

The nationally acclaimed yoga teacher couldn't move when he woke up from brain surgery. But that didn't stop him from practicing yoga. **By Anna Dubrovsky**

# Radical Healing

## Yoga with Gary Kraftsow

GARY KRAFTSOW NOTICED SOMETHING STRANGE as he walked to the podium to deliver the keynote address at the April 2004 Northwest Yoga Festival. He noticed he wasn't walking in a straight line. Instead, he drifted right like a car overdue for a wheel alignment.

The next morning, he packed his bags and flew home to Maui and his 10-year-old son. He felt weak and his heart beat irregularly. He figured he was working too much, that time at the beach would rejuvenate him. But at the beach, he had to hold his son's hand to steady himself.

The symptoms snowballed over the next few days to include radical double vision, dizziness, and loss of muscle tone in Kraftsow's left leg. A CAT scan revealed what they pointed to: a large tumor wedged between his cerebellum and brain stem, a condition medical professionals refer to as "sudden death."

"What should I do?" he asked his doctor.

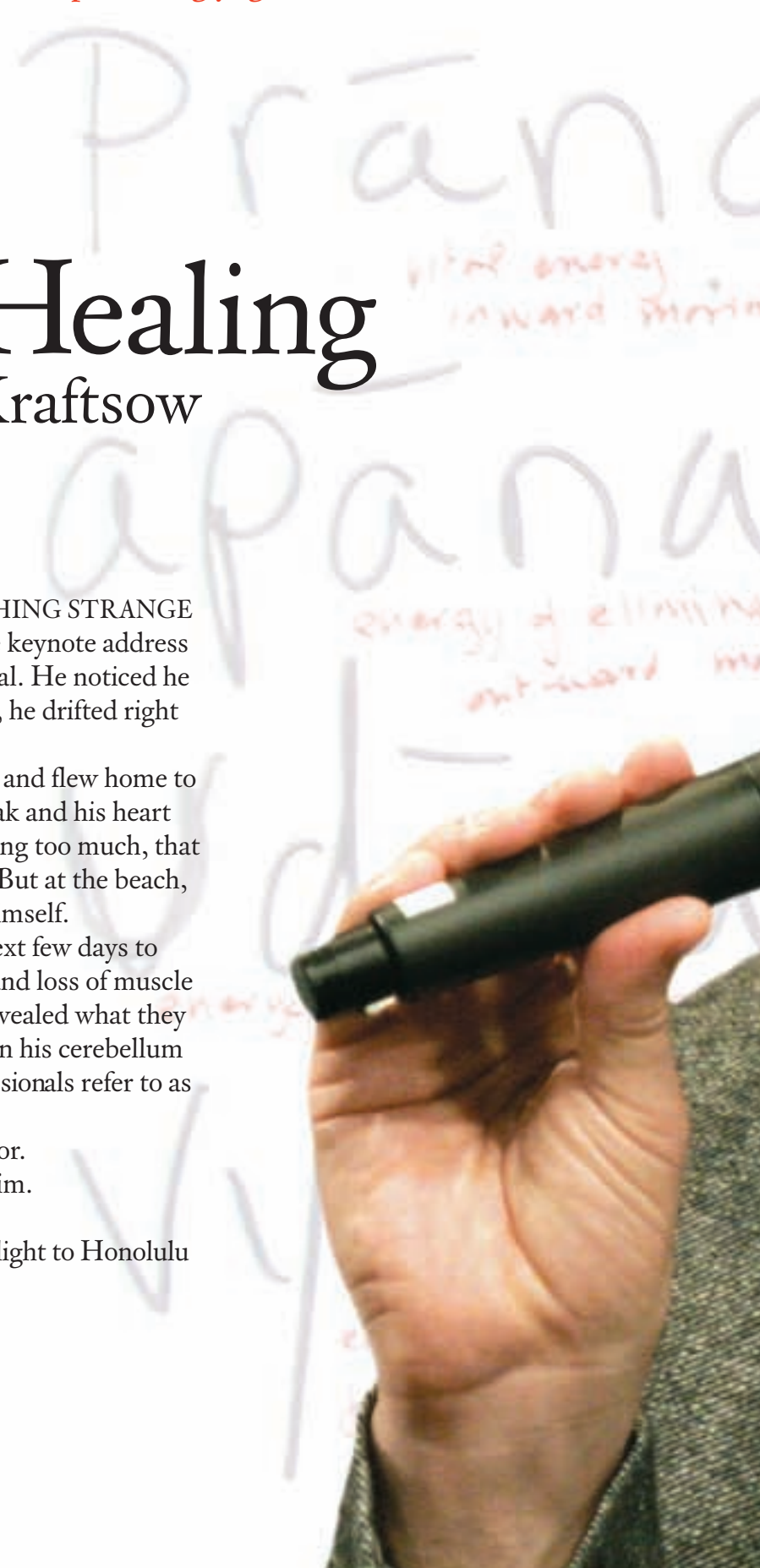
"You need to have surgery," she told him.

