

Reflections on the State of the World — 5

Yoga Commercialism and the Environment

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Yoga started out as a purely spiritual, contemplative tradition aiming at personal transformation and liberation. It has its historical roots in the ancient Indian culture of 5,000 years ago. Even in its Hatha-Yoga branch, which emerged only a thousand or so years ago, it had no other purpose than to guide its practitioners to inner wholeness.

With the transplantation of Yoga to the Western world, which was launched by the well-known Swami Vivekananda in the late eighteenth century, an eventful development occurred: Yoga briskly encountered the particular cultural orientation/bias of the West. Today, over a century later, we know that if Yoga has made an impact on the West, the West has made an equal impact on Yoga. It is far from clear whether this vigorous mutual influence has been truly beneficial for both parties.

It is true, an estimated 30 million people in North America are practicing one form or the other of Yoga and, by and large, claim that they are benefiting from Yoga. It is also true that what they are in fact practicing is so-called “Modern Postural Yoga,” which includes little to no spiritual component and therefore represents a very significant departure from Yoga as traditionally understood and practiced.

As a matter of fact, there is a huge rift between the Western Yoga movement and traditional Yoga, which is still practiced and transmitted as a guru-centric spiritual discipline here and there in India, Yoga’s land of origin. Westerners tend to dismiss traditional Indian Yoga as impractical, autocratic, and overly idealistic, whereas traditional Yoga practitioners, especially those from India, have repeatedly voiced their dismay at the materialistic, narcissistic, and even immoral flavor of Western Yoga.

While contemporary Western Yoga with its emphasis on health and fitness has most certainly contributed in a major way to the development of Yoga’s somatic techniques, it also has largely disempowered Yoga by ignoring the most important dimension of traditional Yoga, which is the transformation of the human mind.

Yet, the transformation of the mind is today an urgent requirement, because it is the only way we can approach the present-day environmental crisis appropriately and efficiently. What crisis? Like most people, many Yoga practitioners are, despite increasing piecemeal media coverage, as yet unaware of the utmost seriousness of the environmental collapse that is happening all around us. They think that recycling and a few other ecological measures is all that is called for.

The stark reality is otherwise! We are in the midst of what the majority of biologists now recognize as the Sixth Mass Extinction (look it up at [One Planet One Life!](#)). Every year, some 50,000 species are becoming extinct. Of the 240 known primates (for whom we

tend to care most), many are critically endangered, endangered, or considered vulnerable.

Pollution is so rampant that global warming is happening at an accelerating rate, which scientists even a year or two ago did not foresee. Nature is slow to change on a large scale but when it does, it is difficult to stop it. We are definitely at that tipping point. Studies show that at the present rate, global warming may take 150 years or more to correct itself, providing that greenhouse gas emissions are stopped globally and now. This is obviously not the case and presumably will not be in the near future. Consequently, we must expect the worst to happen, beginning with our generation, which is already witnessing unpredictable weather, including megahurricanes like Katrina, long droughts in one area and severe flooding in others.

When scientists become personal in their presentations and express their deep concern over the environment and the future of our planet, you can be sure the time has come to listen to them. It's just a matter of time before governments will go into panic mode.

In our book [Green Yoga](#) and also in our free PDF book [Green Dharma](#), we are providing a condensed overview (from different angles) of the most impactful and quite disturbing major findings of science about what is happening with our planet and how our civilization is continuing to pollute land, water, and air, and deprive future generations (and possibly this generation) of the means of survival. The Earth is indeed warming up, displacing countless creatures and rapidly reducing biodiversity. The extinction rate has been calculated as being 1000 times higher than normal! Which species will be next? When will it be humanity's turn?

The glaciers and ice sheets around the globe are melting causing precipitously rising sea levels and threatening hundreds of island populations, as well as those dwelling in coastal areas, and also causing flooding in other areas. In Greenland, which is something of a bellweather in matters of climate change, the thick ice sheet is melting more quickly than thought possible, and some fissures have now water falls the size of Niagara Falls.

We have taken the trouble of looking at all the grim details as a whole rather than as mere piecemeal news flashes. The picture that emerged for us was so alarming that we decided to approach and appeal to at least the two communities that have played an important role in our personal lives: that of Yoga and that of Buddhism (which is also a form of Yoga).

Our appeal is simple and straightforward: If you value human civilization and the welfare of future generations (your children and theirs), you must now do your utmost to curb greenhouse gas emissions and help stop other suicidal practices engaged on a global scale, such as the use of all sorts of toxic chemicals in agriculture (producing our food), for water "purification," indoors and on our bodies.

This involves a major change in behavior. It means going against the grain of our entrenched consumer society, which in many different ways (notably advertising) entices and subtly or not so subtly (through deliberate redundancy, for instance) coerces us to consume, consume, consume.

In our overconsumption (traditionally known as avarice), 20 percent of the world's population claims 80 percent of the world's resources. Then again, every year, 20 million men, women, and children are dying of hunger; 850 million are chronically hungry and easy victims of disease. This is not their problem. It is all our problem.

What makes matter worse is that humanity's population is expanding annually by some 90 million people. In the meantime, melt water disappears into the salty ocean or polluted rivers. Ground water levels are rapidly dropping due to overuse. Arable land is rendered toxic and less productive by industrial agriculture, which means less and less food will be available. The air is becoming increasingly polluted and therefore unhealthy. The world's appetite for meat is increasing, which is the surest way of adding to pollution, because livestock is hard on soil, water, and air.

So-called developing nations, especially China and India, are feverishly trying to catch up with the developed countries. This is an inauspicious trend, because their industrialization is responsible for enormous pollution. While developed nations are slowly attempting to control their output of greenhouse gases, developing countries tend to have no legislation protecting the environment. But the atmosphere is shared by all. Pollution from China and India was shockingly found to hover over Los Angeles. And yet, North Americans and Europeans continue unthinkingly to purchase countless consumer goods made in those countries.

As we see it, it all boils down to making our habits as consumers fully conscious and then firmly reigning in our desires. What is it we want? Do we want to have a future as a species? Do we care whether 50,000 species consisting of millions of individual beings are condemned to death every single year? Do we want health for ourselves and our children? Or do we just want to pile up stuff regardless, knowing that we cannot take a single thing or penny with us when the time comes to bid this life goodbye?

We have come to believe that contemporary civilization is caught in a fateful downward spiral and that overconsumption is likely to prove our nemesis.

Practically speaking, we must drastically reduce our level of consumption. This includes walking or riding a bicycle instead of driving the car even for short distances; giving up tourist trips and jet-setting; reducing electricity use; minimizing meat consumption or adopting an altogether vegetarian or vegan diet (which can be perfectly healthful and delicious).

In other words, we must greatly simplify our lives. If we don't, our lives are bound to become very difficult and full of suffering and be forcibly simplified either by fretting governments or Nature herself.

It is now up to us individually to change our direction and manifest in our lives a modicum of wisdom and compassion for the sake of Planet Earth and all her inhabitants. In this task, we feel, Yoga practitioners have a special obligation.