



Yoga for the Planet

Eight Paths of Green Yoga
for Yoga Teachers and their Students

Laura Cornell

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by Laura Cornell

Helping people heal so they can contribute to healing the planet.

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About Dr. Laura Cornell

Laura Cornell, PhD, is a midwife for healing transformation, helping individuals who are inspired to make a difference birth their gifts into the world. Laura works as a scholar, author, teacher, visionary, and coach, inspiring others to love themselves fully through the practice of Yoga, and to move from there towards healing the planet.

As Founder of the Green Yoga Association, Laura spurred a national movement towards Green Yoga studios, inspired thousands to move away from toxic Yoga mats, and produced two major conferences raising awareness about the connections between ecology and Yoga. She also lead a year-long research project with six yoga teachers on integrating Green Yoga into teaching and practice and initiated the Green Yoga Teacher Leadership program. Laura's Green Yoga work was featured in Yoga Journal, Yogi Times, L.A. Yoga, and Common Ground Magazines.

In her Yoga teaching, Laura offers open-hearted practice, compassionate acceptance, and soul-nourishment. She encourages students of all levels to care for their own bodies as their first step in caring for the planet. She is author of The Moon Salutation: Expression of the Feminine in Body, Psyche, Spirit, slated for release in summer 2011.

Laura is adjunct faculty in the Asian and Comparative Studies Department at The California Institute of Integral Studies and facilitates the Institute's Certificate in Yoga Philosophy.

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Introduction

Thank you for ordering this ebook. I welcome you to a journey of healing as you deepen your connection to the planet. The earth today needs each of us to do our own healing work and to move from there to taking action to address the problems at hand. As Yogis, our actions are empowered when they come from love rather than fear, peacefulness rather than agitation. Yoga is the best way I know of to do that. So welcome to the journey!

This ebook will get you started, and I trust you'll find many helpful tools to help you approach your Yoga practice in a new way. You will gain new insight and awareness into the "green" already present in your Yoga practice, and new practices to open unexpected vistas into connection with nature.

I developed the ideas in this ebook from years of experimenting with my own personal practice and teaching, studying the ancient texts, collaborating with and observing other Yoga teachers, and drawing from the amazing creativity of students in the Green Yoga Teacher Leadership Program and the tele-seminars I lead.

I begin this ebook with the Green Yoga Values Statement. This statement is so central to everything we do in this field that it bears repeating, over and over again. When I first wrote the Statement in 2003, I worked with my collaborative research group and a core group of prominent teachers to revise it. Originally, it was named the "Yoga is Ecological Values Statement," and that's true. Yoga is ecological. Later, as energy and enthusiasm around the statement grew, the statement was renamed the "Green Yoga Values Statement," and it became the founding document of the Green Yoga Association.

The majority of this ebook describes eight paths of Yoga from a green slant, offering suggestions for practice, or ways that Yoga teachers can integrate these ideas into their classes. You will learn about how the ancient, ecological roots of Yoga can be powerfully adapted for contemporary Yoga classes, and how ecological awareness can be fruitfully integrated into the practice. If you're not a teacher, please invite your teacher to download this ebook! But many of the ideas will work for you to try individually.

I have so much more to teach you! I will keep you posted as new offerings become available that you might like to take advantage of. Please be in touch by email to share your experiences with this material.

Green Yoga Values Statement

The health of our bodies depends on clean air, clean water, and clean food. Yoga is grounded in an understanding of this interconnection. Historically, Yoga developed in the context of a close relationship with the earth and cosmos and a profound reverence for animals, plants, soil, water, and air. This reverence towards life is the basis of the Yogic teaching of ahimsa, or nonviolence, non-injury, and non-harming.

Today, the viability of earth's life systems is in danger. If humanity is to survive and thrive, we must learn to live in balance with nature. Now is the time to cleanse and heal the earth and to establish a sustainable relationship with the environment for generations to come.

