

Spring 2020

## A Man-Made Disaster: A Yogic Response to the Environmental Crisis and its Religious, Political, and Economic Origins

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### Recommended Citation

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Loyola Marymount University

**A Man-Made Disaster:  
A Yogic Response to the Environmental Crisis and its Religious, Political, and  
Economic Origins**

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Division of Yoga Studies  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Yoga Studies

by  
Grace Ludwig

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## Introduction

“We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”

— Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

In 1962, Rachel Carson published a book that changed the course of public health and agricultural systems in the United States. *Silent Spring* was the first of its kind; it was the first book to gather all existing evidence on the risk of the use of pesticides in the growing of crops which led to the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, and raised public awareness on the subject of environmental destruction and the effects it has on human health as a whole. Though Carson was first and foremost a biologist, she warned her readers about the “control of nature” as a societal flaw, describing this mindset as an idea “conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, where it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man” (Carson, 1962, 297). Her research sparked interest amongst the public and did make great change at the time; yet, here we are, almost sixty years later still struggling with the same environmental devastation that Carson warned about, and to an even greater extent. We are facing the same fork in the road Carson paved for us; why haven't we been able to make the right choice?

The concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in our atmosphere is the highest it has ever been in the last 800,000 years, due largely to the combustion of fossil fuels that come from a number of human-made sources (Nunez, 2019). Glaciers are melting, sea levels are rising, wildlife populations are going extinct at alarming rates, and it is clear that if this continues for

much longer Mother Nature will take matters into her own hands, likely ending in a catastrophic elimination of humanity as we know it. Even as I write, I sit in my apartment quarantined from the rest of the world for an undetermined amount of time due to the unprecedented global pandemic of the Coronavirus, an event that the world has not seen the likes of since the Spanish flu of 1918. Though Coronavirus cannot currently be linked directly to the climate crisis, it may be a glimpse into the future, as it is a direct result of human intervention and exploitation of the natural world. Much like the other pandemics of the past century, Coronavirus is a zoonotic disease, emerging from nonhuman animals, that would not have made it to the human population had it not been for “a global wildlife trade worth billions of dollars, agricultural intensification, deforestation, and urbanization are bringing people closer to animals” (Brulliard, 2020, Washington Post) that ultimately gives viruses greater opportunity for infecting humans. Furthermore, if climate change continues to destabilize the natural world, we will most certainly see “scrambling ecosystems, collapsing habitats, rewiring wildlife” (Wallace-Wells, 2020, Intelligencer) that are essentially breeding grounds for new and stronger viruses and bacteria.

Coincidentally, the rise in greenhouse gas emissions has correlated with the rise in popularity of Yoga in the Western world and the creation of the Yoga industry. According to *National Geographic* (Nunez, 2019), greenhouse gas emissions have increased by more than a third since the Industrial Revolution, and Yoga practitioners in the West have seen a similar exponential increase over the last century. Wonderful! You may be thinking. Aren't Yogis the epitome of peace, love, and equanimity? Unfortunately, while these may be at the foundation of Yoga's philosophical teachings, in recent years Yogis have not been shown to be at the forefront of environmental activism. In fact, one study shows that Yogis

are actually less likely to make pro-environmental choices than non-Yogis are (Weisner & Cameron, 2020, 1). This is likely because modern “pop culture” Yoga adheres to the Western consumer-based Capitalist framework that we know to be one of the leading contributors to the climate crisis. As explained by Andrea Jain in *Selling Yoga*, “the most successful attempts at diffusion [of Yoga into Western culture] occurred when proponents consistently did concede to consumer cultural trends. These were most often the postural yoga proponents” (2015, 71). As Jain puts it, “postural yoga reflects the dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture, which links the self to the body so that the attainment of health and beauty is central to the transformative, and transcendent process of self-development” (2015, 105). In other words, the “goal” of modern Yoga—which could be debated at length, but in short can be summed up as a “means to prevent more suffering” (Jain, 2015, 107)—cannot be achieved without active participation in the consumer-based culture of capitalist society.

While this is troubling, Yogis are not the only culprits contributing to Western capitalism, nor is Western capitalism the only contributor to the environmental crisis. In fact, the roots of the environmental crisis may be traced all the way back to the beginning of Western culture itself, with the introduction of the patriarchy through Christianity. Christianity advocates for a dualistic relationship between Man and nature—and let me be frank, I do not mean “Man” including all of humanity, but Man alone—which ultimately led to mindsets that feel entitled to the exploitation of women and non-human beings. This is outlined in the *Bible*, as God says: “Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all the earth itself and every creature that crawls upon it” (Genesis 1:26, Holy Bible). Fast-

forward a few hundred years, and we see that the combination of Christian dualism and Western technology has made for an incredibly anthropocentric and patriarchal society that can't help but overtake and destroy the natural world.

What's more, these ideals are so strong and so ingrained in human society today that even traditions that attempt to promote a symbiotic relationship with nature are unable to make change, for Western culture and behavior is an underlying component in the understanding of any new framework it comes into contact with. Though Yoga in the West advertises a lifestyle of unity and peace with the world around us, it is, in actuality, creating a population of people ultimately unaffected and unconcerned with the world around them, for Yogic teachings have been misinterpreted and misconstrued when taught through the Western lens.

Why is it that the practice of Yoga in the West has become a means to disassociate with the world around us? And can Yoga, as it is understood in today's context or from the various philosophies that it encompasses, be used as a tool for ecological social change despite the current trajectory of consumer-oriented Yoga? I feel strongly that the modern Western interpretation of Yoga is far from reaching its full potential, and while it is currently inhibiting positive ecological progress, if it is re-examined and re-structured, Yoga has the power to make all the difference.

This paper aims to answer questions such as these, as well as provide suggestions for utilizing Yogic practices as a means for combating the climate crisis. The combined philosophies of Buddhism, Jainism, and Sāṅkhya that are key components of the Yogic framework can provide answers and solutions to the underlying causes and challenges of the global ecological crisis. To begin, this paper will provide an overview of the historical,

religious, and political roots of the climate crisis. Following will be an analysis of the philosophical teachings within Hinduism that are misconstrued within Western Yogic teachings and are preventing the practice of Yoga from contributing positively to the environmental crisis. The second half of this paper will outline the responses to the ecological crisis that are provided by Jainism, Buddhism, and Sākhya, three of the major philosophical systems that have influenced the creation of Yoga. Lastly, I will outline various Yogic teachings that have been taken from Jainism, Buddhism, and Sākhya that can be used to empower Western individuals to make lifestyle changes that can lead to ecological stability and prosperity.



## Chapter 1

### The Religious, Political, and Economic History of the Ecological Crisis

Lynn White Jr., in his famous article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967) was the first to bring to attention the idea that Western culture has been on a path to ecological devastation from the very beginning of its creation. He states that from the moment “man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them” (White Jr., 1967, 1205) as it presented in the book of Genesis—which can be thought of as the foundation of Western civilization—humanity was on the path to environmental destruction. Man is not created as another aspect of nature; God created Man in his image with the introduction of Adam, and all other creations were for the purpose of serving Man (White Jr., 1967, 1205). Even the creation of Eve was an afterthought, intended to keep Adam company, and the role of women in society is further diminished when Eve eats the forbidden fruit that unleashes the wrath of God and ultimately the wrath of Man. As punishment for this act, God states: “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing / in pain you shall bring forth children / yet your desire shall be for your husband / and he shall rule over you (*Holy Bible*, Genesis, 3.16). Because of this initial story, Western culture, which is centered around the Judeo-Christian traditions, has always viewed its relationship with nature as domineering. It has never been “man and nature,” but rather “man versus nature” which arguably could be equated to “man versus nature and women.”

Though patriarchal societies existed long before Christianity, they were further sustained and enforced through Western colonization which ultimately placed Christian values onto the evolution of all other aspects of societal development. White argues that

today “all significant science is Western in style and method, whatever the pigmentation or language of the scientists” (White. Jr, 1967, 1204). Regardless of where you are in the world, this Western Judeo-Christian lens has been overlaid onto the culture of the people. White explains this is likely because many early Western societies were more advanced in the field of technology during the early stages of colonization than some of their counterparts. This helped them to overtake other, more vulnerable societies, and eventually enforce their culture and religious beliefs onto their empire. White explains that by CE 1000, and possibly even several hundred years earlier, the Western Arabic cultures began to apply waterpower to industrial processes, followed by the harnessing of wind power in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (White Jr., 1967, 1204). In 1444, Turkish clergyman Bessarion wrote a letter to home from his travels in Italy exclaiming his amazement at the “superiority of Western ships, arms, textiles, glass” and was “astonished by the spectacle of water wheels sawing timbers and pumping bellows of blast furnaces” (White Jr., 1967, 1204)—sights he had never seen in the Near East. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century technological differences between the West and East were so great that colonization and conquering of other geographical locations and civilizations was an attainable task, and it was inevitable that Western religion and culture would be overlaid onto the culture of the conquered societies.

