

Jackson wrote about his experiences with the yoga teachers Iyengar, Rishi, & Joel Kramer; and about yoga & running: Runner's World Book of the Month #45.

PLAYING THE EDGES

by Ian Jackson,
Yoga & the Athlete – last chapter

I was sitting on the floor, gingerly testing a sore hamstring. I had hurt it the night before in my eagerness to be at a peak of flexibility for a long-awaited yoga workshop. The teacher, Joel Kramer, was reputed to be one of the most adept hatha yogis in the world. Considering the focus of his discussion, it was very timely for me. While listening to him, I was aware of the sore leg, and that I had started yoga to *avoid* injuries.

As he began his presentation, I immediately liked him. He looked around the room as he spoke. His natural and open eye contact made me feel part of a personal conversation with him rather than a student listening to a teacher.

“I would like to introduce you to a way of doing yoga that may be different from what you are used to,” he said.

“In order to be sure that yoga does not become mere calisthenics, there must be a certain quality of awareness, of mind. Without this, there is no yoga. The focal point is not the gaining of any ends or results, but rather the quality of awareness in the doing.”

I thought about the focal point of my yoga practice since studying with Iyengar and Rishi. Although the sensuality of the stretching was still there, the structure of the asanas had become more important. I had not wanted to admit it to myself, but I had been feeling very discouraged by the great gulf between what I was supposed to be doing with my body and what I was capable of doing. Sometimes my practice had felt like work instead of play.

“People starting into yoga often get the idea that it is the achievement of certain kinds of

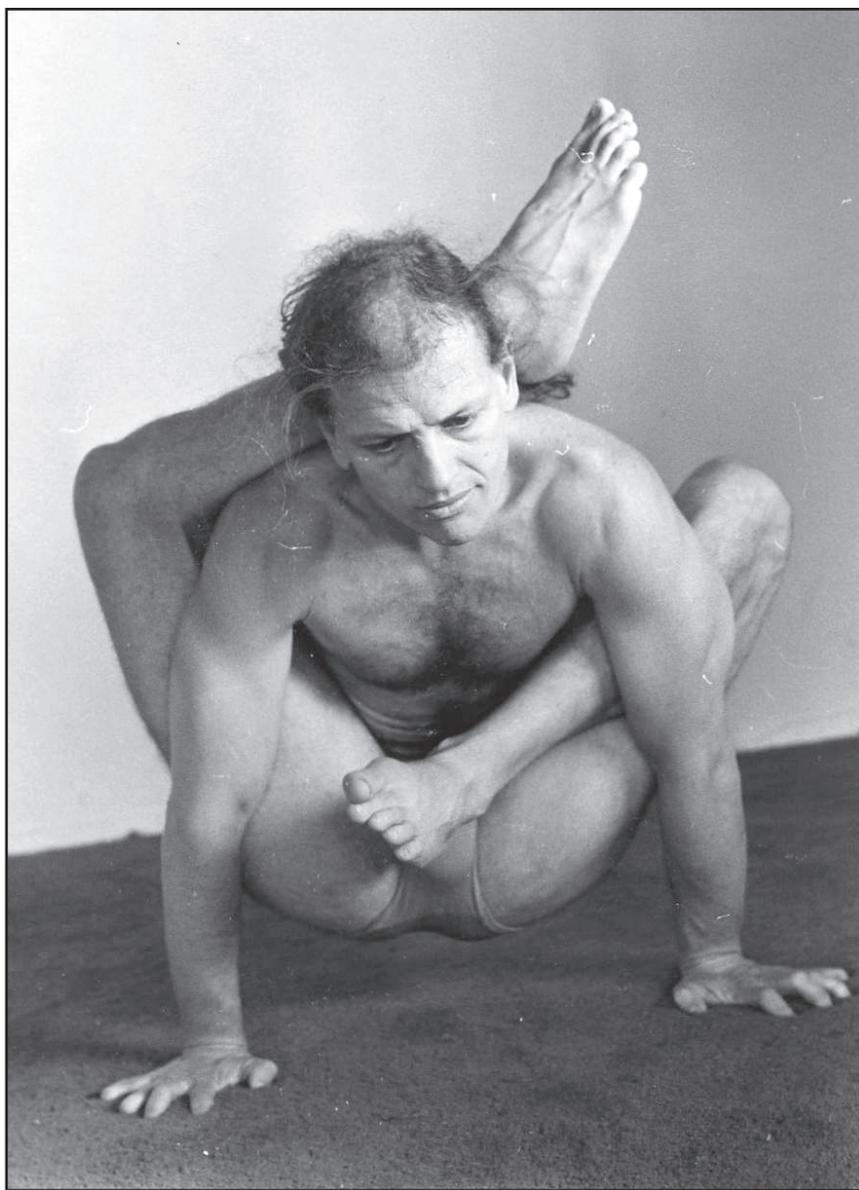


Photo by: Hal Friedman

In attaining this kind of flexibility, you work out tightness in the mind as well as tightness in the body.)

