
A New Look at Yoga:

Playing the Edge of Mind & Body

“A New Look” presents yoga as an evolutionary process and introduces the Yoga of Mind as a powerful approach to self-exploration. Mental yoga reveals the mind’s nature and its filters, and is an important part of physical yoga practice.

by Joel Kramer

What is Yoga? There are as many answers to that question as there are people who do Yoga. This at first might appear confusing, for Yoga is often presented as if there were a true and fixed path to follow leading to a desired end. Enlightenment, samadhi, bliss, peace, higher realms of consciousness – these are the coins of the spiritual market place we are told we can collect with the proper practice and dedication. To find the proper practice it is common to go back to the past, to tradition and authority. Perusing the past, however, there doesn’t appear to be any consensus for there were schools and counter-schools with recommendations running the gamut from demanding severe self-denial and austerities to others that held that only in experiencing life and sensuality to the fullest could true realization be achieved. The teachings of today are just as varied. One school says that all types of Yoga are contained within perfection of asanas, while others say that too much emphasis on the body keeps you limited to the gross material plane.

Tradition is important just as history is important – not as a vice to squeeze the present into, but rather as a stepping stone to grow from. It is necessary for all serious practitioners of Yoga to take from other people’s experience that which can be helpful to create a personal expression of Yoga. In the years that I have been exploring Yoga, an approach has taken form that has been continually revealing, renewing and exciting. The movement of Yoga involves among other things the continual living recreation of

the question, ‘What is Yoga?’ What follows is a brief introduction to the way I answer this question.

Yoga is a living process. The heart of Yoga does not lie in visible attainments; it lies in learning and exploring. Learning is a process, a movement, while attainments are static. One is internally learning about the whole field of life using the energy systems of one’s mind and body to find out how one works and how universal patterns express themselves through individuals. Yoga also involves the process of freeing one’s energy, moving out of the blocks and binds that limit one both physically and mentally. Freeing oneself is part of the process of self-knowledge for one’s binds limit the nature of the exploration, just as releasing them permits learning to occur.

The way freedom is usually talked about is freedom from something: freedom from pain, fear, death, aging, disease, from sorrow, attachment, and of course, from the ego or self which is viewed as the source of all problems. The bondage of flesh and the tyranny of mind as they endlessly create desire, are to be overcome through discipline. Yet anyone who tries to do this necessarily confronts the basic paradox that is a part of the spiritual quest: trying to free oneself from anything contains within it the seeds of the very bondage one is trying to escape. The desire to be desireless is another desire. The push to conquer one’s ego in the belief that ego loss will be the ultimate experience bringing perfection is self-centered activity. The desire for ego loss and perfection

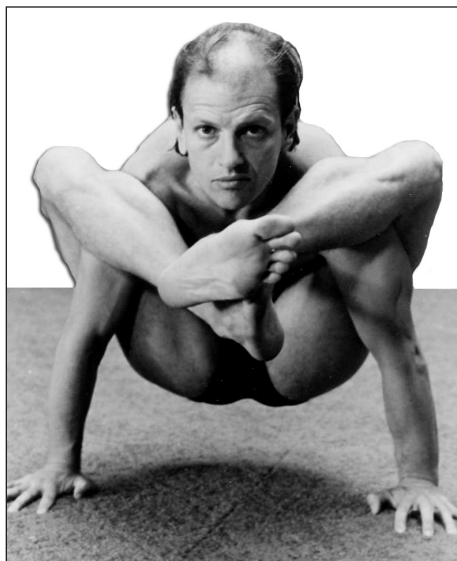
comes from the ego as does all desire. Thought then creates ideas of perfection from second-handed sources or from memory’s projections and strives toward their accomplishment which is more ego activity. This is another example of what I call the spiritual paradox.

If freedom is looked at as a dimension of action rather than as an escape from something, as a living process instead of a goal, the spiritual paradox dissolves. The only real freedom is freedom in action. Freedom is responding totally to the challenges of the living moment. The true spiritual quest is not ‘How do I become free?’ but rather, ‘What is it that binds me?’ The most important thing about questing or questioning is the nature of the quest or question. Asking ‘How do I become free?’ automatically places you in the spiritual paradox, and even more important, is not answerable. For questing after freedom always involves ideas about what freedom consists of. The ideas I have, come from the state of not being free, and therefore involve projections of what it would be like not to have the problems that I have. Freedom here again is freedom from something – fear, jealousy, competitiveness whatever. The very ideas I have of freedom are limited by the state of my consciousness and as I try to force myself into the mold of the idea or ideal, I am limiting freedom right at the start. So I can never find out how to be free by seeking freedom. I can, however, find out the nature of what it is that limits my awareness and the scope of my responsiveness because that can be directly perceived.

