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Ethics and Spirituality of Sustainability:¹ *What Can We All Do?*

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Abstract

This article approaches the topic of sustainability in a broad, interdisciplinary fashion – in the manner of our *total footprint* on the planet, not just our *carbon footprint*. It proposes to bring together the two allied areas of sustainability and spirituality in a dialectical manner, with ethics as a balancing force and spirituality playing the role of the proverbial invisible hand guiding our quest for sustainability. It takes the view that, in essence, spirituality and sustainability are vitally interlinked. When the spiritual dimension of our being is underdeveloped, we turn into pleasure-seeking automatons, plundering the planet in a mindless race called progress. This makes us self-centered and greedy for material wealth which leads to social disharmony and over-exploitation of natural resources. When we live a life of greater self-awareness, we tend to consume less and, more so, less mindlessly. With this understanding comes the liberating realization that *there is no sustainability without spirituality*.

For material development to be sustainable, spiritual advancement must be seen as an integral part of the human development algorithm. Our societies are human nature writ at large; therefore, we believe that the solution to society's current chaos lies in the spiritual transformation of each one of us. The choice we face is between conscious change and chaotic annihilation. We believe that the most important eco-spirituality struggles will be won or lost during this decade. While policymakers and governments can play their respective roles, each one of us has to do our part by consciously adopting spirituality and sustainability as a way of life. Only an individual life rooted in the continuous harmony with nature – a life based on moral and spiritual awareness – can preserve the sanctity of the planet.

Introduction

This article explores the inherent relationship between sustainability and spirituality, and the role of ethical leadership in honoring and maintaining this interconnectedness. We believe that unless people's moral and spiritual qualities are nurtured and developed, the best of sustainability efforts will not work. Our political and economic thinking needs to be attuned to spirituality rather than materialism – no economics is any good that does not make sense in terms of morality. We need to refuse to treat economics and politics as if people do not matter. After all, we are “Homo moralis” and not “Homo economicus.” We believe that the way to achieve sustainable, harmonious living in all spheres is through lived morality and spirituality at the personal level. The journey for world transformation starts indeed at the individual level.

¹ Partially based on author's forthcoming books: *Spirituality and Sustainability: New Horizons and Exemplary Approaches*. Springer, USA: 2016 (with Marques and Mitroff); and *Leadership Today – Practices for Personal and Professional Performance*. Springer, USA: 2016 (with Marques).

The article demonstrates that true ecological sustainability, in contrast to the cosmetic variety we too often see around us, depends upon our deeper understanding of fundamental spiritual values such as interconnectedness and oneness, non-violence and compassion, contribution and selfless service.

Likewise we have to start viewing our organizations as “living systems” rather than as “machines for producing money.”² Thus true sustainability is not possible without a deep change of *values* and commitment to a lifestyle at the individual level and the organizational level. It cannot be achieved simply as an expression of economic functionality or legislative contrivance. Therefore, to the question, “How to improve the state of the Planet?” we reply: “Everybody can do something!”³

The Context: The Current State of the Planet

Human activities are changing the climate in dangerous ways. Levels of carbon dioxide which heat up our atmosphere are higher than they have been in 800,000 years. 2014 was planet’s warmest year on record. And we have been setting several records in terms of warmest years over the last decade. One year does not make a trend but 14 out of 15 warmest years on record have fallen within the first 15 years of this century.

Climate change is no longer just about the future we are predicting for our children or grandchildren. It is about the reality we are living with every day, right now. While we cannot say any single weather event is entirely caused by climate change; we have seen stronger storms, deeper droughts, longer wild fire seasons. Shrinking ice caps forced National Geographic to make the biggest change in its atlas since the Soviet Union dismantled.⁴

Environmentalists continue to point out that the current state of our planet is alarming – from the standpoint of economic development, social justice, or the global environment– and that sustainable development has hardly moved beyond rhetoric since it was first used in the 1980s. It is fairly evident to anyone who has a nodding acquaintance with world affairs that humanity is hardly closer to eradicating extreme poverty, respecting the dignity and rights of all peoples, or resolving environmental challenges, climate change, or the extinction of plants and animals.⁵ And to add insult to the injury, strangely, we find ourselves in an era of “sustainababble” – marked by wildly proliferating claims of sustainability. Even as adjectives like “low-carbon,” “climate-neutral,” “environment-friendly,” and “green” abound, there is a remarkable absence of meaningful tests for whether particular governmental and corporate actions actually merit such description.⁶