flexibility which opens up energy centers. And that is true, to an extent. For me, flexibility comes only as a by-product of exploring areas of tightness. Ambition tends to make us tighter. Striving for flexibility can bring flexibility to a certain degree, but in the long run it is detrimental to the total well-being of the person. As soon as we drop the ambition and get into exploring our tightness, the conflict between what we are and what we want to be dissolves, and that brings a physiological relaxation.”

I thought back to my racing ambitions, and the havoc they had wrought in my life. Yoga had somehow seemed inherently safe, so totally out of contact with the competitive spirit that it was a guardian against the excesses of ambition. Now I wasn't so sure about that anymore. In all honesty, I had to admit that I had brought the competitive spirit into striving for perfection in the asanas. In spite of warnings from Iyengar and Rishi, I was doing my yoga with a striving mind instead of a receptive body.

“If you approach your yoga as a way of tuning into your body/mind feedback system, you can very quickly learn to be your own teacher. Teachers come and teachers go, but fundamentally one is always with oneself. You must not accept me as an authority just because I have a certain way with words and certain levels of flexibility. Take what you can from my presentation to open up doors for your own inner exploration. You are never really in touch with yoga until you learn to do it on your own. Teachers are useful guideposts, but if you accept a teacher as an authority and obey blindly, that puts you out of touch with yourself.

I knew what he said was fundamentally true. For many months now, I had been going to Felicity's class or to a teacher training session at least once a week. Regular feedback from a teacher kept my practice from becoming sloppy. There seemed to be more to learn all the time, a steady progression into ever finer precision of structural adjustment. But in spite of these advantages, I much preferred practicing yoga alone, choosing my own pace and my own sequence of asanas. I knew that outside guidance had helped me tremendously, but perhaps I was now ready for more independence.

“In my yoga, the breath is the controlling factor, the inhalations and the exhalations. Beginners usually try to do the asanas with the mind. They have in mind an image of the positions they want to get their bodies into, and they try to force it.

How well that described my own beginnings with Hittleman's book! I recalled the agony I had senselessly endured in trying to reach what I thought was the proper body position.

“When the mind is controlling, there is always a gap between what you are doing and what you want to be doing. The mind has an image of the perfected position, or a memory of yesterday's level of flexibility or whatever. And it finds the gap between the image and the reality disturbing. It gets anxious, and that anxiety is physical – a bind in the tissue, a

blockage of energy.

“If you allow the breath to be the controlling factor, there is no gap. Then there is a total movement of energy which is extraordinarily efficient. And the energy is not dissipated in the push to get past the edges of your tightness, but it enters into the exploration of the edges.

“When you are working in the asana, your edges, or limits, reveal themselves to you in the sensations of stretch in the muscles and joints. You have to tune into body/mind feedback to play the edges with awareness. Playing your edges elicits a quality of attention which places you in the living instant. This is the essence of yoga.”

I tried to remember the quality of awareness in my recent practice, but I couldn't really be sure about it. I was not even sure if last night's practice had been alive and aware. My sore hamstring suggested that striving for perfection had deadened it.

“Yoga is self-exploration. It's a way of learning about yourself. Learning and exploring take energy. If while actually doing yoga you are comparing yourself with others, or with your idea of the perfect posture, or with anything else, the energy you devote to comparison is lost from yoga.”

“We have been conditioned to be accomplishment oriented,” Kramer continued. “But to be accomplishment oriented in yoga is to remove the energy from the process. It's the doing of the yoga that's got to turn you on. If achieving certain levels of flexibility turns you on, then you're going to find yourself aiming at them. The paradox is that the more you are interested in the goals, the less in the doing, the less accomplishments come. The less you are interested in them, the more they come.”

I thought back to my running, and how I had amazed myself in racing time after time. I remembered how easy running, for the sheer joy of it, had led to marathon times that I simply couldn't believe. And I remembered how everything had turned sour: when, having tasted success as an accidental by-product of doing something I loved, I began to get greedy for more, and to grasp for it.