Therefore, as practitioners of Yoga we will:

- Educate ourselves about the needs of the biosphere as a whole and our local ecosystems in particular.
- Cultivate an appreciation for and conscious connection with the natural environments in which we live, including animals, plants, soil, water, and air.
- Include care for the environment in our discussion of Yogic ethical practices.
- Commit ourselves to policies, products, and actions that minimize environmental harm and maximize environmental benefit.
- And if we are Yoga teachers or centers, we will incorporate these commitments into our work with students.

This statement has been endorsed by over 500 Yoga teachers, scholars, and studios.

Path 1: Touching Earth and Sky: Jnana Yoga

As yoga teachers, we care deeply about the fate of our home, this Earth. We know that the health of our planet is in danger, and that the current ecological crises of global warming, species extinction, and ecosystem destruction require immediate attention.

Underlying this problem is our worldview. Humans have come to think of ourselves as separate from nature, or as somehow immune to the environmental consequences of our actions. Yoga practice helps to counter this false perception.

Yoga has always taught the principle of union, and tantrism in particular affirms the nonduality of spirit and matter, heaven and earth, humans and nature. This is Jnana Yoga, the path of wisdom, which gives us the deep understanding that we are one with the earth, the cosmos, and the divinity that supports them. The fate of the planet is also our fate.

In our unique position as teachers of yoga, we can help our students to directly experience themselves as an inseparable part of nature. Here are some ways to incorporate awareness of this essential connection into your classes.

- Lead students in guided meditations on the elements. Meditation on earth, water, fire, air, and space (ether) were among the earliest forms of both Buddhist and yogic meditation. For example, deep contemplation of the element earth enables practitioners to perceive their interbeing with the body of the earth. Our body is the earth's body.
- When guiding pranayama, acknowledge the interchange between humans (and all other animals) with plants through the element air. We breathe in oxygen created by these plants, while they in turn breathe in the carbon dioxide we exhale.
- Sensitize your students to the earth-sky axis that runs through the spine, grounding physically into the earth and reaching up into the lightness of space. Just as Gayatri Mantra, the most famous mantra of the Vedic Yoga tradition, begins by invoking the powers of earth, sky, and heavens, so too can we begin our yoga classes by physically connecting with these realms.

A centering meditation for creating unity with earth and sky

Come to a seated position in a comfortable cross-legged pose. Visualize roots growing deep into the earth, and feel the quiet steadiness of the earth coming up into your body. Recognize that your body is made of the elements of the earth; your bones and muscles are made from its minerals.

Now use those bones and muscles to press into the earth, and feel your spine gently lengthening in response to the pull of gravity. Reach up through the spine, and feel the lightness of the skin opening to the air. Breathe gently, and feel the lightness of the crown of the head opening energetically to space. Visualize energy running through the spine from sky to earth, and back again from earth to sky, flowing in rhythm with the breath. Allow yourself to be a conduit for this life force.

Path 2: Fostering Love for the Earth: Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti Yoga, or the path of devotion, is one of the three great paths of yoga as described in the Bhagavad Gita. Total devotion unfolds the heart, and takes us to union with God(dess).

Upon falling in love with Mount Arunachala at age 16, the great saint Ramana Maharshi vowed never to leave his beloved. Sri Rama Tirtha was so in love with the rivers of India that he declared them to be the very veins of his body. The Mother, spiritual companion to Sri Aurobindo, wrote an entire book devoted to flowers, their spiritual and physical care, and the messages they give us.

Over and over again, the yoga tradition enjoins us to treat the entire earth with reverence and to pray for its well-being. The practice of noninjury, ahimsa, is considered to be the greatest vow for all yogis, and stems from the profound and historical reverence within yoga for animals, plants, and the elements of nature.

Yoga has gone through phases where love for the earth was expressed explicitly, and other times when this love was less critical to human survival and thus less emphasized. At this moment in history, we need to name and own our love for the planet, to uphold earth-reverence as a profound path of yoga and a way of serving the divine.

