

Mind in Asana

An Interview with Joel Kramer

By JEANNE MALMGREN CAMERON

Joel Kramer emerges from the bedroom, where he's been working on his asanas, slips easily into Lotus position, and settles down for a long talk about one of his favorite subjects. Kramer is physically small and compact, with a solid though not overly muscular body; his abundant energy spills out in incessant hand gestures and in a forehead that wrinkles deeply with each thought. Clearly, he loves talking about yoga, loves doing yoga, and he approaches the topic with all the reverence and humor that such an intense interest inevitably inspires.

Joel, in the past 15 years or so, you've carved out a name for yourself as something of a maverick in the Western yoga community. You are almost completely self-taught, you don't seem to follow anybody's rules but those of your own instincts, and your theories, in some cases, debunk some of the classical teachings of yoga. What's yoga all about for you?

From my perspective, yoga is a transformative process, a continual renewal of the possibilities we have as human beings. And my movement in yoga has been to translate a lot of what might be called the wisdom of the ages into modern, meaningful terms that can be appropriate for our lives and our culture.

That's exactly what makes your approach so suitable for Western students, I think. Your attention to the role of mind in yoga practice – what you call Jnana Yoga – is particularly attractive to those of us interested in the body-mind synthesis. How did you come across the principles of Jnana Yoga and begin to apply them to your life?

In the 1960s I was concerned with some of those excruciating dilemmas that young people face, questions like, "Why am I here?" "What's living about, anyway?" and

"What in the world should I be doing!" First I looked for answers along a traditional, academic route, working for a doctorate in philosophy and later switching to the study of psychology. Eventually, though, all that became like a game of tic-tac-toe, where you know the game so well you never lose! But I still wasn't getting the answers I wanted. So I dropped out of graduate school in 1965 and began to investigate the influx of Eastern philosophy just beginning at that time. I was particularly interested in the differences between Eastern and Western approaches to the structure of thought.

One day a friend played me a tape of a lecture by Krishnamurti. At the end of the half-hour, I realized I hadn't heard a word of it! When I listened to it again, I understood that I had tuned it out because what Krishnamurti was saying undermined many of the things I held dear. He was talking about how deeply conditioned the human mind is. This was my first introduction to what, in the broadest sense, might be called yoga, the yoga of the mind. I was totally fascinated by the methodology of his approach to the inner search – an inward turning of the mind onto itself. I'd never seen anything like this in all my formal training.

As I explored further and realized what a highly conditioned mind I had, I also became aware of what a highly conditioned body I had – how stiff and tight it was. So around 1967 I began to do physical yoga. At that time not too much information was available about Hatha Yoga, and the art, at least in this country, was rather primitive. I began to pick people's brains who knew something about it, and I lived for a while with a man who had studied in India. Although his classes didn't particularly interest me, I was attracted by the way he moved as



Photo by: Kevin W. Kelly

Joel Kramer

an animal, a kind of elegance, an élan. So I decided to look into this physical yoga on my own – and I've never stopped! It just clicked for me quite naturally. Not that I was particularly flexible – I could hardly touch my knees at first, let alone my toes, and I couldn't do any of the postures. But I began to see that I was playing with energy, and I developed an internal, nonintellectual understanding of the meaning and differentiation of energy. The physical yoga began to move energy in a way that made it easier for me to become more attentive to my internal processes.

Which in turn enriched your study of Jnana Yoga.

Yes. I began to see how the mind structures and conditions. How it builds habits, and how those habits actually filter our perception of the world. I began to observe how I dodge things with my mind, how I separate myself from others out of fear or out of a need to feel better than they. I didn't find all this particularly comfortable, but I did find interesting!

Maybe you'd better clarify what you mean by Jnana Yoga.

Jnana Yoga is a quality of awareness in which the mind turns in upon itself and begins to observe its own conditioning process. You're not saying, "Oh, I shouldn't be doing this," you're not necessarily trying to control it or make it go away, you're just becoming interested in the nature of mental conditioning.

Much of the structure of our conditioning reveals itself only in our relationships. Let's say, for example, that you and I have a relationship. If you hurt my feelings, I'll start to see you through the filter or memory of that hurt. There are lots of things I could do with that: I could forgive you, I could avoid you, I could ignore you, or I could eke out a little vengeance against you – not necessarily even consciously – by a sharp word or a subtle put-down, or by telling my friends what a drag you are. And I would probably enjoy this vengeance, even though I don't

a shattering of self-images, a major shift in one's habitual life patterns.