“For me, the doing of yoga is learning how really to tune into the feedbacks, to the energy. In a very real sense, yoga for me is play. It is playing with oneself in a very intimate and direct way. And, as is the case with all play, yoga doesn't take any effort. This might be hard to grasp at first, but you see it whenever you watch a child playing. A child at play expends an enormous amount of energy, but no effort. Yoga is adult play, and, like child's play, it involves a great amount of every, but no effort.

I thought back to my best marathon, and the uncanny feeling of just sitting back for a free ride and paying attention simply to keeping the running body in trim. I spent all of my energy in that race. I was exhausted when I crossed the finish line. But the energy seemed to flow through me. All I had to do was use it economically. I didn't have to strive to generate

it. It came by itself; the race situation called it out.

“Whenever you force yourself, you’re forcing yourself towards something – a goal, an end, a result. The end becomes the focal point of attention. You get trapped in pushing yourself towards that end, whether it be a completed posture, releasing a bind in the body, or, more remotely, the ideas you have about self-improvement, higher consciousness or enlightenment.”

I added to myself “or the desire to run a sub-2:30 marathon.” Everything that Kramer was saying about yoga applied directly to my running experience. I had to admit that I had not fully learned the lesson. My sore hamstring was painful proof that I was still attached to striving for goals.

“The effort of goal striving actually works against us, because it tightens us. As we try to become something, that very effort actually clamps the tissue. Part of the learning in yoga is learning about this, tuning in to when the mind and body are doing this. The fact of the matter is that most of us are ambitious, and when we first begin to do yoga, we bring that ambition to our yoga. I am not saying one should try to get rid of ambition, for that is just another ambition. What I am saying is that when we become alert to the nature of ambition, one sees its destructive qualities and its binding nature. When one sees this clearly, ambition becomes less interesting. Yoga can teach you about this in a very intimate way, both physically and psychologically.

If this were all that yoga had to offer, I thought, it would be more than enough to recommend it to any athlete. With this kind of sensitivity and awareness, sport becomes play. All energy and no effort. Tuning in to how effort tightens the tissues can work on a day to day training basis or on a stride by stride racing basis. When effort comes in, the joyful play of energy goes out. When force is applied to the body, it becomes dull.

What Kramer had to say about energy and effort reinforced

my own hard-won insights about the racing obsession. And as he discussed the psychological aspects of yoga, he expressed the same ideas that had occurred to me when I discovered Wilhelm Reich and Ida Rolf.

“There’s nothing mysterious about tightening. It’s something you do to yourself, over the years. All the daily irritations, frustrations and anxieties accumulate in the muscles and, as you condition yourself with habits, they also get etched into the body.

“Most of us take our psychological problems, put impressive sounding labels on them, and in one way or another forget about them or make them unreachable. But if there is a problem in my, it is *in* me, in the nerves, in the glands, in the response repertoire of the body. To learn about this is to see that the division between the mind and the body is not real. The mind and body are not two separate entities, but rather two aspects of one energy system.

“The conditionings, the traumas, the hang-ups, call them what you will, actually live in you. They don’t live in a name or in a psychology book, but right in the tissues, in the nerves, in the musculature, in the way the body holds itself. You really learn about this in yoga.”

I thought back to the emotional patterns touched off by certain asanas, and I wondered how much of my growing sense of decisiveness and clarity was due to the release of emotional

problems stored up in tight muscles. I

also thought forward, and wondered where this release was going to take me.

Every day brought new surprises. My life already seemed to be going wildly and beautifully out of control. The more I shrugged off ideas about how I *should* feel and act, the more I expressed how I actually *did* feel, the more I appreciated the free flow of spontaneity and openness.

Kramer’s ideas about the spiritual aspect of yoga also struck a responsive chord in me. The spiritual aspect had always



made me a little uncomfortable, because I couldn't really get into it. I couldn't meditate, or at least I couldn't do what I had been led to believe was meditation. So I got deeply into my body. When people asked me if I meditated, I told them, "Not in the usual sense, but I do meditate in the asanas. For me, a heavy three-hour session is a three-hour meditation on the body."

But I got the impression that no one was buying my version of meditation. It just wasn't "spiritual" enough. I found myself getting defensive about it. When people kidded me about how much I was into my body I'd laugh and say, "Why not? It's the only home I have."

"There is a great deal of confusion about spirituality in yoga," said Kramer. "Most people who consider themselves spiritual seekers are looking for greater depth of experience, more profound insights, higher realms of consciousness. In short, they want deeper, richer, and if possible, longer lasting experiences. After we have collected many of the so-called mundane experience, like college, psychotherapy, groups, sex, drugs, the whole gamut of it, we hear about spirituality and we say, 'That's for me!' Spirituality is painted as the experience to end all experiences. That's quite enticing, you know. But seeking more experience is just another self-centered activity, no matter how profound or spiritual the experience is said to be. Spirituality comes in a different way from seeking greater depth of experience."