Though modern science is often discussed as beginning in 1543 with the publications of Copernicus and Vesalius’s works, the distinctive Western-centric tradition of science and technology actually begun in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with the mass translations of Arabic and Greek scientific works into Latin (White Jr., 1967, 1204). Science and technology are often thought of as being very separate fields from religion; however, the religious beliefs of individuals are so fundamental to one’s behavior that it is incredibly

difficult to separate one's actions from their religious beliefs. Thus, the anthropocentric and patriarchal nature of Christian-based civilization that was already ingrained in Western society combined with their advancement in technology ultimately led to unstoppable anthropocentric and androcentric scientists and engineers. Fast forward a few hundred years, and the devastating result of this needs no explanation.

The perpetuation of the Christian-based patriarchy is troubling with regards to humanity's relationship with nature, but that is not the only ecological concerns this framework has produced. Consumerism, which is a product of Western Capitalism, is also a result of systematic patriarchy. In the simplest terms, consumerism is a "process that combines behaviors in order to utilize economic goods" and is a "means to have a good or a service, to own it, to use or to dispose it in order to satisfy particular needs" (Firat, et al, 2013, 183). In its beginning stages, the intentions of consumerism were pure and used only as a means to obtaining necessities; after time, however, consumerism has become a means to gain social status and encourage competition in a framework that ultimately has no end-goal. Sadly, as consumption increases, "there is no increase in satisfaction, causing unlimited consumption" (Firat, et al, 2013, 184). Marxist-feminist work explains that without an institutionalized patriarchy, Capitalism would not be sustainable:

Capitalism relies on the ongoing and violent expropriation of women, indigenous peoples, nonhuman animals, and the biosphere...both "women" and "nature" have a similar, indispensable function in the mechanism of expropriation: they occupy analogous positions in the logic of capitalist accumulation in which the mechanisms of exploitation are dependent on the invisible base of expropriation. (Oksala, 2018, 223)

Moral implications aside, one of the main problems with Capitalist consumerism is that it is incredibly destructive to the environment. Research shows that as much as 20% of all carbon emissions are directly attributed to individual consumerism (Ivanova, 2015, 526). What's more, up to 80% of these emissions are actually caused by "household consumption" in the form of secondary impacts, or the effects caused by the production of the goods and products we buy (Ivanova, 2015, 526). For example, the amount of water it takes to raise cattle, butcher it, and deliver it to your grocery store is astronomical in comparison to the water we use to wash the dishes or take a shower. This means that consumer choices, which are perpetuated by patriarchal Capitalist consumerism, are much more directly related to carbon emissions than personal household choices.

The androcentric and anthropomorphic framework of our culture is often embedded so deeply into society that it's difficult to unveil all complications within it. There are, however, some more tangible environmental-related results of the institutionalized patriarchy that stems from the Christian framework that are worth mentioning. For example, studies show that men on the whole are less concerned with the state of the environment and are less likely to perform pro-environment behaviors than women. Men litter more, recycle less, eat more meat, are less likely to buy an electric car, less likely to vote according to environmental concerns, and generally leave a larger carbon footprint than women do (Brough et. al, 2016, 567). The reason for this is not biologically concerned with sex, but rather a direct result of the cultural notions of gender outlined in the system in which we live. Under the patriarchy, women are not only expected to be more selfless, caring, and empathetic, but they are taught to value and embody these traits. Men are taught the exact opposite; expressing nurturing and empathetic behavior shows

vulnerability and it lessens one's masculinity, and the sheer act of caring for nature is considered "feminine." Studies show that men are less likely to donate to environmental causes with names such as "Friends of Nature," as opposed to charities with so-called "masculine" logos, and are also less likely to use reusable shopping bags because they identified single-use plastic bags as more "masculine" (Brough, et. al, 2016, 576).

Though it may feel extremist to call out Christianity, the patriarchy, and Capitalist consumer culture in this way, we can't expect to fix the damage it has caused without recognizing its role in the problem. Though many scholars have successfully outlined these systematic problems, few have been able to give concrete solutions. Unfortunately, one of the only scholars to recognize these concerns and provide well-thought-out solutions has yet to have her ideas manifested. Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her book *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1992), like Lynn White Jr., feels the ecological crisis is rooted in the patriarchal nature of Western society which ultimately stems from the dualistic framework of Christianity that places Man above nature and Woman (Ruether, 1992, 4). Ruether states: "the way these cultures have constructed the idea of the male monotheistic God, and the relation of this God to the cosmos and its Creator, have reinforced symbolically the relations of domination of men over women, masters over slaves, and (male ruling-class) humans over animals and over the earth" (Ruether, 1996, 3).

Ruether dedicates an entire third of her book to providing remedies to the ecological crisis that involve spiritual reframing and rethinking within the Western Christian context. For example, Ruether suggests looking at "Christ as both creator and redeemer of the cosmos, and not just of human beings separated from the cosmos" which is a central part of the New Testament but is often left out of modern Christian teachings

(Reuther, 1992, 229). She suggests viewing the cosmos as “the mediating context of all theological definition and spiritual experience” (Reuther, 1992, 229), so that our understanding of God and humans can shift into a place where we, as humans, will be able to have a more interdependent relationship with nature.

The irony of Reuther’s work is that she points out that the problem of climate change stems from the patriarchy, and ultimately no progress or change has been made as a result of her work. And, while Reuther’s effort was valiant and deserving of the kind of recognition that it may have gotten had it been written by a man, she does miss a key factor. Reuther felt that the Christian framework that eventually led humans to a domineering relationship with nature could be re-interpreted and then in turn applied to solve the problem it created. This, to me, seems impossible. Never in the existence of humanity and society have we seen entire groups of humans realize that they were wrong about something and in turn, change their actions to reflect this realization. What we have seen, however, is individuals and sometimes small groups of people having moments of clarity, often given to them by the divine, and then branching off from the rest of the group to create something new. We’ve seen this pattern many times throughout history: Christianity being the original branch away from Judaism, which led to Catholicism, which led to Lutheranism, and so on, as just one example.

I think it was a mistake of Reuther to believe that Christianity can be re-worked. Rather, those working under a Western framework (which may very well be synonymous with Christian) must branch off and create something new. And this, I believe, is where Yoga can come into play.

## Chapter 2

### Advaita-Vedānta as our Current Model of Modern Yoga

The leading spiritual tradition that holds as the foundation of modern Western Yoga—and by “modern Western Yoga” I mean the postural, or *āsana*, based classes that are practiced as a physical fitness regime with mindfulness and meditation practices sprinkled in—is the Advaita-Vedānta school of Hindu philosophy. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that most Western yogis know virtually nothing about Hinduism, aside from perhaps a few names such as Lord Shiva or the elephant God Ganesha who has become a popular figure amongst spiritually fascinated Westerners. The Advaita-Vedānta school of Hinduism is likely an even lesser known term, even though Western Yoga’s single most influential philosophy stems from this tradition: the idea of oneness. Oneness, also known as interconnectedness, is the idea that all living beings on this planet and within this universe stem from the same source energy. Though Advaita-Vedānta is certainly not the only school of thought that engages with the idea of interconnectedness, modern Western Yoga utilizes Advaita-Vedānta’s interpretation of oneness to a greater extent than it does other tradition’s interpretations.

Advaita-Vedānta is under the assumption that “each individual self (*ātman*) is, in the end, no different from and infinitely connected to an impersonal unitary consciousness (*brahman*)” (Miller, 2018, 3). Because of this, Advaita-Vedānta is monistic, non-dual, and believes that everything we interpret as apart from ourselves is, in actuality, the same as us, which is also the same as God, or *Brahman*. This is in contrast to, say, the Buddhist interpretation of interconnectedness, as Buddhism does not engage with the notion of a

soul or God. Though interconnectedness exists in both philosophies, Advaita-Vedānta asserts that after liberation, one will be united with God. Liberation in Buddhism, which is called *nirvana*, is simply a state in which one is freed from the bonds of *karma* and the cycle of rebirth. Yoga in the West has taken on the Advaita-Vedānta interpretation of oneness for one simple reason: it has more similarities to Christianity.

As we know, a large part of all transnational spread of culture can be attributed to the spread and enforcement of Christian ideals which sought to bring down Pagan and non-monotheistic religious traditions. Colonization of India in general was for the purposes of spreading Christianity, and the texts we often cite as the most authoritative texts on Yoga are such because Western authorities claimed them to be so. For example, although the *Yoga Sūtras* is commonly thought of as the most authoritative text on Yoga today, it was actually not a text that most Yogis were reading and practicing from until the early 1800s. At this time, according to Yoga scholar Mark Singleton (2008, 80), the British were attempting to find a piece of Indian culture they could connect with and use as a method for getting the Indians to buy into their rulership. The *Yoga Sūtra*, which is reminiscent of Western Protestantism because of its emphasis on *Iśvara*, or God, fit British ideals and quickly became an authoritative text on Yoga through their translations and enforcement (Singleton, 2008, 84). Similarly, Advaita-Vedānta became a very popular practice when it made its way to the United States through Swami Vivekananda in the early 20th century, as it emphasized ideas Westerners were already familiar with (Strauss, 2005, 35).

