

# EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS: INTERPERSONAL YOGA

“Exploring Relationships” creates a foundation for the Yoga of Relationship by extending Joel Kramer’s feedback-based principles and evolutionary vision of yoga\* to the social and interpersonal arena.

by **Diana Alstad**

**R**elationships can be one of the greatest sources of tension in your life. Yoga, which explores and releases physical and mental tightness, can be both a powerful tool and a useful framework when its principles are applied to relationships. One may wonder what relevance yoga (which is generally thought of as a self-absorbing inner search) could possibly have for intimate relationships. Yoga focuses on exploring conditioning patterns in the mind and body. Interpersonal relationships are systems just as the mind/body unit is a system. Even for those who are not involved in yoga, this analogy provides a new perspective that offers valuable insights on such basic issues as freedom, control, dependency, communication, conflict, and the very nature of relationship itself.

For years I had been pursuing what seemed to be two separate interests: psychology and spirituality. Through psychology I was hoping to find an approach to the problems of intimate relationships that could be used on one’s own, without resorting to therapy or outside authorities. At the same time, wanting answers to such questions as the meaning of life, the nature of the universe, and my place in it, led me to an interest in spirituality and Eastern thought. All the while, I was looking for a common thread, a way of bringing these two realms together.

Searching for a synthesis, I was introduced to a unique approach to yoga that integrates the concerns of daily life with the spiritual dimension. As I began to practice this combination of physical (Hatha) and mental (Jnana) yoga, I found that there was actually no way for the emotional and relational aspects of daily life not to affect and be affected by doing yoga. By applying this internal yogic exploration to my interactions, a way of approaching interpersonal issues evolved that offers tools for dealing with problems without having to go outside the relationship for help. Relationships can get so clouded by confusion, lack of communication, resentment and mistrust that people, feeling overwhelmed and helpless, assume they have no alternative but to seek outside help. External aid and information can be very useful and sometimes even necessary; however, whether you are using outside aid to help solve the problems yourself, or relying upon it to solve them for you, makes a world of difference, for one builds strength while the other fosters dependency.

At a certain point in the maturation process, it is necessary to become the final authority concerning the movement of your life. Even conflicts that you feel hopelessly stuck in can be dealt with independently if they are looked upon as challenges to grow from. If you have a way of approaching the binds in your relationships

as they come up, instead of seeking help mainly during crises, this will allow you to handle future problems as well as current ones more quickly and easily. You may actually be able to prevent crises from developing. A real freedom and relaxation come when you know you can count on yourself to clarify and deal with your own problems. Doing this develops the confidence necessary to bring to the surface underlying relational conflicts that you were resigned to. Even little on-going tensions affect the whole quality of your daily life. Turning your problem’s into opportunities for learning and growth makes you stronger, for the more you rely on your own resources, the more you develop them.

Although much of yoga traditionally does involve reliance on outside authorities, the approach that I am describing does not. It teaches you instead how to use the limits of your mind and body to transform yourself. The problems stemming from subjectivity that make people look for objective help (or at least an impartial referee) can never be totally eliminated. What follows is rather a way of starting from where you are and using your problems (anger, jealousy, confusion, or whatever) as your teachers, to reveal the binds at their source. This can not only eventually resolve many seemingly inherent conflicts, but the process itself, as in yoga, transforms and deepens your relationships.

## Yoga and Relationship

This combination of Hatha and Jnana Yoga is concerned with discovering how the body and mind function and what it is to be a human being. Here yoga is viewed as an exploration that moves you beyond the habits (networks of conditioning) of mind and body which define your mental and physical limits. The very act

\*Some key principles of Joel Kramer’s evolutionary approach to the Yoga of Mind & Body are described in his foundational *Yoga Journal* articles “Yoga as Self-Transformation” and “A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind and Body.” (posted at [www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com](http://www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com))



Photo by: Mark Wexler

of exploring opens you and puts you in touch with yourself as a living process. Finding out the nature of your binds can be a way of opening and releasing them. Opening up physically opens you mentally and vice versa, for how you feel influences your thoughts and how you think affects how you feel. Also, the more you open internally, the more you can potentially open emotionally and in relationships.

An individual is an interrelational energy system in which each part of the body itself is a system in relation to the other parts. The person as a whole is a system in relation to his or her environment. Each part of the body has its own intelligence that can be tuned into and learned from.

One aspect of the exploration involves becoming sensitive to your own feedback the relationship between your internal processes and states, and reactions to externals such as diet, environment, and people. Tension, pain and illness can be looked upon as messages indicating blockage in the flow of energy and communication between systems. By using yoga postures as highly refined tools, you can learn how to open up these closed areas. This approach to yoga can transform your attitude toward so-called problems; instead of being your enemies, they become your teachers. Mental yoga sharpens the mind's awareness of its own nature. Normally we take thought's contents and movements for granted. Paying attention to how thought works allows one to see how the mind affects emotions.

