

Optimal Health with Gary Kraftsow

By Rebecca Russell

"A spine never walked into my office without a liver attached to it," Gary Kraftsow declared as he kicked off a workshop advocating a holistic, yogic approach to attaining optimal health.

In the U.S., "we sacrifice our health for wealth" in our focus to get ahead, he said. Yet Gary maintains that we have the potential to create, sustain or regain our health. Everyone can pursue optimal health, but the quest is unique to each individual.

Optimal health begins with authentically knowing who you are at every level. "We don't all have equal genetic inheritance, biological inheritance or intellectual capacity. Each individual is fulfilling their own potential. And you can't become something you aren't," he said. A focus on ideals--whether personal appearance, status, athletic prowess or alignment in asana--creates suffering for those who can't attain the ideal. Consequently, "our expectation for our health is part of our health."



Gary visited Moksha Yoga Riverwest on July 20-23 for the first time in three years to lead a workshop for more than 70 attendees from the Midwest, the East Coast and Canada. Gary is credited with bringing Viniyoga to the West. At 19, as a student of religious studies at Colgate University, he traveled to India and began yoga studies with T.K.V. Desikachar. Now, more than 30 years later, Gary is a leader in yoga therapy. His credentials include having conducted studies for the National Institutes of Health documenting the successful use of yoga to treat back pain and anxiety and being founder and director of the American Viniyoga Institute.

Unlike a workshop filled with vigorous asana practice, this was a weekend of rigorous intellectual challenge. Gary explained concepts from the Vedic Taittiriya Upanisad, one of the primary Upanisads that focus on five interrelated layers of the human system (called koshas). His thoughtful discussion was interspersed with examples and humor to keep the content relevant.

During the Friday evening introduction, Gary pointed out that "optimal" is relative to your phase of life. Viniyoga teachings provide an approach to understanding the phase you are in according to your age, preferences and interests, plus what you want to optimize or repair.

Sunrise is the period of physical and emotional development, the time of becoming. In the midday phase, which we enter when we are in our mid-20s, the focus shifts to protecting and balancing what has been developed. In sunset, from age 70, we turn inward, reflecting a greater awareness of what Gary translated as "understanding the meaning of life in the approach of the reality of death."

On Saturday and Sunday, Gary expanded on information included in his second book, *Yoga for Transformation*. He detailed five koshas (annamaya, pranamaya, manomaya, vijñanamaya and anandamaya), reviewed the yogic tools available to develop these koshas and led practices to illuminate the discussion.

Annamaya-Asana

Annamaya is the physical body. Asana is the tool to pursue optimal condition, with a goal of movement that addresses each individual's needs. Throughout the workshop, Gary reiterated the Viniyoga precept about asana: "Rather than conform the body to an external, perceived form of an asana, adapt the form of the asana to suit the needs of your body."

In the Viniyoga tradition, asana practice also brings the body into balance, creates a feeling of lightness and provides movement, "which is good for everything without hurting anything else." Desikachar once said to him, "running is for horses;" Gary explained that he meant that while jogging benefits the cardiovascular system, it can be bad for the joints.

After reminding the students of their time of life--99% of the attendees represented the midday phase--Gary discussed the heritage of different yoga styles. Some more vigorous asana resulted from distinct purposes--such as teaching children discipline or helping Tibetans keep warm in the mountains--purposes that adult Westerners don't typically face. He challenged attendees with the suggestion that the majority are practicing asana that is counter to their physical needs.

Gary identified four focus areas for asana in pursuit of optimal health: how you move, how you adapt the movement to meet your needs, how you breathe (joining the flow of breath with movement of the spine) and how you sequence the movement according to your goals. Movement should address the spine, alignment, joint function, and muscle and ligament conditions.

Yet asana is not only about movement; it's about movement connected to breath. "Asana without breath is calisthenics," Desikachar told Gary.

Gary led an asana practice that combined flow between poses, breath and movement within the pose (a hallmark of Viniyoga). What seemed like a sequence of familiar asanas was enhanced by movement within the poses--such as standing in *trikonasana* (triangle) while raising and lowering the arms and changing the *dristi* (gaze)--which proved challenging. Afterward, Gary explained that the sequence was designed to move the spine, cultivate functional movement patterns and optimize structural potential.

Pranamaya-Pranayama

Pranamaya is the animating force within us, specifically of the physical properties of digestion, immune function and cardiovascular well-being. Pranayama, the adaptation of breath, is the tool for optimizing this kosha.

Gary detailed the goals of metabolic systems, from regulating digestion (to maintain agni, the digestive fire), the cardiovascular system (blood pressure, cardiac rhythms) and the nervous system to balancing the endocrine system and maintaining viability in the urinary/reproductive system.

For the respiratory system, the goal is to increase the breath threshold, which influences physiology. Increasing the breath threshold requires practice over time and can include different techniques targeted at individual needs.

Gary cautioned that pranayama first should be explored with an experienced teacher to avoid a negative impact on your system and to ensure that the practice is consistent with your goals. Beginning with five minutes of pranayama daily creates changes in your life and impacts your system, he said.

The pranayama overview was followed by an asana practice--designed to develop the breath--and pranayama.



Manomaya-Chanting

Manomaya is the mind, specifically the intellect and how we learn. Optimal fitness in this area relies on having an interest in learning, keen memory, sustained focus and the ability to separate perception from memory. Keeping the mind alive and having an interest in lifelong learning are key.

Chanting is the yogic tool for enhancing manomaya. The Sanskrit term is smṛti, that which is heard and remembered. Gary said that during his studies in India, he learned by chanting. While his experience was chanting to the point “you can’t get it out of your mind unless you have a lobotomy,” he offered this counsel for today’s yoga students: “If you do something and you are present, you will remember it.” He led attendees in chanting to demonstrate.

Vijnanamaya-Meditation

Vijnanamaya is wisdom, the way you know who you are. Ancient teachings identify meditation as the tool for development of a one-pointed mind to allow each individual to face what he or she has and is. Optimal vijnanamaya uses meditation to create compassion, tolerance, gratefulness and generosity.

Styles of meditation may include svadhyaya, deep self-reflection that brings you more in touch with who you are, your values and your priorities; pratipaksa bhavanam, the practice of seeing things from a different perspective; and mantra japa, a long-term meditative practice that enables you to transform the mind and your story toward a new direction or goal.

Anandamaya-Prayer, Ritual

Anandamaya reflects the blissful state. It connects us to our innate capacity for happiness. Prayer and ritual (such as chanting) are tools for accessing anandamaya.

This enlightenment is optimized “through relationship with that which is never changing: relationship to God, your higher potential, your true nature,” Gary says. It cannot be contingent on changing circumstances--acquiring the newest thing, seeking entertainment, even through another person--because those aren’t sustainable.

“There is a dimension in everyone that has a connection to [something] greater than what you can see and think,” he says. “Yoga offers ways to cultivate within by understanding and coming closer to yourself and God. The God your heart longs for comes to you.”

In India, yoga is practiced one-on-one and people come together for prayer. Gary believes that yoga studios are replacing houses of worship for many people in the West by offering a place for community and personal reflection.

At one point during the workshop, Gary was asked to distinguish between styles of asana practices. He gave the example of Chicago baseball fans who choose whether to root for the White Sox or the Cubs. “If you love the sport, you find ways to make it work for you,” he said. “One may be more appropriate at different times as you refine your understanding of yourself and your own intention evolves.”

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