Oneness in Advaita-Vedānta asserts that I am you; you are me; we are both made up of the same elements that the tree outside and the birds chirping in it are made out of. And, though it may be hard for our simple human minds to understand, the notion that we



are living separate and independent lives from one another is simply an illusion. My body, your body, the trees and the birds in the tree's bodies do not really exist; for all that exists is spirit (or God or *Brahman*--the name itself is an illusion, as well) and we are all just a part of spirit. Once we have realized this truth, we will be reunited with God. If you've attended a Yoga class in the United States or other Western country you've likely heard this before. Perhaps you've been laying in *savasana* while the teacher reads a verse from the *Upaniṣads* (900-600 BCE)—the ancient Indian texts that are among the first to mention Yoga and that Advaita-Vedānta stems from (Feuerstein, 2012, 63)—that reads something like this:

Those who see all creatures in themselves / And themselves in all creatures know  
no fear. / Those who see all creatures in themselves / And themselves in all  
creatures know no grief. / How can the multiplicity of life / Delude the one who  
sees its unity? (*Isha Upanishad*)

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. You may have come out of *savasana* and thought to yourself, “yes, that’s right! I *am* one with all beings!” You may have felt as if you cultivated some sense of compassion and empathy. The irony of experiences such as these is that while the intentions of the teacher and student both were pure, and perhaps it did bring practitioners a sense of reverence and peace, it was, ultimately, encouraging practitioners to relinquish feelings of control and responsibility for societal issues. The idea that we are all interconnected and “one” may sound like a very pleasant mindset to live under; however, it is curating a culture of people who are content with and disinterested in the world around them. This is because, as J. Baird Callicot explains, the “Hindu perspective is that the world in which environmental problems are manifest is either a

beguiling appearance or an outright illusion. Hindu religious practice seeks to transcend this world, not to improve it” (2000, 500). In the modern Western context, this is often misinterpreted and used as a justification for selfishness and pessimism. After all, if all of life is an illusion and we are going to be united with God after we have left our bodies, why bother with anything besides ourselves?

In its traditional setting, this Vedāntic philosophy did not have such adverse effects. On the contrary, Vedānta and Hinduism on the whole are incredibly peaceful traditions that promote a positive and symbiotic relationship with nature and have followed this path into present day India. Notions of *karma* and *dharma* are among the first Hindu concepts that come to mind, and it is widely known that Hindu practitioners do not eat cow meat for their relationship with the cow is sacred. This, paired with the many depictions of worship of the natural world in Vedic scripture, the reverence for the elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether, it is clear that despite the goal of transcendence, the relationship one has with nature is of great importance to Hindu philosophy (James, 2000, 512). In fact, it could be argued that one cannot transcend beyond this world without some sort of engagement with the natural world. What’s more, several modern-day ecological movements in India are fundamentally Hindu, such as the Chipko resistance movement, named for the Hindi term that can be roughly translated to “tree hugger” (James, 2000, 507). If Hinduism, and by extension Advaita-Vedānta, were entirely unconcerned with the physical world, it seems unlikely that these movements would have been created in the first place.

However, the modern Western Yogic interpretation of these Hindu and Advaita-Vedāntic concepts of oneness and transcendence are misguided. Westerners simply do not have the same fundamental understanding of the “self” that Vedāntans do, and therefore

cannot have the same understanding of interconnectedness or transcendence. Westerners are attracted to Advaita-Vedānta for its emphasis on God, but the very nature of the Western Judeo-Christian God is dual—Man is separate from God—while Advaita-Vedānta is non-dual—all beings are the same as God. When one discusses the “self” in an Advaita-Vedānta context, they are talking about their soul that is ultimately the same as God (James, 2000, 501). Regardless of if a Westerner is referring to their soul or ego when discussing their “self,” it is not the same thing as God. To talk about oneself in Advaita-Vedānta *is* to talk about God. Furthermore, to say that “I” am practicing Yoga in either of these contexts is to say extremely different things.

This difference in the Western and Eastern understanding of “the self” can be seen clearly when comparing its influence on cultures and infrastructures. The Indic model, regardless of what religion the society practices, largely emphasizes wholeness and equanimity within the larger group. The Western model emphasizes hierarchy and a chain of command. We see this within the Catholic church with the Pope, as well as within Western corporations with the model of a CEO and individuals working their way up the corporate ladder. The religious systems of the East have monks and nuns, but their system of religious leadership as well as one’s role in society is not based on power and competition in the way that as it is in Western culture. Even the late hierarchical caste system of India showed the role of interconnectedness within society. Interconnectedness does not exist in the Western model, as hard work and dedication will (in theory) allow one to earn a higher social status regardless of their upbringing. In the caste system, one’s social status is a birth right and ultimately necessary for the continuation of harmony within the whole.

What's more, it appears that the ideas of oneness and transcendence are the only Advaita-Vedānta concepts implemented into Western Yoga, and when they are placed into the Western context, which is dualistic and values individualism and freedom, they become further skewed and over-simplified. And unfortunately, this distorted version of Advaita-Vedānta ultimately serves only to feed the Western consumer-oriented "self-care" movement. In an article discussing the negative environmental contribution of the Yoga tourism industry, Patrick McCartney states that Yoga "is an integral component of the wellness ideology of "self-care" which proposes that the world will be healed through the self-absorption of the self-centeredness of the atomized, individualized, docile consumer" (McCartney, 2019). Often thought of as one of the most positive things to come out of 20th century America, in reality the "self-care" movement is fueled by deceptively troubling Capitalist-based intentions. In a 2017 *New Yorker* article, "self-care" is defined as being synonymous with "self-reliance," which both "stem from the puritanical values of self-improvement and self-examination" (Kisner, 2017, 14). The problem with this is that it becomes the responsibility of the individual to find a 'self-care solution' to their existential anxiety or oppression. Kisner states that under this model "victims will become isolated in a futile struggle to solve their own problems rather than to collectively change the systems causing them harm" (Kisner, 2017, 14). Those suffering are told that it is not only their own problem to fix their suffering, but it is their fault that they are struggling, too, because they haven't been practicing enough self-care. And instead of being given tools to find their own sense of peace and mental stability, they are shown advertisements that show facial sheet masks and Yoga classes solving all of their problems—and they believe it. And in a capitalist consumer-based society, this is nearly impossible to achieve. Ultimately,

individuals are taught to feel responsible for their own happiness in a society where happiness is expensive and virtually unattainable (Kisner, 2017, 14).

Moral implications of this aside, one of the main issues this creates is that it cultivates attitudes that are unconcerned with the world around them because they are too wrapped up in their own lives. Reminiscent of the Advaita-Vedānta ideal of transcendence, Kisner describes captions on social media platform Instagram containing the hashtag #selfcare as eerily “Trump-like” (Kisner, 2017, 14). Among these are captions such as: “Completely unconcerned with what’s not mine;” “But first, YOU;” and “I can’t give you a cup to drink from if mine is empty.” (Kisner, 2017, 14). Those who do feel that their self-care ‘game’ is strong, have captions such as “I can’t change my circumstances, but I can focus on me;” and “Happiness comes from within” (Instagram, 2020). Though these all sound like nice sentiments, the reality is that they are affirming attitudes that believe that one’s only obligation is to oneself, and what is happening in the world around them is not their responsibility. This is then further justified by Western Yoga teachers telling practitioners that because of the laws of interconnectedness, by taking care of oneself we *are* taking care of the world around us.

One Yoga practitioner, in a study analyzing the sensorial effects a Yoga posture practice has on the minds of Western yogis, is described as pointing to her heart and stating: “at least if the world burns down tomorrow, I’m okay in here.” Ironically, this study framed this statement as a positive remark, describing the yogi as having experienced “equanimity” that led the practitioner to “greater acceptance of [the globe’s] current state whether nature is healthy or damaged” (Weisner & Cameron, 2020, 15). The study in question concluded that in some instances Modern Yoga practitioners are even

less likely to perform pro-environmental behaviors than non-Yogis, and this may be directly related to this Advaita-Vedānta teaching that aims at relinquishing oneself to the Divine. Weisner and Cameron explain: “Changing the environment through intentional pro-environmental behavior may present a contradiction to the intention of ‘surrendering’ perpetrated by yoga, and/or may reveal practitioners’ own contradictory practices that they nonetheless accept and decline to resolve” (Weisner & Cameron 2020, 18). In conclusion, Weisner and Cameron believe that “Serious attempts to cultivate sustainability through [modern postural yoga] must be done without neoliberal ambitions that associate bodies with capitalist principles” (Weisner & Cameron, 2020, 19).

