how your identities move you around, what kind of behaviors they bring about, what information you let in and keep out. Doing this is an example of observing how the filtering process works, which in turn can give you unimagined possibilities to act less mechanically and be more truly responsive. This is where real freedom lies.

YT: I recently saw Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

JK: So did I.

YT: The information is obviously worth putting out there.

JK: It’s very important for people to see it.

YT: Some people believe it’s already too late to save us.

JK: Nobody can know that for sure. The way evolution works is that it really puts you up against it. Evolution is a “touch and go” game. Our species’ survival is a function of whether humanity cares enough to change. Whatever the outcome actually will be, it is essential to act as if what you do can matter. For if we do not so act, then it is surely too late.

YT: The yoga of mind seems to be the yoga that would propel society into change.

JK: It’s the nature of our minds that has led us to where we are, and if we want to construct a viable world we have to change our

perception of what’s real, what’s going on, and how it came to be.

YT: And how does one, on a practical level, have an effect?

JK: Each of us has our gifts and can do what we can. I do what I am doing in the hope that it has an effect. If it didn’t, it wouldn’t interest me. The question that you asked is one of the most pertinent questions. What can a person do? Al Gore is an example, although where he is positioned is part of what has allowed him to make this film, which hopefully will have great impact. Most of us do not have the kind of power he has, but we all have our own unique capacities. I feel a momentum is building. We are spiritually on a cusp point as to whether we, as a species, are going to grow up and become adult and use our intelligence to remain viable. That is our evolutionary challenge, but it’s also the spiritual challenge of the times. This is what “bringing spirituality down to Earth” really means. The interesting question, which we need to ask ourselves, is “How much do I really care?”

YT: And why do you care?

JK: And why do I care? I’ve dug very deep on this one and the answer I came to is that I simply do. If I didn’t care, why bother? Why bother with anything? In the “view from eternity,” humans, this planet, this very universe we inhabit, will eventually disappear. So why care if humanity ceases to exist now or a million years from now? I don’t believe that we have even approached our potential as representatives of what Existence constructs through the seemingly arbitrary, and sometimes brutal, evolutionary process. I do care. Caring about something outside your own individual pleasures or position in the world is the miracle and magic that gives life meaning. The magic of love breaks through the isolation of our own internal dramas. From the view of eternity, whether humanity makes it or not, is not going to essentially change the game of existence. But from my very human point of view, it matters tremendously to me, and in this I know I am not alone.

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad are now teaching in California and nationally. Their Yoga Journal articles are at JoelDiana.com; their political papers on protecting democracy and on abortion are at rit.org in Editorials. They can be reached at info@JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com.

Yoga Journal articles posted at JoelDiana.com:

Yoga as Self-Transformation (Joel Kramer)

A New Look at Yoga:

Playing the Edge of Mind and Body (Joel Kramer)

Exploring Relationships:

Interpersonal Yoga (Diana Alstad)

Mind in Asana:

An Interview with Joel Kramer (Jeanne Cameron)

The Third Perspective and Yoga:

Bringing East and West Together (Joel Kramer)