
Sustaining the Cosmic Wheel of Creation: Journey from Consumer to Contributor

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Nature and wisdom never are at strife.

—Plutarch

If you want to awaken all of humanity, then awaken all of yourself.

If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world, then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself.

Truly, the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.

—Lao Tzu, *Hua Hu Ching*, 75

Abstract

The sorry plight of contemporary world is that we are too preoccupied in the relentless pursuit of changing everything in the external world except ourselves. Gandhi once said, “Our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as being able to remake ourselves.” (Eknath Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe: The Power of the Individual to Heal the Environment* (California: Nilgiri Press, 1989), 20.) 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, ignoring a vital fact that unlimited growth on a finite planet cannot be possible. 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*. The central thesis of this chapter is that in order for sustainability to be sustainable, it must help us transition from *being a consumer to becoming a contributor*. To facilitate this transition, the chapter will present some contemporary applications of the concept of Cosmic Wheel of

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Creation as conceived by the Bhagavad Gītā, the Indian wisdom text. Since all wars are fought first in the mind, this chapter will also suggest that the starting point for safeguarding the sustainability of our planet is purging our mind of the toxic emotions. It will present some strategies for managing excessive desire, anger, and greed that rob our peace of mind and in turn disturb the peace of the planet. In addressing these vital issues, a symbiotic and dialectic approach will be followed applying the key tenets of Advaita Vedānta and Buddhist Psychology.

Politics Without Morality and Economics Without Ethics

Politics without morality, even so as economics without ethics, is a dead end road for it ignores the humanity of who we are. As we evolve spiritually, we realize the terror of this disempowering stance. Since we *are* the world, transforming ourselves is essentially transforming the world. We can no longer only rely on the political and governmental systems to solve the present sustainability crisis. This chapter maintains that only an individual life rooted in the continuous harmony with nature—a life based on moral and spiritual awareness—can be sustainable for the entire creation. Put differently, only by reclaiming the spiritual dimension of who we truly are can we preserve the sanctity of the planet.

We believe that the solution to society's current chaos lies in the spiritual transformation of each one of us. 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 concern that as humans, we are the least sustainable of all species. Jonas Salk is reported to have said, "If all the insects were to disappear from the Earth, within fifty years all life on Earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the Earth, within fifty years all forms of life would flourish."¹

Vedānta: The Art and Science of Harmonious Living

By way of a holistic solution to the current sustainability dilemma, the chapter unfolds the vision of Oneness as propounded in Advaita Vedānta, the non-dual philosophy enunciated in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā, the spiritual texts of India. The Dalai Lama has also recently reminded us that "we need to promote a sense of the oneness of the 7 billion human beings."² The understanding of this fundamental 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.

¹"If all the insects were to disappear from the earth." Quoted during a Ted Talk by Sir Ken Robinson. Retrieved August 20, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JYW2JfKXsg>.

²His Holiness the Dalai Lama Talks to the Japan Doctors Association, April 4, 2015. Retrieved January 15, 2016: <http://www.dalailama.com/news/post/1258-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-talks-to-the-japan-doctors-association>.

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.”³ 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.”⁴ When you feel the suffering of every living being in your heart, that is true awareness. 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.”⁵ Upaniṣads are spiritual treatises of Hinduism that contain the culminating wisdom of the Vedas, the books of Knowledge (gnosis). They are also known as Vedānta (*Veda + anta*: the end, *anta*, of the Veda). 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* denotes: *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 most *nearest* thing to us. So it represents that knowledge which destroys ignorance most certainly and brings the seeker close 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 Śankarācārya,⁶ takes this derivation and therefore equates the term Upaniṣad with self-knowledge (*ātma-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* and *readiness* 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.”⁷ 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

³K.A. Krishanswamy Iyer, *Collected Works of K.A. Krishnaswamy Iyer* (Holenarasipur: Adhyatma Prakash Karyalaya, 2006), 239.

⁴*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.

⁵Juan Mascaró, translated and selected, *The Upanishads* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965/1979), 43.

⁶Though strictly not its founder, Śankarācārya was undoubtedly the greatest expounder and systematizer of Advaita. Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), the famous Austrian existentialist philosopher, once told Professor K. Satchidananda Murthy that “*there is no metaphysics superior to that of Śankarā.*” See K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. xvii. (emphasis added).

⁷Juan Mascaró, translated and selected, *The Upanishads* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965/1979), 49.

