



5-2022

The Usefulness of Yoga Towards Interconnected Environmental Liberation

Gayatri Sehgal
Loyola Marymount University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sehgal, Gayatri (2022) "The Usefulness of Yoga Towards Interconnected Environmental Liberation," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The Usefulness of Yoga Towards Interconnected Environmental Liberation

By Gayatri Sehgal

Abstract: There are a great number of interpretations of the term Yoga today, often being an elusive term. Yet we must recognize the importance of questioning which interpretation can provide us with a clear lens into its meaning, given the legacy of colonialism which has warped our understanding of it. Yoga has a great deal to offer us, and some of its imperative offerings for us today are its ethical principles, particularly the dissolution between the opposition of self and other. This paper employs the principles of nonviolence, non-stealing, and moderation from the *yamas* (external ethics) of Patanjali's eight-fold path, as well as loving-kindness from Buddhism. Using a decolonial framework, we see that some of the initial definitions of Yoga have come from a divisive perspective, dissonant with its most common Sanskrit translation to literally mean "union." Even the lines drawn between the dharmic traditions skew them away from the multiplicity model that had existed before colonial involvement. With unconscious intentions to define these traditions from a Western perspective, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism were deemed religions independent of one another, similar to the way colonial powers kept practices divided based on religious definition for Western practitioners. By zeroing into Hinduism, for example, it is evident that this term was simply fabricated to define the indigenous practices of those living around the Indus River and land past it from the European perspective. Yet these *dharmic* practices were often responses to one another, as they intermingled and informed one another throughout their evolution upon the Indian subcontinent. As such, they can be understood to be interdependent with one another. The ethics contained within them as well have been that of non-division between the surrounding environment and animals, lacking the notion of the superiority of humans over non-humans, similar to the lack of superiority of one spiritual path over another. It is this perspective of union which has the potential to refashion our relationship with the other, as Yoga works to both demolish the ego and any false divisions it convinces us exist. The main illusory division which has contributed to violence and theft from the non-human world is that of our innate humanness, which is one of the ego's last efforts while being deconstructed by yogic practices. This is how it may be useful for our modern-day struggle to achieve climate and animal justice. In particular, our survivalist fear-based power struggle with the non-human world has clouded us from seeing that we must surrender to the interdependent truth of compassion if we are to heal the wrongs we have committed to the supposed "other." If we consider the outrageous breeding and cyclical murder of cows and bulls for dairy, a

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

byproduct of their reproductive cycle which is wholly unnecessary for human consumption, we can see the dire necessity to inhabit greater compassion for non-humans. It is this very negligence which continues to plummet Earth's potential to remain our habitable home, as animal agriculture accounts for unimaginable levels of resource depletion and produces all spectrums of illnesses within humans upon exposure or consumption. Only by receding from this violence can we understand that loving-kindness requires surrender of our survivalist nature and redirection towards ethical alternatives as often as possible. In this way, we can remain accountable to deconstruct our inherently divisive ego and achieve collective freedom.

Keywords: Interdependence, Environmental Justice, Yoga Ethics, Decolonization, Anti-Speciesism

Defining Yoga may be one of the most contentious tasks one could ever embark upon; each person may wish to see it from their own perspective. Because of this, there may even be as many ways to define Yoga as there are beings who know about it. Often this question should be left alone, as it may not even resonate with someone to read about a definition of Yoga they feel disagrees with their own, unready to hear its Truth. It can be like trying to empty a swimming pool full of jello with a colander—puzzling and absurd. A lofty Indian parable recalls a spiritual teacher who would not speak to her audience when they said they do not know what she is going to teach, because they would not understand her teachings if that were the case. She also refused to teach them the next day when they said they do know because it would be useless, and thereafter would not teach when some of the audience said they did know and others do not, because those who know should teach those who do not.¹ The teaching of this parable is a non-teaching meant to translate into quietude for the mind, since it is naturally attuned to overanalyzing such questions as, “what is Yoga?”