The body's potential responsiveness is limited by stiffness, lack of strength and endurance. The mind's responsiveness is limited by the way it thinks about things. The ideas and beliefs through which you view the world necessarily keep you within the field of these thought structures. The way that you think about things totally influences not only the way you act, but the way you perceive. If, for example, you think that thought is the villain preventing you from experiencing the 'now' and therefore must be conquered through meditation, that mind-set influences everything you do. In intellectual circles there is the tendency to greatly value thought; in spiritual circles there is a tendency to judge thought negatively. The interesting thing is that both evaluations are just thought judging itself.

Yoga is the process by which I find out the nature of my binds and keep in touch with those aspects of life that limit freedom. I have found that a synthesis of two traditional approaches of Yoga is the most direct route to this exploration. Hatha, the physical Yoga, and Jnana, the mental Yoga, both deal with discovering the limits that conditioning imposes. No conditioning is just physical or just mental. How we think is a part of how we feel and, of course, how we feel influences the thought process. The term 'conditioning' here refers to habits of the mind and body which are programmed in through experience. This includes genetic conditioning which is also programmed in through experience, although the experience is of a different order.

Yoga then is the exploration of one's total conditioning, Hatha Yoga using the body as the doorway, and Jnana Yoga using the mind. I am not presenting conditioning as a new villain to be conquered. Conditioning is part of the organizational principal of universal energy which builds patterns and systems that are the stuff of life. Conditioning is a fact which actually aids the movement of life, for without it there would be no life. At the same time conditioning is a hindrance to freedom since habits also constrict by



Joel Kramer playing the edge in asana.

Photo by: Mark Wexler

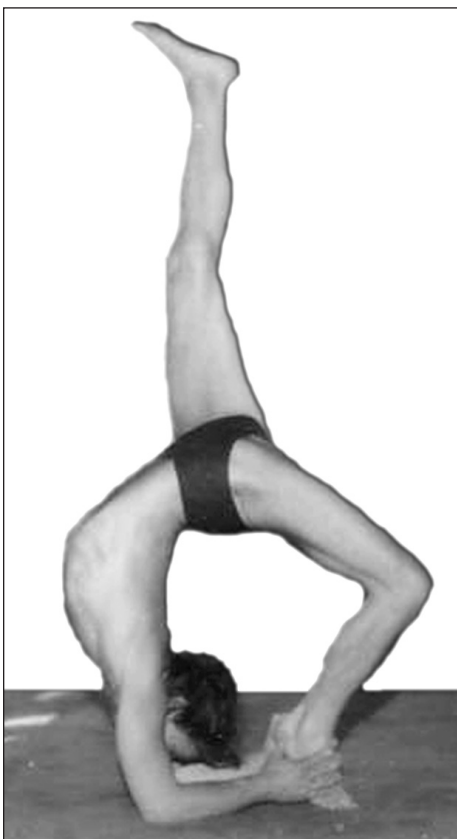


Photo by: Ben Thompson

channeling the new into old patterns, by creating and reinforcing the tendency to go on automatic which limits awareness, and by creating attachments to familiar pleasures and securities which block real change. Freedom does not lie in negating or overcoming the fact of conditioning which is impossible, but rather in springing, in the living moment, from those patterns that limit the field of what is possible.

In Hatha Yoga what is possible in any posture is a function of your conditioning (including what you ate yesterday). If instead of trying to force yourself into the idealized final position, you use the posture to explore the limitations imposed by conditioning, there is automatically a relaxation in mind and body. The postures then become highly refined tools to approach the edge or limit that binds you. Awfully playing at the edge of conditioning changes the field of what is possible.

Yoga is a process of opening, of moving beyond the physical and conceptual limits of conditioning. Experience by its nature conditions, so that moving out of it is an endless process. There is no mastery of yoga since one can only master that which has an end. The concept of opening, however, can slyly become just another idealized goal to be achieved. Actually, awareness of the tendency of the very nature of thought to stop process is part of what Jnana Yoga is about.

A key to the process of opening that keeps you truly opened is what I call 'playing the edge.' The body's edge in Yoga is the place just before pain, but not pain itself. Pain tells you where the limits of physical conditioning lie. Since the edge moves from day to day and from breath to breath (not always forward), in order to be right there, moving with its often subtle changes, you must be very alert. This quality of alertness which is a meditative state is at the heart of Yoga. A great danger in Hatha Yoga is going on automatic so that the postures become mechanical exercises, bringing with them dullness, fatigue, and resistance to doing Yoga at all.