It's critical that we awaken devotion not only to the idea of a transcendent God or Goddess, but to the very body of this earth which is our home. Fostering reverence is a sacred contribution we, as yoga teachers, can make to healing the human relationship to the planet. Here are some ways to awaken devotion to the earth in your yoga students.

- Talk with your students about devotion as one of the main paths of yoga. Encourage them to see reverence toward all life and toward the body of the earth as part of their yoga. When they notice the beauty of the sunset or the full moon, they can consciously expand the physical sensation of awe into love for all.
- Read poetry in your classes that inspires reverence, perhaps the work of Mary Oliver or the Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz. I also recommend Drew Dellinger's love letter to the milky way, (available at www.DrewDellinger.org), ancient yoga hymns, or Danna Faulds' poetry (see below).
- When engaging in a pose, send love and blessings to the animal or plant being it represents. In Tree pose, for example, send blessings to the trees nearby, thanking them for the oxygen they provide and praying that they thrive and remain free of disease. The conscious act of extending goodwill for the benefit of another creates a habit and a body resonance that will stay with your students after they leave class.

One Embrace

I breathe in blessings,
bird song, the light of
stars dimming in the
dawn. I breathe in
mystery and mountain
streams, equanimity
and the audacity to live
boldly, freely, willingly
in service to the whole.
My open hands rest
lightly on my knees.
They vibrate with energy,
fill with possibility and
grace. I breathe out
judgment, expectations,
doubt, and everything
that handcuffs me
and holds me back.
Breath completes the
circle of ebb and flow,
highs and lows, form
and formless joined
in one embrace.

—from Danna Faulds' fourth book of poetry, *From Root to Bloom: Yoga Poems and Other Writings*,
available at yogapoems@aol.com.

Path 3: Reengaging with the World Forest: Aranyaka Yoga

The guiding wisdom of prana exists not only in our bodies but also in the world around us. But when we spend most of our time driving in cars, moving through cement-sealed cities, and practicing yoga in sterile, closed rooms, we begin to feel cut off from the soul force of the planet and the universe.

Humans have perhaps never lived so isolated from what the Upanishads referred to as the World Forest, that sense of the cosmic connectedness of trees, humans, stars, and planets in one grand inseparable web. This is a tremendous loss, for our spiritual richness as humans as well as for the beings who have lost their connection to us.

Consciously connecting with the amazing diversity of the sacred as it manifests in birds, flowers, rivers, trees, and mountains is an essential healing yoga for our age. I call this Aranyaka Yoga, or the Yoga of Going into the Forest.

While it may feel new, turning to nature as friend and teacher is as ancient as yoga itself. Key Vedic rituals highlighted concentration on the rising and setting sun as well as celebration of the lunar phases. The sage Dattatreya's 27 gurus included animals, plants, the elements, the sun, and the moon. And the great yogi Gautama Buddha chose the pipal tree as his steady companion the night he set out to reach enlightenment.

To help your students reengage with the gifts of the World Forest, organize a special class or event during which you take your students outside. This is an opportunity to take them deeper inside themselves, into their own inner quiet.

Begin by choosing a place that will be protected from passersby or where casual observers will not be a distraction—a forest grove, a private spot in a local park, or a nearby beach. Be ready for whatever weather arises. Relax into it with welcoming presence!

Help your students to work with the senses, meditating on the sounds that surround them, noting their volume and variety, and continuing to come back to the breath. Have them open their eyes and rest the gaze on the horizon, taking in the full panorama of the vista, and allowing the mind to simply receive the vastness of what is spread before it.

Guide them in walking slowly through the space with meditative awareness, noting the weight in the feet, the sensations on the skin, the sounds, sights, and breath as they become a part of the landscape, a part of the sacred energy in this space.

Have them choose something in the landscape—a rock, a leaf, a tree—with which to connect. Encourage them to open themselves to the full presence of this other being, to receive it with all the senses. If it feels appropriate, invite them to open a dialogue with this companion, asking important life questions and receiving guidance.

Finally, invite them to share their experience with the group, reminding them that no experience is good or bad, right or wrong. Encourage them to repeat this practice on their own, becoming more and more attuned to the World Forest around us.