In our hearts, we already know what Yoga is. Even when coming across its most common spiritual translation from Sanskrit, the definition “union” is all that is needed for one to hear. Yet for those of us that prefer a chatty altercation to deeply absorb Yoga's meaning, we must then wrestle with our intentions to know such a thing. What is it that we and the world need when asking this question? What does the definition of Yoga, and the yogic philosophy imbued within it, truly have to offer? Yogis internationally have already gotten to know Yoga's physical and mental benefits, most prominently through asana and meditation. Yet this is only an ankle caress by the white waters at the shore of what Yoga has to offer our world.

¹ Satish Kumar, *You Are, Therefore I Am* (Cambridge: Green Books, 2002), 63.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Yoga offers a robust set of moral principles which are meant to regulate our relationship to ourselves and our world. These principles are both the most overlooked and arguably most important qualities of what Yoga is. There is a gaping need to discuss them since most Yoga practitioners do not seem to know or care about them and our world is in a worse state of distress than ever before, in dire need of greater compassion. The non-practice and misapprehension of yogic ethics comes primarily from a sense of hierarchy and disconnection. The specific ethical principles this paper will focus on are *ahimsa* (non-violence), *asteya* (non-stealing), and *brahmacarya* (moderation) which are part of the *yamas* (external ethics), the first branch of Patanjali's *ashtanga* (eight-fold) path, and the Buddhist concept of *maitrī* (loving-kindness). Since Yoga is the intentional practice of simultaneously liberating both the self and the other, those who choose its path must incorporate environmental action and animal liberation as a vital part of their *dharma*. The vegan lifestyle is the closest it gets to embodying these ethics.

The paper will unpack this idea by honing in on the following assertions. Yoga developed alongside a deep ecological understanding of Indian land and environmental cycles, and its philosophy emboldens ethical actions towards it. Not only does the Western understanding of Yoga come from a divisive worldview, it also prevents those who practice Yoga from using its full offering of morality towards the "other." The *dharmic* traditions, including Yoga and Hinduism, are indigenous practices of the Indian land and so procure actions that sustain its harmony. The commonly deficient and ineffectual Yoga practice stems from a misconception of its ethical teachings. To get to the root of the modern-day lack of compassion, we shall concentrate on our relationship with animals and the environment. It will require decolonial theology and anti-speciesist ecocritical theory, as well as a few popular sources geared towards encouraging ethical actions for definitive yogis and non-yogis alike.

When we first take a look at the names of Indian spiritual traditions, including Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism, we may see that they are forged as separate and exclusive. This was done by those in power to say so. Since their encounter with colonial powers, they have been defined and studied as religions by the Western theological and anthropological fields. Yet, such a study consisted of projections upon them by the orientalist eye. Sadhguru, a lifelong student and now popular guru of Yoga from Mysore, India, shares insight with his audience in a YouTube video about the "Hindu." He clarifies that this is geographical identity rather than a religious one.² The Sanskrit word for stream is "Sindhu," which was the name given by Indians to the Indus River. The British adopted this into the word "Indus," thus leading to formulations such as "Indu" and "Hindu" to refer to the

² Isha USA and Sadhguru, "What Is the Origin of Yoga and Hinduism?," YouTube, May 8, 2015, educational video, 0:04 to 2:53, <https://youtu.be/W0--cUGIu6c>.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

peoples of India. He goes on to discuss the divide this has created between Hindus and non-Hindus as "coming from a certain indoctrination that anything different from you has to be against you."³ Instead, the term Hinduism can be better understood as something akin to "India-ism" due to its locational reference. It is in this manner that the term shall be understood and will be used as throughout the paper.

Despite regional ties, they are still inherently spiritual practices, and it is often confusing for Western theological scholars and unaware newcomers when spirituality does not neatly conform within the category of religion. Decolonial professor of Asian theology Veena Howard relays that:

Contemporary scholar of religion Harjot Oberoi draws attention to the historical fact, saying that religion as 'a systematized sociological unit claiming unbridled loyalty from its adherents and opposing an amorphous religious imagination . . . [is] a recent development in the history of the Indian people.' Oberoi is referring to the basic world views of Western institutionalized religions, which, prior to the interface of Indian thought with Western notions of religion, had not defined Indian traditions.⁴