"When?"

She'd already arranged for a same-day flight to Honolulu and an MRI at a hospital there.

"Yesterday," she said. >>

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TODAY, IF YOU GO to a workshop with Kraftsow (who has been teaching yoga for more than 30 years), don't unroll your sticky mat right away. Take a seat on the floor or pull up a chair, and prepare to stay awhile. The preoccupation with *asana* (postures) in some quarters of the yoga community frustrates Kraftsow. The notion that yoga is an exercise regimen has become so entrenched in the West that nonpractitioners commonly shrug it off with: "I can't do yoga. I'm not flexible." Not only has yoga been reduced to *asana*,

the Chinese Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu. After his first semester at Colgate University, he spent a month in silent retreat at a nondenominational chapel near campus, reflecting on Lao-tzu's teachings. The chapel had an extensive world religions library. It was there, he says, that he "met Patanjali." In Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, a foundational yoga text, the word *asana* appears exactly twice.

The following fall, Kraftsow traveled to India as part of a Colgate program. For six months, he studied yoga and Hindu mysticism. His yoga

interminable hermeneutic arguments. He passed another year and a half in India until his teacher asked what he was still doing there. "You know too much," Desikachar told him. "Go home and teach." In 1983, Kraftsow opened Maui Yoga Therapy.

From a distance, Kraftsow's yoga sequences can appear undemanding, even mundane. But a closer look reveals their artistry. They are mosaics of movement, breath control, chanting, and other yogic techniques. Kraftsow calls his approach Viniyoga, a Sanskrit

## I COULDN'T DO ASANA OR PRANAYAMA OR CHANTING, AND YET IT WAS YOGA THAT WAS FUNDAMENTAL TO MY RECOVERY AND STABILITY.

but *asana* has been reduced to stretching and what Kraftsow calls "self-chiropractic," a fervid pursuit of textbook alignment. What he will tell you—and presently show you—is that yoga isn't about getting to know the postures. It's about getting to know yourself.

Kraftsow grew up north of Philadelphia in a Jewish family. As a teenager, he was less interested in the Phillies than in

teacher was none other than T.K.V. Desikachar, whom many regard as the father of yoga therapy.

Within months of graduating from Colgate with a degree in religious studies, Kraftsow was back in India. This time he stayed for two years, continuing his training with Desikachar. He returned to the States for a PhD but quit short of the finish line, weary of the

word that refers to skillful adaptation. He's adamant that the practice should be adapted to the individual and not the other way around. In other words, you'll never catch him molding a student into a textbook version of the triangle pose. Instead, he'll adapt the triangle to best serve the student. It's a methodology some colleagues call "ugly yoga," but always reverentially.

Maui Yoga Therapy is now the American Viniyoga Institute, and Kraftsow has traded Hawaii for California. He spends much of the year traveling, conducting workshops, speaking at conferences, and training yoga teachers and therapists. He is 53, healthy, and by many accounts a different man than he was before brain surgery. "He's more gentle, more loving, more present, more clear," says Kathy Ornish, who teaches Viniyoga in Michigan. "He used to be more pointed and opinionated. He's still opinionated because he's so knowledgeable, but he's more diplomatic in his delivery. And he's a different teacher, too. He couldn't do *asana* for a long time. He couldn't do *pranayama*



Kraftsow teaches the principles of Viniyoga at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Massachusetts.

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Lead image of Gary Kraftsow: Andy Kropp / AP Photo; All other images: Courtesy of American Viniyoga Institute

(breathing exercises), either. I think you fully understand the power of yoga when you can do nothing but watch your breath or touch your fingers. The subtle becomes more profound.”