Bhagavad Gītā could be seen as a commentary on just that initial verse.⁸ When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded cheerfully, “That’s easy: Renounce and enjoy.”⁹ 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 (*ātman*) 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*.¹⁰

The Bhagavad Gītā, the loftiest philosophical poem that forms a part of the epic, Mahābhārata, is a well-known Indian spiritual and philosophical text and its message is universal and non-sectarian. Both the Gītā and the Vedas base their philosophy of universalism on the understanding that the whole existence essentially forms one single unitary movement despite the apparent variegated diversity. What universal vision of ethical conduct is presented by the Gītā and the Upaniṣads which fosters sustainable lifestyle and growth? In the remaining sections of this chapter, we present some spiritual values and virtues based on the teachings of the Gītā and Upaniṣads that can contribute significantly to sustainable existence.

Fivefold 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 toward gods, seers, ancestors, fellow humans, and animals. The *Pancha Mahā Yajñās* are extremely versatile set of 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*—five areas of contribution—are:¹¹

⁸Thomas 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.

⁹Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Upanishads, Translated for the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987), 205.

¹⁰Sir 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].

¹¹The section on *Pancha Mahā Yajñās* draws upon Swami Paramarthanandaji’s discourse, *The Spiritual Journey*. Retrieved July 20, 2015: <http://talksofswamiparamarthananda.blogspot.com/>. Also see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4jfDxMaXWQ>.

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

Our first contribution is in the form of the *Pitru Yajña*—whatever we do for the preservation of the family and for the protection and honoring of our ancestors and our senior citizens in general. The maintenance of family structure with love and care is *Pitru Yajña*. A society is considered mature only when it takes care of its elderly people properly with respect and reverence. Next contribution is the *Manushya Yajña* which is in the form of all kinds of social service that we do through varieties of organizations, charities, and associations. In this offering, we help our fellow human beings. The *Bhūta Yajña* represents our reverential attitude toward all the plants and animals and our contribution for the protection of nature, protection of environment, and protection of ecological balance. The *Deva Yajña* represents our reverential attitude toward the five basic elements, *Pancha Mahā Bhūtāni*—Space, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. These elements are looked upon as the divine expression of the Lord. The worship is offered to the Lord conceived in the form of a Universal Being, *Vishva rūpa Īśvara*. Finally, the *Brahma Yajña* represents 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.

When we follow the *Pancha Mahā Yajñā*, it brings about an all-round harmony through spiritual, *dhārmik*, activities. We conclude this section with a Peace Invocation:

ॐ सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः ।
 सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चिद्दुःखभाग्भवेत् ।
 ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

om sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu nirāmayāḥ |
sarve bhadrāṇi paśyantū mā kaścidduḥkhabhāgbhavet |
om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||

May all be happy, May all be free from misery.
 May all realize goodness, May none suffer pain.
 Om! Peace. Peace. Peace.

Key Ethical and Spiritual Virtues

Ethics deals with choosing actions that are right and proper and just. Ethics is vital in commerce and in all aspects of living. Society is built on the foundation of ethics. Without adherence to ethical principles, businesses are bound to be unsuccessful in

the long run. As has become abundantly evident from the recent events, without ethics, a business degenerates into a mere profit-churning machine, inimical to both the individual and the society.

Virtues are *lived* values. In this context, Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher and author of *Nicomachean Ethics*, employs the word “hexis”¹² (from Latin “habitus”) in a very special sense, denoting “moral habituation” or a dynamically “active state of moral virtue.” For Aristotle, happiness is the “virtuous activity of the soul in accordance with reason.” Urmson clarifies that, in Aristotle’s view, “the wise man who wishes for the best life will accept the requirements of morality.”¹³ Aristotle further clarifies that, to be happy, we should seek what is good for us in the long run for we cannot become happy by living for the pleasures of the moment. Aristotle includes among the main constituents of happiness such things as health and wealth, knowledge and friendship, good fortune, and a good moral character. For him, a life lived in accordance with excellence in moral and intellectual virtue constitutes the essence of a happy life: “He is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life....A good life is one that has been lived by making morally virtuous choices or decisions.”¹⁴

In the same manner, the Buddha uses the word “compassion” in the sense of “wisdom in action”—right understanding flowering into right action. Chinese use a word called “te” which means virtue in the same sense. *Tao Te Ching* is great classic book by Lao Tzu. It means the Way, the way of virtue and power—denoting that one has to walk upon it.