Western colonial notions of theology at the time of definition essentially assumed the exclusivity of one's religious group, which extended to defining insiders as holy and outsiders as unholy. Instead, the Indian traditions tend to practice their reverence to both self and other. As such, a fundamental part of their practice entails ethics towards all, whether that includes other people, non-human animals, and the surrounding natural environment. The self/other duality is transcended with a collective sense of mutual dependence. In Indian spiritual philosophies, one's ethics are their *dharma*, a concept that encompasses beneficial actions not only towards oneself, one's interpersonal relationships, or even one's community, but unto the interdependent cosmological net of all that is.⁵

Howard speaks about the ongoing conversations which spiritual seekers would engage in throughout Indic history with those that believed differently than them, a pervasive theme that was exterminated by colonialists for the introduction of exclusivist belief systems.⁶ It was a way to contend with one's preconceived biases and establish fluidity of one's practice, incorporating elements of

³ Isha USA and Sadhguru, "Origin of Yoga and Hinduism," 3:06.

⁴ Veena R. Howard, "Toward an Understanding of Dharma: The Questions of Identity, Hybridity, Fluidity and Plurality," in *Dharma: The Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Sikh Traditions of India*, ed. Veena R. Howard (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 3.

⁵ Howard, "Toward an Understanding of Dharma," 24.

⁶ Howard, "Toward an Understanding of Dharma," 9.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

different -isms which may resonate with an individual or social unit. Respectful, unassuming engagement with contrasting ideas, behaviors and personalities encouraged cooperation, which amplified one's authentic embodiment of their spirituality and allowed for mutual liberation. Indeed, liberation can only be mutual. Egocentrism, whether theological or colonial ethnocentrism, holds back not only the other but the self as well, and thus their networks of interplay and coaction. Since each of the Indian spiritualisms constitute an axiom of *dharmā*, or focused ethical action towards the liberation of the collective, they are better understood as the *dharmic* traditions.

This is where the lines potentially become blurry between Yoga and Hinduism. It must be addressed that though they may not necessarily be the same, they are of the same root with frequent overlap in their ethical premise. Patanjali's Yoga and other renunciate practices, such as Buddhism and Jainism, have been reactions to ritualistic, Vedic text-oriented practices.⁷ It was the latter which non-Indians came to lump together as Hinduism. Yet Swami Ambikananda, in email conversation with Hungarian Yoga author Gejza M. Timčák, said:

In the West, generally speaking, philosophy is shaped outside the boundary of religion. That is not the case in India. So neither Samkhya nor Yoga are isolated from the religion of India, they were arguments made within the context of the religious thought and tradition of their time and as such are theologies. In fact, they are two of the 'accepted' or 'orthodox' theologies within Hinduism."⁸

When interpreted from a decolonial perspective, if we replace the word "religion" with "*dharmic* tradition," and read "Hinduism" as connoting geographical origin, this quote bridges the often confusing relationship that has existed between outwardly ritualistic Vedic traditions and inward-focused renunciate Yoga across Indian history.

The underlying root out of which both Vedic and renunciatory practices have sprung is the land of India, interacting and exchanging amongst one another upon its soil. One can observe the land's impact in yogic principles by the flocks of non-Indians who travel there in search of the spiritual answers Hinduism teases. Those who are attracted to the path of Yoga, and have the means to do so, feel naturally inclined to pursue travels to the holy areas of India, like Varanasi or Rishikesh. The influence of earthy mysticism can also be found in the personification of the Ganges River into a deity which sits

⁷ Stuart Ray Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 95.

⁸ Gejza M Timčák, "Yoga as a Part of Sanātana Dharma," *Spirituality Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 27.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

atop Shiva's head, the worship of holy basil and *peepal* trees, and of non-human beings in the elephant and monkey characteristics of Hindu deities Ganesh and Hanuman, respectively.

The othering of bioecology, which many Westerners may consider reasonable, is challenged in Yoga. As a system for moving towards self-liberation, Yoga acknowledges that the beings around oneself are intertwined in their influence of one another, encapsulating a union not just of the energies within the self but with the outside world as well. As such, these practices have intended to work within the ecological systems designed divinely by our mother Earth. Because Yoga is an inherent connection to the land of India and its spirituality is rooted in its Indigenous nature consciousness, each practitioner's *dharma* is intimately linked with their surrounding environment as well. This means that not only must disciples of Yoga dismantle the ego within ourselves, but its effect outside of ourselves as well to reach liberation.