"If you read the great spiritual books of the world, you find they all say the same thing. There's really only one place to look, and that's within, within you. For the universe displays itself within you. And nobody can do that for you. Nobody can guide you as deeply within yourself as you can. Nobody has that inner touch. Nobody can play your edges for you."

"Yoga, spiritually, mentally and physically, is a way of playing with the edges or frontiers of one's being. Real adeptness in yoga lies in how awarably one plays with the edges. In the body itself you experience your edge as a special quality of sensation, generally right before pain. It is difficult to describe since it is a non-verbal experience, but it is not difficult to discover for yourself. The feeling of energy is the key. By the feeling of pain, I mean discomfort which the mind seeks to escape. Thus, if you push past your edge into pain, attention has been removed from yoga."

"Many of us approach yoga like puritans," he said. "We go under the saying 'no pain, no gain.' The pain makes us feel that we are doing something good to ourselves. But real yoga is not a play with pain. Pain blocks the necessary quality of attention. If you try to ignore it, then you are operating out of greed or ambition. Of course, you can learn from that, because that's where you pull muscles. You see, greed lives with you for a while."

Yes, greed was still living with me. I thought back to the physical breakdown following my long bout of overtraining. Greed lived with me for months after that. Greed for goals is

basically the same, in yoga and running.

"If your images of what is structurally correct become goals you strive for, they can be destructive. This is a difficult point, so please don't jump to conclusions about what I mean. Structures can be useful toys to play with. The danger comes when the toy becomes the final authority so that one forces oneself to the structure, ignoring one's edges. This is the stuff of violence."

"To get into any asana is to play with structure, to some extent. Structures tune you into the feedback networks. To be involved with hatha yoga is to be involved with structures. The destructive element comes in when the structure becomes the goal that you're shooting for."

"Take the image of correct structure in the headstand, for instance. To try to force yourself into the correct image is to lose the quality of exploration. Rather than using an image, I work with the muscles and bones, and let them be the guide through feedback. The spine should be straight in the headstand, not because anyone says so, but because your body tells you so."

"The body tells you through feedback. I tune into the pressures on the spine. I tune into the point of contact on my head. I play with gravity as it works through my body. When my headstand is weightless, with no strain, then I know it is right. Only through the process of internal play, a continuous readjusting, does the body get a chance to tell you that the spine is straight."

"A natural tendency of mind is to get oriented towards results, goals. I don't think you should resist this tendency, because resistance is just another goal. Remain aware of it, and through that quality of awareness you leave yourself malleable."

"For me, the interest is in the inner feel of how the musculature works and where the greatest efficiency in the stretch is. If your interest is the efficiency of the stretch at the instant, then really there isn't any goal involved. And when your interest is in the maximum efficiency of stretch, automatically the proper structures come. In fact, this is how the structure of the asanas evolved over the centuries."

I translated this into running terms. If your interest is in the running itself ("On action alone by thy interest"), on the rhythm of the arms and legs, the body carriage, the breathing, then you are running in the living instance rather than in some future race.

"One of the little tricks of yoga is generally to do your weak side first. You might find, for instance, that your triangle pose is much better on the left side than the right. If you do the strong side first, you have an unconscious tendency to try forcing the weak side up to the same standards of accomplishment. So you push yourself, and as you push, the muscles clamp down."

"If you do the weak side first, it is easier to devote more energy to it. You get frustrated when you do it after the strong

side, and you tend to spend less time with it. Moreover, if you do your weak side first, you can always do it again after you have done your strong side, to bring a balance.

“We are tempted to go for our strong side because we have been conditioned to go for accomplishment. It is un-American not to go for accomplishment, but it is also un-Indian and un-Chinese too. It’s no different anywhere. Accomplishment is the carrot we dangle in front of ourselves.

“But if you strive for accomplishment, then you tend to ignore pain. Pain can mean many things, but no matter what it means, you risk pulling muscles if you try to push past it. You can take risks if you want to, but why not use the pain as a sign that your attention is wandering and your body is complaining. Then you can back off and begin to play with it.

“In some ways it’s like a flirtation. It’s like flirting with the edges of oneself. And that flirtation must have a quality of attention if it is to open up the tissues. If I’m not right here – now, if I’m off in some image of what I want or in stoic endurance of the pain, then I cut myself off from the exploration which is yoga.

“Yoga is learning to play with feeling. Yoga *is* feeling. Although the books don’t write it up this way, it is probably the most sensual activity you can engage in.