For many experts, the increasing level of carbon dioxide in the environment is the most worrisome. The Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research (EDGAR) – a database created by European Commission and Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency – released its recent estimates, providing global past and present day anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollutants by country. According to these estimates, the US has

² Arie de Gues, *The Living Company: Habits for Survival in a Turbulent Business Environment* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 91, 176.

³ David Biello, State of the Earth Still Seeking Plan A for Sustainability: How to improve the state of the planet: “everybody can do something.” *Scientific American*, Oct. 12, 2012. Retrieved July 31, 2015: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/planet-seeks-plan-for-sustainability/>.

⁴Climate Change and President Obama's Action Plan. Video retrieved on August 3, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=182&v=r4ITx56WBv0>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Engelman cited in Michael Renner, “The Seeds of Modern Threats,” in *World Watch Institute State of the World 2015: Confronting Hidden Threats to Sustainability* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013), 2.

the second highest CO2 emissions, trailing behind China, and one of the highest CO2 emissions per capita.⁷ This situation calls for creative solutions both at the collective and the individual level. At the same time, we cannot wait for and rely on legislative measures alone; something fundamental needs to change in terms of how we live and in terms of our world view.

Crown of Creation or Bane of Creation?

As humans, we always pride ourselves to be the crown of creation, the most evolved creatures. Let's say, somehow, chimpanzees came to know about this contention. They would probably say, "If this is what being evolved means, we don't want to evolve. If being evolved means destroying our own kind, mindlessly plundering the planet, and destroying the setup that supports us, we are happy being perceived as less evolved species."

Our dignity as humans should lie in protecting those who are weaker than we. Those who have more power ought to be kinder to those who are weak. All spiritual traditions teach us not to do to others what we don't want to be done to us. No living being wants to be hurt, to die. The golden principle applies to all living beings. Why this cruelty to animals? Moreover, this cruelty to animals is not environmentally sustainable. That time does not seem to be too far when we will have to stop this, if only as an environmental necessity.

Observation and reflection dictate that the universe was not created for humans alone. In the grand scheme of things, all forms of life are equally precious and so are their needs.

It is a matter of great disgrace that as humans, we are the least sustainable of all species. Although we like to consider ourselves as the "crown of creation," given our track record, perhaps, the "bane of creation" would be a more fitting epithet. Every part of the creation contributes its dutiful share in the mutual maintenance of the universe. A coconut plant, when young, can grow mostly on wastewater. After 5-6 years, it carries the sweet water safely stored in a shell over its head, as its gift to the universe, faithfully producing 50-75 coconuts for the next 50-60 years. Consider the life of a tree: requiring very little by way of care and maintenance, it absorbs CO2 and produces oxygen. Every part of its existence is useful to the universe in the form of shade, fruits, lumber, and so forth. The world's forests absorb almost 40 percent of manmade CO2, according to University of Leeds research conducted in 2011.

Vedānta: The Art and Science of Harmonious Living

The article unfolds the vision of Vedānta, the non-dual philosophy as enunciated in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā, the spiritual texts of India. The understanding of this truth, that we are essentially One Limitless Reality, "strikes at the very root of narrow views based on selfishness and is the foundation of higher ethics. This higher Self is of the nature of Bliss, as displayed in our instinctive love of Self; and to recognize it in others is to bring social harmony for no one will be inclined to harm himself. It paves the way for spiritual and moral perfection."⁸ The Gītā (13.28) puts it succinctly: "He who perceives the one Lord dwelling in all beings as their Self cannot harm another, for the Self cannot harm itself."⁹ True awareness

⁷ EDGAR: Trends in global CO2 emissions: 2014 report. Retrieved August 1, 2015: http://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/news_docs/jrc-2014-trends-in-global-co2-emissions-2014-report-93171.pdf

⁸ K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer, *Collected Works of K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer* (Holenarasipur: Adhyatma Prakash Karyalaya, 2006), 239.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 251. This is Mr. Iyer's rendition of Gita's verse 13.28. This author has not come across such a unique and apt interpretation anywhere else.

is when you feel the suffering of every living being in your heart. This is the key message of the Gītā.