An often overlooked and major part of ego deconstruction is that at the base level, we must transcend our humanness. This has heavy implications for our behavior towards the environment and other beings. The ego tells us that what we are is everything other than our true nature of simply being. In other words, it tells us, "I am handsome," or "I am a lawyer," or "I am a daughter." At this level also exists, "I am human." What remains after deconstruction is "I am," or pure beingness, which is what pervades in All That Is. Language does not have the capacity to encapsulate this beingness, as it is an adapted product of human limitations, inherently subjective and binary in its nature. Yet it is at this point of yogic deconstruction that we can envision the collective beingness as a matrix of nondual objectivity. Land contains this quality, giving no particular favoritism towards any species or playout of interactions upon its surface. Countless species have come and gone throughout time. And it is from this land matrix that climates emerge, relationships between individual organisms and species build upon one another, and complex patterns and stories form.

In the humility of our egolessness, we can start to see our own species from the land's objective point of view. We are like any other species is to her, and yet our false distinctions between who is more or less important persist within the human consciousness. When we allow our human ego to lead, our survivalist nature favors us as the greatest species in need of highest priority. This human superiority is what allows us to justify violence towards non-human ecosystems, species, as well as individuals, as they are deemed unworthy of the importance humans are already most often given. Parallel is the idea of one spiritual path over another, whereby their division into formal religions impeded the ability to allow multiplicity within peoples' trek towards liberation, a colonized view which has dominated the theological understanding of *dharmic* traditions until recently.

We must recognize this division stems from the competitive nature of survivalism, conditions which many humans in Western nations no longer occupy, but which still dictate our unconscious

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



psyche. The primary aspect to this unconscious perspective is that one must lose in order for another to win, and so the violence enacted for the means of winning are justified. Swami Ajaya speaks about this in terms of the solar plexus chakra (*maṇipūra*) in which the struggle of unionizing the self and other is essentially a war-like competition, and the only way to rise above this struggle is for all parties to surrender.⁹ This occurs through recognition of the nondifference between oneself and the party one is struggling against, as one side must continue to lose as the other wins, a phenomenon which reverses roles in due time. Only after several cycles or simply through the power of reflection, both parties eventually realize that the win can only occur when a solution is found for the benefit of all. Until then, we remain glued to the cyclical, divisive nature of competition, with hatred and fear projecting contortions of the other within our psyche. With the adoption of *maitrī* towards the opposing other, we may reframe our perspective according to love and abundance, an understanding that there are a great deal of materials and activities available to us without any need for violence or exploitation. This heals both extremums interdependently.

Such an understanding is useful for understanding today's issues of social and environmental justice. One such issue that bridges both is our treatment of animals in today's age. The instinctual nature of animals has been demonized, made repugnant and framed as uncivilized. Because humans deem themselves capable of rationale, Western thought believes us to not only be unworthy of the title of "animal," veiling our evolutionarily mammalian ancestral path, but misconstrues us as entirely superior to them as well. Long removed are we from learning non-human animals' true teachings, such as that of occupying the present moment fully, or moving with the innate tides of nature through seasons inner and outer. Our human supremacy stretches into a false hierarchy between beings not only within the animal kingdom, but far outside of it as well. Due to this, the exponential increase of carnage that human industries continue to inflict upon other species and ecosystems in recent times for our narcissistic consumption habits, a blatant violation of *brahmacarya*, is beyond mortifying. It is the source of perpetual grief for the underprivileged humans affected by consequential catastrophes, as well as for the animal rights and climate advocates at work deconstructing this false supremacy.