Let's talk a little about your theory of how the mind influences the body in asana.

I have found that the essence of yoga is not physical flexibility, but the quality of mind you bring to your practice. For example, the mind is very much attached to making progress, to getting better. But after you've made some initial progress in yoga, you come to a point where the body has to stop and assimilate it. You hit a plateau. Suddenly, you have to put in the same amount of energy just

its limits, but that's not the issue.) The real blocks are the limitations in the mind. We've already seen how the mind can limit our movement in relationships; it has the same effect in asana. For instance, think about the reasons you come out of a posture when you do. Maybe you're bored, you feel you've done your duty, you've held it as long as some book says you should, or whatever. If you look closely, you'll find that the first thing that tires in a pose is usually the mind. The quality of attention weakens first. You begin to treat the body casually, and then the body becomes tired. To build endurance in yoga, you must build the capacity to be in the body and attentive to it for longer periods of time.

Let me give you another example of the role mind can play in asana. As I do yoga in the morning, I may watch my mind say to itself, "I want to be at least as flexible as I was yesterday. Hopefully more so, but certainly no less." The mind approaches an asana with a set of expectations with a remembered level of flexibility that it wants to match, feeling good if it reaches it, better if it surpasses it, or a little turned off if it doesn't quite meet it. The mind can't help doing that, because the very nature of thought is comparative. But if that becomes the total way you approach your practice, you run the risk of ignoring the feedback of the body while unconsciously pushing toward an image. And that image limits you and causes you to tighten.

There seems to be a paradox here. We talk about yielding to the body's native intelligence, but we've also seen that much of what happens in the postures is controlled by the mind.

It's not really a paradox. At times the mind controls the body; at other times the body takes over. But at still other times there is total movement, with the body and mind working together. This point, which involves a fusing of body and mind through the breath, has a special energy, a special quality to it.

And you can reach this point by focusing on the breath?

Yes, because the breath is one of the systems that both functions automatically and can be controlled. You've heard teachers say, "Breathe into your shoulder," and you think, "How in the world does one do that?" It's not that you're breathing into your shoulder – you're breathing into your lungs, obvi-



Photo by: Ben Thompson

acknowledge that I'm a vengeful person. But if I begin to look closely at the nature of this relationship, I can observe that when you hurt me, I automatically want to hurt back. If I can just observe this automatic, conditioned response without judging it, I can see my conditioning. And that seeing frees me from having to react to you in an automatic way. In order to do that, though, I have to be willing to look.

This sounds very much like Buddhist Vipassana meditation – watching the arising of thoughts and feelings without evaluating or trying to control them.

Many traditions touch on this – Vipassana, certain Hindu techniques, Taoist traditions. They're all describing a quality of awareness that does nothing but observe. You observe the movement of thought within yourself; you don't try to silence it or make it go away. You're trying to catch it in the moment of its appearance. Although it sounds simple, this is probably one of the most difficult things to do, because it's very hard to do nothing and just take a look at what's happening. But this, I feel, is how we move toward real understanding. Growth almost always involves

to maintain a certain level of proficiency. Of course, at this point the mind starts losing interest, and you back off, do yoga less or even stop doing it altogether...until your body begins to complain and you feel motivated to put more energy into it again.

In other words, you continue on the same old treadmill.

Yes. And it's the attachment to progress that causes this cycle. I'm trying to teach people that part of the game of yoga is figuring out ways of keeping yourself turned on so that the practice stays new and fresh. For example, someone can be in a finished asana that is aesthetically quite beautiful, yet they may not be doing yoga at all. Whereas another person may be far from the completed pose but is much more in touch with their body and what's happening there. As I've said, I feel that yoga is a process. In some ways, the accomplishments are like the froth on a wave. They have their own beauty, but they're relatively insubstantial.

So the mind does have a direct effect on the way we do postures.

Definitely. In fact, the real limits in yoga are not physical (Of course, the body has

ously – but through the energy of the breath and the focus of the mind, you can channel and maneuver energy into different parts of the body. In some ways, the breath is like a miniature universe, involved in a process of expansion and contraction, stretching and relaxation. Once you learn how to use the breath in the body, you can relax into a posture, acclimatize, adjust – and come out of the asana fresh and relaxed.

One of the techniques you're well known for is "stretching in the nerves." What does that mean? Can you give us an example?

Ordinarily, when we're stretching, we're reaching for an elongation in the musculature. But there's another kind of stretching, neural stretching, that doesn't require great extension or flexibility. It involves using the muscles to move through the nervous system, actually channeling energy in a certain direction through the body.