Path 4: Transforming Ourselves--Transforming Our World: Raja Yoga

On a global level, the current environmental crisis may be considered a problem of human spiritual evolution. As a species, we have become tremendously powerful intellectually and technologically. Yet the growth of our spiritual and ethical capacities has not kept pace with these advances.

As a planetary community, we have not yet articulated the relationship of values to actions—at least not clearly enough to protect the earth from nuclear and toxic waste, ecosystem degradation, and glacial melting. But rather than beating ourselves up, we can recognize an opportunity for growth.

As each one of us commits to living more consciously, guided by our deepest values, the potential for the transformation of our species is activated. As each of us is transformed, the human species is also transformed. Our own ethical growth is thus an act of compassion we undertake for the benefit of the entire planet.

In yoga philosophy, the yamas and niyamas form the foundation from which flows all right action. They are the gems of wisdom passed on by the great yogis of the past five millennia. Our task today is to fully engage these core yogic values at this critical moment in history. The earth needs our evolution now.

Every one of the yamas and niyamas is directly applicable to our relationship to the planet. Let's consider brahmacharya, conscious energy management. The life force that we seek to strengthen and enhance through brahmacharya exists not only in our body as sexual energy, but also as the force which vitalizes the entire planet and everything on it.

Through a deep consideration of brahmacharya, we become aware that seeking pleasure through excessive travel and consumerism depletes the earth—and ourselves. We then seek to find pleasures that are closer to home and less taxing on the earth, and to transmute pleasure-seeking itself into an overflowing love of the world.

Here are a few teaching tips for talking with your students about the power of yoga to contribute to global transformation.

- Set an intention at the beginning of each class that the transformation experienced by the class will be for the benefit of the entire species and the planet as a whole. Dedicate the practice to the well-being of all living things and the elements of the earth.
- In a mini-lecture before class, introduce students to the yamas and niyamas, perhaps one per week. During asana practice, refer to the principle again in reference to the poses; for example, when teaching ahimsa, nonviolence, encourage them to enter each pose in a spirit of kindness, respecting their body's limits and deepening with gentleness into their most expansive and compassionate version of the pose. (See meditation below.) Encourage your students to engage the value as a mode of embodiment.

- Set a foundation for nonjudgmental compassion as the basis for all conversations related to ethics and the environment. This is not only central to ahimsa but also to environmental progress. Judgment leads to feelings of guilt, burden, and denial, impeding the natural process of change based in love. With many of your students, your entire environmental work may be to help release unhelpful mind-states so they can access their inner joy and freedom. This in itself is a powerful step toward planetary change.

Guided meditation for ahimsa (nonviolence)

As you begin your practice today, set an intention to grow in compassion toward yourself, toward all living beings, and toward the planet.

Gently but steadily affirm that you will be kind to yourself as we go through this practice, respecting your body's limits. Prepare to let go of any judgments about yourself, and instead to find a place of tender-hearted acceptance for all you encounter. Bless this body you have been given, bless your thoughts, bless your emotions. Welcome your learning path and the state of your body and mind in this moment, with gentleness. If there is any part of your life that needs forgiveness, do it now.

Send blessings to the others who have gathered here today—blessings for peace of mind, for gentleness toward themselves, and for ongoing growth in compassion toward all beings.

Now send your blessings beyond the boundaries of this room. Bless those closest to you, your friends and family. Notice your desire for their health, peace, and happiness. Then bless the entire human family, all the people on this planet, whatever their conditions or life situation. Wish them health, peace, and happiness.

Send a blessing to all the plants in this vicinity—the trees, mosses, grasses, and flowers. Send a blessing to all the animals—the birds, caterpillars, snakes, spiders, and raccoons. Recognize that tender place in your heart that wants all beings to be well, just as you want this for yourself.

Finally, send out blessings to the entire planet—the water, the soil, the air. Feel every cell of your body resonating with kindness—toward yourself, toward all beings, and toward the body of the earth. Rest in the resonance of this kindness.

