

What is Green Yoga?

by Georg and Brenda Feuerstein

In our book [Green Yoga](#), we make the point that traditional Yoga is inherently green, that is, environment friendly. Why, then, do we speak specifically of "Green Yoga"? The answer is obvious: because much of contemporary Yoga is anything but green. In fact, as part of our consumer society, it is thoroughly "commodified" and plays into the very mindset that Green Yoga criticizes and seeks to overcome. As we put it:

We realize that few adherents of contemporary Yoga have, as yet, discovered Yoga's spiritual and moral teachings beyond the allure of the bodily postures. (p. 12)

However, we qualified the preceding statement by saying:

But it would be too uncharitable to think that they could not do so in the future. Yoga has a power all its own, and not a few people have gradually moved from mere posture practice to a deep commitment to yogic morality and spirituality. (p. 12)

In other words, even die-hard "posturalists" are potentially able to find their way to Yoga's moral and spiritual wisdom and thus also to its profound environmental relevance. Indeed, if they were to carefully consider the matter of pollution—a central concern for environmentalism—they would quickly realize that their aspiration to achieve physical health and fitness cannot ultimately succeed as long as air, water, and earth are polluted. So, just from a purely physical perspective, they should be eager to embrace Green Yoga to help create a healthier environment.

It is our view that a purely physical definition of health is far too narrow. For a more rounded definition, we must also consider our mental and spiritual wellbeing. After all, we are not merely bodies but embodied minds with access to what some psychologists regard as "transpersonal" (spiritual) states or realities. From a yogic perspective, health is the kind of wholeness that comes when we have discovered our "true nature," our spiritual core. This kind of wholeness will always escape us when we identify exclusively with the body or the mind as if they were independent "objects."

Thus, our argument goes far deeper than any preoccupation with one's bodily wellbeing. The environmental devastation we are witnessing today is, for us, primarily a moral issue, for two reasons:

First, we humans stand indicted as the principal cause of pollution and global warming. There is no one and nothing else to blame. Moreover, there is no one else who could possibly rectify the situation.

Second, our lifestyle is a source of endless suffering for countless nonhuman beings, who are unable to correct the wrong inflicted on them. They are the main victims of the Sixth Mass Extinction, which is underway today and which may yet prove our own

undoing. Unless we humans change our ways, the repercussions of our inconsiderate lifestyle will inevitably lead to the destruction of the entire biosphere.

What must we do? First of all, **we must change our priorities**—our values, our philosophy, and then our attitudes and behavior. For practitioners of Yoga this means: we must make our Yoga practice *rigorously* green.

Green Yoga is Yoga practiced *responsibly* at a time of unprecedented peril affection the entire biosphere of our planet.

Green Yoga, then, is *spiritual* practice, with proper attention paid to the universal moral and spiritual values championed in traditional Yoga. The emphasis here is on the word "universal."

Unless we feel so moved, we need not adopt the idiosyncratic religious doctrines and symbols of traditional Yoga as current in Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism. Examples of historically conditioned doctrines are the belief in the existence of Râma, Krishna, Râdhâ, Shiva, Kâlî, or any other deity; the metaphysical belief that Spirit and Matter are eternally in antagonistic opposition; that there are exactly seven subtle centers (*cakra*) and 72,000 subtle channels (*nâdî*) in the body, or that sentient beings are subject to reincarnation. (Of course, reincarnation may yet become established fact; many already regard it as such.) It also is a nonuniversal belief, for instance, that one gains liberation simply by reciting the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* or some other sacred scripture; that the lotus posture removes all diseases, or that some sages practiced meditation while standing on one leg for a thousand years.

When speaking of universal values, we refer to fundamental insights into the human condition and behaviors based on them, notably that nonharming is better than harming, truthfulness better than lying, nonstealing better than stealing, kindness better than meanness, generosity better than miserliness, compassion better than callousness, patience better than impatience, love better than hatred, calmness better than anger, forgiveness better than vindictiveness, integrity better than corruption, and so on.

A universal value is also acknowledging the existence of transpersonal states and processes and the fact that we as humans are capable of self-transcendence and self-transformation, as well as transpersonal realizations through proper mind training. Green Yoga upholds these fundamental axioms of traditional Yoga.

As we explain in our book, **Green Yoga has two ethical pillars:**

First, the core ideal of Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending action), which is captured in the Sanskrit concept of *loka-samgraha*.

Second, the Mahâyâna Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*, the practitioner who is committed to spiritual altruism through the cultivation of *bodhicitta*, that is, the mind focused on the liberation of all beings.

Closely related, these two ideals—one from the Hindu tradition, the other from Buddhism—both simultaneously communicate reverence for all life and the discipline of mindfulness. It is through the cultivation of mindfulness that we become fully aware of

the intrinsic value of all sentient beings and how we can serve them or take them into account in any given moment. It is through reverence for all life that our practice of mindfulness become truly relevant here and now. Mindfulness and reverence relate to each other as the head does to the heart.

Green Yoga, like all traditional Yoga, is a sustained exercise in personal integration—the harmonization of head and heart, will and action, inside and outside.

When we really see the catastrophic damage we as humans and as individuals have done, and are doing, to the environment, our only sound moral choice is to change the way we think, emote, and behave. We must *live* our Yoga, and this must become more than a well-meaning slogan. **Today, living our Yoga means that we must live sustainably, bearing in mind the environment as a whole and future generations of human and nonhuman beings.** The living Earth itself is at stake.

Green Yoga is an opportunity to truly practice traditional Yoga in the context of our contemporary planet-wide crisis and to become a benign presence on Earth.

See also the article [What is Yoga?](#)

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