

An Evolutionary Approach to Spirituality

Talks by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

Humanity is at a cusp point in its evolution, perilously suspended between the beliefs and habits of adolescence and the urgency of becoming adult. In our world of vast changes, traditional roles and rules are shifting causing old securities, both personal and social, to be fraught with uncertainty. As old ways of being become part of the problem, we must forge new awareness and meaning into life, evolving both individually and socially. Part of this endeavor involves translating the wisdom of the ages into modern, meaningful terms. Since spiritual hierarchies upheld rigid belief systems, much of “spirituality” became deeply bound by tradition and authority, like religion. Spiritual traditions and practices developed in authoritarian social contexts that were taken for granted so they can contain archaic beliefs and ideals that hinder evolution.

But tradition can be used as a stepping stone to grow from rather than as a vice to squeeze the present into. Spirituality can be approached as exploration and its practices used to foster conscious living and change if one is not attached to fixed or outmoded beliefs. Part of spiritual tradition is reinterpreting what spirituality is. Reformers have always re-examined and redefined the thrust of importance of spirituality, which later became tradition – to be redefined again as times and consciousness evolve.

Spirituality & Evolution

We humans are at a cusp point in our evolution that will determine our survival. This is not only predictable, but is in a sense necessary. Evolution uses crises and necessity to forge change. As old ways crumble or threaten our very survival, we individually and as a species must forge a more evolved relationship to spirit and each other. This is the evolutionary and spiritual challenge of our times.

“Spirit” is the embedded force within existence that is the invisible driver of evolution. Spirituality is ignited by how people connect with each other, the planet and their epoch. As spirituality itself participates in the evolutionary momentum, it needs to be periodically reframed to mesh with new discoveries, potentials, and challenges. A major urgency of this epoch is to broaden our spectrum of awareness to further the deep worldview, values, and identity transformations underway.

Bringing Spirituality Down to Earth

Humanity is on an evolutionary and spiritual cusp as to whether we will mature and use our untapped potential to remain viable. Spirituality has traditionally been viewed as in another “higher” realm—pure, otherworldly—to be personally attained, instead of as a creative force infused in the fabric of living. This age-old, fateful split between the spiritual and the mundane views spirit as “unearthly” and humans as flawed. Any worldview that separates spirit from living is no longer viable in our world of accelerating change and crises.

Bringing spirituality down to Earth involves ending the destructive rift and extending spirituality into social relationships and global issues, bringing more care, purpose and connection into daily life. A modern evolutionary framework for spirituality can bring a needed shift in awareness, values and relationships to meet the challenges of our lives and times.

Unmasking Spiritual Authoritarianism

This engaging, taboo-challenging dress-down of spiritual ideals and clichés explores dogma vs. dynamism, livable vs. unlivable ideals, certainty vs. openness. Can practices make you spiritual? What’s the dark side of enlightenment? Is total selflessness desirable? Why are our loftiest spiritual ideals beyond human capacity?

What we hold sacred urgently needs reexamining: making truth-seeking sacred instead of tradition is a key to a viable future. Defending outmoded beliefs blocks insights and problem-solving, which is now deadly. Unlivable spiritual ideals create inadequacy and self-mistrust, sabotaging relationships and making people easy to manipulate as they seek saviors. Awareness of disguised authoritarianism disempowers it, increasing freedom and possibility. This creative frontier unleashes the intelligence and care needed to meet our epic challenges.

Yoga & Evolution

Yoga is an age-old transformative process that can transcend the beliefs and attitudes of its origins. It can be creatively adapted to the needs of the times and foster conscious evolution. Approaching yoga as exploration helps break through the habits of mind and body that bind us, freeing and expanding consciousness. Growth comes as awareness, empathy, and identity broaden, becoming more inclusive.

Yoga at its core aims at understanding the timeless question “Who am I?” If you delve into the deepest regions of your being, you learn not merely about you, the individual, but about yourself as part of the total fabric of life and an active participant in evolution. Yoga opens up deep communication within oneself, which leads to transformation. It can also explore and open boundaries between people bringing real communication, which is communion. This allows you to touch into the existential reality of others and share deeply in the movement of life. Yoga can transform the very fiber of your being, freeing you for a more profound relation with life and more aware participation in the evolutionary process.

Bringing East & West Together

Yoga as it exists today is caught between two opposing worldviews. The East gives priority to unity and Oneness; the West emphasizes multiplicity, valuing the individual and the unique. Each view touches into something real and important, but alone is also incomplete and imbalanced, creating an unnecessary and false polarization that people internalize. The mystical Oneness worldview emphasizes merging with the whole through surrender; the Western worldview promotes individuation and control. These two ways of looking at things can create great inner conflict. We all want to realize ourselves as individuals and also to connect with something larger and more profound.

A different perspective can transform awareness and living by resolving the oppositions between the inherent polarities of existence: merging and individuation, being and becoming, control and surrender, attachment and non-attachment, self-transcendence and self-enhancement, living in the present and creating the future. These seeming polarities are actually not opposed—except in the way we think about them. Unity and diversity are two aspects of the same thing; neither wholeness nor separateness could exist without the other. Individuation and merging are two poles of a growth process necessary to each other.

Yoga, which means “union,” is an approach to living that can help forge a needed synthesis between East and West. The flame of yoga moving West offers an exceptional opportunity to infuse aspects of Eastern mysticism with Western practicality and science, creating a more viable context to meet today’s challenges.

Our talks are followed by discussion.

Each talk can be a separate event or combined with others into a longer seminar.

*This could include any of our talks on **A Modern Approach to Yoga:***

Yoga as Transformation, Yoga of Relationship, Yoga of the Mind, Yoga for These Times

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Joel Kramer is considered a founder of modern American yoga for his seminal contributions to re-visioning yoga in the West. A pioneer and innovator of physical and mental yoga, his evolutionary vision of yoga is foundational for many of today’s teachers. His book *The Passionate Mind* illustrates mental yoga. His widely influential “**Yoga as Self-Transformation**” (*Yoga Journal*, 1980) presents many principles of his original mind/body approach that have become an integral part of American yoga. After graduate studies in philosophy and psychology, Kramer was a resident teacher at Esalen (1968-70) and taught yoga seminars with Diana Alstad until 1982, both returning to teaching in 2006.

Diana Alstad led mental, physical and relationship yoga seminars with Joel Kramer from 1975-82 at Esalen, Omega, and other centers. She created a foundation for a yoga of relationship in “**Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga**” (*Yoga Journal*, 1979) by extending Kramer’s yogic approach to the social arena. A Yale Ph.D., Alstad taught the first Women’s Studies courses at Yale and Duke and trained in several therapies.

Joel & Diana have been life partners working together since 1974. They coauthored *The Passionate Mind Revisited: Expanding Personal & Social Awareness* (2009) concerning individual and social evolution and *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (1993) unmasking hidden social, mental and spiritual authoritarianism. Their articles, YouTube and podcast links, book reviews and overviews are at JoelDiana.com.