Path 5: The Ecology of Asana: Hatha Yoga

Asana, the practice of posture, makes up the bulk of the yoga classes we teach. Is it possible for asana to awaken ecological consciousness? Gratefully, the answer is a resounding yes.

Yoga posture has always been a means of expressing the basic interconnectedness of the human body with the earth and cosmos, and with our animal and plant relatives. Sun Salutation is a means of bringing the sun's radiance into the body at dawn's early light. Postures modeled after animals and plants move the soul to stretch and breathe into an expansion of self that embraces the divinity within all of nature. Recognizing this, the *Gheranda Samhita*, a classical yogic text, states "The postures are as many in number as there are numbers of species living in this universe." (verse 2.1)

The earliest artifacts of yoga show humans enacting their connectedness to earth, plant, and animal realms. Three small seals from the pre-Vedic period in the Harappan Valley show a man wearing a headdress of bull horns and sitting cross-legged in meditation, his body swirling with lines of energy. He is surrounded by four animals: an elephant, a buffalo, a tiger, and a rhinoceros. This is the first depiction of a yoga posture.

In another seal from the same period, a woman reaches toward a tiger; the reverse side of the seal shows a creature half woman, half tiger. Today when we are in Cat or Lion pose, we remember the spinal fluidity and spiritual ferocity of our tiger sisters and brothers. Another pre-Vedic seal shows a group of people worshipping a tree spirit. Today when we engage in Tree pose, we feel the quiet rootedness of trees, as well as the way in which they reach toward the light. To this day, many of the most significant postures carry the name of animals and plants, including the fish, cobra, turtle, locust, crow, eagle, swan, cow, frog, lion, tree, and lotus.

Here are some tips for guiding your students to connect with nature through asana.

- Help them experience a soul resonance with the animals, plants, and other beings whose forms they assume. The shape of the pose does not always connect us with its namesake, but when we experience the pose playfully, poetically, or on the level of qualities, the connection becomes clear. Resources for the animal and plant aspects of yoga poses include any good children's yoga book, Swami Radha's *Hatha Yoga: The Hidden Language: Symbols, Secrets, and Metaphor*, and Victor Van Kooten's *From Inside Out: A Yoga Notebook from the Teachings of Angela and Victor*.
- Occasionally be willing to change the name of a pose to highlight species native to your area. Yoga in India evolved as a means of connecting with that time and that place. While tradition carries power, it is just as true that yoga must be rediscovered in each era, responding to contemporary needs and localities. Examples of adaptations might include practicing Owl (Eagle) pose, Salmon (Fish) pose, or Deer (Cow) pose.
- Remind your students that caring for the body is our first responsibility in caring for the earth. Our bodies are part of the planet, made up of the elements of earth. Making healthy choices, such as including yoga in one's daily routine, is our first responsibility in caring for the planet. Protecting the earth begins with ourselves.

Guided movement and meditation on Owl Pose

Bring your hands in front of your heart, crossing them over each other slightly with palms facing the body. Interlace thumbs and spread your fingers wide, coming into owl mudra. Close your eyes and bring the presence of the owl into your consciousness.

Open your eyes and inhale, bringing your arms up to the side and overhead. Exhale, bringing the arms in front of the body, crossing the right elbow under the left, and wrapping your hands around each other, palms touching. Rest your eyes on one point with steady focus. Breathe and feel. Become aware of the strong vision and hearing of the owl, senses powerfully attuned. Sense your own owl-being, wise, attuned, watchful. Release, inhale arms up, and exhale, coming to the other side.

What kind of owl are you? A spotted owl, living in the tree trunks of old growth forest? A burrowing owl, living in ground squirrel burrows in the earth? A snowy owl, living in arctic tundra? Feel your own owl-being, and breathe into it.

Release the pose, and come back to owl mudra. So many owl species today are threatened due to loss of habitat. Send your blessings to the owls on planet earth.

Path 6: The Way of Action: Karma Yoga

Helping our students to understand action in a yogic sense is one of the most powerful tools we can give them in facing today's environmental crisis. Action in yoga stems from selfless service based in love.

