

SITTING DOWN WITH RADICAL YOGI:

[INTERVIEW]

Joel Kramer

BY JULIE DEIFE



Photos: Julie Deife, LA YOGA Ayurveda and Health

Joel Kramer is trained in philosophy and psychology, is a physical and mental yoga adept and a radical who's back after many years of self-imposed seclusion. He was a resident teacher at Esalen Institute from 1968 - 70 and a regular contributor to the Yoga Journal in the 80's.

Kramer taught many of today's most famous teachers including Erich Schiffmann and David Swenson and he is the author of *The Passionate Mind* and, along with his partner Diana Alstad, *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* which is a comprehensive and detailed work exploring authoritarianism in religion, institutions, the family, sexual relations and addictions.

At age 68, Kramer has decided to offer yoga again and to speak out on critical public issues. Why?

Kramer: I started talking again because of the state of the world. I feel we are a species at risk.

Julie: How much time do you think we have as a species?

Kramer: I have no idea. I operate on a strange kind of evolutionary perspective, and from my point of view, things have to get worse in order to do the kind of transformation that is going to be necessary for viability.

Many years ago, when I was complaining to a very smart man who was actually Trudeau's energy minister about the state of the world, and he looked at me and said, "Look, if you are really interested in change then optimism is your best strategy;" intuitively, I knew he was correct. The question is, how do you become optimistic and not be a Pollyanna or self-serving? Over the years, we have developed perspectives that I do not call optimistic, I call "possibilistic." We have real possibilities and unless people begin to move toward these possibilities, I think we are in real trouble.

Evolution always puts you against a barrier that either you cross it or you do not. One of the things that I think we are, and I think we are many things as human beings, are "unconscious self-reflective predators."

Julie: But that is not a state that we have to maintain, right?

Kramer: Exactly. It is a state that we cannot afford to maintain, but it is what brought us to the top of the chain. If you go back to old tribal mechanisms, one of the things that you find is that human beings are genetically programmed for personal survival and for group survival because we are social animals, and these things ordinarily work in tandem, but now they are not.

Julie: What's holding us up?

Kramer: The power that we have achieved through technology is forcing us to look at long-term implications, and we

just do not know how to do that very well.

Julie: Why?

Kramer: Technology has moved faster than we have socially. We are up against thousands of years of a kind of success story that allowed this species to fill all of the ecological niches and things of that sort, and the very thing that made us successful is now, to be a little coarse, biting us in the ass because the systems are broken. The greatest changes that occur historically are when a moral system breaks down. But moral systems do not live in isolation; they are embedded in the world view. In other words, you do not have a morality 'here', and a way of looking at the world 'there'. They are all intertwined with each other, and that before the moral system breaks down, the world view begins to fracture.

Julie: What is consciousness?

Kramer: Descartes said, "I think, therefore, I am." I do it differently. I say, "We human beings are conscious, therefore, consciousness exists." The very fact that experience exists, let us take consciousness and spread it out wider; the capacity to experience is a miracle.

Julie: Your yoga practice, Joel, do you see it as a gateway to higher consciousness?

Kramer: I have practiced yoga for thirty-eight years regularly, and the conclusion that I came to is that there are many doorways to consciousness, and yoga is potentially one of them, but it is not absolute.

If yoga is something right for you, and I do not feel it is right for everybody, it is a beautiful touchstone into energy, into danger, and there is a great danger in it.

Julie: What is the danger?

Kramer: Its great danger is that of self-absorption. I become totally interested in my diet, and I become totally interested in my own spiritual development.

But the beautiful thing about yoga in terms of the physical aspect as well as the mental aspect, in terms of energy and in terms of the momentum of one's life, is it is a lot harder to lie to yourself in the body. The body has its own wisdom, and the body tells you things. My relationship to yoga is a feedback-oriented relationship.

Julie: Through postures?

