



Yoga teacher Kirileigh Lynch also works as an environmental consultant to the ABC.

PHOTOGRAPHY: RUSTY WHITE



# green to the soul

Many yogis are discovering that their practice offers many opportunities to promote a greener way of life.  
By Sue White

For Sydney yogi Kirileigh Lynch, her two passions, yoga and environmental action, took some time to come together.

“I’d flirted with yoga for years, and I’d always had green tendencies, but neither had produced ‘light bulb’ moments,” Lynch says. “About eight years ago I was walking with a friend on council clean-up day, and she pointed to an exercise bike sitting on the curb, saying, ‘What a shame. Think of the time and energy that went into producing that. Someone probably bought it on TV a year ago, and now it’s being thrown out.’ It was the first time I really got it. I could see clearly how my actions had an impact on the earth,” she says.

As Lynch got deeper into her yoga practice, her environmental awareness began to grow exponentially. “The first time I heard the yoga sutra *Sthira sukham asanam*, I saw the larger picture,” she says. This sutra is often translated as “May our connection to the earth be steady and joyful”.

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According to yoga, the reason why we don't need "stuff" to be happy is simple; everything we need to be happy is already inside of us.

Today, Lynch's life merges her two passions. In her role as an environmental coordinator for the ABC's headquarters in Sydney's Ultimo, she can be found installing timers on printers, vending machines and fax machines; setting photocopiers to automatically print double-sided; and working with staff on tackling green issues, from motor vehicles to lighting. She also teaches Jivamukti yoga, a form of hatha where yogic philosophy and an individual's capacity to create change are as prominent as the dynamic asana.

"What I take out of yoga I put into my environmental commitment, and vice versa," says Lynch. "When I teach, it's hard for me to talk about mountain pose without relating it to the earth. At work, my practice helps me be more compassionate, especially with people who have different points of view."

#### THE YOGIC CONNECTION

For those like Lynch, keen to better understand the links between yoga and the environment, yogic philosophy offers some tangible opportunities. Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga does not begin with twisting ourselves in knots, but in 10 ethical precepts. Amongst the five yamas (restraints) and five niyamas (observances), Patanjali offers some clues on how to interact with ourselves, others and the planet.

For many yoga practitioners, it's the first yama, *ahimsa* (non-harming), that is seen as the all-important rule of thumb. Although individuals enact *ahimsa* differently, one of its most popular expressions—a vegetarian (or vegan) diet—is understood to be one of the most environmentally significant actions any individual can make. Those presenting the statistics on eating less meat are far from lefties. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation is just one group reporting on the environmental impact of the livestock sector, noting in 2006 it was responsible for "18 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions...a higher share than transport."

While links to yoga may begin with *ahimsa*, they definitely don't end there. When Ghandi reportedly said, "There's enough in the world for everyone's need, but not for anybody's greed," he may have been talking expressly on Patanjali's ethic of *aparigraha* (greedlessness).

Living in the west, you don't have to be a yogi to have struggled with *aparigraha*. The fading excitement of an impulse buy may be a firsthand experience of what Patanjali advised: grasping for more doesn't lead to lasting happiness. According to yoga, the reason why we don't need "stuff" to be happy is simple; everything we need to be happy is already inside of us.

## 10 easy green changes

**Eat less (or no) meat.** If that sounds too hard, start with one meat-free day a week, and slowly increase this over time.

**Read more.** Practice the yama of *satya* (seeking the truth) by getting informed about the realities of what's happening on our planet. Then act accordingly!

**Less is more.** Starting practising *aparigraha* by easing back on consumption or buying second hand, small, conscious actions make a difference.

**Travel eco.** If you regularly buy takeaway food (all those lunches at work), invest a few dollars in a knife/fork/spoon combo. Yes, it's plastic, but only once. Buy for a few dollars from any camping goods store.

**Choose local, organic foods wherever possible,** and start asking questions of your suppliers. Farmers markets and food cooperatives are often filled with informed foodies. If budget's an issue, find farmers who aren't certified organic, but who don't use pesticide sprays as a good interim solution.

**Say no to plastic bags** as a matter of course and support the local "bag swap" programs appearing in pockets across the country.

**Ask for your morning chai (or coffee) in your own mug.** Metallic insides are harder to find, but generally accepted as healthier (heat and plastic don't mix). This easy alternative to disposable cups is also a visible symbol that encourages others to think about their own actions.

**Turn off commercial television.** Use it as a chance to read, talk to someone you love, practice or simply give your energy field a break from all the "wanting" the barrage of ads can bring.

**Meditate on the sutra** *Sthira sukham asanam* (Yoga sutra II:46).

**Stop drinking bottled water.** The 250 million litres of bottled water Australians consumed in 2006 took an incredible 456,131 barrels of oil to produce, largely because the two main ingredients in plastic PET bottles are derived from crude oil.

Denby Sheather (below) chose to use bamboo floors, vintage furniture, low-allergen paints and eco-friendly yoga mats in her yoga studio.



"I don't lecture about the changes [to my studio]; I just let people absorb the information."

PHOTOGRAPHY: BACKGROUND ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/DENISE TORRES; BASKET OF VEGETABLES ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/TYLER STALMAN



This page: the Shiva Ashram in Victoria. Below right: members of the ashram, including environment coordinator Sharvani Hughson (second from left) in the ashram's permaculture garden.

To improve their carbon footprint, the Shiva Ashram community converted an old swimming pool into a rainwater tank, and residents and guests save water showers to put on the garden.