AT THE AIRPORT in Maui, Kraftsow said good-bye to his son.

“Are you coming home tonight?”

Matteo asked. Kraftsow told him no.

“Are you coming home tomorrow?”

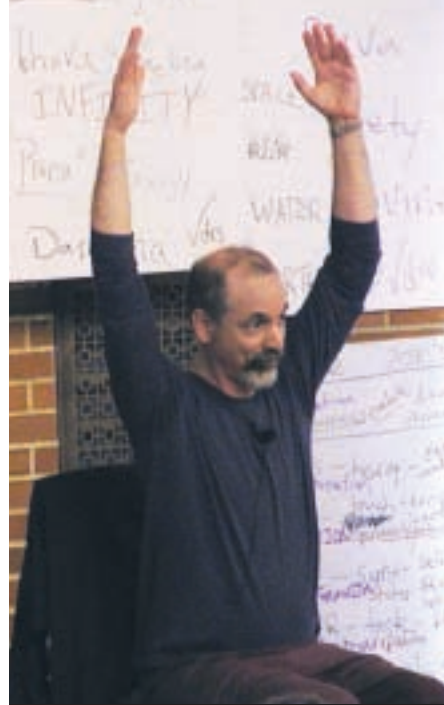
Again, Kraftsow answered no.

His son asked when he was coming home. Kraftsow told Matteo the truth. He didn’t know. Then he got on the plane, leaving Matteo in Maui with his mother. “That was the hardest moment of my life,” he recalls.

In Honolulu, Kraftsow checked into The Royal Hawaiian, a pink-drenched hotel on Waikiki Beach. He had less than a week to prepare for surgery and the possibility that he wouldn’t wake up. “So I did a lot of yoga,” he says, “but no asana.”

The cornerstone of Kraftsow’s practice is *pancha maya*, a model of the human system referenced in ancient Indian texts. According to this model, also known as the *kosha* model, we are comprised of five dimensions or layers: the physical body (*annamaya*), the breath or life force (*pranamaya*), the intellect (*manomaya*), the personality (*vijnanamaya*), and the heart, which is the seat of bliss (*anandamaya*). In the days leading up to surgery, Kraftsow plumbed every dimension of his being.

“The first thing I did was go through my body on almost a cellular level—my toes, my feet, et cetera—with the mantra *annamaya namaha*. It was like touching all parts of myself with awareness and a loving attitude. Then I went through all the physiological functions, system by system, imagining what happens in the respiratory process, digestion, and so on with the mantra *pranamaya namaha*.” The meditation continued with a review of all that he’d learned in life, and the mantra became *manomaya namaha*. He cata-



**Kraftsow challenges the idea that a posture has a correct classical form. He teaches students how to adapt postures to suit their individual needs.**

logued his attitudes and character traits, silently chanting *vijnanamaya namaha*. Finally, reaching the deepest layer, he assessed his capacity for joy: *anandamaya namaha*. The Sanskrit word *namaha* is an expression of reverence, the verbal equivalent of a deep bow.

“I did it for hours and hours, charging my system with appreciation and committing to take care of myself going forward,” he says. The practice was one that he’d never done before. It just came to him: *Om annamaya namaha. Om pranamaya namaha. Om manomaya namaha. Om vijnanamaya namaha. Om anandamaya namaha*. “It left me with a sense of completeness, of having gone over everything in the best way that I could.”

He also practiced breathing techniques and chanted Vedic verses related to healing. He took walks on the beach, feeling the ocean lap his feet. He thought a lot about his reasons for living: Matteo and the new woman in his life. By the time he checked into the hospital, he’d transitioned from shock and anxiety to hopefulness. “I am not saying I had no fear, but fear was not at the forefront of my awareness. I was

cautiously optimistic that I would come through it.”

Surgeons removed a tumor the size of a golf ball from his brain. The news was good. It was a benign schwannoma; Kraftsow didn’t have cancer. But the seven-hour surgery had taken a toll. The tumor had wrapped itself around the fifth cranial nerve, and surgery had damaged the fourth. The left side of his face was numb. He saw everything in duplicate. He couldn’t move for several days, his muscles atrophied, and he dropped 30 pounds. “I couldn’t function, but I could remember the yoga,” he says.