Just as the mind is more elusive than the body, so the edge in Jnana Yoga is not as obvious as in Hatha. The habits of mind that have accumulated over time continually reinforce themselves. Habits of mind are repetitive ways of thinking about things and of structuring the world in such mental patterns as beliefs, values, fears, hopes, ambitions, self images, images of others and of the universe itself. For instance, whether I view the universe as either basically benign, ma-

levolent or neutral (indifferent) seems to be an abstraction far removed from daily living that I might seldom overtly think about. These world views, however, are the basis of common attitudes (idealism, cynicism, skepticism) which are patterns that color all perceptions by monitoring what comes in, and directly affect day to day life.

How does one play the edge of thought? In Hatha Yoga, the Yoga is in the quality of attention to the physical system so that one learns to listen to what the messages of the body are saying. The muscles, tendons, nerves, glands, and organ systems have their own intelligence and information processing networks that can be tuned into and learned from. Playing on the edge physically sharpens the ability of the total organism to interpret and integrate this information. Thought also manifests in systems which are set ways of thinking about a particular segment of one's life. These systems are sometimes in harmony with each other but often not. Each role or pattern in one's life has a thought structure or system that gives life to and perpetuates the behavior.

Hatha Yoga stretches and strengthens one physically so that one has a stronger and more flexible body. Similarly Jnana Yoga stretches and strengthens one mentally so that one can use the structures that thought builds creatively and harmoniously, and yet not be bound by the limits that thought places on life.

Mental edges are similar to physical edges in that they are marked by resis-

tance to movement and opening. In the mind, fear is the indicator of resistance as pain is in the body. Fear circumscribes the structure of personality or ego. The ways you think about yourself or the world are the basic building blocks of personality and they are very rigid. When these structures are challenged, fear arises. Fear often expresses itself through attack and defense as a means of alleviating the pain that fear brings. Attack and defense are a way of shoring up (protecting) the challenged structure and burying fear in what is called the unconscious, giving you the illusion of not being afraid. Fear is a great teacher since it is a key to finding out the nature, depth, and degree of your attachment to various thought structures.

In Hatha Yoga, as you awarely play the edge of what is physically possible, your edge moves. What is possible has changed - you have changed. There is more flexibility, more openness in the tissue, and correspondingly more energy. As Jnana Yoga plays the edges of mental resistance, the very doing of this moves the edge, enlarging the limits of what is possible. This is really what expanding consciousness is all about.

A major difficulty in Jnana Yoga is that since your mental edges define the way you perceive, the very perception of where your edges or conditionings are is limited by your present perception: if I try to look at the way that I look at things, the way I do it is the way that I look at things. How I look at things at any given moment is me. Another problem of Jnana Yoga is that there is no set body of techniques corresponding to asanas to use to play your mental edges. In Hatha Yoga the asanas are necessary because in living you rarely challenge or even reach your physical edges. You are, however, confronting your mental edges on a day to day basis whether you want to or not, so that mechanical technique is not necessary.

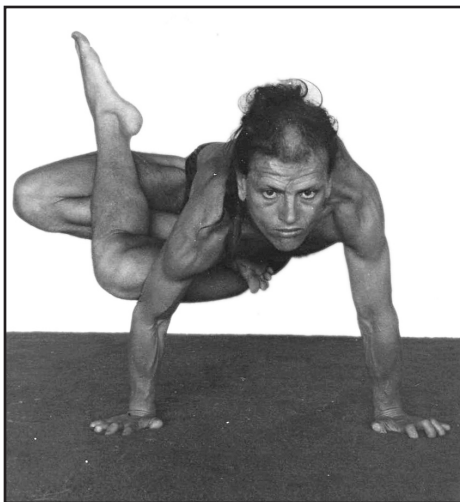
In Hatha Yoga the demands of a given posture, the immediacy of the feedback of physical pain, the possibility of injury through carelessness, the proper use of breath, can aid in bringing forth the

necessary attention. In Jnana Yoga, attention is also the key. To find out how thought works, it is necessary to pay attention to the forms it takes: words, sentences, images. It is also very important to be aware of where your attention is at any given moment. Your attention at any moment is what you are at that moment and this directly reveals your conditioning.

Being aware of the movement of attention is actually a meditative process that shifts consciousness. The resulting sense of distance and quality of detachment permit an objectivity that is not bound by the structures of thought. This objectivity is the source of newness and creativity, bringing a sense of awe that transcends the merely personal. It can also bring fear. Since we hold the world and ourselves together with thought, real objectivity can challenge the fabric of our lives bringing resistance and fear. This very fear is an indication of the existence of mental conditioning and paying attention to it (playing the edge of it) 'stretches' it in a somewhat similar way as awarely playing the edge of pain stretches the body.