Though the Hindu Advaita-Vedānta school of philosophy is an important piece of Western Modern Yoga and the Yoga traditions on the whole, it’s current placement within the framework is inappropriate and misguided and perpetuates selfish and anthropocentric behavior. Advaita-Vedānta in its pure form is incredibly altruistic, and historically has cultivated a group of compassionate and empathetic people that live symbiotically with the world around them. Taken out of context and placed onto a system that already encouraged individuality and exploitation, however, Advaita-Vedānta has not proven to be as helpful.

### Chapter 3

#### The Jain, Buddhist, and Sākhyan Perspectives on Ecology

##### **Jainism:**

While the current system of philosophy that modern Western Yoga embodies is largely unhelpful with regards to the ecological crisis, there are countless components within the Yoga traditions that may initiate great change if they were to be implemented. One of the philosophical systems that goes into the Yoga traditions is also known for being one of the world's most peaceful religions: the religion of Jainism, which is founded on the principle of *ahimsā*, or non-violence. In fact, the goal of Jainism—for one's soul to be spiritually liberated from the bonds of karma—can only be achieved through eliminating one's karmic matter, by way of practicing *ahimsā* (Soni, 2016, 33). *Ahimsā* in Jainism is defined as “abstaining from any kind of injury, in thought, word, and deed, to any kind of living being, immobile or mobile” (Tatia, 2002, 3). Put into practice, this concept supplies the most obvious solutions to the ecological crisis, as it outlines a set of moral standards that cultivate a congregation of people who have interest in and empathy for all sentient beings within all of the natural world.

Sentience, in Jainism, is defined more so on whether or not a being has the capacity to suffer, rather than to feel as it is in the traditional sense. The purpose of this is to make a more impressionable statement about the importance of treating all sentient beings with compassion. Jain scholar Kristi Wiley references animal activist and philosopher Peter Singer, who comments on this Jain notion: “If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration” (Wiley, 2002, 37). He

goes on to state that sentience is the only reasonable boundary for which we can define our level of concern for others, whether they be human or non-human, as “To mark this boundary by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary way” (Singer, 2002, 37). There is no hierarchy of beings, according to Jainism, and though humans are the most developed of all beings, they are not privileged in any way (Tatia, 2002, 3).

All sentient beings are a part of the bigger picture of the universe and play an important role in maintaining homeostasis. Though the practice of *ahimsā* does certainly foster one’s own spiritual development, the purpose of *ahimsā* is not purely for such individualistic reasons; rather, it aims instead at not disrupting the spiritual development of all other beings. This idea stems from the Jain belief that all sentient beings—humans, plants, animals, and all—contain a *jīva*, or a soul (Bronkhorst, 2016, 41). In the earthly realm, a soul in its physical and embodied manifestation can be defined as: “a living being that is aware and that experiences pleasure and pain through its single sense of touch” (Wiley, 2002, 38). One-sensed beings include all types of “plants or vegetation... including the *nigoda*, a minute form of vegetable life that is characterized by innumerable souls sharing a common body which, in turn, is embodied in other forms of life, including the bodies of human beings” (Wiley, 2002, 39). In other words, every rock, ray of light, and microorganism contains a *jīva* and should be treated as such.

The most poignant Jain practice for maintaining *ahimsā* is a strict vegetarian diet, that excludes the consumption of all meat and eggs, in addition to root vegetables such as potatoes, garlic, and carrots, as the consumption of these vegetables ends the life of the plant they come from upon harvest (Wiley, 2002, 45). While this form of vegetarianism



may feel extreme to most non-Jains, interfering with the lifespan of any sentient being, regardless of species, is an extreme act of violence in Jainism. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, one of the most important Jain texts, makes a point to explain how any sign of life should be protected, and states: “As the nature of this [person] is to be born and to grow old, so is the nature of that [plant] to be born and to grow old” (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, trans. Hermann Jacobi, 1884, 10).

In addition to a vegetarian diet, Jain lay practitioners practice what is known as the small vows, or *anuvrata*, in contrast to the great vows, or *mahāvratas*, which are strictly practiced by members of the monastic orders. The great vows consist of non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-attachment (Tatia, 2002, 8). The small vows refer to a commitment to perform the great vows to the best of one’s ability. For example, while a member of the monastic order would be committed to abstaining from any act of attachment, to the point where they would not own any clothing, a lay person would be committed to limiting their consumption of material items as much as possible. These vows extend far beyond vegetarianism and are a factor in every decision a Jain practitioner makes. For example, a Jain would never enter a profession that promotes violence or inadvertent harm to other beings. Acceptable occupations are therefore limited to things such as merchants, traditional forms of medicine, and service to the government (Jaini, 2002, 144).

*Ahimsā* and the *mahāvratas* aside, other aspects of Jain philosophy are also extremely compatible with an environmentally conscious lifestyle. The concepts of *purasparopagraho jivīnam* (interdependence), *anekāntevāda* (the doctrine of many perspectives), *samyaktva* (equanimity), and *jīva-daya* (compassion and charity) are all Jain

teachings that laypeople are expected to abide by. Interdependence, which is a concept found in other traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, teaches that “all life is bound together by mutual support,” which means that all aspects of nature are dependent and reliant on the cooperation of all other life forms (Singhvi, 2002, 219) are expected to respect the mutual dependence upon one another.

While the concepts of *samyaktva* (equanimity) and *jiva-daya* (compassion) may be self-explanatory, *anekāntevāda* does not translate quite as simply to English.

*Anekāntevāda* can be thought of as the doctrine of “manifold aspects” (Singhvi, 2002, 220). *Anekāntevāda* states that the world is a “multifaceted, ever-changing reality with an infinity of viewpoints depending on the time, place, nature, and state of the one who is the viewer and that which is viewed” (Singhvi, 2002, 220). In other words, it is the understanding that there can be an infinite number of different and equally valid viewpoints to one subject. This belief leads to the concept of *syadvada* (relativity), which states that the truth, too, is relative to one’s perspective. Therefore, absolute truth cannot be understood from one singular viewpoint only. Because of these Jain doctrines, Jains do not look at the world as anthropocentric and are able to make better choices when it comes to protecting the environment, as the viewpoint of all other species and beings are considered in all actions.

The impact of Jain philosophies on other Western traditions is profound. Though the average yoga practitioner in the United States may have never even heard of Jainism, they very likely would have heard of the *yamas* or the *niyamas*, or at the very least, Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*, which is often revered as the most influential text on modern yoga. Yoga practitioners and teachers across the Western world know the *yamas*—the set of

moral principles that tell how to conduct one’s life outlined in the *Yoga Sūtra*—by heart, but few could name the *mahavratas* if promoted. The irony of this is they are the same: *ahmisā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *bramacharya* (maintenance of vitality), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) are the five moral codes for living one’s life in accordance with both the Jain and Patañjalic traditions (Jain, 2015, 14). What’s more ironic, is that the themes presented in both of these traditions seem to have been influenced in various ways by one another during each of their developments. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* (ca. 350 BCE) set forth the five great vows, which then appear as a major portion of Patañjali’s eightfold path as the *yamas* in the *Yoga Sūtra* (ca. 200 CE). Later on, Haribadra and Hemacandra (ca. 700 CE) of Jainism appear to have used Patañjali’s eightfold path as “a schematic for their own Jaina articulations of Yoga” (Chapple, 2016, 126). Both systems include a series of eight steps which include a set of parallel moral codes that lead one to a practice of deep and intense meditation that ultimately leads one to surrendering to the divine (Chapple, 2016, 128).

Whether or not Western Yogis know where the *yamas* and *niyamas* among other concepts stem from, their impact on Western Yoga practitioners is clear, especially with regards to the environment. For example, Western Yoga has helped teachers and practitioners alike in cultivating more “*ahimsic*” lifestyles, as it appears that Western Yogis, particularly Western Yoga teachers, are more conscious consumers than non-Yoga teachers. In a 2020 study from the University of Winchester Center for Animal Welfare, it was reported that 29.6% of UK Yoga teachers follow a plant-based diet (n = 446), which is twenty-five times that of the wider UK population (Mace & McCulloch, 2020, 1). According to researchers, this is believed to be “based on applying yogic teachings such as

the principle of *ahimsā* through abstaining from the consumption of animal products” (Mace & McCulloch, 2020, 1). What’s more, the decision to abstain from eating meat was not a passive decision, for 86% of those surveyed—both meat eaters and non-meat eaters—believe that “minimizing animal suffering is just as important as minimizing human suffering” (Mace & McCulloch, 2020, 14).

Regardless of why a yoga teacher may choose to eat a plant-based diet, however, it is obvious that eating a plant-based diet is more impactful on the environment than a diet consisting of animal products. Eating a fully plant-based (vegan) diet is four times more impactful on the environment than recycling (2017, Institute of Physics). No current statistics on the number of vegan-identifying yoga practitioners in the US have been collected; however, it cannot be denied that an individual who follows a vegan or vegetarian diet who cares nothing about the environment has a greater and more positive impact on the environment than a non-vegan who cares as much as Greta Thunberg but still chooses to eat animal products. It is clear that the concept of *ahimsā* as a yogic teaching that stems partially from the Jain tradition has had a vast impact on yoga teacher’s beliefs and actions, and ultimately the environment.