Even the deification of reasoning over all other emotional and sensory perceptions within human capacity represents a false hierarchy. It has obstructed our innate sensitivity towards others, our anguish upon witnessing another's suffering, or our anger which arises from witnessing the disillusioned systems of today. Each of these is shamed in stark contrast to the encouragement of selfish logic. And when negative emotions are shamed, they grotesquely magnify. The *yamas* are meant to prevent this, but the

⁹ Swami Ajaya, *Psychotherapy, East and West: A Unifying Paradigm* (New Delhi: Himalayan Institute Press, 1983), 261-263.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

other branches of *ashtanga* help dissolve tough emotions by practicing nonjudgment so we may continue to act ethically despite past evidence.

Yogic teachings also suggest compassion for the other is meant to exist not due to our obvious similarities but despite our differences, as they are simply false illusions of division characteristic of physical reality. Dalai Lama XIV, the current spiritual leader of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, says,

Śāntideva argues that, although there are different parts to our body, such as our head, limbs, and so on, insofar as the need to protect them is concerned, there is no difference amongst them, for they are all equally parts of the same body. In the same manner, all sentient beings have this natural tendency—wishing to attain happiness and be free from suffering—and, insofar as that natural inclination is concerned, there is no difference whatsoever between all sentient beings.¹⁰

In the physical realm it may appear as though we are separate, but when one suffers, all else suffers too.

The mistaken belief that independence shall be our priority arises from our blindness to these interdependent workings of Earthen life. In both the most mundane and unusual of situations, we owe any sense of independence to all that is working correctly. If we live alone in an apartment of a city, we rely on farmers to grow the food at our grocery store, laundry people who maintain the nearest washing machines, and electricians who install and repair circuitry at the very least, and those are just the people involved. We may not be aware of the microbiome in the soil of the farmed crops, worms transmuting organic waste into nutritious fertilizer, or the pollinators turning flower to fruit. Hence, even if we decide to live a remote subsistence life, it could never truly be considered self-sufficient, as we would still need to rely on the biosphere and elemental cycles of the environment around us. Yogic practice must include recognizing our relationships with these other beings and cultivating *maitrī* towards them.

Take the human connection to animals, for example. As children, we know without a doubt that we do not desire the flesh of animals. They seem to us just like ourselves—childlike, instinct-driven, kind to us, and go-with-the-flow. We experience seamless, nonverbal communication with them which we do not think to question, whether it was for a few minutes at a petting zoo or for years with a household pet. Yet, as we grow into adults, verbose human neurotypicality gets drilled in as more valuable (even more holy) and communication with the other is made taboo once again. As historian and political science professor Kimberly K. Smith contemplates,

¹⁰ Tenzin Gyatso (Dalai Lama XIV) and Geshe Thupten Jinpa, *The World Of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 86.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

The animals don't stop expressing themselves, of course; it is just that adults learn to ignore them. [Alice] Walker suggests that we are able to learn this kind of indifference or deafness because we have power over them; we don't have to listen to them. In other words, animals' 'inability' to communicate with us is not a natural fact; it is an artifact of our domination over them.¹¹

The only stance which would resurge our open channels of connection with animals is active anti-speciesism; in other words, to work towards demolishing hierarchy between human and non-human animals. Ignorance towards animal suffering does not only hurt the animals, but it hurts us as well. It strips us of our instinctive nature that is inclined to aid them. A Yoga practitioner that follows *ahimsa* would find it their duty to dig deeper when they happen to come across an interpersonal voice or online video which reveals the horrifically speciesist structure of Western food systems. It would be a yogi's *dharma* to question even cultural norms which promote animal violence.

One such example is the superficial worship of cows as the embodiment of maternal energy by Hindus. Behind opaque walls, cows must be sexually violated repeatedly throughout life to bear calves, only for their milk and child to be stolen from them. This results in intense grief and pain for her, the slaughter of the child if he is male, or reinstatement of this cycle if she is female.¹² After several rounds of this, as well as miscellaneous mutilation done to her body, when no longer fertile, she herself is sent to be hung upside down by a back leg where her throat is slit to be turned into beef, regardless of whether the consumer of her milk was vegetarian or not.¹³ Yogic ethics would say this violates *asteya* due to the theft of a mother's milk, a newborn from its mother's company, and both their flesh for hamburgers, all of which is unnecessary in today's abundant world of nonviolent, plant-based alternatives. This inhumanity continues at a wildly efficient, dehumanizing rate because of the demand of culturally ingrained dairy products, both in India and in the West. Whether a cow is pictured next to Krishna or not, whether they are illustrated with happy faces on Trader Joe's milk cartons, it does not discount a yogi's *dharma* to question what is truly happening when food systems objectify animals for profit.

