

# Health Insights Today

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## The Yoga of Caring for the Planet

By Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC

*“Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realize that we cannot eat money.”*

~ CREE INDIAN SAYING

Recently, a couple of my yoga teacher friends shared with me photos of themselves in beautiful and complex yoga postures. These photos were made remarkable by the combination of the yoga posture and the stunning backdrop – a still lake surrounded by long, lean trees; craggy rocks, the ocean waves and the horizon. For many Western yogis and yoginis, a yoga practice is a fitness routine, conducted on a regular schedule in a gym, studio or home. However, yoga is much more than a physical practice, and its most basic teachings challenge us to recognize that we are not separate from each other or from the natural world which surrounds us. Thus it can be said that yoga and caring for the planet go hand-in-hand.

Yogic tradition is rich and its history long. Most yoga practitioners trace their lineage back to an Indian sage named *Patanjali*, who is credited with compiling *The Yoga Sutras*, a series of short aphorisms (*sutra* can be understood as a suture or thread) that detail the philosophy and practice of yoga. The sutras are in some ways inscrutable to Westerners as written, but this should not surprise us for they were initially conveyed orally by a master teacher who explained each *sutra* during the apprenticeship of a student. Today, we rely on extensive commentaries to contextualize and illuminate this ancient wisdom.

### Non-Harming, Non-Greed

Within *The Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali sets out the eight-limbed path of yoga, only one limb of which is the physical postures that dominate western yoga practices. And, prior to practicing *asana* (the physical postures of yoga), an aspirant was historically expected to have integrated into his (and it was usually a male) life the *yamas* and *niyamas* – the moral restraints and observances necessary to achieving the state of *yoga*, which is both freedom and union. Within the *yamas* and *niyamas* are several life practices which coincide with caring for the planet, largely because they remind us that we are not separate from all life surrounding us, but integrally interconnected and interdependent.

The two moral restraints that most obviously challenge the current-day yogi/yogini to live in harmony with the planet are *ahimsa* and *aparigraha*, non-harming and non-greed. While some choose to interpret *ahimsa* as an admonition to honor our physical limitations while practicing *asana*, that is not the most accurate interpretation. This moral restraint invites the yoga practitioner to a deeper consideration of his/her overall pattern of living with respect to all life surrounding him/her. True *ahimsa* involves a daily mindfulness about how our thoughts, words and actions impact our world. Likewise, *aparigraha*, non-greed, teaches us to more wisely steward our time, energy, material things and relationships. It requires honest self-examination (*svadhyaya*) to locate the ways in which we take more than we need – thereby leaving less for others – in the context of not only material goods, but also our time and energy and that of those with whom we are in relationship.

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## Cleanse the Body, Cleanse the Earth

While the United States is not the most populous nation on earth, it is the nation that consumes the most in terms of the earth's resources. *Aparigraha* requires that we evaluate our role as a consumer of the earth's limited resources and take steps to insure that we are not taking more than we need, thereby harming the planet that sustains us and our fellow human beings who also require food, water, energy. One who practices *aparigraha* is also conscientious about not fouling the earth for generations to come in order to satisfy unchecked appetites today.

*Niyamas* are observances that the yogic practitioner actively incorporates into his/her life. The two that are most relevant to a discussion of planet care are *saucha* and *santosha* – cleanliness and contentment. Cleanliness is much more than a matter of showering daily. It includes attention to both internal and external bodily cleanliness, but also attention to the cleanliness of one's surroundings. Cleanliness in this context is not merely defined as a lack of dirt or bacteria, but rather should be understood more broadly. Yoga practitioners seek to nourish and maintain their bodies with the most pure foods, drinks and body care products available to them. This honors the body's natural processes and rhythms, allowing it to focus less on purging itself of toxins added on a daily basis through dietary and self-care habits that are full of chemicals and additives and more on sustaining itself in optimum health. It goes without saying that a yoga practitioner who is breathing deeply neither wishes to inhale clouds of perfume nor clouds of diesel exhaust, both of which have negative consequences for this exquisite gift in which we live – the body.

## Accepting What Is, Then Changing It for the Better

*Santosha* might be considered a sister of *aparigraha*, for if one cultivates non-greed, the avoidance of taking more than one needs without cultivating contentment, s/he might become resentful. Resentment is not a productive emotion for one who seeks to awaken to the union of all life. Thus, the yoga practitioner actively pursues an attitude of contentment with what is. Make no mistake, a yoga practitioner is not resigned to the world as it is and the observance of *santosha* does not require passively accepting one's circumstances. Rather, *santosha* teaches the yoga practitioner to work skillfully in the present, not grasping and agitated about the need for change, but patiently, mindfully creating both the mindset and the physical possibility for a future that is different.

And so it is that my friends who practice yoga love to step outside sometimes and combine their bodily practice with the wonder of the natural world. Attentive to the ways in which the earth sustains and enlivens them, they celebrate their dependence on the resources the earth provides, while drinking deeply of the air, the light, and the beauty that surrounds them. Nourished by this practice, they continue along the path mindful that by living in accordance with *ahimsa*, *aparigraha*, *saucha*, and *santosha*, they might truly transform their lives and the lives of those around them while preserving this precious planet.

**Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC, is Provost and Professor at Cleveland Chiropractic College–Kansas City and teaches yoga in Kansas City.**