## **Buddhism**

The Buddhist perspective on ecology must be discussed relationally to a few key terms that stem from the Buddhist tradition: Interdependence, *āhimsa*, and the Middle Path.

Interdependence is the idea that all beings are interconnected with one another in “a great web of interdependence rather than as isolated and independent entities” (Gross, 2000, 412). “All pervasive interdependence” is a part of the Buddhist understanding of cause and effect. There are no accidents, nor are there divine interventions, according to Buddhism.

This means that all actions taken by an individual will have an effect or repercussion that extends throughout the entire cosmos. This is often described as the “butterfly effect,” which is metaphor that tells us that a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world may be the impetus for other actions that eventually lead to an earthquake in another part of the world. While this is an extreme example, we can see the effects of this law throughout our everyday life. For example, Rita M. Gross, in her analysis on the role Buddhism can play in combating the problems of over-population and over-consumption, reminds us that oftentimes, consumption of material goods that we take for granted in the Western world is directly related to poverty and suffering in other parts of the world (Gross, 2000, 413). The law of interdependence can help us determine whether or not an action may be morally sound. For example, the decision to have or not have a child may not feel like a very selfish act on its own; after all, it is a biological desire of all organisms to reproduce. However, if one takes into consideration the implications of adding an additional human child to an already overpopulated world, we may think differently. To this idea, Gross states: “It is equally clear that a Buddhist position would regard ecologically unsound practices regarding reproduction or consumption as selfishly motivated disregard for the finite, interdependent cosmos” (Gross, 2000, 413).

The Buddhist notion of interdependence can also help us relate to the term *ahimsā*, or the act of non-harming, from a Buddhist perspective. Interdependence says that at one point throughout cosmological history, all beings have been the mother of all other beings. In other words, you have been my mother and I have been yours, at some point throughout the trajectory of our karmic energies’ lifespan and cycle of rebirth. Because of this, we must do our best to not cause harm to any other beings because all beings are our relatives.

This principal of *ahimsā* is a principal that pervades throughout all Yogic teachings, regardless of tradition or lineage, though it is often discussed with one action in mind: the consumption of meat. Though Buddhist practitioners and scholars debate whether or not vegetarianism is a necessary practice, it feels to me that the answer is obvious if looked at with the doctrine of interdependence in mind. If one needs animal products to sustain their life or the life of their community, doing so with care and mindfulness seems reasonable and necessary. If this is not the case, however, under a Buddhist framework it seems simply irresponsible to contribute to unnecessary suffering.

It may very well be that the notion of interdependence is what separates the Buddhist view of the value of other life organisms from the way other (Western) traditions value other life forms. On the surface, the definition of *ahimsā* sounds an awful lot like the “Golden Rule” in the Christian tradition: “Do unto others as you would not want others to do unto you.” Where they differ, however, is within the underlying purpose of these doctrines. The action of *ahimsā* is for the purpose of preventing suffering of other life-forms, whereas the Golden Rule is aimed at the prevention of suffering of other humans.

This becomes obvious when observing ways in which the Golden Rule has been implemented into International Environmental Law, which is inherently Western in reason. Though there are many international laws aimed at protecting the environment, these laws only have concern for the protection of biodiversity and the preservation of species for the benefit of the human race. According to the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), the goals of CIEL is to “protect the environment, promote human rights, and ensure a just and sustainable society” ([www.ciel.org](http://www.ciel.org)). Nowhere in their mission statement do they assume responsibility for preventing the suffering of non-human beings, nor do

they state that it is their aim is to create equality within all ecosystems. In fact, their mission statement is fundamentally anthropocentric, and states that they aim at creating law that “reflects the interconnection between humans and the environment” ([www.ciel.org](http://www.ciel.org))—once again, implying that humans are a separate entity from the interdependent natural world. (Snyder, 2000, 351).

Another obvious culprit to our climate issue that the Middle Way may remedy is the modern obsession with consumption. Consumer culture, according to the Buddhist perspective, stems from the three poisons: greed, hatred, and delusion (Sivaraksa, 2000, 181). And what feeds one poison, often feeds the others. Sulak Sivaraksa, in his commentary on how consumerism has become somewhat the “religion” of modern society, explains that traditional Asian culture, specifically Thai Buddhist culture, had very different values from today. In the traditional model, “Exploitation, confrontation, and competition are to be avoided, while unity, community, and harmony are encouraged” he explains. Over time, these values, which Sivaraksa explains had been sustained for over 700 years, have tragically become “overwhelmed and diluted” by Western capitalism (Sivaraksa, 2000, 181). While he makes sure not to romanticize traditional, rural Asia and its culture, Sivaraksa feels strongly that the introduction of Western capitalism overwhelmed and overtook Asian values, which traditionally encouraged a healthy relationship with nature and consumption (Sivaraksa, 2000, 182). This seems to be as a result of the temptations of the three poisons. Consumerism feeds off greed, and “consuming one thing arouses us to want more” (Sivaraksa, 2000, 182). What’s more disturbing is that consumerism “supports those who have economic and political power by rewarding their hatred, aggression, and anger,” which is only encouraged by the

educational systems that teach us one needs a high paying job in order to be a valuable member of society (Sivaraksa, 2000, 181-182).

The Middle Way, which can be thought of as finding a place of “right effort,” with “not too much, not too little, not too tight, not too loose” (Gross, 1997, 298), offers a suggestion for consuming responsibly. Following the Middle Way can aid environmental concerns in ways that are less aggressive and extreme than some other tactics that are often suggested for improving climate change, such as practicing a fully plant-based diet or getting rid of one’s car, that may not be practical or realistic to most consumers. Though it is unrealistic to go back to a time before Western capitalism, finding a middle ground between Western capitalism and these rural Asian models may provide us with a society that takes on the best of both worlds. Rita M. Gross reminds us that “The Middle Way emphasizes that too much wealth or ease tends to promote complacency, satisfaction, and grasping for further wealth... However, the Middle Way also points to minimum material and psychological standards necessary for meaningful human life” (Gross, 2000, 414). To do this, however, we must begin with understanding of the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion within ourselves (Sivaraksa, 2000, 182).

### **Sā khya**

One of the most integral components of the Yoga traditions is the influence of Sā khya philosophy, one of the six schools of Indian philosophy that developed from the Vedas. Though Sā khya is no longer extant, much of its teachings and philosophies can be found in other forms of Indian philosophy, and in some ways all other Indian philosophies can be thought of as an elaboration of Sā khya (Miller, 2018, 1). Sā khya is often confused with Advaita-Vedānta because of its portrayal in the *Yoga Sūtras*. The *Yoga Sūtras* were



originally written with Sākhya philosophy in mind, however, modern commentaries, in the wake of Shankara's popular Vedantic interpretation of Yogic texts in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Davis, 2015, 128), have interpreted the *Yoga Sūtras* to denote Advaita-Vedāntic themes incorporating the element of oneness into their commentaries.

What's more, the process of liberation in both systems comes from a realization and obtaining of certain knowledge. However, the two philosophies are otherwise quite different and, in some ways, complete opposites of one another. The primary difference between these two philosophies is that Sākhya is a dualistic system whereas Advaita-Vedānta is purely non-dual. As it was discussed earlier, Advaita-Vedānta, unlike Sākhya, is under the assumption that each individual soul (*ātman*) is interconnected with all other souls and are ultimately the same thing as pure consciousness (*brahman*) (Miller, 2018, 3). Advaita-Vedānta is monistic, non-dual, and believes in a unitary consciousness. Sākhya, on the other hand, adheres to the theory of multiple *puruṣas*, which can be likened to an individual soul. This suggests that rather than an "indivisible, and unitary consciousness out of which reality and experience emerges, each individual person possesses their own solitary consciousness (*puruṣa*) which, though apparently ensnared in the workings of the mind, body, and world (*prakṛti*), is ultimately and inherently free from all such activity" (Miller, 2018, 3). There is no God in Sākhya, only the self (*puruṣa*) and all other matter (*prakṛti*). Liberation occurs when one obtains the knowledge that *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are separate from one another. In other words, Sākhya is a dual, atheistic system in which liberation can occur but results in only pure consciousness; not a uniting of self with God as it occurs in Advaita-Vedānta.