Many of the environmental appeals we receive in the mail today are based on criticism of people, corporations, or governmental policies that are “destroying the planet.” Much of the environmental news we hear invites despair or overwhelm. While clear thinking and truth-telling regarding the problems we face are essential, such messages do little to inspire the root of effective action, which is based in compassion for self, others, and the planet as a whole.

Action based in criticism, anger, or fear is tiring and will have limited effect. In contrast, the Bhagavad Gita reminds us to dedicate every single action, large or small, to service of the Divine (see sidebar). When we do this, our actions are purified and flow naturally; inwardly we experience peace and steadiness.

Moreover, the Bhagavad Gita tells us that the result of our action is not up to us—the outcome belongs to God (or Goddess) alone. We may undertake the most perfect, most appropriate action, but the desired result may not come in this lifetime, or ever.

Does this mean we give up hope of protecting and healing the environment? No. Skillful action includes a strong awareness of the desired outcome. In the case of the earth, our desired outcome is a healthy planet: vital soil, water, and air; thriving ecosystems; and a climate that fully supports life on earth.

As we hold our intention to foster the health of the planet with non-attachment to outcome, something surprising happens: We experience more joy and thus greater effectiveness in our actions. If our joy is dependent on outcome, we can be battered by apparent success or failure. If, instead, our joy is allowed to bubble up from within, as the inherent result of service and devotion, we find freedom and ease in action.

To bring an understanding of the path of action to your students, try the following:

- Talk to your students about the path of Karma Yoga. You might choose to read a verse from the Bhagavad Gita at the beginning of class each week for several weeks. Explain the meaning of the verse and allow time for questions and comments. The yogic understanding of action feels foreign at first to our enculturation, in which we are accustomed to seek quick results and become depressed if a particular outcome is not achieved. We all need repeated, gentle encounters with these yogic concepts in order to open up a dialogue with our deeper beliefs, allowing core transformation to occur. Be patient with yourself and your students, and come back to the yogic teachings repeatedly and steadily, as a grounding and a practice.
- Teach the Standing Warrior poses as a way to activate the spiritual warrior within. As peaceful warriors, we add love and truth to the traditional virtues of all warriors. While in the pose, help your students to feel their courage, dedication, discipline, loyalty, and desire for positive engagement and service.

- At the end of class, prepare your students to leave this mini-retreat ready for joyful, restful action. As the class sits after savasana, invite them to feel the awakening of love in the heart that is the fruit of their practice. This is another way to experience lotus pose: The lotus represents the flower of love that blossoms from our yoga. Invite your students to let their practice bear fruit in their lives.

Wisdom from the Bhagavad Gita on the way of action

Do the work that comes to you, but don't look for the results. Don't be motivated by the fruits of your actions, nor become attached to inaction. (2.47)

Do your duty to the best of your ability, O Arjuna, with your mind attached to the Lord, abandoning (worry and) attachment to the results, and remaining calm in both success and failure. The equanimity of mind is called Karma yoga. (2.48)

Work done with selfish motives is inferior by far to the selfless service or Karma yoga. Therefore be a Karma yogi, O Arjuna. Those who seek (to enjoy) the fruits of their work are verily unhappy (because one has no control over the results). (2.49)

No one is free of actions even for a moment, because everyone is moved to do things by the qualities of nature. (3.5)

Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work a man attains the supreme goal of life. (3.19)

All works are being done by the Gunas (or the energy and power) of nature, but due to delusion of ego people assume themselves to be the doer. (3.27)

Those who are devoid of attachment, whose mind is fixed in knowledge, who do work as a Seva to the Lord, all Karma of such liberated persons dissolves away. (4.23)

Whatever you do, Arjuna, make that an offering. Whether it's eating, sacrificing yourself, giving help, or even your suffering (tapas), offer it to me. (9.27)

Path 7: Creating Community for Earth Healing: Sangha Yoga

The yoga tradition has always relied on community networks that support learning and help practitioners meet physical and spiritual needs. Historically, groups of yoga students banded together for growth and communal living, the public supported seekers by providing food and other assistance, and seekers gave back to the public through teaching and compassion.