Speciesism does not only refer to animals, however, nor is it distinctive to the modern day. Several large species of animals who had thrived throughout multiple ice ages became routinely caught

¹¹ Kimberly K. Smith, *Governing Animals: Animal Welfare and the Liberal State* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 124.

¹² Earthling Ed, "You Will Never Look At Dairy In The Same Way Again," Rutgers University on YouTube, January 6, 2020, educational video, 0:46 to 5:05, <https://youtu.be/Ko2oHipyJyI>.

¹³ Earthling Ed, "You Will Never Look At Dairy In The Same Way Again," 7:55.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

as the prey of human hunts, driven down the surefire route to extinction within the end of the last glacial period.¹⁴ Our failure to address our lack of ethics towards the other has not only classically been a theme of species extinction simultaneous with human history, but is the sole culprit for today's mass extinctions. Philosophy and humanities professor Sandra Baquedano Jer says,

From the ecocide concept perspective, this manner of relating to other species appears to place human groups at the center of their own universe, one which turns on an egotistical axis of indifference, and in accordance with a pattern within which speciesism, reification, pillage, and destruction have been the rule rather than the exception. The potentially fatal novel aspect resides in the impact of the sheer reach that these self-destructive dynamics have acquired in the present day.¹⁵

She argues that our default speciesist worldview is self-destructive, because in harming the balance we have with others, we destroy ourselves as well.

Veganism is the social justice movement which opposes speciesism. In fact, veganism is synonymous with environmentalism. It acknowledges our misconstrued conceptions around superiority to other animals and their place within ecologies. What is often misunderstood is that veganism places the other above the self in a manner which unconsciously triggers self-defense amongst audiences, echoing Swami Ajaya's articulation of the solar plexus dilemma. And yet, this could not be farther from the truth. Donald Watson, the co-founder of the Vegan Society, defines veganism as,

A philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practical—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.¹⁶

A special focus must be placed on the fact that this definition does not exclude human beings. It would do so only if it used the term "non-human animals" when referring to the boycott of their exploitation, therefore it does not place the other above the self.

¹⁴ Sandra Baquedano Jer, "Ecocide or Environmental Self-Destruction?," *Environmental Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2019): 241.

¹⁵ Sandra Baquedano Jer, "Ecocide or Environmental Self-Destruction?," 241.

¹⁶ "How To Live Vegan," The Peaceful Planet, 2021, <https://www.thepeacefulplanet.net/veganism-ethics/>.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

It clarifies that living by vegan, *ahimsic* ethics means only going as far as it is doable and practical for one's own survival, denoting people who are economically or medically unable to refrain from the consumption of animal products are exempt. Since the self and the other are placed at equal footing, veganism is the acknowledgement that neither is better nor worse. This echoes yogic teachings, as the true work of a yogi is in demolishing false hierarchy of the ego above all others. Interestingly enough, both veganism and the decolonization of Hinduism represent allegories for the ego-deconstructive work that Yoga is all about. Sadhguru rounds up the message to his audience in the aforementioned video by shining a light upon the erroneous creation and upholding of a Hindu identity, highlighting how it fuels the ego when we see ourselves as characteristically separate from others.¹⁷

"Yoga practitioners, we feel, have a particular obligation to live in a green way, mainly because this reflects the essence of the tradition which they espouse . . . In addition, however, we must strive toward creating a healthy mind for ourselves," say authors of *Green Yoga*.¹⁸ Yoga is popularly known to provide many benefits to the corporeal self as byproducts of the path towards realizing the mystical Self. Living vegan, too, has been shown to clear mental fog, eradicate acne, reduce inflammation, reduce one's excess weight, improve athletic performance, along with using only a fraction of land and resources that meat-eaters use. And so, the reasons for choosing veganism include compassion for animals, temperance towards environmental use, and personal health consciousness—demonstrating its wholesome compliance of interdependence. The benefits which accrue for one's body and mind through ethical practices may motivate them to seek the Divine deeper. In the grand scheme, feeding the physical self is also a service to the greater whole when it becomes clear that the self is not divided from others. Once this is realized, Yoga practice becomes not only towards one's own person, but all that which you do for others upon the journey towards interdependent liberation.

