



Deep green yoga

Questions for Gillian Kapteyn Comstock

Gillian Kapteyn Comstock, MA, is a holistic psychotherapist and codirector of Metta Earth Institute, A Center for Contemplative Ecology. Certified in Kripalu, Jivamukti, and Advanced Interdisciplinary Yoga, she has led yoga retreats, quests, and trainings in nature sanctuaries around the world. She is a founding member of the Green Yoga Association and serves on the Green Yoga Council. Gillian will present a workshop on Deep Green Yoga at KYTA Conference 2010, June 24–27. She spoke recently with *Yoga Bulletin* Editor Tresca Weinstein.

▲ **Yoga Bulletin** *What is the relationship between yoga and nature?*

Gillian Yoga is nature. Yoga means union, wholeness and connectedness with all things. We've come to think of it as something we do on a mat that's separate from the rest of life, but really it's connected with everything else. To experience nature is to be in yoga.

▲ **YB** *It seems like it would be easier to experience that connectedness when you're doing yoga in a beautiful place, with mountains and trees outside the window. How do you experience that connection when you're practicing yoga in the middle of a city?*

Gillian We might not always have the wild forest around us, the mountains, a beautiful river, but we are always connected with nature. We're breathing air—that's nature. Our bodies themselves, the pulsations of life within us, are a microcosm of the rivers and seas. To

tune into that is to tune into the whole cosmic pulse. We have asana to help us attune to those sensations within. Kripalu Yoga is such a great form for helping us attend to sensations, and when we do that and pay attention to what our muscles feel

like, what our bones feel like, that connection with nature is still happening, even in a room with no windows in the middle of Manhattan. Yoga helps us come into our bodies freshly in the now and, when we slow down enough to be in the now, we become much more aware of our actions and the effects of our actions and we have the potential to enter into that stream of the living universe in a much more alive way.

▲ **YB** *How is Deep Green Yoga different from other styles and traditions?*

Gillian One of the most wonderful things about American yoga is the creative freedom of asana, and that connects us to the body and to nature. But there's still a tendency to put yoga in a box, to isolate it on the mat. The shadow side of that wonderful American yoga is we get materialistic about our practice, we're thinking about our yoga clothes and "How does my butt look?" Deep Green Yoga is about reminding ourselves of our vast connection with nature, remembering that yoga is about more than what happens on the mat. It's a way to fully participate in the universe's story. Through our practice of moving muscles and bones and reaching, we are in a sense jumping into Alice in Wonderland's hole, entering into a universe that's about becoming and being and participating. Instead of a universe of products, objects, and things—my mat, my yoga clothes, my practice—we're in a participatory, process-oriented universe. That's basic ecological theory, where everything is interconnected. No one thing exists by itself.

▲ **YB** *In your workshop description, you mention five key principles of Deep Green Yoga. What are they?*

Gillian The first one is interconnection, the idea that everything is connected to everything else. The Internet is a great metaphor for the web of life, the interconnection of all life. Similarly, the second principle is about being in relationship to everything around us, and we use partner yoga as a way to cultivate being in relation. The idea of ecologically oriented yoga is that we're more than ourselves—it's an illusion that we're ourselves alone, doing our own interior practice. Practicing partner yoga allows us to actively communicate with others.

Then there's the principle of wholeness, nondualism. There are uniqueness and diversity in our world, but there's a deeper wholeness that exists. So we welcome everything into our house as a guest, even if we perceive it as being harmful or disturbing. It's all part of the whole. And what happens when we embrace this idea of wholeness is that we go beyond judgment. We begin to trust that the universe has an innate intelligence to it. Even if you have a negative experience, even if there's a tear in the fabric of beauty, there's still wholeness in it. Even the atrocities that occur in the human world are part of this primal universe.

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▲ **YB** It's difficult to reconcile that idea when you witness the kind of suffering that happened in Haiti this winter, for example.

Gillian It doesn't mean there isn't suffering. There is suffering. But along with suffering, there is also compassion and the capacity for healing. Everything is linked to everything else. There's the horror of what happened in Haiti, but there's also this amazing and powerful response that happened all over the world. What a rising of the human spirit in the face of catastrophe.

▲ **YB** Absolutely. Tell us about the other two principles.

Gillian The fourth is reverence, a spirit of awe or wonder, being in the now, being present to experience this awe. And the last concept is communion. The French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had the brilliant and moving concept of the noosphere. He thought of it as another atmosphere around the planet, an atmosphere of consciousness that we all participate in, so that we no longer think of ourselves as separate—we're part of this new organism. His idea was that instead of looking at ourselves, as human beings, as the apex of evolution, that our next challenge is to become like the cells in the brain of the earth. I have a friend who's a beekeeper and I often use the metaphor of the hive, of having hive consciousness, all of us being part of a magnificently working whole. There are practices that support a glimpse of the experience of being in that noosphere or hive consciousness.

There are actually so many ancient practices and philosophies already in the yoga tradition that are essentially ecological. When you get in touch with that, it stirs a deep environmental activism. A split can happen between spiritual activism and environmental activism, and Green Yoga is about bringing them together. People think about Green Yoga as being about buying environmentally friendly yoga mats and organic cotton yoga clothes, and that's part of it, but it's also about tuning into that interconnection and wholeness so that activism just happens.

▲ **YB** How do these concepts translate into a yoga class?

Gillian That's what we'll look at in the workshop. How do you teach in this way? In most American yoga classes, the teacher is in front of the class, with rows of mats lined up. One way to immediately challenge that idea is to teach in a circle. Things start to change right away—there's a shift in the model from direct teaching to participatory experience. We're challenging the idea that the teacher is the one that knows and the students are the ones that don't know. Can we think about our yoga as a learning community, and can we as teachers cultivate and respond to the brilliance of the student? When you learn the art of improvisation, you become more responsive to the magic and mystery and surprises that happen in your classes. You can do circle yoga, too, where you're actually connecting, touching other people in the circle. Thich Nhat Hanh says the next Buddha will not be in the form of a person, but will be in the form of community.

▲ **YB** What does Green Yoga off the mat look like?

Gillian On the mat you develop the passion and skills so that, off the mat, you can remember your interconnection and wholeness. When we can be conscious about our breath, we recognize we are all breathing the same atmosphere, the same air that all those around us are breathing. If you really contemplate that practice on the mat, then you have a different way of relating with people, and even with objects. Your food, for example—where does it come from? How is it affecting your body? Since ancient times, yoga has had so much to say about diet, and the recognition that indeed we are exchanging energy with the living earth when we are eating. So if I'm looking deeply at a soybean on my plate, I can see where it came from, I can see the farmer, I can see the conditions of the farmer—all of that simply by tasting the soybean, smelling that food on my plate, being connected to the experience of eating. We're bombarded with challenges that are overwhelming, but I can look at the food on my plate and make the most ecological choice, attuning, comprehending, contemplating what is right in front of me that I could respond to. Right there, moment to moment, is an opportunity to make a choice. ■



Visit Gillian and Metta Earth Institute on the web at
➔ www.mettaearth.org.

Find out more about the Green Yoga Association's resources for studios, its Green Yoga Sanghas program, and its Seva Groves tree-planting project at
➔ www.greenyoga.org.

Learn more about greening your yoga business at the ➔ [Yoga Journal Boston Conference](#), April 6–11, 2010.

To join a conversation about yoga and environmental awareness, visit the ➔ [KYTA Community Forum](#).