Why focus on the Upaniṣads and the Gītā, above all? The Upaniṣads have been extolled as “Himalayas of the Soul.”¹⁰ Upaniṣads are spiritual treatises of Hinduism that contain the culminating wisdom of the Vedas. They are also known as Vedānta (*Veda* + *anta*: the end, *anta*, of the Veda). Literally, the Sanskrit word *Upaniṣad* means “sitting down near”: *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *shad* (to sit). That is, knowledge received by sitting down humbly near a teacher. Alternatively, the word *Upaniṣad* could denote: *upa* (near), *ni* (definitive, doubt-free), and *shad* (to loosen or to destroy). In short, the word, *Upaniṣad*, signifies Self-knowledge, for our self is the nearest thing to us. So it represents that knowledge which destroys ignorance most certainly, bringing the seeker closer to the Ultimate Reality of his/her own self or existence. A treatise that contains such knowledge is therefore called, Upaniṣad.

The greatest Indian philosopher and commentator of sacred Hindu texts, Ādi Śāṅkarācārya, takes this derivation and equates the term Upaniṣad with self-knowledge (*aṭma-vidyā*) or the knowledge of the Absolute (*Brahma-vidyā*). This is also referred to as “secret knowledge” or “esoteric knowledge.” The secrecy is not so much a matter of unwillingness on the part of the teacher to *reveal* this teaching as it is to ensure *preparedness* on the part of the student to *receive* this knowledge.

Consider the opening verse of *Īsopaniṣad* which states, “Behold the universe in the glory of God: all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal: set not your heart on another’s possession.”¹¹ The importance of this verse is evident from the fact that Gandhi held this opening verse in such high esteem that he believed that it contained the essence of Hinduism. *Īsopaniṣad*, one of the ten principal Upaniṣads, is a short text of just 18 verses. Gandhi believed that the entire Bhagavad Gītā could be seen as a commentary on just that initial verse.¹² When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded cheerfully, “That’s easy: Renounce and enjoy.”¹³ The message of the Upaniṣads is: Reality is One, without a second. And there is an absolute identity, oneness, between the truth of an individual (*aṭman*) and the truth of the universe (*Brahman*).

If the value of a wisdom text lies in enabling us to lead a better spiritual and social life, then the Gītā meets these two tests supremely. As Sir S. Radhakrishnan, Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at University of Oxford (1936–1952), has stated:

The two tests of the value of any religious Scripture are whether it helps man to find himself and attain peace and whether it contributes to social harmony. It seems to me that the religion of the Gita satisfies these two tests, the *spiritual* and the *social*.¹⁴

The Vedas base their philosophy of universalism on the understanding that the whole existence forms one single unitary movement despite the variegated diversity. We can see the

¹⁰ Juan Mascaró, translated and selected, *The Upanishads* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965/1979), 43.

¹¹ Juan Mascaró, translated and selected, *The Upanishads* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965/1979), 49.

¹² Thomas Weber, “Gandhi’s Moral Economics: The Sins of Wealth Without Work and Commerce Without Morality,” in Judith M. Brown and Anthony Parel, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 138. See also: Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads, Translated for the Modern Reader* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987), 205.

¹³ Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Upanishads, Translated for the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987), 205.

