

Yoga and Ecology

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The threat of global warming has forced all of us to start to think what we can do to save our planet. Some of us might think that the task is so overwhelming that we cannot do anything about it. Yet if many of us would consider altering our lifestyles, we will be able to affect the transactions of the market place whose products are made to meet our demands.



In this regard, the spiritually oriented lifestyle contained in the classical Austanga Yoga system given by sage Patanjali some 2500 years ago has become very relevant today. Patanjali encouraged yoga practitioners to adopt certain ethical codes that would bring about the required mental balance needed to delve deep into the mind through meditation. Those codes were divided into **10 universal principles** called **Yama (Self Restraint) and Niyama (Positive Observances)**. I would like to focus on one of these principles which are very applicable to our current environmental crisis.

It is known as Aparigraha. It means to limit the consumption of material objects to a level that we reasonably need for the preservation of ourselves and our family. In other words non-greediness.

Aparigraha is sadly overlooked in today's global consumer culture which encourages us to, "Shop Till You Drop". Our society glorifies beauty, sex, glamour, power and fame. And we suffer the corresponding ailments of drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, crowded and unhygienic urban cities and a huge gap of wealth between the "haves" and the "have nots". In our mad rush for obtaining pleasure through the senses we have depleted the Earth's natural resources and almost wiped out our own inner urge to experience our deepest self.

The pursuit of material pleasure is in inverse proportion to our running after spiritual bliss. In other words, the more we seek happiness in external objects, the less we feel inclined to feel the inner peace from our soul.

Yet the nature of the physical world is limited. Everything that is physical, even our own bodies, has a natural cycle of birth and death. By trying to seek total fulfillment in physical objects whose duration is only temporary will leave us feeling frustrated and dissatisfied.





The Green movement's encouragement of the **three R's (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle)** is a modern interpretation of the ancient principle of Aparigraha. The **plastic bag** we thoughtlessly accept from the convenience store vendor was made from oil, a fossil fuel produced from the decayed bodies of ancient animals over thousands of years. Yet we use up this limited resource just to have the convenience of carrying our snack home and throwing the plastic bag in the garbage, not realizing that it will not break down again. And just ask yourself, "How many plastic bags do you use in one day?"

Aparigraha is the principle of **conscious living** or "**the proper use of all material things**". While our grandfathers would use cloth bags to buy their food stuffs or glass jars to preserve their foods or furniture that they handed down to their children, or watches that would last a lifetime, all of these habits have been long lost in our imbalanced consumer oriented society fed by the greed for consumption based on profit and not on need.

Aparigraha does not teach us to turn back the clock and live as in the Stone Age. That would be an impractical solution. Nor does it want to restrict our natural requirements or needs through force as Communism once tried to do. Aparigraha will differ from person to person. The **minimum needs** of a bachelor are not the same as a family of ten. It will depend on our own common sense and discriminating faculty to decide what is enough for our personal needs. The best guide is our own **inner conscience** that helps us to differentiate right from wrong.

In order to observe Aparigraha in relation to current environmental issues we may consider in what way we could reduce, reuse and recycle the things we use, the cars we drive, the homes we live in, the appliances we use and how we save food, fuel, electricity and water.

Taken within the context of a spiritual lifestyle which seeks to experience **happiness** from a spiritual source as well as from a physical source Aparigraha becomes a useful tool to guide our consumption patterns out of a genuine concern for those who have less than we do and also to preserve the precious natural resources gifted to us by Mother Earth. As mentioned before, Aparigraha is one of ten principles when taken as a whole will guide the yoga practitioner to evolve himself harmoniously within and without, for the well being of himself and his society. That is why Aparigraha makes sense from the spiritual point of view, the ecological point of view, the humanitarian point of view and the economic point of view.



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