As we saw in the introductory chapter, Sanskrit word “*Rta*” means “cosmic order” and “*dharma*” means the self-nature of a thing: like burning/heat is the self-nature of fire. Similarly, as human beings, morality, virtue, is our innate nature—every one “knows” that it is not right to hurt others. How so? It is because no one wants to be hurt. I do not want to be hurt; likewise no one else wants to be hurt; therefore, I should not hurt any being. So, it is our “moral duty” not to hurt, as the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant would say. Then why as humans, despite our knowing well that it is not right to hurt others, we end up still hurting others through wars, aggression, active, and passive violence? Is there a way out of it?

In the Bhagavad Gītā (16.1-3), Śrī Kṛṣṇa described that fearlessness, purification of one’s existence, cultivation of spiritual knowledge, charity, self-control, performance of sacrifice, study of the Vedas, austerity, simplicity, nonviolence, truthfulness, freedom from anger, renunciation, tranquility, aversion to faultfinding, compassion for all living entities, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty, steady determination, vigor, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, and freedom from envy and from the passion for honor are among the essential qualities which are

¹²W.D. Ross rendered “hexis” as a *state of character*. See David Ross, translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹³J.O. Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, 2.

¹⁴Mortimer Adler, *Arsitotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980). Emphasis added.

needed for our self-development. These qualities are in the mode of goodness (*sattva guṇa*) and are considered essential not only for leaders to govern but also auspicious for their own progress on the path of liberation. Good leadership approaches and practices in the Bhagavad Gītā philosophy are also deep-rooted in the concept of *dharma* or virtue.

In the Gītā's terminology, the performance of actions selflessly as a service or as an offering to the Supreme sustains the cosmic system. In turn, such actions purify the mind and make it a fit vessel for the reception of self-knowledge which alone is the true means to spiritual freedom.

The spirituality of the Gītā is firmly rooted in the ethical values. There is no progress on the path of spirituality if there is no harmony and unity between our *vichāra* (thought process) and *āchāra* (conduct). Without ethical purity, the true message of the Gītā will elude us. Gandhi who made his life his message believed that one needs to observe five disciplines to arrive at the correct understanding of the interpretation of the Gītā:

But you must approach it with the five necessary equipments, viz., *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truth), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-possession), and *asteya* (non-stealing). Then and then only will you be able to reach a correct interpretation of it. And then you will read it to discover in it *ahimsa* and not *himsa*, as so many nowadays try to do.¹⁵

These five disciplines are called *yamas* (abstentions) since they represent “moral restraints” or rules for living virtuously. These rules can be very effective in the workplace to create an atmosphere of amity and harmony. Practicing these abstentions, however, does not equal becoming “ineffectual” or allowing ourselves to be taken advantage by others. Commenting on these five *yamas*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood have rightly noted, “We must think of ourselves as the servants of the mankind, and be ready to put ourselves at the disposal of those who need us. It does not mean, however, to lend ourselves to the evil purposes of others ... The truly helpful man is like public trolley car, available to all who care to use it, but travelling, nevertheless, along a fix route to its destination.”¹⁶

Ensuring the Wellbeing of All Beings

As a practical manual of living, the Gītā articulates a vision of life which is at once lofty and pragmatic. It presents values that are at once universal and cosmic in scope, germane not only to human beings but to all living beings. It lays down the guidelines for leading a wakeful and a meaningful life—a life marked by goodness and contribution. What makes our life purposeful and meaningful? What is the

¹⁵Cited in Raghavan Iyer, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press/Oxford India Paperbacks, 2012), 69.

¹⁶Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Society, 1953/2007), 148–149.

essence of being good and doing good? What does it mean to grow in goodness? How can one grow from being a consumer to becoming a contributor? The Gītā holds the keys to all these existential questions, and much more. It recommends that we approach life as a network of mutual interdependencies in which everyone has to contribute their allotted share. And the touchstone is not mere human welfare but the welfare of all beings (*sarvabhūtahite*: BG 5.25; 12.4). Only then we can ensure the preservation of the planet. This understanding holds the key to a sustainable future for all.