Today more than ever, we need to foster community as a way of healing the tremendous isolation of our age. I call this Sangha Yoga, the yoga of conscious connection. Sangha Yoga is a medicine for our times, and a needed remedy for earth healing.

My local Quaker Meeting has a group called Eco-Berries that worships together and has also catalyzed the wider community around earth-friendly issues like bike riding, hybrid cars, energy-saving lightbulbs, and taking the train instead of flying.

A San Francisco Bay Area Buddhist group called Green Sangha gathers for meditation and outdoor service; they also spearheaded an awareness campaign about the multiple problems associated with plastic packaging and plastic bags. The Green Yoga Association began with a group of six yoga teachers, and grew to include networks of yoga teachers, studio owners, and practitioners.

Such groups raise awareness and inspire others, while also helping us respond to the emotional challenges associated with environmental degradation and destruction. Despair, depression, guilt, and denial are common responses to the eco-crisis and get in the way of positive change. Groups must be prepared to give time for emotional healing if they are to be truly effective.

Here are some ways to create sangha.

- Use your classes to foster community among your students; help them use each other for moral and spiritual support. During your opening centering, encourage them to send blessings to each other for inner peace and strength. Close the class in a circle, and help them learn each other's names. Engage in occasional partner exercises and sharing that helps them get to know one another and share the challenges of their lives, including their intentions and difficulties in living in balance with the earth.
- At least occasionally, practice poses with your class in a circle (or several concentric circles for larger groups). The Moon Salutation is ideal for circle practice because of its side-to-side orientation and sense of expansion that embraces community. While in Goddess squat, you might say, "Look around the circle, and feel the power and strength held in this group." Or practice Tree Pose in a circle, and allow your students to experience the support of their neighbor that makes balance easier for many (see sidebar). Other poses that are ideal for circle practice include Dancer (with forward hands linked in the center), Warrior III (with arms gently resting on each other's backs for support), and shoulder massage (always a favorite).

- Begin a sangha group that focuses on mutual support toward earth healing. You might do this at your studio as a way of supporting community among your students, or with a group of friends or other yoga teachers as a support for yourself. Include time for quiet meditation as well as for personal sharing, and if the group desires, engage in action projects once cohesion has been built.

The changes needed to balance our lives with the needs of the earth are not changes that can be made alone. The support, inspiration, and cooperation of a group of like-minded individuals is essential in transforming cultural patterns. Yoga includes caring connection with others and the earth as part of the process of internal alchemy.

Sangha Yoga practice: Tree pose in a circle

Stand in a circle about an arm's length from each other and visualize yourself standing on the forest floor. As we come into Tree pose, let's become Sequoia Redwood, the giant redwood of coastal California, sending our blessings to the redwoods, and receiving welcome from them in turn.

Place your right hand lightly on the shoulder of the person to your right. Become aware that in this circle you have support for balance if you need it, and that you also give support to others. Bring your weight over the right leg, strengthening and deepening your roots, and then release the left foot from the floor. Bring your left foot into any variation of Tree pose that works for you today, maybe a sapling, with the left foot at the right ankle, or maybe all the way up onto the thigh. A healthy forest needs all types and ages of trees.

Bring the left hand to the heart, breathing in our diversity and connection. A redwood grove shares nutrients through its roots, nourishing the young trees that might not reach the canopy. Extend the left hand up toward the sun, letting the branches reach toward the light. Breathe and feel. . . and release the left leg, bringing it down and rooting into both legs.

Preparing for the second side, place your left hand on the shoulder of the person to your left, bringing your weight into the left leg, and release the right, coming into Tree pose.

Let's become aware of all the beings who live with us, in and around this tree. Soil gathers on our branches, providing food and habitat for moss, lichen, worms, birds. Fog rolls in, and our branches catch the moisture, making it rain gently below. Our leaves give off oxygen and take in carbon dioxide. Our roots draw in nutrients from the soil and from decaying leaves and trees.

