

Gary Kraftsow Biography

Education, Influential Teachers, Vision

Yoga offers a process of transformation, with the potential to eliminate the symptoms and causes of suffering, and help us actualize our full potential at every level. My understanding of yoga, and of the deeper impulses towards faith, devotion, realization and actualization that are inherent in the human condition have been shaped by my teachers of yoga and world religions, and by my personal experiences.



My journey began over 30 years ago at Colgate University where I was majoring in religious studies. Early into the didactic training I was hungry for a deeper experiential understanding, and so, at 19 I traveled to India to attend Madras University. Here I studied privately with a well-known mystic and scholar of Saiva Siddhanta, the Saivite Tantra of south India, V.A. Devasenapathi.

During this same time, I began my study of yoga with T.K.V. Desikachar, son of T Krishnamacharya. I had a rare opportunity while studying in Krishnamacharya's home to combine insights gained from the mystical teaching and practices of Saivite Tantra as taught by VA Devasenapathi with the very practical science of yoga as taught by T.K.V. Desikachar and T. Krishnamacharya, who himself was a Bhakta in the Visisthadvaita lineage.

Back in the United States, my studies continued with respected scholars. Among them were Kenneth Morgan, a leading authority on the study of world religions, and M. Holmes Hartshorne, one of the foremost scholars on Soren Kierkegaard, often described as the "Father of Christian Existentialism". These foundations of learning have given me a unique opportunity to understand the human condition from the perspective of diverse cultures, and appreciate the universal relevance and applicability of Yoga.

Having completed my studies at Colgate in 1976, I returned to India for two years to deepen understanding of yoga philosophy and practice. Having been a gymnast in high school, the asana came easily. I found myself most interested in the study of pranayama, chanting, and various source texts of the yoga tradition. After returning from India, I began doctoral studies in a program on psychology and religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, under Dr. Raimundo Panikkar. Panikkar was perhaps one of the greatest teachers I ever had. In addition to being a Catholic priest and a Vedic scholar, he had multiple PhD's, was a scientist, a world renowned scholar of world religions, and a world leader in interfaith dialogue. Beyond all of these impressive credentials what impressed me most was his living example of integrated spirituality.

Panikkar has been very influential in my life. I was able to complete the course work for my doctorate, and receive a master's degree, focusing on health as a paradigm for spiritual transformation, before he retired. When he left the University, I returned to India for another year to delve deeper into yoga, and in particular, Viniyoga, and the practical tools of spiritual integration and transformation, including meditation and tantric yoga. Impressed by Panikkar's

knowledge of science, and guided by Desikachar who was himself an engineer, I also began a serious study of the science of Yoga Therapeutics.

When I left India, I settled in Hawaii and started Maui Yoga Therapy, where I continued to refine my understanding of yoga for a modern context as I worked with hundreds of students. I continued to explore and learn, traveling to study further with T.K.V Desikachar and another influential teacher, the great Tibetan Buddhist master, Kalu Rinpoche. I pursued a deeper study of Vajrayana, the great Tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and also served on the board of the Maui Dharma Center for nearly 20 years.

In 1983 my ability to train teachers in this lineage was recognized, and I was awarded the Viniyoga Special Diploma from Viniyoga International in Paris, France.

In 1999, Maui Yoga Therapy morphed into the American Viniyoga Institute (AVI) where we have continually evolved our professional training programs, including our Viniyoga Teacher Training, a Foundation for Yoga Therapy Training (a recent addition) and the AVI Viniyoga Therapist Training.

As the American Viniyoga Institute evolved, so did my transmission of the teachings into two books, *Yoga for Wellness* and *Yoga for Transformation*, and two DVDs, *Viniyoga Therapy for Low Back, Sacrum, and Hips* and *Viniyoga Therapy for Upper Back, Neck and Shoulders*. A highlight of my 30-plus year study of yoga and its potential for health and healing was the invitation to develop a protocol for the National Institutes of Health Study on “Evaluating Yoga for Chronic Low Back Pain.” The study demonstrated the positive effect of yoga on low back pain and was accepted by and published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The birth of my son Matteo started one of the more transformative experiences in my life. Just as he has deepened my appreciation of life, so too, in a different way, did my diagnosis with a life-threatening brain tumor in 2004. It was yoga that sustained me through the experience of diagnosis, multiple surgeries, and long recoveries with multiple complications. I couldn't do asana or pranayama or chanting, and yet it was the inner dimensions of Yoga practice that were fundamental to my stability and recovery.

My intention is to continue my work to make the ancient teachings of yoga relevant for people with health and life challenges, and to make the wisdom transmitted to me through remarkable teachers accessible in our modern context. I am pleased to join with others in the yoga community as we develop standards for the education of Yoga Therapists. The American Viniyoga Institute continues to grow and offer training opportunities for aspiring teachers and Yoga Therapists and for Western health care professionals who are eager to learn more about yoga and Yoga Therapy. The potential of yoga to help any individual actualize their full potential, no matter what their health or life challenge, motivates me to continue to innovate and share.

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