¹⁴ Sir S. Radhakrishnan, as cited in D. S. Sarma, *Lectures on the Bhagavad Gita*, with an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Maylapore, The M.L.J. Press; 4th edition, 1945), viii. [emphasis added].

operation of this awareness in an Indian wisdom text that states: For the magnanimous, the entire world constitutes but a single family (*udāracaritañāṁ tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*).¹⁵

Five-Fold Offerings to the Universe: Pancha Mahā Yajñās

Ethical conduct in the Upaniṣads revolves around the five *Yajñās* or offerings/sacrifices. These sacrifices are described as a person's duty towards gods, seers, ancestors, fellow humans, and animals. The *Pancha Mahā Yajñās* are extremely versatile religious cum spiritual disciplines. They have a religious (ritualistic) dimension as well as a spiritual (non-ritualistic) dimension. We provide the spiritual version of these "offerings" as follows:

These Pancha Mahā Yajñās are:¹⁶

1. *Deva Yajñā* (Offering/Service to the Lord)
2. *Bhūta Yajñā* (Offering/Service to the Animals and Plants)
3. *Manushya Yajñā* (Offering/Service to all Human Beings)
4. *Brahma Yajñā* (Offering/Service to all Seers/Saints and Scriptures)
5. *Pitru Yajñā* (Offering/Service to Parents/Elderly and Ancestors)

In its ritualistic form, the *Deva Yajñā* is regular worship of the Lord. In its spiritual form, it represents our reverential attitude towards the five basic elements, *Pancha Mahā Bhūtāni* – Space, Fire, Air, Water and Earth. The worship is offered to the Lord in the form of a Universal Being, *Vishva Rūpa* Īshvara. *Bhūta Yajñā* is a reverential attitude towards all plants and animals and our contribution to the protection of nature, protection of the environment, and protection of an ecological balance. Non-ritualistic *Manushya Yajñā* is in the form of all kinds of social service that we perform through varieties of organizations, charities, and associations. *Brahma Yajñā* is our reverential contribution to the preservation and propagation of scriptural learning by supporting the teachers, *Ācāryas*, and the spiritual institutions which support and propagate such activities. Finally, *Pitru Yajñā* is whatever we do for the preservation of the family and for the protection and honoring of our ancestors and our senior citizens in general. A society is considered mature only when it takes care of its elderly people properly with respect and reverence.

Turning the Wheel of Cosmic Co-Creation: Life as an Offering!

In order to grow spiritually, enjoy the Vedas, one has to convert one's whole life into an offering to the Divine, as a cosmic sacrifice (*yajñārthātkarmano*: 3.9). According to the *Gītā* (3.10–3.13), all beings are a part of the cosmic wheel of creation, sustained by the principles of mutual contribution and mutual maintenance. Therefore, every action should be performed in a spirit of sacrifice, *yajñā*, which sustains all beings, as an offering to the Universal Lord. They are great thieves, according to the *Gītā*, who do not help in the turning of this cosmic wheel of sacrifice (3.12). Thus, the *Gītā* does not stop at concern for humans alone; it is cosmic in its scope and universal in its view.

The *Gītā* (18.5) mandates threefold acts of sacrifice (*yajñā*), charity (*dañam*), and austerity (*tapas*) and considers these as the "purifiers of the wise." "*Yajñā*" literally means a sacrifice or an offering. The highest form of offering is living a life of sincerity – a life led by *being good*

¹⁵ *Mahōpaniṣad*—VI.73 (a). Alternative rendering: "For those who live magnanimously, the entire world constitutes but a family." See: Dr. A. G. Krishna Warriar, trans., *Maha Upanishad* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House, n.d.). Accessed: July, 31, 2015: http://advaitam.net/upanishads/sama_veda/maha.html.

¹⁶ The section on Pancha Mahā Yajñās draws upon Swami Paramarthanandaji's discourse, *The Spiritual Journey*. Retrieved July 20, 2015: <http://talksofswamiparamarthananda.blogspot.com/>.

and *doing good*. A sincere life is characterized by doing what we love and loving what we have to do. “*Dānaṃ*” means charity and denotes much more than writing a check to a favorite cause or organization. At the deepest level, it means the gift of “expressed love.”

The Vedic philosophy of India has always emphasized the human connection with nature. The sacred literature of India – The Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, and Bhagavad Gītā, – contain some of the earliest teachings on ecological balance and the need for humanity’s ethical treatment of Mother Nature. The Vedic seers recognized that the universe is intelligently put together which presupposes knowledge and intelligence. The Vedic sages underscored interdependence and harmony with nature and recognized that all natural elements hold divinity. They posit the Lord as the maker as well as the material of the world, thus investing all creation with divine nature. Vedas do not view it as an *act* of “creation” per se as many theologies postulate, but an *expression* or manifestation (*abhivṛyakti*) of what was unmanifest before.

