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## **Yoga, Consumerism, and the Sixth Mass Extinction**

**By Georg and Brenda Feuerstein**

*Namaste. We are grateful to Shubatma for inviting us to talk about the concept of Green Yoga and for being willing to read our contribution to this conference out loud. Regrettably, we were not able to accept her kind invitation to participate in this conference in person. We were unable to do so for the simple reason that we can no longer justify long-distance travel, especially by air, because of the significant contribution to environmental pollution this would entail. We even resolved to restrict our travel on land to necessary visits within Canada where we live. We hope that all of you will understand.*

Now, to talk about Green Yoga means first of all to talk about Yoga. So, this is where we will begin.

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, Yoga had no other purpose than to guide its practitioners to inner wholeness and freedom. This is a very important point, which needs to be appreciated properly because of what is happening today in contemporary Yoga.

With the transplantation of Yoga to the Western world, which was launched by the well-known Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century, an eventful development occurred: Yoga briskly encountered the particular cultural orientation, or materialistic 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 doubtful, however, whether this vigorous mutual influence has been truly beneficial for either party.

It is true that an estimated 30 million people in North America and perhaps an equal number in Europe and other regions of the Western hemisphere are practicing one form or the other of Yoga. It is also true that many, if not most of them, claim to have benefitted from Yoga. It is, moreover, 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 we see it, there is in fact a huge rift between the Western Yoga movement and what we call 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 orientation of Western Yoga. At the same time, Indian practitioners of Yoga are increasingly coming under the influence of Western values, standards, and expectations. Not surprisingly, their own Yoga practice is more and more taking on a decidedly Western flavor.

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 *radical* transformation of the human mind and behavior.

Yet, who would want to deny such a deep transformation is today an urgent requirement, because it is the only way we can approach the present-day social and environmental crisis appropriately and efficiently. The ill health of our society is not in question, even though the population at large prefers to pretend otherwise. But what about the environmental crisis? Despite increasing, if piecemeal, media coverage of our planet's environmental devastation, many Yoga practitioners—like most people—are as yet unaware of the utmost seriousness of the environmental collapse that is happening all around us. They think that recycling aluminum, can, glass, and paper is all that is called for.

The stark reality is otherwise! Possibly Australians are more in touch with this than North Americans. With few exceptions, most Americans still turn a blind eye to environmental issues. Perhaps, they will wake up when their lives are more directly impacted by water shortages, crop failures, frequent power outages, and so on.

We applaud the fact that under the new prime minister, Australia finally ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Better late than never! In the meantime, of course, it has become overwhelmingly clear that the Kyoto Protocol is only a makeshift program, which does not meet even the minimum requirements in order to prevent disaster in the near future. Governments tend to work with outdated projections and at a snail's pace. They don't like to alarm the population, which, however, ought to be warned in no uncertain terms of the impending difficulties and trials. In other words, the Kyoto Protocol needs to be thoroughly revised to reflect the present knowledge of the rapid deterioration of the global environment.

We are in the midst of what the majority of biologists now recognize as the Sixth Mass Extinction (look it up on the Internet!). Every year, some 50,000 species are becoming extinct. Of the 240 known primates (for whom people tend to care the 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 so in the near future either. Consequently, we must expect the worst to happen, beginning with our generation, which is already witnessing unpredictable weather, including megahurricanes like Katrina, long droughts or severe flooding.

In June of 2008, the Australian branch of Friends of the Earth published David Spratt and Philip Sutton's book *Climate "Code Red"* in a PDF version online. In the meantime, their work has been published in book form by Scribe Publications under the same title. This document rightly speaks of global warming as a very serious *emergency*. In August, Andrew Simms, who is policy director and head of the climate change programme at the New Economic Foundation, started an online countdown clock. He gave our civilization 100 months—that's about eight years. After that point, he argued, the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will be so concentrated that severe climate change will become inevitable. Since then, other scientists have stepped forward with similarly gloomy prognostications.

Scientists tend to be a rather conservative bunch. They fear the ridicule of their fellow academics perhaps more than most people. They are reluctant to break out of the mould unless they are very sure of their calculations and predictions. But when they become personal in their presentations and express their deep concern and indeed their alarm over the environment and the future of our planet, we can be sure the time has come for us to listen to them.

We think it is just a matter of time before governments will go into panic mode and start to institute Dragonian measures. When that moment comes, the low-to-middle-income families can expect to take a severe beating. To prevent government interference and loss of freedom, it seems reasonable to adapt to the present-day crisis by making necessary personal sacrifices *voluntarily*.