In Sākhya, our world and reality does exist in the form of *prakṛti* and *parināma*, which is the “unfolding of psychosomatic experience” (Miller, 2018, 3). *Parināma* describes the process of *prakṛti* bending around itself to create our experience of life. In other words, *parināma* is *prakṛti* manifested in various ways, most notably human suffering. The extent to which we experience suffering is based upon the proportion of the three *gunas* (perpetual qualities): *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, or luminosity, activity, and inertia respectively, on one’s *buddhi*, which can be thought of as our intellect or “seat of emotion” (Miller, 2018, 3). The three *gunas* continually act upon us in varying proportions and make up our different day to day experiences and the way we react to these experiences. For example, an individual who has cultivated a lot of *sattvic* energy may not react as negatively to, say, getting let go from their job, as compared to an individual with a more *tamasic* disposition that may be very emotionally distraught and upset by being let go from their job or an individual with a *rajasic* disposition who may be outright angry.

Other central themes to Sākhya philosophy include the presence and relationship one has with the elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether, which are the foundational elements of all forms of *prakṛti*. Liberation occurs when one is able to distinguish between the *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, which can only occur when the mind gains mastery over the senses, which are an extension of the elements of *prakṛti* (earth, water, fire, air, and ether). In order to gain mastery over the senses, one must eliminate ignorance by developing discernment through various meditation practices.

Sākhya’s influence on the Yoga traditions is astronomical. Its most complete teachings are found in Patañjali’s *Sākhya-Kārikā* (ca. 400 CE) (Miller, 2018, 1), but Sākhya philosophy exists in many of the earlier major Yogic texts—the *Upaniṣads*, the

*Bhagavad Gīta*, the *Puranas*, and most famously to Westerners, Pātañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*.

The *Yoga Sūtra* centers around the *Sā khyan* goal of obtaining the ability to discern between *puruṣa* and *prak ti*, which will ultimately lead to freedom from suffering and liberation. To do this, one must follow the Eight Limbs of Yoga, which consist of practicing:

1. *Yamas* (restraints) including: 1) Non-violence, 2) truthfulness, 3) non-stealing, 4) abstinence, and 5) non-attachment
2. *Ni-yamas* (Observances) including: 1) Cleanliness, 2) Contentment, 3) Self-discipline, 4) Self-study, and 5) Devotion to God
3. *Āsana* (posture practice)
4. *Pranayama* (breath-control practice)
5. *Pratyāhāra* (withdrawal from the senses)
6. *Dhyāna* (Concentration)
7. *Dhāraṇā* (Meditation)
8. *Samādhi* (pure contemplation, sometimes thought of as liberation)

Though most modern translations present the *Yoga Sūtra* under an Advaita-Vedānta lens, as mentioned previously, all of these practices traditionally stemmed from *Sā khya* philosophy, and are *Sā khyan* in nature. The practices of non-violence and withdrawal from the senses, in particular, are key concepts that must take place before one can expect to reach *samādhi* or ultimate liberation. One piece of the Eight Limbs model that is emphasized in the *Sūtras* but not generally in modern practice is that these practices are placed in order. *Ahimsā*, or non-violence, alongside the other *yamas*, is purposely placed as the very first practice and must be perfected before one can move on to the next limb.

*Ahimsā* in the *Yoga Sūtras* is not only the first practice, but it is often thought of as the most important: “According to Sanskrit norms, items listed first carry the most weight and inform what follows. Thus, *ahimsā* can be considered as the most important *yama* and to inform all subsequent teachings” (Mace & McCulloch, 2020, 2). *Āsana*, or the posture practice that is most commonly associated with the practice of Yoga in a modern context,

is the third limb. If one were truly practicing the Eight Limbs of Yoga in the sequence that they were intended, it is unlikely that most modern Yoga practitioners would be far enough along their spiritual journey to be practicing *āsana*.

In stark contrast to some of the other spiritual traditions that make up Yoga, Sāṅkhya does not adhere to the notion of interdependence that is often one of the founding arguments for practicing *ahimsā* in other traditions. Rather, “the act of non-injury becomes the first step toward absolute separation from the interdependent transformations of the material world” (Jacobsen, 2009, 110). Therefore, *ahimsā* is “based on this idea of interdependence as a source of suffering and the disharmony of the world” (Jacobsen, 2009, 111). Sāṅkhya, thus, is inherently a philosophy that promotes a symbiotic relationship between all beings on the Earth, as it prompts one to withdraw from the disharmony that is inevitable when one is engaged with their senses and, therefore, perceiving the world to be interconnected. According to Sāṅkhya, “the world is not a harmonious functioning whole, as emphasized in Deep Ecology, but a disturbed realm” (Jacobsen, 2009, 110). This may be an incredibly un-romantic perception of the world, however, the outcome of adhering to a Sāṅkhyan lifestyle is one of complete unity and peace with the natural order of one’s true self (*puruṣa*) and the elements (*prakṛti*). Though it may be out of a demand for spiritual purity, and not necessarily an act of compassion, “complete withdrawal from materiality is therefore the ultimate act of non-violence” (Jacobsen, 2009, 110).

Sāṅkhya does not believe that the natural world is, nor can be made to be, compatible with human life; rather, it is humans that must change their behavior in order to live symbiotically with nature. One of the major faults of environmentalists is that they

believe they can manipulate technology and the world around us so that the planet can continue to provide the abundant resources we need to sustain our current lifestyles.

However, it is clear that this tactic is not working. The ecological message of Sākhya - Yoga, according to scholar Knut Jacobsen, “is that one should withdraw from the world.

Leave nature as it is! One should control oneself, not the world!” (Jacobsen, 2009, 117). In

other words, abstaining from violence toward other beings and releasing attachment to the use of unnecessary material resources, which would ultimately lead to a harmonious

natural environment, would simply be a given if all beings were subscribing to a

Sākhyan lifestyle.

## Chapter 4

### Practical Yogic Solutions for the Ecological Crisis

We have now examined where exactly the ecological crisis stems from—Christianity, which led to the development of the patriarchy, which led to consumer-based Capitalism—and we have also taken a look at the overarching philosophical system of Advaita-Vedānta that the current Western Modern Yoga framework embodies, including the concepts of interconnectedness and transcendence that are skewed through their placement on Christian-oriented individuals. The evidence is clear: the current societal system in place as well as the current Yogic teachings found in Modern Western Yoga classes are detrimental to the environment.

Although it is clear that Modern Yogis are not currently at the forefront of positive ecological change, and scholars are at odds about which piece of the Yogic framework is the most conducive to promoting change, Yogis everywhere can agree on one thing: Yoga has the potential to make great change. There are countless teachings from the Jain, Buddhist, and Sākhyan traditions that have the potential to bring our planet out of ecological despair, but so many of them are either taken out of context and appropriated or left out of the Western Modern interpretation of Yoga entirely. Over the remainder of this paper, I intend to outline some of the key components within these traditions that I believe would be most helpful in combating the climate crisis if they were to be properly implemented into the modern Western Yoga framework, and suggestions for how to implement them.

Western society values individualism and freedom greater than any other fundamental values. For this reason, I do not feel that it is practical to implement Yogic ideals that are counter to the notions of individualism or freedom. In fact, it seems likely to me that this is how the Advaita-Vedānta teaching of interdependence became so misconstrued when it was implemented into the Western Yoga. Interconnectedness and independence are virtually opposites of one another, and one can simply not understand the idea of interconnectedness if the idea of independence is so fundamental to one's beliefs and value system. The suggested Yoga teachings I will present, therefore, will not be ones that attempt to counter these Western ideals.

The Yogic concepts presented below aim at combatting the anthropocentric and patriarchal nature of Western culture that stem from the Christian tradition and have fueled capitalist society and ultimately our environmental crisis, as well as promote positive and immediate ecological change.

### *Ahimsā*

The single most important Yogic practice that I feel needs to be encouraged more in the modern Western Yoga tradition is the concept of *ahimsā* (nonviolence). As discussed previously, *ahimsā* is the first and most important of the *yamas* presented in Pātañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*. Not only this, but *ahimsā* is the leading principle of the religion of Jainism, and a central theme in Buddhism and Sākhya, among other traditions that go into the modern interpretation of Yoga. *Ahimsā* is ultimately the common thread between all major religions—even Abrahamic religions stress the importance of kindness towards others, as discussed previously with regards to the “Golden Rule.” The difference between

the Christian understanding of *ahimsā* and the Yogic understanding, however, is that it is anthropocentric in nature and does not extend its understanding to non-human beings.

*Ahimsā*, I believe, can guide us to one of the most impactful actions an individual can do for the environment as outlined by the Institute of Physics (2017): eating a plant-based diet.

The most obvious route for implementing this is to apply the Jain understanding of *ahimsā* into modern Yoga practices. However, Jain vegetarianism is often criticized as being too extreme. In addition to a strict form of vegetarianism, community members who follow the most intense *ahimsā* practices restrict their window of eating and drinking to daylight only, so as not to accidentally ingest any small life forms that may have snuck into their food, and will not light a match past dark so as not to attract bugs to the flame. Though the Jains are certainly the largest organized community to practice vegetarianism and are having a profound impact on the state of the environment, it is unrealistic and impractical to expect Western societies to adhere to such practices.

