

The Yoga of Relationships

by Joseph Dispenza

When Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad speak about relationship, you listen. They have been teaching and writing about relationship — and relating to one another — for 33 years. During much of that time, they have written groundbreaking books and seminal articles, and have taught workshops at high-powered personal growth places like the Esalen and Omega Institutes.

“I developed a point of view around yoga,” Joel Kramer said in a recent interview. “My idea was to use yoga for self-exploration. Out of that the notion of yoga as a way of exploring relationships came to Diana.”

Kramer is an internationally recognized yoga adept and innovator, whose unique insights became a basis for the modern American practice of yoga. His many articles on the subject seek to free yoga from its authoritarian roots. His book, *The Passionate Mind: A Manual for Living Creatively with One’s Self*, embodies his unique approach to what he calls the Yoga of Mind — inviting the reader to look within and expand personal consciousness through self-seeing and self-understanding.

“It is a systems approach to yoga,” said Diana Alstad “and those principles can be extended by exploring who you are now within the sphere of relationship. Relationships are systems that evolve through exploration.” Alstad is a renowned author and lecturer, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, and an early and outspoken feminist; she originated and taught the first Women’s Studies courses at Yale and Duke Universities.

Together, Kramer and Alstad authored *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (1993), about hidden authoritarianism in our culture and how it corrodes human relationships. The book decodes social and spiritual control, showing how individuals and society manipulate fear and desire to maintain power. It unmasks authoritarianism in ideals and ideologies that we take for granted, including traditional spiritual frameworks and their unlivable ideals of purity and selflessness.

“The ideal of selflessness as an absolute is something we have observed as being det-

perimental in relationships,” Alstad said. “It fosters an attitude that makes you feel inadequate or guilty and can cause imbalances that lead to resentment and erode passion. Renouncing self-centeredness does not really work in daily life. Not having conditions of unacceptable behavior, for instance, actually may be inviting abuse and enabling it.”

Unconditional love is another ideal that Kramer and Alstad find somewhat suspect. Touted by spiritual guides and spiritual tradition as one of the most essential virtues of a “spiritual” person, trying to practice unconditional love may present an obstacle to protecting oneself in some instances.

“With selflessness,” Kramer said, “people are always eager to tell you how to be more selfless...usually to their benefit, of course.”

“What we need is a dialectical approach, not the authoritarian approach advocated by popular spirituality, which tends to polarize — things are either ‘good’ or ‘evil,’ Alstad said. “The ideal of unconditional love makes an authentic experience of it less likely. Lofty ideals that are unlivable bring dysfunctional relationships instead of viable ones.”

Kramer and Alstad challenge the dualistic split between matter and spirit. They see spirit as embedded in matter. “There has been a separation between the spiritual and the mundane,” Kramer said. “We are interested in a holistic perspective — one is in the other. I don’t have a spirit...I am a spirit.”

According to Kramer and Alstad, the human relationship to spirit evolves in different epochs. In Buddha’s time, for instance, it was important to frame spirituality as a way of ending suffering. Now the spiritual force moving through us is connection — connecting with each other. One cannot accumulate spirituality. Rather it is an energy that occurs when connecting with others or with something larger than oneself.

This is why the study of relationship has been so important to Kramer and Alstad. “Healthy relationships must value emotional openness as well as protecting boundaries when needed,” Kramer said. “Unless handled awarely, relationships usually break down around issues of control and power.



Photo: Julie Deifé, LA YOGA Ayurveda & Health

It is necessary for us as a species to create viable ways of dealing with control and self-centeredness in order to connect more deeply.”

Authors Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad are completing work on a new book, Spirituality for Atheists. They will explore these ideas further and offer other insights into their work on consciousness expansion and relationship in their talk at the Authors’ Sala. It promises to be a lively presentation. Their articles and podcasts are at www.JoelDiana.com.

Joseph Dispenza is a co-founder of LifePath in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and the author of God On Your Own: Finding a Spiritual Path Outside Religion.

San Miguel Authors’ Sala February 8, 2008 Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad Talk: “The Yoga of Relationships”

Humanity’s evolution in the arena of personal, social and ecological relationships lags dangerously far behind our potential and our amazing accomplishments in most other fields. This talk will present new frameworks for more viable relationships and address why humans are having trouble being the functional, caring “social animals” we need to become at all levels to survive.