How can God be both the material (*upādāna*) and efficient (*nimīta*) cause of the universe? Are there any parallels of this phenomenon in the familiar world? The Vedas provide two examples to show how the maker and the material can be one. The first example is of a spider and the spider web. Spiders produce silk from their spinneret glands located at the tip of their abdomen.¹⁷ The second example is dream objects and their creation by the dreamer. During a dream, the “dreamer” is non-different material and efficient cause (*abhina nimīta upādāna kāraṇa*) of dream creations. When a dreamer dreams about being afraid of seeing a lion, the outside world – lion, jungle, and so forth – are the creations of the dreamer’s mind. The emotion of fear is also within the dreamer’s mind.

The great practical advantage of viewing the Lord as both the material and the maker of the universe is attainment of spiritual outlook regarding the entire creation. When everything becomes divine in our eyes, we develop a reverence for all life. Equipped with this understanding of One Self in All and All in One Self (*sarvātmabhāva*), we can live a life of harmony, benevolence, and compassion toward all existence. In the following section, we explore the necessity of adopting a plant-based diet as a matter of compassionate and sustainable necessity.

Sustainable Diet: Animal vs. Plant Based?

One of the cardinal principles of sustainability is that, in the name of progress, we should not *upset the setup* carelessly. At its most fundamental level, that entails paying attention to what we eat for our bodies are “food bodies” and we are what we eat. Sri Ramana Maharshi, the great Indian sage of 20th century, used to say that of all the yogic rules and regulations, the best one is taking of *saṭtvic* foods in moderate quantities. This view is consistent with that expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā, and indeed most of the sacred literature of India. According to the Bhagavad Gītā (17.8), *saṭtvic* foods are those foods which nourish the body and purify the mind – foods that contribute to longevity, purify one’s mind, and provide strength, health, happiness, and satisfaction. Such foods are sweet, juicy, fatty, and palatable. On the other hand, the Gītā (17.9-10) continues, foods which are too bitter, sour, salty, pungent, dry, and hot can lead to pain, distress, and disease of the body. According to the *Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad*

¹⁷ Spider Web. Retrieved July 31, 2015: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spider_web.

(7.26.2), “When the food is pure, the mind becomes pure. When the mind is pure, the memory becomes firm. When memory is firm, all ties are loosened.”¹⁸

What is the moral and metaphysical basis of a vegetarian diet? It is the understanding that no living being wants to get hurt or to die. Our self is the dearest of all to us. Love of self comes as a natural endowment that perhaps has its roots in the instinct of self-preservation. An important verse in Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad states that we do not love our husband, wife, son, or any other being for their sake, but for our own sake: “It is not for the sake of all, my dear, that all is loved, but for one’s own sake that it is loved.”¹⁹ However, in our bid to convey our self-interest, we often tend to forget the simple fact that, likewise, everyone’s self is also most dear to him or her.

Metaphysically speaking, all life is one. There is single essential Reality that pervades the entire universe and enlivens all beings. According to the Hindu Vedic tradition, all creatures form the limbs of a single, all-pervading divine being. To benefit any one limb is to benefit the divine being and to harm any is to harm the integrity of the divine being. Therefore, every one of our actions should be performed for the welfare of all beings. All the great spiritual traditions of India, drawing upon this root idea, dictate that a spiritual aspirant must abstain as much as possible from causing any harm to any living being. However, at the same time, it is recognized that life inherently involves harm of some form or another.

Life Feeds on Life

It is an inevitable principle of life that life feeds on life. Our duty is to minimize it. As a Vedic verse puts it, “Life lives by living off another life” (*jīvo jīvena jīvati*). It is true that vegetarians, too, cause harm by killing plants or using animals to plough the fields, so inadvertently harming other beings in the process of raising crops. However, this seems minimal compared to the routine cruelty that is involved in raising, transporting, and slaughtering animals for food. For want of a nervous system, the plants cannot feel the pain, but the animals can. Like us, these animals can feel the pain and do not wish to be physically hurt or killed.