“Pain can turn yoga into a chore or a discipline in the destructive meaning of the word. Destructive discipline is doing stuff you really don’t want to but think you should because you’re hungry for the goal it’s supposed to take you to. I think this kind of discipline is a form of self-abuse.

“The root meaning of discipline is to learn. Simply to learn. To be truly disciplined is to be totally involved in learning. If your yoga becomes a chore or a play in pain rather than an exploration, then you’re going to find yourself not doing it.

“I’m not interested in yoga as a chore. I’m interested in it as a mode of play, a really intimate way of playing with oneself. The whole secret of yoga is just doing it for the sake of doing it. No goals, no objectives, no gains, no losses. Once the mind gets into that perspective, there is an automatic release of tension.

“It’s really very simple. You’ve just got to dig it. If you don’t dig it, it doesn’t happen. That’s the way it is. You’ve got to love doing it. And by love I mean a quality of passion, a quality of

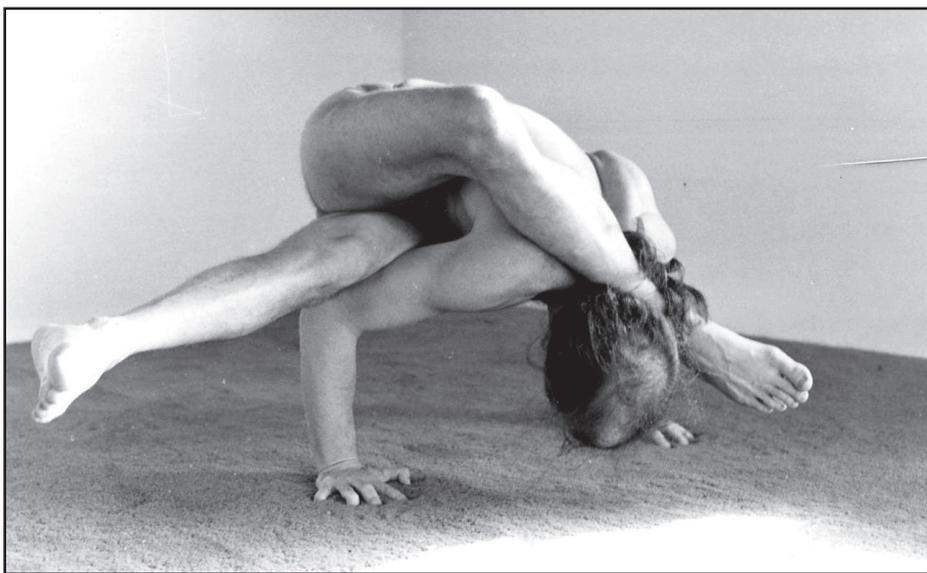
abandonment. It is the doing of it that is the heart of yoga.”

Kramer began to prepare for a demonstration of postures. As he unbuttoned his shirt, he continued to speak.

“What you will see is not the way I work when I am alone. Usually, I stay with each pose longer, and my breathing becomes more deeper and slower. There is nothing magical about the degree of flexibility I have attained. It came naturally as I continued to play the edges over the years. As the edges got further out, I had to start using these advanced and intricate poses. The easy poses simply were nowhere near my edge anymore.

“One of the secrets of continued exploration, especially as you get very flexible, is always to spend a few breaths away from the edge. Even though you know you have the flexibility to hit it hard, don’t. Begin at the beginning every day; approach the edge slowly, with the breath.”

And with this Kramer cut short his introductory remarks. As he took off his shirt and pants, he seemed already to be internalizing, to be withdrawing into his body awareness. He was wearing brief swim trunks, and although his muscles were not bulky they were extraordinarily well defined. His movements had that relaxed fluidity that I have come to associate with all people who have been into hatha yoga for some time. He began with the headstand, breathing deeply and evenly as he moved into it. From the basic headstand, he moved through a cycle of variations, twisting his body to one side and the other, then folding his legs into the lotus pose and twisting again.



His breath grew steadily deeper, and it became obvious what he meant when he said that he let the breath control rather than the brain. It was his breathing that moved him. When twisting, for instance, he would go a little distance on the exhalation, hold on the inhalation, then move deeper into the twist on the next exhalation.

Using this method, he began to do fantastic things with his body, working into poses that I had only seen photos of up till that time. There was a quality of great power and grace in his every movement. He executed the most difficult and intricate poses with consummate ease. As I watched him, I sensed that he was letting himself be moved, rather than exerting the effort to control. Seeing his demonstration tied it all together for me. ■ ■ ■