Kramer: I am not posture oriented. I am what I call, "body oriented." The postures are tools for me to explore the limitations and the feedback systems of my body. Through the processes of aging and the processes of doing yoga, yoga has

changed for me many times over the years; yet I am dealing with a system that has limitations, and the yoga shows me where the edges of these limitations are, how I can play with them, how I can generate energy and how I can utilize this as a touchstone for the nature of the life I live. To me, that is an ongoing process, not a function of getting you anywhere with finality.

Julie: Speaking of getting anywhere...as a species do you think there is anything such as a global morality?

Kramer: I do not think so. All religions preach peace, love and compassion, and they all kill each other and have for thousands of years, with justification. If I take the *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, here is Krishna, presumed God, telling Arjuna, "Go kill your relatives because it is your *karma*."

Karma is used as a justification. I am not saying that it is true or false. I am just looking at how it functions. How else does it function? It functions in the same way that an omniscient god functions in Christianity: look at every sneaky thought that you do and judge it, and then create consequences for it. That is what *karma* does, too.

Julie: Isn't there the idea that *karma* is an energy?

Kramer: That is the difference. In a god, you have a personal personification. In *karma*, you have an impersonal principle, but they function the same way.

I think that part of becoming an adult is that you realize that each and every one of us in our own way is creating the world that we live in, small or large.

"We have real possibilities and unless people begin to move toward these possibilities, I think we are in real trouble"

Julie: Why are people flocking to eastern thought systems?

Kramer: Because eastern thought systems, particularly Buddhism, are sophisticated psychologically. They work a little better with science although not absolutely when they try to justify themselves in quantum mechanics, but they try. Basically, that is what I call "old spirituality," Buddhism being the best of the old. Part of its appeal is that Buddhism has very sophisticated psychological mechanisms to detach you from a lot of the things that are bothering you. I look at eastern religions and western, too, to an extent, as working within what I call a "renunciate framework."

Julie: Give it all up to...?

Kramer: ...to something more important. What they are re-

ally asking you to renounce is something that I do not think is re-nounceable. They are really asking you to renounce self-centeredness ultimately.

“Evolution pushes toward consciousness because it is the only way that existence can experience itself. Without that, why bother?”

Julie: And you can’t?

Kramer: I do not think so because that is a part of the nature of individuation. We are animals that are both self-centered and self-absorbed, and we are animals capable of altruism and love and expanding outside of ourselves. Most people have selflessness here, self-centeredness there, at opposite ends of the spectrum. The spiritual momentum is moving from self-centeredness to selflessness until ultimately you become totally selfless and you are either a saint, an avatar or this or that. From my point of view, this is total bullshit because altruism and egotism are embedded in each other and define each other and are part of a dialectic that human beings play on the edge.

I am not relegating everything into what is called “enlightened self-interest,” which I do not think is true. I am saying there is both self-interest and there is real care, real altruism, but it is not endless.

Julie: Is anarchy the opposite of authoritarianism?

Kramer: Because we are social animals, I do not believe that real anarchy is possible. I believe that breakdown is possible, and there can be moments of anarchy, but I think that anarchy as a thing is just not the way this species works.

Authoritarianism has been the glue that has kept social orders together for thousands of years. What do I mean by authoritarianism? Two very simple things: a person or an ideology that thinks they know what is better for you than you do and the second one, which intertwines with the first, is a person or an ideology that is what we call ‘feedback proof.’ This means that no matter what occurs they are not going to change. What we feel is that this worked very well in our childish or even in our adolescent phase, but in terms of accelerated change, this very authoritarianism keeps us from doing the kind of problem solving that we really need to do when we do not know how we are going to impact the future, and how this is going to impact life on this planet. Authoritarianism is very appealing.

Julie: Coming back to survival of the species, what do we need now?



*Kramer and partner Diana Alstad are working on another book, **Spirituality for Atheists, Agnostics & Inquirers**.*

Kramer: The thing that I think we need, as an overriding system, is a global morality that deals with what is called the ‘commons’: common air, water, fuel and energy.