It is true that no one in reality can have a completely harmless existence. But that does not mean that we should abandon the core value of harmlessness. We must minimize the harm we cause to other creatures as far as possible. The Buddha said, “All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill or cause another to kill.”²⁰

Clearly no one is arguing that Eskimos and others who have no other means of sustenance should adopt a vegetarian diet. However, abstaining from eating meat is possible for nearly all of us, given the choices that the modern life accords. This is the minimum all of us can do.

Live and Let Live

Nonviolence, *ahimsā*, forms the basis for the vegetarianism within Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism though it goes well beyond just being vegetarian. This core principle is derived from the Vedic injunction “*ma himsyāt sarva-bhūtāni*” – do no harm to living creatures. This recommendation is also repeated in the Upaniṣads. A commitment to a nonviolent way of life

¹⁸ Swami Nikhalananda, trans. and ed., *The Upanishads: A One Volume Abridgement* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 347.

¹⁹ *na vā are sarvasya kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati*: Swāmī Mādhavānanda, *Brihadāranyaka Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 246–247.

²⁰ Acharya Buddhārāhita, trans., *Dhammapadam: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 43.

emanates from the profound understanding of the moral and metaphysical basis of life. It is only when one is able to perceive and “realize one’s self in the Self of all” can one become nonviolent in the truest sense. The Christian dictum of “love thy enemy as thyself” – because our self is dearest to us – the practice of loving all, including our enemies, as “ourselves,” hinges on realizing the fundamental oneness of all life.

It is well beyond the scope of this article to recount the health hazards of eating meat. They are very well documented in the current scholarly and popular literature on health and nutrition. In the final reckoning, it all depends upon our personal beliefs and choices. These choices, being habit-driven, are not always easy to change, even if one is willing. The spirit is *willing*, says the Bible, but the flesh is *weak*. Observation and reflection make it clear that as human beings we are not the most rational creatures when it comes to forming our beliefs and making our choices. If life were rational, nobody would choose to smoke. For some, the decision to become vegetarian happens instantly. They read some study on the risks of eating meat or watch documentary footage of a factory farm, and meat is off their menu for good. For others, the decision may come in fits and starts.

We cannot appeal to the cheetahs and lions in the jungle to become vegetarians. They are instinctively programmed as such by nature. As humans, we have choices and can certainly choose to become vegetarian/vegan as a healthy decision both for ourselves and for the environment. We can also choose to become vegetarian/vegan out of love, kindness, and compassion.

Once this author heard a sage say, “I can live without fish. Why bother fish?” Exactly! Why bother the poor fish or a chicken or a cow. Of course, one can find a thousand reasons to rationalize and continue doing what one is doing in terms of one’s eating habits. It has been observed that “when the reason is against man, man turns against reason.” Choosing not to cause the suffering of other living creatures for the satisfaction of our taste buds and appetites is the minimal expression of compassion we all can offer.

Concluding Remarks

Let’s seek and share the underlying truth of mutuality that does not lead to unnatural differences and disharmony. That is the truth of our identity behind diversity—the essential oneness of all that exists. By seeking the truth that is equally good to all existence, we will be able to revere all life and truly redeem our human existence. Only then can we ensure equally the happiness and welfare of all beings. That will be our true gift of sustainability to the universe. Eleanor Roosevelt, with an insightful futuristic vision, has said, “The future is literally in our hands to mold as we like. But we cannot wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow is now.”

The choice is ours.

We conclude this essay with a poem which encapsulates the key message of living a sustainable life. The poem emerged as the author walked by an old oak tree, with its characteristic urgency and poignancy.



Conversations with a Tree!

Today during morning walk,
I paused near a wise old tree;
It greeted me, as always, gently;
Unassumingly with an inviting look!

I have heard it whisper,
as I pass by it, everyday:
"I produce oxygen;
What do you?"

Today, there was urgency in its voice,
As if it had lots of questions for me;
Which needed to be addressed,
As a matter of life and death!