Mental yoga is concerned with seeing the whole context of a process or issue, instead of seeing from the point of view of the individual. Viewing a situation with oneself as part of the total picture, rather than the center of it, opens the possibility for objectivity, even in seemingly subjective realms. Since many interpersonal conflicts come from not seeing the total picture, which includes the other's point of view, this objective viewpoint is often enough to break through the binds.

There are many aspects of life and conditioning that tighten you, but nothing can put you "up tight" quite like relationships. This tensing affects your life, your yoga, you from the way you think to the way you move and react. In a very basic way, who you are cannot be separated from your relationships; so awareness of how they affect you physically and emotionally on a day-to-day basis is vital.

If you begin to look for connections, you will see how enormously yoga and relationships affect each other. Discovering how and why you tighten yourself is at least equally as important as trying to loosen up. For instance, if your mate feels threatened by your yoga because it's changing you too much, he or she may express fear or resentment in a variety of ways, including subtly pressuring you to do less. This conflict can't help but affect your yoga: the amount and quality of your practice, the tightness you bring to it, where your attention is while doing it. By making you more sensitive, yoga can also affect how you move in the world. You may find your food preferences change and it could be more difficult to tolerate smoke and air pollution. Since friendships involve sharing common pleasures and interests, friends may urge you to join in familiar pastimes that may no longer seem right for you. To whatever extent you get into yoga, it can potentially rearrange your life habits. As you loosen physically, you may also open up more with others, adding depth and richness to your relationships.

Even though yoga and relationships are so intimately connected, there is no formal yoga of relationship in tradition. In fact, much of yoga involved withdrawing from the world and its distracting concerns. This withdrawal, which is not an inherent part of yoga, had philosophical as well as practical roots that were both linked to a specific cultural context. In Indian thought, the material world of daily life and the spiritual world were separate realms. Although, ideally, every aspect of life was infused with the spirituality from art and music to the caste system and daily activities the spiritual dimension was valued far more, and everyday reality was considered only a shadow existence (*maya* or illusion). The major focus was on transcending the self, achieving "ego loss" through merging into Oneness. Another reason for withdrawal from the world was entirely pragmatic: except for the wealthy, people had to choose between family life and spirituality because having a mate and children meant not having the economic ability or time to pursue spiritual discipline. The tradition of renunciation, celibacy, and withdrawal (*sannyasa*) was for most people the only way to devote themselves to spirituality. It was commonly held that householders should reserve the most intense spiritual focus for their later years when, having fulfilled familial and work responsibilities, they could remove themselves from relationships.

Moral codes and formalized rules for human interaction reduced the need for alertness to the ever-changing complexities of relationships and thus served as a means for removing attention from the worldly plane. The rigidly structured Indian society, with castes and arranged marriages, did not encourage exploring relationships in a dynamic way since this could have undermined beliefs and customs and threatened institutions.

Following rules is mechanical and therefore appropriate only if the nature of the activity is also mechanical. In any creative endeavor, rules are at best a guidepost and at worst a cage. The expression of creativity must be permitted for there to be growth and maturation in relationships. Blindly following externally imposed codes, or trying to live up to ideals, is very different from using relationships to learn about yourself and others. Forcing yourself into an ideal posture is, likewise, different from using the posture as a tool or guide to discover your limits and follow your energy. The one emphasizes conforming to an external model, while in the other, it is the internal sensitivity that aligns and moves the body. Interpersonally, sensitivity is also necessary to move relationships in a way that involves mutual care.

It is no accident that a unique synthesis between ordinary life and the spiritual is now possible in the West. Because of our technological advances and comparatively flexible social structures, people can live and work in the world, have children, and pursue growth-oriented activities at the same time. A true blending of spiritual and secular can more easily occur in a culture where people are able to blend them in their daily lives.

## Relationships as Systems

Just as a person is a system with boundaries dividing the "me" from the "not-me," so, too, a relationship is a system. When two or more entities unite, a system is formed whose essence is different from that of the parts (whether it be a molecule, a solar system, an organization, or a couple). When hydrogen and oxygen unite, they form a liquid, not a gas.

A relationship is a more complex organization of “matter/energy” with its own patterns or laws, which are different from those of its components. The whole system influences the boundaries and movements of all its parts. Since the laws of the molecule permeate and affect its individual atoms, this partially determines how they move. Once they form water, hydrogen and oxygen atoms no longer move as totally separate entities. This also happens to each member of a couple.

The couple, which can be one of the deepest and most powerful human bonds, might be compared to a water molecule. When you open up deeply to another, incorporating him or her into your identity, your very personality is transformed. Your identities become so interwoven and interdependent that you are literally no longer the same person. The couple itself becomes a system, a whole, having patterns of its own. The patterns of a relational unit influence the individuals in a not dissimilar way to how the molecule affects its atoms. No one touches us so deeply as those we are “bonded” with, such as mates, parents, children, and close friends. Considering the tremendous explosive power there is in the interrelationship between atoms, it’s not surprising that intimate personal relationships can produce such intensities as love, anger and jealousy.