Buddhism, too, provides a clear understanding of *ahimsā* that may prove to be useful if practiced in combination with an emphasis on the Middle Way. Allowing the option of free-will is appealing to Western society and gives practitioners guidelines for living life mindfully without the addition of an entirely new religion. However, following the Middle Way in this instance may not lead to a society of vegetarians. The Middle Way suggests the guideline of “everything in moderation,” and this may prove to be a slippery slope to those who are not disciplined with regards to vegetarianism or veganism. What’s more, vegetarianism in Buddhism is a complex topic to begin with and can leave much room for debate. Some sects of Buddhism, such as Chinese Mahayana, adhere to a



vegetarian diet, while others do not or are encouraged but not required to. Monastics in some traditions are allowed to eat meat if it is donated by the laity, as it grants a layperson merit if a monk uses their gift (Cianciosi, 2013, 16). Furthermore, encouraging the Middle Way in the Western context would likely not result in a reduction of meat eating among Western Yoga practitioners.

Though *ahimsā* is typically one of the few philosophical concepts taught in Western Yoga teacher trainings, it is often not stressed to the extent that it is in the traditions that it stems from. In my own 200-hour Yoga teacher training, for example, I was told that while *ahimsā* can be taken to mean vegetarianism or veganism if one desires (yet another example of Western freedom of choice extended to an originally non-Western practice), it is not a requirement for one to practice vegetarianism in order to be considered a “Yogi.” After much research and deliberation, however, I would have to disagree.

Jonathan Dickstein from the Department of Religious Studies of the University of California Santa Barbara made a strong case for this in his analysis of Pātañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* (PYS). He states: “I conclude that the PYS unconditionally prohibits the intentional harming of animals for any purpose, and incontestably so with respect to the structure of *aṣṭāṅga yoga* (Pātañjala Yoga)” (Dickstein, 2017, 613). What’s more, Dickstein believes that any attempts at justifying one’s consumption of meat is an abomination: “Pātañjala Yoga in no way sanctions harm to animals, and hence a dedicated Pātañjala Yoga practitioner either adopts such a regimen immediately or is consistently striving to do so” (Dickstein, 2017, 613-614). While this does not prohibit Yogis practicing another form of Yoga from eating meat, it should be noted that the *Yoga Sūtra* is by far the leading text on Yoga in the Western world and is often the only text consulted for philosophical guidance

in a Western Yoga teacher training. Therefore, it can be presumed that the majority of Yoga practitioners—whether they realize it or not—are practicing some version of Pātañjala Yoga when they attend their local Yoga studio’s classes. To deny practitioners and teachers the full understanding of this text and meaning of *ahimsā* is to appropriate the text and teaching to serve and propagate Western ideals under the romanticized label of Yoga.

It is for this reason that I’d like to suggest a teaching of *ahimsā* to modern Western Yoga practitioners that can be encouraged through an analysis of the *Yoga Sūtra* that gives justice to its messages. Though we know that the text is not often read through a completely Sāṅkhya lens, a foundational understanding of Sāṅkhya-Yoga before analyzing the *Yoga Sūtra* can lead practitioners to understanding their relationship with the Earth and the elements that make up our planet. This, in turn, will inform how one interprets the *Yoga Sūtra* and conducts their life. Dr. Christopher Chapple of Loyola Marymount University explains the path to which an in-depth understanding of Sāṅkhya-Yoga can lead:

If harm is done to the air, earth, or water, effects will be found in those beings that dwell therein. The diminishment or sacrifice of one species will affect other species as well, making life more difficult... A conscious practice of nonviolence or *ahimsā* will provide an ongoing point of conscience when making decisions that have environmental impacts, including the choice of one’s food, the choice of one’s car, and even the choice of one’s Yoga mat. (Chapple, 2008, 258)

In addition to playing a large role in the reversal of climate change, practicing *ahimsā* by eating a plant-based diet can also help to combat issues surrounding the

patriarchy. Vegetarianism and veganism are inherently feminist issues, as described in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol J. Adams (1991), for both animals and women become an “absent referent” in modern Western society. Behind every meal that includes meat is an “absence” of violence and death cloaked by the label of “beef” or “pork.” Linguistics re-names the animal to mask the fact that “meat” was once a living and breathing sentient being. Women, too, function as an “absent referent” within society through the discussion of sexual violence and abuse. Adams explains: “Women, whose bodies actual rape is most often committed, become the absent referent when the language of sexual violence is used metaphorically. These terms recall women’s experiences but not women” (Adams, 1991, 22).

Adams describes meat eating as a male-identifying activity and arguably the “logo” for masculinity, as “gender equality is built into the species inequality that meat eating proclaims, because for most cultures obtaining meat was performed by men. Meat was a valuable economic commodity; those who controlled this commodity achieved power” (Adams, 1991, 11). In this way, meat eating is the ultimate symbol for the patriarchy. Because of this, Adams reminds us that the act of meat eating mirrors and encourages male power every time it is consumed (Adams, 1991, 178). It is obvious that in order to overthrow this destructive system, the consumption of animals must end; to do this, Adams suggests we surrender to the symbolism found in our linguistics about the plant kingdom and create new symbolism for the animal kingdom. Luckily for us, notions of *ahimsā* throughout all the Yoga traditions provide an outline for doing this.

### *Anekāntevāda*

Another Yogic teaching that is often not emphasized in Western Yoga teachings but goes hand in hand with *ahimsā* is the Jain notion of *anekāntevāda*, or the idea of multiple worldviews. As discussed previously, *anekāntevāda* emphasizes that there are infinite possibilities of opinions and ideas that are all valid at any moment of time, depending on all the factors that go into forming one's worldview. In practice, this idea can be thought of as respecting other's opinions with whom you disagree, regardless of why you disagree with them, because we often do not know all the factors that go into another's opinion. *Anekāntevāda* could be extremely useful to combatting the environmental crisis by encouraging those with very extreme Western anthropocentric and patriarchal ideals to gain perspective on the other worldviews, namely, the worldviews of nonhuman life forms. *Anekāntevāda* “legitimizes considerations from nonhuman perspectives, enabling us to consider the effects of our actions on nonhuman life-forms and environments” (Koller, 2002, 20).

Teaching this Yogic concept and adopting this practice in one's life may also be particularly helpful with regards to veganism and vegetarianism. As discussed in an opinion piece in the *New York Times* entitled “Stop Mocking Vegans,” non-vegetarian columnist Farhad Manjo explains: “Although vegans can marshal stronger evidence to support their claims than adherents of many other belief systems — whether of other diets or major religions — they get little respect, and their ideas rarely receive mass media acknowledgment other than mockery” (2019). The tragedy of mocking vegans, Manjo says, is that it creates intimidation and a sense of shame among one of the only populations actually making an effort to reduce violence, promote peace, and encourage stability within

the environment. Imagine the education the plant-based population would be able to provide were they not constantly ridiculed for their dietary choices. Manjo urges meat eaters not to give up eating meat, but rather to simply give vegans a chance. Here, we see *anekāntevāda* in action, and if further encouraged in popular culture Yoga teachings we may see the end of the vegan criticism within this lifetime.

### ***Aparigraha***

Although eating a plant-based diet is one of the single most impactful actions an individual can make in order to end the environmental crisis, the Institute of Physics (2017) outlined three other actions that one can take that will be the most impactful: Avoiding air travel, living car-free, and having smaller families. Though each of these actions may seem like a major sacrifice and be contrary to the American ideal of freedom and independence, one Yogic practice that can be tremendously helpful in finding peace with these necessary actions is the concept of *aparigraha*, or non-attachment. Although *aparigraha* was discussed earlier with regards to Jainism, *aparigraha* is a concept that spreads over countless Eastern philosophical systems, including Buddhism, Sākhya, and Hinduism. The Buddhist notion of *aparigraha*, for example, can be particularly helpful with regards to the suggestion to have smaller families.

Buddhist scholar Rita M. Gross, for example, reminds us that Western “religions often criticize excessive consumption yet encourage excessive reproduction” (Gross, 2000, 410). Gross suggests taking a look at the notion of interdependence for an understanding of the repercussions of one’s choice to reproduce excessively; I, however, feel that Buddhist interdependence implemented into a Western society that values independence would not

be successful. Rather, emphasizing *aparigraha*, non-attachment, will allow individuals to release their need for a large family and come to the conclusion that having excessively large families is an irresponsible choice.

In addition, Gross suggests that a simultaneous shift in the way Westerners view sex must occur. Although the primary purpose of sexuality in humans has proven to be for “communication and bonding,” Western society, which utilizes a Christian moral code, views the action of sex as attached to the outcome of reproduction and sex without procreation is fundamentally wrong. The practice of non-attachment in this context would allow for individuals to release themselves from this viewpoint, which would ultimately encourage responsible reproduction and smaller families.