In our book *Green Yoga* and also in our related book *Green Dharma*, we provided 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 even 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 before 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 *absolute best* 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 (2.5 million tons of fertilizers, for example), for water “purification,” and not least indoors to keep our homes spick and span. Actively search out alternatives! The information is available. Alternative methods and products are also available. It just takes your will, your initiative.

Our absolute best 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 total human population claims 80 percent of the world’s resources. Most of humanity—the unfortunate members of our human family—are condemned to survive on the equivalent of \$300 per person per year. Actually, 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 increasing annually by some 80-90 million people. In the meantime, melt water disappears into the salty ocean or polluted rivers. Ground water levels are rapidly dropping. Arable land is rendered toxic and less productive by industrial agriculture, which means less food will be available. The air is becoming increasingly polluted and therefore unhealthy. The world’s appetite for meat—shockingly even among middle-class Indians—is increasing, which is the surest way of adding to pollution, because livestock is extremely hard on the environment.

So-called developing nations, especially China and India, are feverishly and foolishly trying to catch up with the developed countries. This is a fateful trend, because their industrialization is responsible for enormous pollution. While developed nations are all-too-slow in 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 alarmingly found to hover over Los Angeles. And yet, North Americans and Europeans continue unthinkingly to purchase countless consumer goods made in those countries, driving their industrial engines even harder.

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 gone forever 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 an ill-fated 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. They will be forcibly simplified either by fretting governments taking drastic measures or by Nature herself making even more extreme adjustments on a large scale.

Yoga practitioners face the particular challenge of becoming *green* Yoga practitioners.

History asks of Yoga practitioners that they become spiritual heroes and heroines, that is, people who care about the world they live in and are willing to walk their talk. Above all, they are people who will vigorously dedicate themselves to alleviating suffering in the world not only among human beings but among all sentient beings on this planet.

Green Yoga is Yoga that is based on traditional Yoga's profound spiritual and moral principles and that acknowledges the unprecedented plight of our Earth and the enormous suffering abroad in the world today. Thus, Green Yoga as we understand it is not a new-fangled system, certainly not a product of the insidious commercialism of much of contemporary Yoga.

Green Yoga is environmentally sensitive and conscientious Yoga. Whatever your personal religious or philosophical preferences may be, Green Yoga is possible for you because it simply is deep moral practice. After a lifetime of practicing Yoga in one form or another, we both have arrived at the same conclusion: Either Yoga is morally sound discipline or it is nothing at all. Either Yoga promotes the physical, moral, and spiritual welfare of *all* beings or it amounts to very little.

Practitioners of Green Yoga are what the Buddhists call *bodhisattvas*, that is, individuals devoted to the enlightenment of all beings not merely their own liberation. Some beings are not in a position to attain enlightenment immediately, but this is irrelevant. We must have their long-term benefit in mind while at the same time catering to their immediate physical needs. That's a tall order to be sure. But if we are taking Yoga seriously, what else is there for us to do?

It is now up to us individually and collectively to change our direction and manifest in our lives a modicum of wisdom and compassion for the sake of Planet Earth and all her numerous inhabitants.

We are keeping this talk deliberately short, so that our message does not become diluted. Once again, here are our main arguments:

- Our human civilization is unsustainable and even shows clear signs of suicidal tendencies.

- Our natural environment is in the process of collapse and the world-wide situation is one of dire emergency.
- As Yoga practitioners, we have the moral and spiritual obligation to step out of the vicious cycle of consumption and do everything we can to resist the suicidal propensities of our civilization.
- Regardless of what the rest of the world is doing or not doing, as spiritually committed practitioners of Yoga, we must assume responsibility for the welfare of all present and future beings.
- We must act **now** as decisively as we possibly can.

The present-day crisis is an opportunity to apply the best and wisest principles of living, as we find them embedded in the age-old tradition of Yoga. We hope and pray that you will make the right choices and help our planet to maintain a livable environment for future generations of human and nonhuman beings. As the Buddhists pray:

May all beings have happiness and its cause.

May all beings be free from suffering and its cause.

May all beings never be separate from the happiness that is beyond all suffering.

May all beings dwell in equanimity, unaffected by attraction to dear ones and aversion to others.

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Traditional Yoga Studies  
P.O. Box 661  
Eastend, SK S0N 0T0  
Canada