

Teacher Spotlight: Joel Kramer



*Editor's Note: Joel Kramer is regarded by many as the father of modern American yoga for his evolutionary vision of yoga, which is foundational for many of today's leading yoga teachers. He was born in Coney Island in 1937, is the author of **The Passionate Mind** and co-author with Diana Alstad, his partner of 32 years, of **The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power**. He did four years of postgraduate study in philosophy and psychology at the University of Florida, Columbia and NYU, and was a resident teacher of yoga and consciousness at Esalen (1968-1970). He gave seminars around the world until 1982 reaching many with a modern view of yoga that was first put forth in such Yoga Journal articles as "A New Look at Yoga" and "Yoga as Self-Transformation." Diana created a foundation for the Yoga of Relationship in "Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga" (Yoga Journal,*

*1979) by extending to the social arena Joel's feedbackbased, systems approach to the Yoga of Mind and Body. To offer people a yogic framework and tools for relating, she and Joel developed and taught the Yoga of Relationship at such centers as Esalen and Omega. Their book-in-progress is **Spirituality for Atheists, Agnostics & Inquiring Minds: An Evolutionary Foundation for Values.***

Even as a young person I was concerned with the basic questions of meaning that people ponder and sometimes agonize over: Why am I here? What's living about anyway? Can I even know? And what in the world should I be doing with my life? First I inquired through traditional, academic routes. Putting my hopes into Western thought and science for answers that became more elusive the deeper I delved, I spent years in graduate school trying to solve to the riddle of existence. Eventually studying philosophy came to a point of resembling tic-tac-toe, where you know the game so well that you never lose an argument. But this provided little consolation as my questions remained unresolved. So in the early sixties I dropped out, caravaned to

California, became part of the burgeoning sixties counter-culture, and began investigating Eastern perspectives and practices.

I was fascinated by the differences between Eastern and Western approaches to the mind. My first introduction to what I consider mental yoga came in 1966 when I heard Krishnamurti speak about self-examining the conditioned mind. I found his methods of self inquiry brilliant and groundbreaking, although I came to differ from many of his conclusions. This was my initial contact with the Eastern route of looking within, where the mind turns inward upon itself to observe its own workings and conditioning processes. I found that being able to internally experience the structures of

my thoughts was an amazing new route to self-understanding that gave me the handle I needed to move forward. The Yoga of Mind led me on an odyssey of discovery that soon incorporated hatha yoga, which I have been doing regularly for about forty years. I eventually found that neither Eastern nor Western worldviews quite fit my experience, which led to writing books explaining why.

Being a parent and my two wonderful daughters revealed core aspects of living and of myself that I could not have discovered on my own. In 1974 I joined with my life partner Diana Alstad who has been of quintessential importance in my personal development, thinking, teaching, writing, and in integrating Eastern and Western frameworks. Having long been concerned with power and gender patterns, she created the first Woman's studies courses at Yale and Duke. Diana brought to my perspectives a social and relational awareness focused on bringing spirituality down to Earth – where it is sorely needed. It is in the arena of relationships, both personal and social, that we humans have neither shined nor used our extraordinary creativity to deal properly with the nature of power, privilege, and the many ways that people control each other for self-protection, gain, status, and placating fears. Through Diana's instigation and vision we wrote *The Guru Papers* to unmask

cultural, mental and spiritual authoritarianism.

I view yoga as a very personal and evolutionary activity that changes both with the times and over a lifetime. I have attempted to make yoga more relevant by moving it out of its locked-in traditional, often authoritarian roots. I stopped formal teaching in 1982 to write and think about the state of the world and my relation to it. I began teaching again in the fall of 2005 largely owing to a sense of urgency that putting my “two cents” into the collective pot might have value and relevance in these disturbing times. I teach asanas as the body is a fundamental place for learning and for generating the energy useful in integrating the myriad inputs of our runaway world. However, now I'm focusing more on teaching the Yoga of Relationship and the Yoga of Mind. The human mind has brought both great beauty and marvels of understanding, but it has also brought us to being a species at risk. Just as physical yoga helps the body become more resilient and flexible, it is my hope that the Yogas of Mind and Relationship can contribute to the creative capacities of the human mind and heart that could help make humanity viable. ■

Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad teach by invitation nationally and internationally. They can be reached at info@JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com.

Their foundational 1970s & '80s Yoga Journal articles are posted as pdfs at
www.JoelKramer-DianaAlstad.com

Yoga as Self-Transformation (Joel Kramer)

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

Exploring Relationships: Interpersonal Yoga (Diana Alstad)