The world is in need of people that strongly stand by compassionate ethical principles, and it is those people who have found Yoga around the world that are one of our greatest hopes. They must seek liberation not only for themselves, but for others as well as there is since there is truly no separation between them. Veganism is one of the best ways to go about this since it acknowledges reducing harm as much as possible is how all beings may thrive, the only lifestyle which fits the definition of *ahimsa* in every inch of its practice. Yogis must also commit to keeping an open heart towards those who are different, whether they believe in a different name of God or have hooves different from our own two feet. It is also vital for us to uphold *brahmacharya* towards the resources that we require, as well as *asteyic* boycott of that which is not. Sorrowfully, over the past couple of centuries, our Earth has seen a

¹⁷ Isha USA and Sadhguru, "Origin of Yoga and Hinduism?," 2:52.

¹⁸ Brenda Feuerstein and Georg Feuerstein, *Green Yoga* (Eastend, Saskatchewan: Traditional Yoga Studies, 2007), 12-13.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

dramatic decrease in species and a steady increase in the imbalance of nearly all ecosystems. As indigenous practices of the diverse geology of India, the *dharmic* traditions including Hinduism and Yoga, offer us a bounty of knowledge to correct these human-made catastrophes.

The ultimate *dharma* is a bridge for the gap between self and other, which earnestly allows us to realize the Ultimate Self. Its practice can come from an enthusiastic, open exchange between those of different beliefs. *Dharmic* Yoga practice may, and should, also come from the practice of ethical principles that its philosophy encourages towards the outer world, *yamas*, including the natural environment and other living beings. One of the best ways to go about this is choosing the vegan lifestyle, as it provides hefty benefits for both oneself and others. Yoga may be an elusive term, having practically hundreds of translations from its Sanskrit source, but the thirst for its interpretation must come from an intention of altruism as that is what the planet urgently needs at present from its human practitioners. This is how we create solidarity between different humans and other species, acknowledging our ever-present interconnected goal of liberation.

Bibliography

- Baquedano Jer, Sandra. "Ecocide Or Environmental Self-Destruction?" *Environmental Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2019): 237-247.
- Ed, Earthling. "You Will Never Look at Dairy in the Same Way Again." Rutgers University on YouTube. January 6, 2020. Educational video, 15:30. <https://youtu.be/Ko2oHipyJyI>.
- Feuerstein, Brenda, and Georg Feuerstein. *Green Yoga*. Eastend, Saskatchewan: Traditional Yoga Studies, 2007.
- Gyatso, Tenzin (Dalai Lama XIV), Geshe Thupten Jinpa, and Richard Gere. *The World of Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.
- "How To Live Vegan." The Peaceful Planet, 2021. <https://www.thepeacefulplanet.net/veganism-ethics/>.
- Howard, Veena R. "Toward an Understanding of Dharma: The Questions of Identity, Hybridity, Fluidity, and Plurality." In *Dharma: The Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Sikh Traditions of India*, edited by Veena R. Howard, 1-37. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Isha USA, and Sadhguru. "What Is the Origin of Yoga and Hinduism?" YouTube. May 8, 2015. Educational video, 6:40. <https://youtu.be/W0--cUGlu6c>.

Kumar, Satish. *You Are, Therefore I Am*. Cambridge: Green Books, 2002.

Sarbacker, Stuart Ray. *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021.

Smith, Kimberly K. *Governing Animals: Animal Welfare and the Liberal State*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Swami Ajaya. *Psychotherapy, East and West: A Unifying Paradigm*. New Delhi: Himalayan Institute Press, 1983.

Timčák, Gejza M. "Yoga as a Part of Sanātana Dharma." *Spirituality Studies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 24-31.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 5, Issue 1, May 2022

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles