

Yoga and Ecology: Why Yogis Eat Carrots Rather Than Cows

The philosophy and practice of yoga have a lot to offer the field of ecology and sustainable development.

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By Roar Ramesh Bjonnes

To live a life according to the wisdom of ecology is the most urgent task for humanity today. What can the philosophy of yoga contribute to this critical challenge? How can we develop an environmental ethics according to yogic principles? What would a sustainable ethics based on yoga look like? Mind in Nature For science, viruses represent the smallest accumulation and diversity of molecules which is recognized as "life." Maybe in the near future, when more advanced techniques are employed, we will recognize the sentience of smaller aggregations of molecules. For now, viruses personify the boundary between life and non-life according to science. According to the so-called Santiago theory, developed by Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, the process of cognition is intimately linked to the process of life. Hence, the brain is not necessary for the mind to exist. A worm, or a tree, has no brain but has a mind. The simplest forms of life are capable of perception and thus cognition. For the spiritual sages of India, it is impossible to draw a final line between animate and inanimate beings. According to yoga philosophy, there is "mind"; even in the so-called inanimate world of rocks. This type of "mind" is dormant, as if asleep, because there is no nervous system in rocks. Native Americans certainly experience this mind in the cosmos. In the international best-seller, *The Secret Life of Plants*, Peter Thompkins and Christopher Bird report that, when killing a tree, some Native American tribes have a heart-to-heart conversation with the tree. In no uncertain terms would they let the tree know what was going to happen, and finally they would ask for forgiveness for having to commit this unfortunate act of violence. In the same book, they also documented scientific experiments on plants with a modified lie detector. The instrument would register when a plant's leaves were cut or burnt. Not only that, when a plant "understood" it was going to be killed, it went into a state of shock or "numbness." Thus, the scientists explained, possibly preventing it from undue suffering, which again may explain the "warnings" given to trees by some Native peoples. Such laboratory tests may sound outrageous to materialists, but not to the ancient, animist peoples from all over the world, nor to Indian yogis or Western mystics. They have for long informed us that we do not live in a dead and meaningless universe. But unfortunately, nature cannot always express its grief when it is damaged or destroyed. To protect it, we must therefore conserve and properly utilize all natural resources. If nature — earth, trees, and water — truly experience a form of existential pain or grief, at least when destroyed and polluted, our conservation efforts and our ecological outlook must first and foremost acknowledge this innate suffering. And by acknowledging it, nature becomes part of us. To paraphrase noted psychologist James Hillman — one of the innovators in the new field of eco-psychology — our mind is enlarged to include nature; the world becomes us. And if we destroy that world, out of ignorance or greed, we destroy a part of ourselves. "High" and "Low" Consciousness in Nature Since mind or consciousness is part of all living beings and lies dormant, even in so-called inanimate objects as rocks, sand or mud, there is an intrinsic, spiritual oneness in all of creation. Thus, according to tantric yoga philosopher P. R. Sarkar's worldview — whose ideas have combined yoga philosophy with an evolutionary understanding of the world we live in — we grant existential rights or value to all beings, whether soil, plants, animals and humans. He concedes that, in principle, all physical expressions of Cosmic Consciousness has an equal right to exist and to express itself but also that some beings have higher consciousness than others and thus "more rights". Evolution is irreversible — amoebas eventually evolve into apes, but apes never transform into amoebas — thus tantra and yoga also acknowledges "higher" and "lower" expressions of Consciousness. This differentiation is crucial, and it is on the basis of this that yoga philosophy and most ecologists differ. Deep-ecology and Yoga Deep-ecologists, for example, believe that no beings are "high" or "low", all are part of an "egalitarian web of life". The tantric and yogic ecological worldview, on the other hand, is both egalitarian and hierarchical. According to Sarkar's tantra yoga, for example, evolution proceeds by expressing more and more complex beings that are able to express higher levels of consciousness. On this evolutionary ladder, amoebas are at the "bottom" and humans are at the "top." Within this hierarchical system there are various levels of egalitarian cooperation, but the system as a whole is hierarchical. This notion is also supported by the new systems sciences, which proclaim that one cannot have wholeness without hierarchy. As Ken Wilber explains, "'Hierarchy' and 'wholeness,' in other words, are two names for the same thing, and if you destroy one, you completely destroy the other." Each hierarchy is composed of increasing orders of wholeness — organisms include cells which include molecules, which include atoms. In an evolutionary context, the new stage of development has extra value relative to the previous stage. An oak sprout is more complex and therefore endowed with a fuller expression of consciousness than an acorn. A monkey has a more evolved nervous system and mind than an insect, and a human has a more evolved brain and intellect than an ape. This crucial definition of subsequent higher stages of consciousness, of a hierarchy of being, is central to tantra and yoga. But this insight is often overlooked by many greens or deep-ecologists. They often equate hierarchy with the higher exploiting the lower by transferring human pathological experiences of hierarchy — as fascism, for example — to the study of nature. But the ecological universe of nature could not exist without hierarchy, and humans, for good or for worse, are, as the most advanced expression of consciousness in evolution, stewards of the natural world. Hence, according to