People want to stay in control of their lives and protect their boundaries. Every unit, whether a person, a cell or a government, has a cohesive force that preserves its identity and structure. This tendency contains within it resistance to change. Although boundaries often have negative connotations they are essential to the life process. A system is defined by its boundaries, which protect its internal integrity yet not in an absolute way, since all boundaries fluctuate as the organism interacts with the external world. When the outside is let in, whether emotionally or physically (eating, for example), assimilation is always necessary for the process to continue. Boundaries can easily become overly rigid, however, isolating a person from the flow of life (or the system from its environment) to a degree that can become destructive to the individual himself.

Relationships, like other organisms and systems, protect and perpetuate themselves as units. When individuals unite to form a relationship, they partially open their boundaries to each other and intertwine, while still keeping aspects of their internal integrity. Then the relationship as a system forms new boundaries which define it. Relationships, like individuals, can only assimilate a certain amount of change at any given moment, so sometimes withdrawal is necessary to allow a new integration. Boundaries are permeable, and may be flexible or rigid to varying degrees. No entity, including a relationship, is totally closed or self-sufficient, nor is any system completely open at every instant, since both separating from and interacting with the external are necessary for life. A paradox of life is that one is fundamentally alone, yet one cannot exist outside of relationship.

Like boundaries, “structure” is often seen as a limiting factor. A relationship is, of course, a structure, which does limit you in certain ways. But at the same time it can produce a shared focus that amplifies the energy and power of the individuals involved in a unique way. This can intensify growth, create new possibilities, and produce greater effectiveness: people with mutual needs and interests form organizations and groups to accomplish their goals and increase their power. On the other hand, the structure of a relationship could also cage and dull you, for if the parts are in

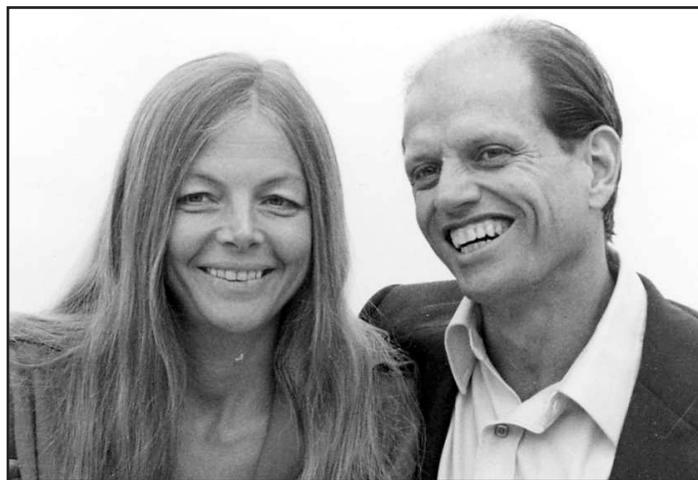


Photo by: Kevin W. Kelly

conflict with each other, there can be great tension and wastage of time and energy.

Interaction is the source of change, while resistance to change is fundamental to continuity. Continuity and change are the two faces of life. Just as interaction between entities changes them, the fact of being an entity at all involves maintaining a thread of sameness. Resistance to change is related to the universal tendency for things to move in patterns and to have continuity, from planets revolving to water running in a path downhill. A relationship also has continuity; as it matures, roles evolve, which are an intricate network of habits, expectations and ways to be. Any unit – a business, a team, a family – develops patterns and roles for efficiency and convenience. These patterns can help smooth the flow of the relationship and make it more productive.

A certain degree of predictability is needed for smooth functioning, but it is also the stuff of boredom and atrophy. This, of course, is the danger of habits. Although some continuity is necessary as a foundation for assimilation, too much security can dull you by stifling change. Newness is essential to kindle interest in life, which is the source of growth. When you’re young, everything is fresh and there’s a whole world to explore. As you grow older, set patterns emerge, regardless of whether you live alone or with others, and it can become harder for newness to enter your life. Since habits and specialization increase with age, it becomes important for adults to find creative ways of allowing novelty and adventure to enter the fabric of their lives. Sometimes a willingness to risk altering some of the basic frameworks is necessary.

A couple relationship can be like a cage that limits you, if it closes you to the outside world. But it could instead be open like a river, which by its nature allows newness to enter and flow through it. A river has a defined form or pattern, yet what’s contained within its form is constantly changing. The couple framework can be like a channel which not only allows but also intensifies growth. Couples often miss the qualities of passion and discovery which they had at the beginning. Many people search for the uniquely vibrant glow of new romance by going from person to person. This, however, limits depth, for a relationship only develops, and reveals its potential and creativity, as people get to know each other through time. Mature relationships can have a unique intimacy, depth and strength that makes them as different from young ones as trees are from scorns. The couple, which displays many of the problems inherent in relationships generally, will be used in most of the following examples.