In a neuro ward filled with moaning and screaming patients, Kraftsow took up his prayerful meditation: *Om annamaya namaha. Om pranamaya namaha. Om manomaya namaha. Om vijnanamaya namaha. Om anandamaya namaha*. “I think I began doing it when I became aware that I was alive.”

ELLEN FEIN was diagnosed with acute leukemia in 2000, three years after her husband died of cancer. Yoga had seen her through her husband’s illness and death. They’d practiced together when he was healthy. She

yearned for yoga as she recuperated from a stem cell transplant at Seattle's Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, but her longtime asana-based practice was unfeasible. "I was very sick," says Fein, a clinical social worker. "I could hardly stand up. I was so exhausted. There's just no describing the shape I was physically in."

The outpatient clinic offered twice-a-week yoga classes to patients and their caregivers, and Fein dragged herself to one. "It turned out to be Viniyoga, which I'd never heard of," she says. "I was completely taken with it. It took me to a deep, internal, quiet place more quickly than anything I'd ever done before."

After four and a half months at the center, Fein returned to her hometown of Montpelier, Vermont. Recovery was

agreed to see her in Santa Monica, California, where he was living at the time. Over the course of several days, he constructed a yoga practice that addressed Fein's manifold needs—physical, cognitive, and emotional.

"It was unbelievable to watch him work," she says. "He was operating on such an intuitive level but also with this amazingly broad knowledge base. He was trying to understand who I was from a *pancha maya* perspective. What was this disease? How was it happening? What things gave my life pleasure? How did my mind work? How had chemo affected my brain? He looked at all of those pieces and then wove together a practice that was not at all what I would have expected. It worked on all the different aspects of who I am or who I could be."

rial air. In fact, Kraftsow may be best known as the architect of rigorous studies of yoga's efficacy. He showed that yoga can alleviate chronic back pain in a study funded by the National Institutes of Health, the results of which were published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. He also designed protocols for studies of yoga for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and generalized anxiety disorder. If he persuades the scientific community that yoga can relieve anatomical, physiological, and psychological problems, he will have done much to quash the perception of yoga as calisthenics. But he's aiming much higher. What Kraftsow wants to demonstrate is that yoga can transform us at our very core—and awaken immeasurable joy. There's no protocol for that.

## OF HIS HEALTH CRISIS, KRAFTSOW SAYS, "I WOULD NEVER WISH IT ON MY WORST ENEMY. BUT IF IT HAPPENS TO YOU, IT'S AN EXTRAORDINARY OPPORTUNITY TO GROW."

slow and unsteady. She couldn't eat out, be in crowds, or travel because of her compromised immune system. She developed graft-versus-host disease, a complication of transplantation, with symptoms ranging from skin lesions to severe intestinal inflammation. Her memory was shot. Her hands were arthritic. She bought Kraftsow's books, *Yoga for Wellness* and *Yoga for Transformation*. "I was looking for an opportunity to see who this guy was and to study with him. I was very interested in how to use yoga in a deeper way for my own healing."

In the summer of 2004, finally well enough to travel, Fein flew to Massachusetts for a weeklong workshop with Kraftsow. It was his first post-surgery teaching engagement. "I just didn't want to go home," says Fein, 58. "I felt like, if there's somewhere I can go and live with this guy and study with him, I would do it." Two years later, Kraftsow

The practice includes classic postures that Kraftsow made Fein-specific. As she inhales her arms overhead, she spreads her fingers and presses up through the heels of her hands. On the exhale, she flexes her fingers, curling knuckles toward wrists. She counts repetitions by pressing her thumb on one fingernail at a time. The hand movements alleviate her arthritic symptoms; the counting addresses her cognitive impairment. Her practice also includes 10 to 12 minutes of breathing exercises and meditation with chanting. It begins and ends with a ritual that Kraftsow designed for her. Looking back, she says, "I wasn't expecting ritual. I'd never had anything I would call a spiritual practice."

At first glance, Kraftsow doesn't appear to be the sort of teacher who emphasizes faith and devotion. He doesn't wear flowing tunics or malas around his wrists. He has a profes-

"It's so individual," says Kraftsow. "You never know what it's going to be, what gives somebody a sense of pleasure, fulfillment. What we as teachers are trained to do is read body language. When someone makes a connection to something that's meaningful, they'll light up. That's like a clue, and then you're like a treasure hunter. You follow it, try to bring it out, and help them make a connection to something that can give them some sense of joy."