One of the things really hindering the planet are the moral value systems that we are operating under relatively unconsciously. Let me give you an example. “What do you like better? Competition or cooperation?”

Julie: Cooperation outweighs competition.

Kramer: Okay, emotionally or at least idealistically you prefer cooperation. From my point of view, that is part of the problem. Competition and cooperation are very much like egotism and altruism. They are not on opposite ends of the spectrum, but they are embedded in each other, and it depends upon what level you want to look.

Teams cooperate to compete better. Species cooperate to compete better. It is not that we have to become more cooperative and less competitive. We have to become better at each. It is competition that has moved this species creatively.

Julie: I see competition for the control of technology.

Kramer: That is one aspect of it. Take Crick and Watson who came up with the double helix; they were competing for a Nobel Prize. They would not have done it if they would not have gotten the reward for it.

The question is, Do we use it intelligently? Do we use it to further our human viability?

Julie: ...or to compete in a race for weaponry?

Kramer: ...or to compete in the race for alternate energy sources?

Julie: ...or organic food supplies?

Kramer: ...or to compete in a way that makes a social order viable. The old spirituality had spiritual development as a very personal thing so that I am interested in my own spiritual development, and I am told many things. For example, I am told, "Give and ye shall receive tenfold." Suppose I was told "Give, and you do not know what you are going to get back"? This is not nearly as appealing.

We need a morality that is based upon consequences for this life no matter what you believe about an afterlife. In other words, a morality that is not particularly interested in one's own personal spiritual development, and I know this is going to sound very radical, but is really interested in the spiritual development of the species.

Julie: So, what is good for you may not be good for everyone else, so you should choose what is good for everyone else?

Kramer: Not necessarily, because you are dealing with a dialectic, and they are interwoven. If the species realizes, in my opinion, that it is the expression of spirituality on this planet, for better or worse, including what is considered our warts, this cannot but help the individual in terms of how it moves through the world.

Whereas, if I am concerned about my own spiritual development, and that is all of my concern, basically there is a conundrum here, and the conundrum is this: I am told that I can only be spiritual if I stop being self-centered, but the only reason I am interested in being not self-centered is because I think it is going to be better. Better for who? Better for me.

Julie: It is radical. I do not think you are going to be invited to every yoga studio.

Kramer: I do not think I am going to be hardly invited to any of them. From my point of view, the energy and the interest that one puts into trying to not be self-centered, is totally self-centered.

Julie: I could not agree with you more. I have tried it, and it is exhausting.

Kramer: I tried it too when I was younger and I came to this conclusion: either there is something radically wrong with me or there is something radically wrong with the structure.

I decided that even if one human being out of a million or one human being out of a billion ever achieved a state of total non-self-centeredness, so what?

"What was considered spirituality two thousand years ago and what is considered spirituality now is not the same because we are not the same as a species."

Julie: Well then, we have a Buddha.

Kramer: Yeah, but you see, I do not believe that ever happened.

Julie: You're kidding.

Kramer: The reason I do not believe that ever happened is that I believe the very nature of the individuation process has that as a core element.

So, the question to my mind is not how to become less self-centered. The question is how to make our self-centeredness and altruism an interwoven thing that brings care and viability onto this planet.

Julie: What is the first step toward that goal?

Kramer: People are grabbing desperately for what I call quick fixes or instant solutions, spirituality, this, that, and that is going one step too far. The first thing that is necessary is the realization on the part of more and more people that the directions that we are moving in, where we are going and how we are going about it does not work I think that is much more important right now than trying to hope that spirituality like the cavalry is going to come in at the last minute and save the world.

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad will be teaching in the Los Angeles area this spring. Joel's seminal "Yoga as Self-Transformation" and their other articles on yoga and relationships are at www.whitelotus.org in Library (without the photos). Their political papers on protecting democracy and on abortion are at www.rit.org in Editorials.

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