## Relationship as Exploration

If you approach your relationships, and the problems within them, as a field for self-exploration, the uniquely concrete feedback derived from the experience can teach you about yourself and the relationship in ways that introspection cannot. The mind has more of an opportunity to delude itself when alone, for there is nothing to challenge its possible errors and misconceptions. Just think how much more readily you see what you consider to be other people's mistakes and shortcomings than your own. Part of thought's sly nature is to feed itself what it wants to hear, reinforcing unaware self-interest in surprising and sneaky ways. This is the source of blind spots, which are all too obvious to everyone else. Relationships keep you on your toes: whatever you put out comes back at you in one form or another. However, while others' reactions can always serve as a mirror, how clear or cloudy the reflection is depends on how much the person is projecting his own images onto you.

An increasingly popular idea these days is that in a perfect relationship, people wouldn't limit each other or be dependent. This is part of a general reaction against limitations in the name of freedom. As a relationship permeates and changes you, it moves you out of your autonomous control, similar to the way a molecule influences its atoms. This is why many people resist deep involvements, preferring to stay in control of their time, emotions and living space. How the other person feels and what he or she wants affects you, and this makes you vulnerable. The notion that a mature person would not be influenced by another's emotional state is unrealistic. If someone you deeply care for, your child for example, is very upset, it affects you.

The nature of relationship involves interdependence as well as a need for independence. Each person has his or her own movement in life; sometimes the two flow together and other times conflict arises which necessitates "working out" with each other to see what is appropriate. Every relationship at some point has differing wants. There is no way to be in accord all the time and thinking you should be limits growth and stifles individuality. It can be hard to find a balance between sharing and having separate activities and interests. There are no simple rules for this, but care is the key. Hurt usually comes from feeling you're not being heard or taken into account, rather than from not getting your way.

To make real contact with others, it is necessary to have a strong sense of yourself as a separate entity. You can only allow yourself to be open to the extent that you are also able to protect your time and space when you need to be alone. People who have a hard time saying "no" when they need to, or who risk losing themselves entirely in another person, are often actually more closed because of it. Spirituality is often presented in a way that frowns on self-centeredness while valuing surrender and "ego loss" (letting go of boundaries and attachments). One reason for the spiritual tradition of withdrawal is that these ideals don't work in relationships or in daily life. Everyone has two aspects: a concern with self-interest, and a need to merge with another person or group and feel a part of something larger. Living itself is an edge-playing between being in control and letting go, as you try to keep your personality and the framework of your life intact and yet stay open to change.

Yoga involves discovering where your limits are, what you have done and are still doing to maintain them, and how these limits

affect and even create the fabric of your life. Yoga can teach you to channel your attention and energy in ways that open you, and expand and extend your limits. Playing on the edge of the body's limits in physical yoga increases flexibility, strength and endurance. While doing postures, your limits keep moving as your body assimilates the openings. Individuals also have limits as to what they can tolerate in terms of hurt, fear, and pace of change. These limits fluctuate with other aspects of your life and depend on many factors such as physical health and energy levels, outside stress, need for security, and whether you're feeling cared for. Approaching relationships as a yoga involves being attentive to the other person's limits as well as your own, which opens them to change. Being aware of the fact that there are limits, and that they are not absolute, brings change in itself. While postures (*asanas*) are a tool in physical yoga, communication is a tool in relationships. To communicate is to break the boundaries of separation between self and other. Communication is a dance with a life of its own that moves and changes you, an art requiring great attention, interest and care.

Much of what is called communication is really projecting memories and images onto each other, or talking at rather than to the other. Deep communication is rare because familiar or ritualized patterns of relating are less risky. Since communication opens you and opening changes you, there is resistance to it. The new you that may emerge from a real sharing is unknown.

Problems often stem from not listening to each other or an unwillingness to see the other's perspective. You may resist listening since it might force you to see things that would change you in spite of yourself: as you open to hearing the other person, you could see that some of the pleasures or habits you're attached to are inappropriate because of how they affect the relationship. Realizing this would make it harder for you to stay the same. Also, really getting to know someone usually involves uncomfortable periods of revealing unpleasant feelings as well as positive ones. Seeing yourself through another's eyes may upset you by threatening self-images you cherish.

Another source of problems comes from accumulated resentments, for even seemingly petty ones interfere with care and communication. Resentment is like a disease; it can gradually poison a relationship if not dealt with in its early stages. There is great danger in allowing resentment to take hold, for the longer and deeper it lives in you, the more it colors the way you feel toward and even perceive the other person. It becomes a constant hum underneath daily exchanges, creating tension which in turn perpetuates more resentment. Physical yoga can make you sensitive enough to detect health problems long before disease or breakdown occurs. In relationships, you can also become sufficiently alert to catch problems when they begin and are the easiest to correct. Whether physically or interpersonally, not being tuned in can in itself create problems and accentuate existing ones to such an extent that traumatic solutions, such as surgery or separation, could be necessary.