Still kind in its manner,
Gentle in its demeanor;
Solemn in its voice,
The tree continued....

Rain or sunshine,
Extreme cold or hot;
I bear my lot, patiently;
Without complaining or comparing!
Do you?

By way of my own care and concern,
I need very little on a daily basis.
Always making sure to contribute,
More than I consume.
Do you?

I offer my gifts of shade and shelter,
Anonymously and generously;
And my fruits and flowers,
To all and sundry, selflessly!
Do you?





I am content in being the way I am,
Without needing to compare or compete;
To outshine or be better than the next tree;
In the mindless race called success!
How about you?

I abide placidly in the present;
Without brooding over the past,
Or pining for the future;
Living fully in the Now, authentically!
Do you?

On yearly basis at least,
I renew myself:
Letting go of the old leaves;
To make room for the new ones!
Do you?

I do not hate my fellow trees,
Nor do I destroy my own kind.
Merely because they are different,
Or hold a different viewpoint!
How about you?

My virtues are: Patience, Generosity,
Acceptance, Forbearance, Caring,
Compassion, Contribution, Usefulness,
Selflessness, Sustainability, Self-renewal!
What are yours?

With my drab, rough exterior,
I stay nimble and pliant inside.
Always ready to adapt and to cater:
Whatever circumstances transpire!
Do you?





I genuinely hold my head high,
Upright in my humility and gratitude;
Always glorifying my Creator,
By serving selflessly Its Creation!
Do you?

In life and in death,
I stay valuable, making sure that
Every part of me is somehow useful,
For the sake of others!
How about you?

My leaves, my stem,
My roots, my bark;
All parts of the Divine Exchange,
You humans call Eco-System.
How about yours?

Even when I die,
I am of service to you;
As firewood to keep your house warm,
And to cook your supreme meal!
Do you?

Above all, I have the
Virtue of Eternal Silence,
And never get bored
with my own existence!
How about you?

As I listened to this wise old tree,
I kept wondering:
What have I done to the Garden
Entrusted to my care?!



About the Author

Professor Satinder Dhiman, Ph.D., Ed.D.:

Satinder Dhiman, PhD, EdD, is Associate Dean, Chair & Director of the MBA Program, and Professor of Management at Woodbury University, Burbank, California. Professor Dhiman has



also served as the Chair for a special MBA Program for Mercedes-Benz executives, China. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Tilburg University, Netherlands, an EdD in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, and a Master's degree in Commerce from Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, having earned the Gold Medal. *He has also completed advanced Executive Leadership Programs at Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton.* He is recipient of the prestigious 2004 ACBSP International Teacher of the Year Award and the Steve Allen Excellence in Education Award, 2006.

Dr. Dhiman's work has been published in multiple national and international journals, and he has authored, co-authored, and co-edited ten books on management and leadership during last 7 years. His current research on fulfillment, which is also the theme of his book, [Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People](#) (Personhood Press, CA, 2012/2014), is focused on transformative habits of mind for attaining lasting joy and fulfillment in both personal and professional life. In his most recent book, [Gandhi and Leadership](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, USA, 2015), Dr. Dhiman offers perceptive insights into the spiritual and moral mainstay of Gandhi's exemplary leadership and its abiding influence on the world today. Some of his forthcoming titles include *Holistic Leadership: A New Paradigm for 21st Century Leaders*. (Palgrave-MacMillan, USA: 2016); *Spirituality and Sustainability: New Horizons and Exemplary Approaches*. (Springer, USA: 2016); and *Leadership Today - Practices for Personal and Professional Performance* (Springer, USA: Fall 2016).

On April 18, 2013, Dr. Dhiman also served as the **opening speaker at TED-x Conference @ College of the Canyons, CA**. He serves as a Chair of ACBSP Peer Review Team (PRT) and accreditation mentor to several universities in the USA, Canada, Europe, and India. He has been recently elected as the President of International Chamber for Service Industry (ICSI), 2014-2015. Dr. Dhiman is the founder and Director of [Forever Fulfilled](#), a Los Angeles-based Wellbeing Consultancy that focuses on workplace wellness and self-leadership.