On a more individual level, the practice of *aparigraha* can also help individuals become more conscious consumers leading to less environmental waste and an increase in sustainability. Dr. Christopher Chapple explains, “By restricting one’s ownership of things, one is able to release attachment from external objects. The market driven economy relies on constant growth in the consumer sector... buying strategically and sparingly can help contribute to one’s own health and the health of others” (Chapple, 2008, 99). Mahatma Gandhi, the King of *ahimsā* and *aparigraha*, advocated for a locally sustained economy based on conscious consumerism. Gandhi is often quoted as advocating for *aparigraha*, in his famous line: “The world has enough for everyone's needs, but not everyone's greed.”

### ***Pratyāhāra***

Though there are countless more Yogic philosophical teachings that could be used to contribute to a return to ecological stability, the one that I will leave with is another that

the average Western Yogi has quite likely come in contact with through the *Yoga Sūtras*: *pratyāhāra* , or the practice of withdrawing from the senses. Though this is one of the denser philosophical practices found in Yoga and it is often a practice performed while in meditation, it is not as complicated as it may seem. For example, another way to think of this practice is to exercise restraint instead of giving in to the temptations of the senses. One way to do this is to think before acting and make a conscious choice about how to react to a stimulus instead of simply reacting to the senses. With regards to the environmental crisis, the practice of *pratyāhāra* can help us make responsible decisions instead of doing whatever we feel like.

For example, one of the main critiques against Yoga as a tool for ecological social change can be found within Patrick McCartney's article "Yoga Tourism and the Trouble with Transformative Travel," pointing to the fact that Yoga as a Western practice is incredibly consumer-oriented and self-serving. Western Yoga has had a tendency to romanticize Eastern culture that has only perpetuated the "wellness tourism" industry, which McCartney explains is an attempt at finding a "deeper emotional level of connection with oneself, others and the world" (2019) through international travel as opposed to a regular vacation. Categorized as a niche form of tourism and roughly an \$808 billion industry, "transformational tourism" accounts for 15% of the total tourism industry, an industry which alone takes up 8% of the world's global carbon supply (McCartney, 2019). Travel on its own is inherently damaging to the earth—carbon emissions from airplanes are among some of the worst culprits, and McCartney argues that the wellness tourism industry, which is led by the practice of Western Yoga, is not producing yogis with a newfound moral compass and code of ethics. Instead, it is leading practitioners to believe

that they must travel across oceans in order to experience spiritual transformation in the places these practices originated (McCartney, 2019). And this, of course, is all without mentioning the incredibly vast market of yoga pants, yoga mats, and yoga towels Western Yogis are all too familiar with.

The practice of *pratyāhāra* can serve as a reminder that giving in to the temptation of the senses only leads to more greed. Although the vibrant pictures of Yogis practicing in exotic locations such as Bali and Costa Rica are very tempting, it is not necessary to travel so far, or even travel at all, in order to experience Yoga. The practice of *pratyāhāra* can serve as a reminder that all that one seeks can, truly, be found within.



### **Conclusion: A Man-Made “Disaster”**

Just after midnight on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020—the 50<sup>th</sup> annual Earth Day—the people of Los Angeles were awoken by a magnitude 3.7 earthquake. The irony of this was not lost, and social media platforms were quickly riddled with jokes and comments about Mother Nature “celebrating” her own Earth Day and stirring up the pot even more amidst the global Coronavirus pandemic. And while the people of Los Angeles were only minimally shaken up and able to brush it off as another “regular” California earthquake, the likelihood of another natural disaster such as this, whether it be an earthquake or a tornado, is exponentially more probable with the increase in carbon emissions and rising temperature of the earth. This is, needless to say, bad news for the human species.

Another piece of irony surrounding this event is that the very label of a natural “disaster” is an oxymoron. In the same way that human language allows for women and animals to be disassociated from the acts of violence that are often taken upon them, language in this instance allows the human species to pit ourselves against nature when such natural phenomena occur. The truth is, there is no such thing as a “natural disaster;” there are only events that occur in nature that result in disaster for the human species. According to the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, the very definition of a disaster is that it is a human problem, defined as: “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic, and environmental losses and impacts” (Chmutina & von Meding, 2019, 283). This definition highlights that a disaster is ultimately a socio-economic

outcome, not the act of nature itself. Though this may be true, we as humans continue to blame nature for the disasters that are not nature's fault. Oftentimes we will label these events "freak" occurrences rather than taking responsibility for the lack of planning and socio-economic inequalities that led to the disastrous effects of events that were ultimately foreseeable. An earthquake that occurs in an uninhabited area is barely noticed, yet a hurricane that demolishes a city is a "wrathful act of God" (Chmutina & von Meding, 2019, 290).

The problem here is that neither nature nor a higher power are acting out of passion, and it is only our domineering human mindset and lack of ability to take responsibility for our man-made problems that perpetuate this language and ultimately the events themselves. It is commonly accepted among the scientific disciplines that human-induced climate change is increasing the likelihood of these natural hazards. The problem then becomes cyclical. The more frequently a natural "disaster" (for lack of a better term) occurs, the stronger the belief that nature is against us becomes. And the stronger this belief, the harder we work to overcome nature. Finally, the harder we work to overcome nature, the worse the climate crisis grows.

We must, then, find a way to break this cycle; we must end this man-made disaster. Taking responsibility for the crisis is one place to start. Though patriarchal societies have existed for as long as humanity has existed, the origins of the climate crisis can be firmly rooted in the origins of the Judeo-Christian traditions. These traditions, which assert that both nature and Women were created for the purpose of serving Man, have ultimately been ingrained in Western culture which views humans as separate and more important than all other life forms. What's more, this piece of Western culture has, unfortunately, been

overlaid onto all the world's cultures and has become the predominant mindset of the global community and global economy, feeding capitalism and perpetuating wasteful consumerism.

While there are other traditions that do not have this belief, this teaching is so fundamental to Western culture that it has skewed the Western understanding and implementation of many other traditions. This can be seen prominently within the Western philosophical interpretation of Yoga, which adheres predominantly to the Hindu Advaita-Vedānta teachings of oneness. Although Advaita-Vedānta is extremely peaceful and in its traditional setting promotes a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, in the Western context it is often misguided and misunderstood. Because it is combined with Western ideologies of independence, freedom, and a disassociated relationship with nature, in the Western Yogic context, the teaching of oneness actually encourages practitioners to abandon feelings of responsibility for societal issues, particularly with regards to the climate crisis. What's more, if one is able to abandon their feelings of accountability for the earth, they are able to be a better consumer, serving as docile and obedient members of capitalist society.

Although Western Modern Yoga is not currently serving as a means to deconstruct the man vs. nature attitude that perpetuates the climate crisis, there is hope for this community. There are countless other Yogic teachings that modern Yogis are not taking advantage of (or, are choosing to ignore) that can lead to ecological prosperity. The religious and philosophical teachings of Jainism, Buddhism, and Sāṅkhya are among the many that go into the Yogic framework, and they all have a response to the environmental crisis. Not all of their teachings will translate successfully into Western culture though, and

they must be taught mindfully. However, there are many Yogic teachings that can bring about great change to the environment, and by teaching the practices of *ahimsā* (non-violence), *anekāntevāda* (many sidedness), *aparigraha* (non-attachment), and *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal from the senses), for example, Western Yogis can take matters into their own hands.

It should be noted, however, that while it is important to take responsibility for and take action to improve climate change, it comes with a caveat: it is extremely difficult. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to combat this problem, the fact of the matter is, is that it is nearly impossible to practice an entirely waste-free and sustainable lifestyle as a modern global citizen, even if you are putting enormous effort into practicing the Eight Limbs of Yoga. Going vegan, which is often the number one recommended lifestyle change for making an individual impact, is a challenge in and of itself not because of the dietary restrictions but simply because there are hardly any options for vegans. Unless you live in Los Angeles—and even still, you can trust me when I say it is a challenge here, too—it is likely that your grocery store does not carry more than one or two meat and cheese alternatives, and if they do, they are wrapped in non-recyclable plastic. And you might as well forget about going to a non-vegetarian specific restaurant unless you enjoy French fries and un-dressed salad. What's more, the illusion of choice is not limited to vegans; there may be 5 different options for milk but upon further inspection, you can see that they are all made by the same producer, and they all come in plastic bottles.

This is not to say that all the Yogic recommendations made thus far are not impactful. Group mentality can play an enormous role in making social change, not to mention the profound spiritual influence such actions can have. However, it should be

noted that you can practice Yoga and all of the Yogic teachings that emphasize a symbiotic relationship with nature, you can go vegan, you can live somewhere where you do not need a car, you can choose not to have children, and you can never travel by air ever again and you are still not likely to be perfect due to infrastructure challenges. While Yoga and all of its teachings can be incredibly helpful in empowering individuals to make lifestyle changes that certainly will have a positive impact on the environment, change needs to happen in all areas of society and on a greater scale, as well. Great change, by no surprise, requires great change. Environmentalist Rachel Carson, who can undoubtedly be called an honorary Yogi, I believe said it best: “The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery, not over nature but of ourselves” (Carson via CBS Reports, 1963).

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