Many things ordinarily considered "negative" that happen in relationships, such as anger, resentment and guilt, can be looked at non-evaluatively as feedback and used to determine where limits lie. "Feedback" is one part of a system telling another part how it is being affected. Yoga has much to teach in this domain because refining and understanding feedback processes are at the heart

of it. Pain is one of the stronger kinds of feedback and can be a great teacher.\*

In interpersonal yoga the feedback comes from others as well as from within. While in *asanas* pain should be avoided as it's a sign that you're opening too fast or over your edge, there are no simple rules for relationships. Here too pain is feedback, but often cannot be totally avoided. Some believe that people cause, and are thus totally responsible for, their own feelings, but this wrongly assumes that one can and should be in total control of emotions. Relationships do impact people and people can and do hurt each other – if a loved one is harmed or dies, you suffer. When hurt, anger, jealousy and other so-called negative emotions occur, there are no set formulas. How one deals with hurt and hurting can only be determined in the living moment. Great sensitivity and care are needed to take each other's feelings, needs and vulnerabilities into account. For instance, if I'm doing something I consider important that causes you to suffer, your being hurt doesn't necessarily mean I should back off or change. That may not be best for either of us, and doing so could build resentment in me, which would inevitably come back at you in one form or another. Neither does it necessarily mean that you should be the one to change, for overriding feelings is always a risk.\*

To communicate, you must not only accurately describe your inner reality, which is difficult enough in itself, but you must also figure out and talk to the other's inner reality in a way that can be understood. This means asking yourself: "How is the other person going to take what I'm saying?" "What are their beliefs, values and fears?" "Will this make them defensive?" It is also important to pay attention to such things as tone of voice, how particular words affect you, how the other's behavior makes you feel, and how you affect the other.

Communication is actually energy – the energy of change. Care and interest open your boundaries as you focus outside yourselves, and the contact between you creates energy. The catch is that you can't force care or interest: either they're there or they're not. You can, however, be aware of what dampens them, such as judging, attachment to being right, and wanting to be dominant or to be an authority. To participate in the joy, depth and adventure of communication, you must be willing to hear and say things you may not initially like, just as in Hatha Yoga you must confront your physical limits in order to transcend them.

### Unraveling "Conditioning Knots"

As the body has blocks and tensions, relationships have what I call "conditioning knots." Knots form when two or more persons' habit patterns or conditioning networks intertwine, "hooking" each other. A significant clue as to whether you are caught in a relational knot is any type of repetitiveness, which may take the form of arguments about the same issues, with the identical words, sentences, and even emotions recurring over and over, in endless variations, while each side rigidly keeps the same viewpoint and tries to convince the other they should change. The very fact of these repeated patterns, which are inherent in knots, indicates that each person involved is both feeding the knot and, in ways that may not be at all obvious, getting something out of it. The recurrence of emotional patterns (whether intense or subtle) is an indication of conditioning. Realizing this while it's happening gives you an opportunity to watch your conditioning in action and see what ignites and fuels it.

Most couples have common themes that knots revolve around, such as how to raise children, handle money, share work and responsibilities, and how open to be with others. Often you could even play both parts, you know them so well. These knots can be like bottlenecks – they contain volatile emotions but have no real movement. Since there is rarely progress toward resolution of these knots, the natural tendency is to want to avoid or escape them. When anger and disagreement are in the air, it seems impossible to work out problems; but on the other hand, people don't want to bring sensitive topics up when they're feeling good either, so most of the "working out" happens when people are caught in the grips of strong emotions. This greatly handicaps you, of course, just as only doing physical yoga when you feel bad or ill would drastically limit your practice. It is much harder to communicate during times of conflict when you are usually out of touch with love or care. Love is an energy that occurs when boundaries open; conflict closes them down.

Just as tight areas need the most attention in physical yoga, knots and impasses need to be explored to see how they work. Physically, you may prefer working your most flexible areas because of the immediate gratification, yet that will create even more of an imbalance in you. Similarly, wanting a relationship always to feel good and be harmonious means avoiding conflict and discomfort, which also creates an imbalance as time goes on. As more and more issues remain unresolved, and even unacknowledged as problems, you bury your bad feelings and never learn the process of unraveling knots. Here, as in physical yoga, great learning takes place as you discover how to work your problem areas and weaknesses. Improving your communication process naturally makes it possible to unravel knots more quickly. Underlying knots may be buried for awhile, only to surface unexpectedly. You're surprised sometimes by the things that bring them up, and dismayed by what you may consider over-reactions in you or the other. Such sore spots often have a backlog of frustration and pent-up resentment that comes out over seemingly small issues. Your "buttons" get pressed, so to speak, and all of a sudden you're not in control. These mechanical-buttons set off networks of conditioning rooted in unresolved issues from the past. Each reaction pattern has its own emotions, gestures, words, tone and values associated with it. "Over-reactions" (a stronger response than the event seems to warrant) can be feedback indicating that a knot exists. The resulting lack of communication increases frustration and tension, and can bring about blame and polarization. Blaming and fault-finding are ways of keeping your position firm and not listening to the other person. This creates a "feedback loop" that once initiated escalates on its own: the more you blame the other, the more he or she resents you and does things to annoy you, the more closed you both become.

Awareness is the key to breaking this kind of loop, for awareness unhooks you from automatic behavior. By changing your focus from anger and blame to interest and curiosity, you begin to see the mechanisms involved in the knot. This makes your communication clearer and less reactive. Reactions may still occur in you, but seeing them as they happen, detaches you from your conditioning so it doesn't have the same power over you. This makes you more objective. Actually, both people do not have to

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\*Parts of this article were revised in 2006 for this pdf.

be interested in approaching relationships this way for change to occur. If just one person can become aware of the mechanisms and stop fueling the other's behavior, this changes the whole interaction and can break the circle.

Conflicting values are often at the root of a knot. When there's a "miss"-understanding, each person is usually "missing" something: the total picture, particularly the other's point of view. The knot is transformed if your interest shifts from self-justification to looking for what you are missing, because part of the problem stems from your attitude. If you can uncover the value systems that fortify each side, as if you were a detective, the underlying nature of the conflict becomes clearer. Having a real curiosity about how your own values are contributing to the knot detaches you from them, making you more objective. It removes the conflict from the abstract level of values and judgments to a more concrete one of needs, desires, interests or styles. Values and criticisms (such as, "You're self-centered for not giving me more attention," versus "You need so much attention because you're weak and dependent") cloud the real nature of the knot.

People often use values to justify their desires or feelings and this keeps them from listening. Values used in this fashion can actually make you more insensitive. For example, if you are feeling caged in and want more freedom, you espouse a value system with freedom and self-sufficiency as the ideals. Then rather than responding to the hurt in your mate's jealousy, you discount their feelings as either overly dependent or self-centered, and try to convince them they shouldn't feel that way or you make them feel guilty for tying you down and being possessive. ("Self-centered," "dependent" and "possessive" are value-laden words.)

Each person may have different needs for growth or fulfillment at any stage in the relationship. One of the most common problems in a couple occurs when one person wants more time and freedom to explore outside interests, while the other wants more intimacy and time together. Each position could easily find values to support and reinforce itself as the way to be, such as, "Openness should not be limited," versus "Scattering yourself in too many places is superficial and prevents depth." Feeling that your way is superior keeps you from seeing how each stance (in this case the "external-exploratory" versus the "relationship focused") can be valuable for the relationship. These two seemingly opposed positions could actually complement and balance each other: the one brings newness in from the outside, keeping interest alive; the other focuses and centers the relationship, giving it continuity and depth. To achieve this balance, each side must accept and appreciate the other's feelings and point of view, letting go of the pleasures of feeling superior and righteous.

Clarifying the problem doesn't automatically reveal a solution, though it may. A knot may either disappear, remain in an altered form, or reveal itself to be a real "impasse." You can only distinguish a knot from an impasse if you go into it and unravel it to its core. Unraveling a knot often leaves nothing there, whereas in an impasse there are fundamental differences at the core, perhaps a basic conflict as to what direction or form the relationship should take, that at the time seems to be unresolvable. If it's an impasse, it becomes important to live with it, carefully observing it and getting acquainted with all its nooks and crannies, instead of trying to get rid of it or wishing it away. Resisting an impasse tends to perpetuate it. Once the rigidities of the supporting value sys-

tems are removed, impasses can change. Exploring not only your own emotional states, but also being sensitive to the other's, can be a form of yoga which may open things up unexpectedly and in surprising ways, as yoga often does. This can allow real contact, even in the midst of discord.

### **Anger and "Clean Communication"**

Anger, which may be coating hurt, usually contains an element of "getting even," a barb of pain. When you've been hurt, there's an automatic tendency to want to retaliate. Pain breeds pain. You may hurt the other under the guise of honesty and openness, without realizing consciously what your intent is. (One is, for the most part, not aware of this vindictive aspect in oneself.) Self-righteousness, stemming from feeling you've been "wronged," accompanies and fuels anger, which makes getting back at the other seem warranted. Anger is like a loop that feeds and justifies itself through blame. There is also great energy and sometimes even pleasure in it, which makes it harder to let go of.

If, when angry, you recognize your impulse to get even and at the same time realize this will close communication by feeding the endless cycle of hurt and anger, that very perception alters the situation. Simple rules, such as "emotions must be fully expressed," do not apply. It's true that if you habitually bottle up your anger and internalize it, it will be physically harmful to you and create a potential explosive backlog of unfinished business. Since you can't hide anger for long, it will come out in more indirect and insidious ways anyway. But on the other hand, if you unleash it unwarily and vindictively, you close the other to hearing you. To keep communication open, there is an edge that must be played between expressing and releasing anger, and holding it back. If your real motive is to punish, blame or make the other person feel guilty, he or she will sense this and close down to you. If, however, you are more interested in communicating how you feel and what you think is going on (including your contribution to it), this may open the other up to hearing you. Once again, it's not simple, for just as truth can be used as a weapon, anger and hurt can be used subtly to manipulate and control. Seeing your true motivation – whether you're more interested in being heard (and hearing), or in getting your way or retaliating – is crucial.

One might be surprised how many daily interactions, rather than stemming from openness, are geared toward winning, impressing, or being right. It's essential to be aware of these tendencies in yourself because ultimately your real intentions, conscious or unconscious, are what matter most of all. In all forms of yoga, the process is greatly affected by your motives and also by awareness, which includes awareness of your motives. Where you're coming from is the source of what you do. In physical yoga, the most important element is the quality of attention you bring to the postures while using them as tools or structures to explore your body. This is also true in interpersonal yoga. There are guidelines that may help open up communication that can be looked on as relational tools. Although some of these techniques are not new, approaching them from a yogic point of view can give them new meaning.

Many communication guidelines involve giving and receiving unpleasant feedback in a way that minimizes defensiveness. This is what I call "clean communication" and it is essential for working out with each other. The time when it's most important, of course, is just when it's most difficult: when you feel angry, hurt, jealous or

threatened. The more cleanly you express these feelings, the easier it is to be heard, since good feedback tries to cut through resistances, conditioning, and reactions that hinder listening. Defensiveness automatically implies closing down, fortifying boundaries and building a case for self-justification. Reducing defensiveness requires care: paying attention to the words you choose (particularly avoiding subtle ways of criticizing), developing a sense of timing and ways of approaching difficult topics, and becoming attuned to the non-verbal nuances of reaction. Sincerely examining your own role in the problem is, of course, essential.

Staying in touch with your feelings can also help: instead of telling the other person what's wrong with them, you can say how what they do makes you feel. Here you're not demanding that the other change, but rather giving information on how they affect you. This in turn leaves you open to their telling you how what you do affects them, but that's part of opening up, too. In this way you can both learn something new about each other. If you say, "When you don't pick up after yourself it's hard for me to work in such an environment," this doesn't imply the other is wrong for not being neater or that you are superior. In fact, you could build a value system to defend either "neat" or "messy" behavior: if one says, "What you call 'messy' is really just being loose and natural, while your 'neatness' is tight and compulsive," the other could retort, "A centered person is more orderly, for how you are inside is reflected outside." Knots form around differences when each person, using values, tries to prove the other wrong. It's easier to live with and iron out differences if values don't get in the way.

How you feel is a fact, in itself neither right nor wrong. By expressing your feelings, you lessen the chances of getting bogged down in theoretical discussions on values, intent or motives. You can always disagree with interpretations and value judgments, but not with how another person is feeling. Negative feedback, given cleanly, is an opening that leaves the giver potentially vulnerable and thus implies he or she is willing to put time and energy into the relationship. Giving difficult or unpleasant feedback can be looked upon as a gift that could open your relationship up in new areas and smooth undercurrents of tension. Seeing this feedback as a gift, instead of an attack, makes it easier to receive as well as to give.

### Interpersonal Tools

Here are some structures or tools to experiment with that can open up different aspects of your relationships and loosen or unravel some of the knots. One dimension of yoga is creating the tools you need to work with your own particular problem areas. You may want to elaborate and modify these to fit your circumstances.

- First, identify the knots by being alert for emotionally sensitive areas and repetitiveness of any kind – no matter how reasonable or justifiable each side seems.
- Try to unravel each knot by identifying its underlying value systems, noting any patterns in reactions, and discovering what each of you are getting out of keeping the knot.
- Be willing to stay with an impasse, watching its dynamics and following the fears, without trying to change it. Just learn about it by living with it.
- Check to see if you're honestly more interested in blaming, punishing, or winning than in communicating. (Feelings of

relish are especially suspect.)

- See if you can forget yourself temporarily and put yourself in the other's place, to find the internal consistency in their viewpoint and describe it objectively.
- Before responding, interpret in your own words what the other has just said to their satisfaction. This can help you see what you may be missing.
- Arranging "feedback sessions" periodically allows feedback to be given outside the context of a heated discussion. And it also keeps it from inundating your life.
- Writing in a journal when confused or upset can reveal and intensify underlying emotions, and show their connection to thoughts and values.
- In watching your responses, it's useful to separate how the content of the message affects you from how you react to the way it's presented.
- Tape recording your talks or arguments allows you to see your own patterns and view the knot from a removed place. It also helps you recognize complaining, sarcasm, put downs, and blame. Listening to yourself is difficult, but crucial, since this rarely occurs in a heated discussion.

Life is full of surprises once you begin to live with the actual problem at the core of a knot, instead of the reactions and values that coat it. Often you get back in touch with love, which has its own unpredictable problem-solving magic. There are always potential knots that need periodic working out. Whether you meet them creatively, or whether you close down in the face of them, is what matters. But there is also a risk in serious exploration: you may discover that you have drifted apart as your interests have changed, or that you're no longer right for each other. Yet, there's more danger in not confronting your problems, for this undermines your own growth and brings stagnation into your life.

Approaching relationships as yoga creates levels of communication and openness that are unique. Part of the process of yoga involves keeping it new and vital by being very alert for the onset of habits, set routines and boredom, because when the mechanical creeps in, it can dull anything. Communication is the key that can allow love to ripen through time. A relationship that promotes newness and creativity while developing the closeness and depth that only time can bring, is hard to replace. The context of such a relationship offers the opportunity to learn about yourself, the people you are involved with, and the world, in a way that can only come through real communication. ☆

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# Unraveling a Knot: Depolarizing Relationships

An exercise by Diana Alstad  
Supplement to “Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga”\*

In a knot, each person trying to win by convincing the other they’re “wrong” is what keeps people stuck *arguing over content*. Instead, if you temporarily put your position on the back burner, you can try seeing if each of you could be partly “right.” Totally *identifying* with your position locks you into subjectivity. But if you *shift to curiosity* about how the knot works and where the other is at, you can join hands in exploration – bypassing some of the conflict’s divisiveness by becoming interested in its nature.

The new goal is to *understand* the knot and its *hidden roots*, to be curious about the other’s reality and how you affect each other’s feelings, to discover *imbalances*, to reveal new *information*, to see the **TOTAL PICTURE** – instead of trying to resolve the knot, win, or change the other. If you learn something new, *say it!* Making someone feel understood and acknowledging their reality can be as or more important than changing.

**I. GETTING CLEAR:** Choose a knot (repeated conflict, pattern or stuck place) to work on. Breakthroughs and major new seeings can sometimes come from just doing these next two steps:

**1. SWITCH ROLES:** Take turns stating the other’s position as if it were your own, using the same sentences, logic, emotions, tone of voice, etc. Try to experience what it feels like to be in the other position.

**2. STATE YOUR OWN POSITION** as cleanly as possible to give your partner a feel of your living reality. Before the other states theirs, they should repeat or describe yours *to your satisfaction*. This helps you both really hear each other and feel heard.

**II. ANATOMY OF THE KNOT\*\*:**

*To clarify your knot’s dynamics, separately or together write or reflect on these aspects of it:*

**3. FEELINGS** caused in each other by the knot. Identify the **TRIGGER WORDS** and **BUTTONS** – *Map the minefield* that makes you both defensive, reactive, hurt, angry, and out of control. Identify how and where each position “hooks” the other.

**4. VALUES** underlying each position – implied or stated. (CLUE: Which of your beliefs and values *justify* your feelings and give you a “right” to them?) You can argue endlessly about values and each make a good case for being “right” – that’s where people get stuck.

**5. WANTS & FEARS** underlying the values. Values often protect from fears and justify, legitimize or rationalize wants. (CLUE – Ask yourself what’s the worst thing that could happen if you *lost*, or gave up defending your position?)

**6. Do you get a hidden PAY OFF** from the knot? Just keeping the *status quo* can be a pay off – when it’s in your self-interest. However, if a knot is caused by external factors (gender or other inequalities, lack of child-care, finances, etc.) one person may not be getting a pay off. *It’s not always symmetrical.*

**7. REPLAY** knot by interacting – but *without trying to win or find solutions*. **SHIFT YOUR FOCUS FROM CONTENT TO PROCESS** by paying attention to both of your feelings and their causes. Say when they occur and explain why.

**TREAT ALL FEELINGS AS IMPORTANT FEEDBACK**, as “facts”, rather than as either “justified” or not. Once acknowledged, feelings often change. Avoid triggering each other if possible. Instead of reacting defensively (mechanically or aggressively), you could try responding to the hidden hurt often underlying anger.

**THE KEY IS TO BE CURIOUS** and more into *exploring and communicating clearly* than winning, convincing, *changing* or getting back at the other. Ask yourself honestly, where are you *really* coming from?? That’s what the other subliminally responds to.

In intimacy, **WHEN YOU WIN, YOU OFTEN LOSE**. Openness, trust and passion don’t last very long in a win/lose framework.

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\*“Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga” by Diana Alstad, *Yoga Journal*, March 1979

\*\*For important exceptions – real *impasses* and disguised, *truncated knots*, which have different dynamics from most knots – see “Exploring Relationships.”