For some people, joy comes from spending time with animals or children. For others, it's walking along the ocean. Kraftsow urges some students to get involved in charitable work and others to join the Sierra Club. "Pleasurable experiences can catalyze a more peaceful state of mind that can be conducive to healing," he says. "That's what we're looking for at the *ananda* level. We try to help someone find a connection to something—to find

some meaning, some sense of purpose, some love.”

Prayer and ritual have given people a sense of meaning for millennia. But many people feel no affinity for the spiritual practices of their ancestors, says Kraftsow. He crafts rituals for students who are so inclined, choosing images, words, objects, and gestures that have special meaning to them.

“At the beginning, the ritual helps me to settle into the practice,” Fein says. “It also helps me notice if I’m in a rush and not paying attention. By the end, it definitely feels prayerful.” Fein’s ritual includes a three-word Sanskrit chant, which she repeats 12 times. She visualizes the infinity symbol, which has an invigorating effect on her. A painting of the symbol rests on the altar of her yoga room, and sometimes she wears an infinity charm around her neck. “For me, it’s just a good symbol—the notion of no beginning, no end.”

Yoga “feels a lot more like a spiritual practice than I imagined it would,” she says. “From the time I got sick, I was looking for a way to have some sense of internal calm that wasn’t dependent on what was happening to my body.”

Kraftsow could help her find it because he had found it. “Facing death and going through this kind of experience makes you so much more real when you’re working with the Ellen Feins of the world,” he says. “When I work with people who have serious, life-threatening, and terminal conditions, I can understand and be with them on a different level than I could before. There’s a different level of connection.”

IF YOU ASK Kraftsow how his ordeal changed him, first he will correct you. He will call it an “opportunity.” Then he will raise a fist and slowly unfold the fingers. He will tell you that the most important lesson he learned was “let-

ting go”—embracing the reality that we can’t control everything. Of his health crisis, he says, “I would never wish it on my worst enemy. But if it happens to you, it’s an extraordinary opportunity to grow.”

In the hospital, when the haze lifted, Kraftsow discovered new depths of stillness. “The stillness of meditation is one thing, but this stillness—I hadn’t had any experience of it before,” he says.



**Three Generations:** Kraftsow pictured with his late father, Ted, and his son, Matteo.

“I was very present, and I had a sense of priorities. It was almost an opportunity to see what it would be like to be a *sadhu* and renounce the world. I wasn’t attached to anything. I didn’t care about material things. There was a lot of

*For a detailed explanation of the pancha maya model, see chapter one of Gary Kraftsow’s book Yoga for Transformation.*

silence. It wasn’t ‘poor me.’ It was all blissful presence and silence.” That was another gift of the brain tumor.

A month after surgery, Kraftsow was back on his feet. But he was plagued with high fevers and headaches “a thousand times more intense than a hangover,” he says. Cerebrospinal fluid was leaking through the membrane around his brain. Chanting and breathing exercises only intensified the pain. He was in and out of hospitals for six months and finally underwent a second surgery. Doctors repaired the leak and told him to take it easy; he wasn’t

to lift more than five pounds for the next year.

“I couldn’t do asana or pranayama or chanting, and yet it was yoga that was fundamental to my recovery and stability,” he says. Physical immobility deepened

his meditative practice, illuminating his highest priorities. “It was yoga that kept me stable and sane, optimistic and clear.”

If you go to a workshop with Kraftsow, he will start by defining yoga. He will tell you that yoga is a process of transformation, a system for shedding dysfunctional patterns and activating your untapped potentials. In time, he’ll teach you asana. It is, after all, a tool for identifying your unique structural challenges and movement patterns. But it’s just the beginning of the story.

“My desire for all those who have only been exposed to the asana part of yoga is that they have an opportunity to appreciate the depth and breadth of this great tradition,” he says. “When you have a life-threatening or serious condition, you can’t rely on what you could rely on before. Yoga is like a raft that can help you go through these things. But in my case it wasn’t asana. It wasn’t even breathing. It was attitude, prayer. These are going to help you when you can’t do anything else.” ■