yoga, we need to acknowledge both unity and oneness as well as high and low (or deep and shallow) expressions of consciousness when developing an ecological world view. Heterarchy vs. Hierarchy We need to emulate nature in advancing what Riane Eisler calls "actualization hierarchies;" we must learn to maximize our species' potential, both in relation to ourselves and to nature. In other words, a self-actualized humanity can learn to integrate itself in relation to nature. Learn to realize our oneness with the "other." Learn to recognize that being on top of the evolutionary ladder does not give us the right to rob and exploit those lower than ourselves. Because of the many pathological expressions of hierarchy in human society — such as fascism, Nazism, communism, or corporate capitalism — many so-called new paradigm thinkers are suggesting a new and supposedly healthier model termed “heterarchy”. In a heterarchy, rule is established by an egalitarian interplay of all parties. For example, atoms may have a heterarchical relationship amongst themselves, but their relationship to a cell is hierarchical. In other words, the various heterarchies are strands in the ever-evolving web of hierarchies, and when functioning optimally, the relationship between them is one of coordinated cooperation. By negating hierarchy and favoring heterarchy only, we establish just another pathology, because the existence or validity of heterarchy does not disprove the existence or importance of positive or actualized hierarchy. There is, according to the evolutionary yoga philosophy of Sarkar, an ongoing movement toward greater complexity and higher consciousness in evolution, while at the same time there is, on a deeper level, ecological cooperation and spiritual unity amongst all beings. Unity and Diversity in Nature In other words, there are both heterarchy and hierarchy. To disprove the hierarchical flow of evolution by saying that all of us — whether leaf, tree, monkey, or human — are equal, heterarchical partners in the great web of life, is to impose on nature faulty and limited concepts. It reduces the wondrous complexity of creation to a lowest common denominator, and that serves neither nature nor humans well. According to Yoga, there is unity of consciousness amongst all beings, because we all come from, and are created by, the same Spirit, by the same Cosmic Consciousness. But nature is also infinitely diverse, and thus consciousness is also expressed in various ways, both “high” and “low”. Hence, a seedling is more complex and therefore more conscious than an acorn, and an oak is more complex and conscious than a seedling. Ecological Ethics According to Yoga Another way of expressing this is that a dog has more capacity for mental reflection and self-consciousness than a fir tree. Both are conscious beings, both are manifestations of Cosmic Consciousness, both have mind, and both have equal existential value — but because of the difference in expression of depth and quality of consciousness, the dog is higher on the natural hierarchy of being than the fir tree. So when we develop our ecological ethics, both the "low" and the "high" expressions of nature must be valued and accounted for. Nonhuman creatures have the same existential value to themselves as human beings have to themselves. Perhaps human beings can understand the value of their existence, while an earth worm cannot. Even so, no one has delegated any authority to human beings to kill those unfortunate creatures. But to survive, we cannot avoid killing other beings. To solve this dilemma, the yogi selects articles of food from amongst those beings where development of consciousness is comparatively low. If vegetables, corn, bean and rice are available, cows or pigs should not be slaughtered. As Ken Wilber maintains, it is better to eat carrots rather than cows. Secondly, before killing any animals with "developed or underdeveloped consciousness," a yogi must consider deeply if it is possible to live a healthy life without taking such lives. Thus, in addition to existential value, various beings, based on their depth of consciousness, have a variable degree of what is often termed "intrinsic value." The more consciousness a being has, the deeper the feelings, and the more potential for suffering. Eating plants is therefore preferable to eating animals. As George Bernhard Shaw once said, "Animals are my friends ... and I don't eat my friends." Yoga and Sustainability It is also ecologically more sustainable to extract nourishment from entities lower down on the food chain. Vast land areas are used to raise livestock for food. These areas could be utilized far more productively if planted with grains, fruits, vegetables, and legumes for human consumption. It is estimated that only 10 percent of the protein and calories we feed to our livestock is recovered in the meat we eat. The other 90 percent goes literally "down the drain." In addition to existential value, and intrinsic value, all beings have utility value. Throughout history, human beings usually preserved those creatures which had an immediate utility value. We are more inclined to preserve the lives of cows than of rats, for example. But, because of all beings' existential value, we cannot claim that only human beings have the right to live, and not non-humans. All are the children of Mother Earth; all are the offspring of Spirit or Cosmic Consciousness. Sometimes it is difficult to know what the utilitarian value of an animal or a plant is; therefore we may needlessly destroy the ecological balance by killing one species without considering the consequences of its complex relationship or utility value to other species. A forest's utility value, for example, is more than just x number of board feet of lumber. It serves as nesting and feeding ground for birds and animals; its roots and branches protect the soil from erosion; its leaves or needles produce oxygen; and its pathways and camp grounds provide nourishment for the human soul. As a whole, the forest ecosystem has an abundance of ecological, aesthetic, and spiritual values which extends far beyond its benefits in the form of tooth picks or plywood. All of nature is endowed with existential, intrinsic, and utility value. This hierarchical, and ultimately holistic understanding of evolution and ecology, formulates the basic foundation for a new, and potentially groundbreaking ecological ethics deeply grounded by the philosophy of yoga. If we embrace the divinity in all of creation, the expression of our ecological ethics will become an act of sublime spirituality. Our conservation efforts and our sustainable resource use will become sacred offerings to Mother Earth, and ultimately to Cosmic Consciousness, the God and Goddess within and beyond nature. Roar Ramesh Bjonnes is Marketing Director and co-founder of the Prama Institute. For more information: www.pramainstitute.org He is an agronomist, freelance journalist, columnist for a Norwegian newspaper and contributing editor of New Renaissance. For more information: www.ru.org His articles have appeared in books, newspapers and magazines in the US and in Europe. He can be reached at: rbjonnes@aol.com