When describing her own efforts to live and breath the yamas and niyamas, Lynch is refreshingly honest: "Everybody in our society takes more than they need. All we can do is try to get it to the *minimum* of more than we need. Aparigraha is so hard. In a way, I'm lucky being a vegan; I don't buy things made from animal products so there's far less I can buy in terms of shoes or clothes! I'm not perfect, but I'm starting to hoard less and shop less. When I get things now they're often re-used or recycled. I probably don't have less stuff, but I'm more conscious about what I do have."

As she began making conscious environmental changes, Lynch soon realised she needed to harness the niyama of *tapas*, or discipline:

"It's so much harder to walk to the shops than drive. You have to be strong with yourself in the beginning, but then it becomes habit and you don't even notice."

#### NEW HABITS AND HABITATS

Denby Sheather, owner of Breathing Space Yoga on Sydney's northern beaches, agrees that creating new habits is simply a matter of focus. She has spent the past two years converting her yoga studio to an eco-space complete with bamboo floors, low-allergen paints, vintage furniture and eco-mats. For Sheather, it's been a journey of education.

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"It's been a big learning curve! If you think about those tea lights in metal tins, who knows where they end up, or if they're made from palm oil? I found a woman doing soy candles and I use those instead," she says.

Sheather says the changes connect naturally to her yoga practice. "Every action and every thought you create has a ripple effect in your body and into your community. When you realise how you are connected to the earth you want to nurture that even more; it's where you're from," she says.

Now, says Sheather, the space has an energy of its own. "Students love it. They walk in and go 'ahhh'. I don't lecture about the changes; I just let people absorb the information. As a teacher you say the same thing again and again, eventually someone hears one word and makes their own changes when they're ready."

At the Shiva Ashram on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, environment coordinator Sharvani Hughson says it can be challenging to not be dogmatic about such an important issue. "I'm still working on trying not to force ideas down people's throats," Hughson admits. "But as people grow in awareness they get more attracted to the idea of taking responsibility for their actions. Practice helps people become more present and mindful, and with this comes an awareness of the



## Books and blogs

*Green Yoga* (Traditional Yoga Studies) by Georg Feuerstein. Not a light read, but a valuable one.

*Living the Good Life* (Hardie Grant Books) by Linda Cockburn. One Queensland family's eco experiment.

*Legacy of Luna* (HarperOne) by Julia Butterfly Hill, An inspiring story about Julia's attempt to preserve the California Redwoods.

[www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com) reports on international eco issues and new products.

[www.noplasticbags.com.au](http://www.noplasticbags.com.au) shows you how to cut down our use of plastic bags.



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## Eco actions for your yoga space

**Source soy candles** or products made from ethically-derived palm wax to avoid contributing to the destruction caused by the palm oil industry. Ecoya's Metro Jar is perfectly portable; \$29.95, [www.ecoya.com.au](http://www.ecoya.com.au)

**Buy Spotless** (ABC books). Shannon Lush's cleaning bestseller has hundreds of natural solutions to keeping your space sparkling.

**Choose eco mats** next time you're replacing existing ones. Earth Yoga Mats contain no latex, PVC or rubber; \$35.20, [www.ecoyoga.com.au](http://www.ecoyoga.com.au). If your school can't afford it, offer to help with a fundraiser or visit [www.yogapass.com.au](http://www.yogapass.com.au), where an "eco-mat cooperative" helps yoga teachers buy mats at around \$19 each. Give your old mat to a community group or friend.

**Painting?** Choose products with no VOCs (volatile organic compounds). Sydney's Natural Paint Place has solutions for all surfaces. Try the Bio Wall mix for interiors; from \$28 (250ml), [www.thenaturalpaintplace.com.au](http://www.thenaturalpaintplace.com.au)

**Don't sell bottled water.** If you want to sell something, make it a re-usable cup and invite students to turn on the tap.

**Cut down on chemicals.** Try Enjo's Bathroom Glove for the sink and tiled areas ([www.enjo.net.au](http://www.enjo.net.au) or pick up second-hand on ebay) and B\_E\_E's Multi-Surface Cleaner, which uses eucalyptus oil and spearmint, for yoga mats (\$8.99, 1800 064 953).

**Go carbon neutral.** Follow the lead of companies like Byron Yoga Clothing and go neutral with the help of an energy assessment and action plan. Many state governments offer financial incentives and subsidies to small businesses for doing this.

interdependence between themselves and the environment," she says.

To improve their carbon footprint, the ashram community converted an old swimming pool into a rainwater tank; residents and guests save water from showers to put on the garden; and Hughson engages with council to ensure the ashram's efforts are the best they can be. She notes that living in a 45-strong community (guests are welcome) immediately helps their environmental goals.

"Eating together means less energy is used for eating meals, and we don't have to heat a whole house for just one person. It's an important connection, because for me a lot of what yoga is about is energy use; through practice we try to store energy to function at our optimal level," she says.

While some residents are more involved than others, the permaculture garden has been a unanimous hit.

"The design looks beautiful, it's all circles and mandalas," Hughson says. "We have chooks under a moveable dome so they're constantly moving. They're not exactly free ranging, but they get a new space every fortnight, and do a lot of the digging and fertilising. I'm hoping one day we'll be able to eat solely from the garden."

For yogis like Hughson, Sheather and others leading the green wave, the changes arising from connecting the two philosophies go deeper than the practical. In fact, as Lynch explains, the results are often intensely personal.

"My job in environmental work makes me learn details; the facts and figures about my purchases and my lifestyle," says Lynch. "But yoga has broken my heart open and taught me compassion for the earth, for people and for animals that will suffer from my decisions. That's my lesson." ❖

*Sue White is a Sydney-based freelance journalist and long time batba yoga practitioner.*

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