Although Jnana Yoga cannot be practiced in the ordinary sense, ('practice' usually means repetition toward the accumulation of desired habits), one may 'practice' Jnana Yoga by simply sitting quietly, observing the inner panorama. An advantage of sitting quietly is temporary removal from external reactions that permits more ready access to thought. Sitting also allows what has been repressed by thought or inattention to bubble up. Since one's mental edges display themselves in the relationships of daily life, with people, ideas, the physical environment, so the 'practice' of Jnana Yoga can and does occur not only during formal sitting, but in all aspects of life.

One might mistake attention for continually trying to figure out what's going on inside which can end up in paralysis or in removal from living. Attention is not an analytical process involving brain activity. It is a simple registering of what is happening so that there is no 'figuring



out' involved.

Trying to be attentive does remove one from what is going on and therefore is not attention. One does not do Jnana Yoga by trying to force attention to the structures of thought to find out what thought's limits are. Since the edges are there, one does not have to seek them. A thought, although more elusive, is as much a fact as a bird or a tree, so all it takes to see it is objectively looking. The simplicity of Jnana Yoga is made difficult in that the brain is so conditioned by thought and so habit-bound in its mental structures that the shift of consciousness from thought to attention at first sounds mysterious. When thought thinks about this shift either through reading about it or by remembering a previous occurrence of it, thought tries to bring about this shift. This is impossible as the shift does not occur within the field of thought. Yet this quality of attention, this shift in consciousness, is available at any instant, for one can be attentive even to the fact of one's inattention.

You only really learn Hatha Yoga by getting on the floor and doing it. You learn about Jnana Yoga by doing it, too. Even though the learning is not a mechanical accumulation of skills, you can learn about the nature of the mental processes, which are mechanical, that keep this shift in consciousness from happening. The very doing of this allows the shift to occur.

Although I have presented Hatha and Jnana Yoga as separate, ultimately they are not, for each complements and com-

pletes the other. I have found that Jnana Yoga is not only helpful in doing Hatha Yoga, but necessary. Hatha Yoga is a miniature universe containing within it in its own form all of the problems of so-called ordinary life: ambition, image making, the subtle or not so subtle intrusion of comparison and competition, the pleasures of accomplishment, the dislike of regression, the frustrations of not having expectations met, and of course, the potentially ever-recurring specter of fear. Fear of aging, of dying, of one's own sloth and laziness, of not measuring up to standards, of not making it (whatever 'it' is) – these and other aspects of life display themselves in Hatha Yoga in a particularly direct and poignant way. Awareness of the structures of thought that come out of physical exploring is an integral part of the process of exploring the body.

In exploring mental conditioning you find that psychological tightness conditions and tightens the body. The common phrase 'up tight' is ordinarily used to describe a mental state. When you are up tight you can notice how the body is also physically tightening. These habitual body tensions that over years bring about stiffness are the repository of internalized mental states. Opening up in physical Yoga opens you up mentally and opening up mentally aids in the opening of the body. I look upon Hatha and Jnana Yoga as two sides of a coin, as mirror images of each other. They are different routes of exploring what it is to be a human being.

Many features of other traditional approaches to Yoga such as Karma Yoga

(the yoga of action in the world) and Raja Yoga (which is Patanjali's specific combination of different Yogas) are incorporated in this approach. Tantric Yoga, which traditionally is a blending or merging of the male and female, can involve an edge playing in relationship which reveals other aspects of conditioning. Bhakti or the devotional aspects of Yoga that involve a surrender to what is, comes out of a deep seeing of how the universe works.

Serious people within an historical epoch have always re-examined and redefined the thrust of importance – which later becomes tradition, to be redefined again as times and the movement of consciousness evolve. The way I have answered the question 'What is Yoga?' is in one sense not traditional. Yoga has always been a synthesis of personal experience and tradition – a blend of the new and the old. Indeed, an integral part of the tradition of Yoga is to be continually reinterpreting what Yoga is. It is this flexibility at the heart of Yoga which has allowed Yoga to be meaningful for thousands of years. ▲

For more on the Yoga of Mind, see "A Yoga Legend Returns: Joel Kramer & the Yoga of Mind," (Yogi Times, July 2006), "Mind in Asana" (Yoga Journal interview), and The Passionate Mind at www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com. Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad teach in California and by invitation. They can be reached at info@JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com.

Yoga Journal articles posted at

www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com:

Yoga as Self-Transformation (Joel Kramer, 1980)

A New Look at Yoga: Playing the Edge of Mind and Body (Joel Kramer, 1977)

Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga (Diana Alstad, 1979)

Mind in Asana: An Interview with Joel Kramer (Jeanne Cameron, 1986)

The Third Perspective and Yoga: Bringing East and West Together (Joel Kramer, 1981)

***The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad**
(North Atlantic Books -- also published in German and Russian)

***The Passionate Mind* by Joel Kramer** (North Atlantic Books)