For example try this: Extend one arm parallel to the floor. Focus your attention initially into the upper part of the chest and into the shoulder and then begin to move it slowly out along the arm. Sort of squeezing the the bicep and the back tricep and locking the elbow, p-u-s-h energy down along the top of the arm and into the elbow. Keep breathing. Now move the energy into the forearm, squeezing the muscles of the forearm, using the wrist as a focus, continuing that movement outward and down the arm. Now move the energy from the wrist into the fingers of the hand, s-t-r-e-t-c-h-i-n-g outward. What we're looking for is almost a feeling of vibration moving down the arm, like feeling the whole arm at once. Now relax. The actual movement of the arm in this extension was no more than an inch or an inch and a half, but it took real attention to feel that line going. This is what I call stretching into the nerves when you're using the muscles to pull the energy of the nerves downward and outward.

This technique doesn't improve flexibility per se, but it does begin to give the body the assimilative capacity to integrate flexibility through increased neural strength. Working with lines of energy also makes it increasingly difficult to injure oneself, because injuries are usually the result of reaching for flexibilities that the body is not ready for.

Another Kramer specialty is "playing the edge." What does that involve?

One aspect of yoga is learning how to play



Photo by: Ben Thompson

Joel Kramer "plays the edge" in Ganda Bherundasana (above) and Eka Pada Rajakapotasana IV (right).

on the edges of one's limits. It's a matter of learning to distinguish between intensity and pain. The maximum extension of the muscle is right before pain, on the edge of pain. I call this the final edge. Of course, there are also other subtler edges. For example, a more immediate edge is where the body meets its first resistance. Let's say I'm stretching in Forward Bend, and I don't feel much, until I suddenly feel a little tug in the small of my back. That little catch is an edge. I can bypass it immediately, or I can stop there and breathe until it goes away, and then move on to the next edge. The process of moving through postures is playing on the subtle feedback of the body, waiting for the edges to open.

As you might guess, an edge can move. It moves from day to day and from breath to breath. And it doesn't always move forward. Sometimes it moves back, which is psychologically hard because the mind becomes attached to flexibility and accomplishment. But it's important to listen to your body and be able to advance or move back with the edge. You're involved in a kind of flirtation, a dance, with the edge.

I gather, then, that you don't advocate pushing through pain in a posture?

From my point of view, one should never be in pain in Hatha Yoga. Pain is feedback from the body, and it also shifts your attention away from what you're doing. Have you ever noticed that when you experience pain in an asana, your attention is greatly weakened. But people tend to push as far as they can, hold it as long as they can stand the pain, and then come out. If, instead, you use the posture to open the body, rather than the body to achieve the posture, you will move more slowly – but you will be involved in the real process of yoga.

If your yoga is painful, it will become a chore, instead of the real joy it should be, and you'll figure out all sorts of reasons to avoid it.

How do you deal with the pain of injuries?

Injuries in yoga generally come from one of two sources: greed or inattention, and sometimes a combination of both. The problem with injuries is that we tend to look at them as failures, not as opportunities to learn. An injury is no tragedy, it simply means that your edge moves way back. Just follow your edge and listen to the feedback of pain. It teaches you patience! Pain, then, is one way our yoga is "sabotaged."

What are some of our other resistances to doing Hatha Yoga?

There is the basic resistance to getting down on the rug in the morning. And there is also the resistance to letting go of certain aspects of one's life that one is attached to. I mentioned that growth involves the shattering of images. This can be frightening, because the shattering of images releases an energy that threatens to move you out of control. All of a sudden, you don't quite know who you are, or what you're going to do. By its very nature, yoga begins to build the energy that breaks through inner blocks. It's an amusing paradox, because on one level yoga is a control freak's dream. You can achieve control over the body, and even, to some extent, over thought and emotion. But the more you control yourself on that level, the more you build energy that pushes you out of control on another level. And most of us resist going out of control.

Fundamentally, yoga involves an intricate dance between control and surrender. At every moment in an asana we have a choice: "Should I push, or should I relax? Should I control, or should I let go?" Most of us go the control route (we're what I call "pushers") because it gives us the sense that we're doing something, going into the musculature and moving the energy there. It's much harder to learn to let go, to allow the body's wisdom to move us (to be what I call "sensualists"). It's in the balancing of control and surrender, of the ability to move the body and the ability to let go, that yoga really becomes meaningful. □

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