Feel the community of life that surrounds this grove of redwoods, and as we release the pose and come back into human form, feel how we are part of that same community, held in a web of giving and receiving.

Path 8: Embracing the Unity of Opposites: Tantra Yoga

Tantrism is arguably the most ecological of Hindu philosophies, and is the root from which Hatha Yoga developed. It was Tantrism that most clearly recognized the divinity pulsing in all of nature. Further, Tantrism affirmed the possibility of achieving spiritual liberation through the vehicle of the world, rather than needing to pull away from or reject it.

Literally, tantra means weaving together, and Tantrism has always been associated with embracing and unifying the opposites, including spirit and nature, male and female, light and dark, grief and joy.

In other philosophies of Hinduism, nature is seen as feminine, and both nature and the feminine are devalued in relation to transcendent consciousness, seen as masculine. Tantrism subverts these categories by honoring both the feminine and the masculine—the immanent and the transcendent. This has major resonance for today's Green Yogis, who strongly desire spiritual growth and transformation, but are also concerned with caring for the planet.

One of the most important things you can do with your students is to help them open to both the light and the dark places in relation to environmental issues. While we may experience joy and peace during time spent in nature, we are also aware of deep grief and concern for ecological crisis. Embracing both poles is equally important. Tantrism teaches that neither of these apparent opposites is more “spiritual” than the other. Both are essential for an authentic life and an authentic practice.

One of the most powerful aspects of yoga is the way it opens us to the healing influence of the light, manifesting as peacefulness, joy, and trust in the basic goodness of universal processes. This light guides our actions as we seek healing and uplifting for the planet. Invoke this guiding light in prayers at the beginning or end of class, by reciting the Gayatri Mantra, for example. Said in English or Sanskrit, Gayatri Mantra reminds us to focus on the unifying light that sustains the cosmos, and to let that same light permeate and purify us as individual beings.

Similarly, opening to the dark brings clarity and compassion. Our ordinary lives do not give space for the deep grief many people experience in the face of the ecological devastation of our time. Yoga teachers can name the grief and help students give meaning to this suffering. Both the yoga and Buddhist traditions recognize suffering as the foundation of human existence. According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, “To one of discrimination, everything is painful indeed” (YS 2.15, in Satchidananda, 1984). The universality of suffering is also the first noble truth of Buddhism.

As we become aware of suffering, a space for compassion can arise, along with the natural desire to minimize suffering. Teachers can encourage students to send blessings to the dark places (dukkha), and to their own and others' suffering. Students may be guided to acknowledge their vulnerabilities and their sorrow at the ways in which we are not living in balance with all life. The teacher might wish to read poetry that names such sorrow, or to lead students in sending blessings to particular species or ecosystems that are suffering.

See the essential unity of spirit and nature, and you will be walking the ancient path of Tantrism. Bring the light to bear on your efforts to heal the planet while opening equally to the dark, and your work will bear great fruit.

Gayatri Mantra

Om bhur bhuvah svaha
Tat savitur varenyam
Bhargo devasya dhiimahi
Dhiyoyona Prachodayaat
Om.

Om, earth, sky, heavens.
We meditate on the effulgent light
which generates and sustains the cosmos.
May that same effulgence enlighten and guide us.

Blessings for all beings

As you feel your breath in the body, send yourself a blessing, asking for gentleness and compassion in your practice. Then let your awareness expand to the others who have gathered with you today for this practice, sending them also blessings, that their practice may bear fruit in greater peace, nourishment, and strength of being.

Then send your awareness out beyond this room, and become aware of the animals and plants that live near here. Send blessings to the soil, blessings to the water, and blessings to the air, wishing their vitality and well-being. Send blessings to all the beings that live on this planet.

May all beings and the body of the earth be peaceful. May all beings and the body of the earth be happy. May all beings and the body of the earth be free.

Om, shanti, shanti, shanti.

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