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

In order to grow spiritually, enjoin the Vedas, one has to convert one's whole life into an offering to the Divine, as a sort of cosmic sacrifice (*yajñārthātkarmaṇo*: BG 3.9). According to the Gītā (3.10–3.13), all beings are a part of the cosmic wheel of creation, sustained by the principle of mutual contribution and mutual maintenance. Therefore, every action should be performed in a spirit of sacrifice, *yajña*, 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 (*yajña*), charity (*dānaṃ*), and austerity (*tapas*) and considers these as the “purifiers of the wise” (*pāvanāni manīṣiṇām*). “*Yajña*” literally means a sacrifice or an offering. The highest form of offering is living a life of sincerity—a life led by being good 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—contains some of the earliest teachings on ecological balance and harmony 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. They 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 significance. Vedas do not view creation as an *act* of “creation” per se as many theologies postulate, but an *expression* or manifestation (*abhivyakti*) of what was unmanifest before.

The following excerpt from Chāndogya Upaniṣad, one of the most important Upaniṣads, explains the process of creation in an amazingly simple scientific term, and puts the irreducible minimum of spirituality based on this understanding within the compass of one short paragraph. By way of universal spirituality, it also represents its pinnacle:

In the beginning, there was Existence alone—
 One only, without a second.
 It, the One, thought to Itself:
 “Let Me be many, let Me grow forth.”
*Thus, out of Itself, it projected the universe,
 and having projected the universe out of Itself,
 It entered into every being.*
 All that is has its self in It alone.
 Of all things It is the subtle essence.
 It is the truth. It is the Self.
 And you are That!

—Chāndogya Upaniṣad¹⁷

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.¹⁸ The second example is dream objects and their creation by the dreamer. During dream, the “dreamer” is the single material and efficient cause (*abhīna nimīta upādāna kāraṇam*) of dream creations. When a dreamer dreams about being afraid seeing a lion, the outside world, lion, jungle, and so forth are the creations of dreamer’s mind. The emotion of fear is also within dreamer’s mind.

The great practical advantage of viewing the Lord as both the material and the maker of the universe is the 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.

Our dignity as humans should lie in protecting those who are weaker than us. Those who have more power ought to be more kind 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. Moreover, this cruelty to animals is not

¹⁷Adapted from Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Upanishads, Translated for the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987) and Swami Nikhalananda, trans. and ed., *The Upanishads: A One Volume Abridgement* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964).

¹⁸Spider Web. Retrieved July 31, 2015: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spider_web.

environmentally sustainable. That time does not seem to be too far when we will have to stop this, if only as an environmental necessity.

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-Based Versus Plant-Based?

In their groundbreaking book *Population, Resources, Environment*, Stanford Professors Paul R. and Anne H. Ehrlich state that the amount of water used to produce one pound of meat ranges from 2500 to as much as 6000 gallons.¹⁹

As stated earlier, one of the cardinal principles of sustainability is that, in the name of progress, we should not *upset* the very *setup* carelessly. At its most fundamental level, that entails paying attention to what we eat since our bodies are primarily “food bodies” and we are what we eat. Sri Ramana Maharshi, the great Indian sage of twentieth century, used to say that of all the yogic rules and regulations, the best one is taking of *Sāttvic* 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), *Sāttvik* 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 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (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.”²⁰

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 one of the Upaniṣads states that we do not love our husband, wife, son, or any other being for their sake, but for one’s 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.”²¹ However, in our bid to get our self-interest across, we often tend to forget the simple fact that, likewise, everyone’s self is also most dear to him or her.

¹⁹Also see: John Robbins, *Diet for a new America: how your food choices affect your health, your happiness, and the future of life on earth* (Novato, Calif.: H J Kramer, 2012).

²⁰Swami Nikhalananda, trans. and ed., *The Upanishads: A One Volume Abridgement* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 347.

²¹*na vā are sarvasya kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati, ātmanastu kāmāya sarvam priyam bhavati*: Swāmī Mādhavānanda, *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, with the Commentary of Śankarācārya* (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 246–247.

Metaphysically speaking, all life is one. 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 was 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. 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 plow 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.”²² 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.

High Cost of Raising Livestock

Raising livestock for meat comes at a very high cost to the environment. Climate-impacting emissions are produced not just by the animals’ digestive systems, but also by the fertilizers and manure used to produce feed and the deforestation taking place to provide grazing lands. To add insult to injury, livestock animals consume large amounts of water, agricultural and land resources that could be deployed to support a higher quality of life for humans. In a 2014 research report by Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, an independent policy institute based in London, Rob Bailey, Antony Froggatt, and Laura Wellesley provide a comprehensive overview of high environmental cost of raising livestock. They also review the findings of the United Nations Food and Agriculture

²²Acharya Buddhārakkhita, trans., *Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 43.

Organization (FAO) over last ten years. Their research indicates that livestock industry produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all cars, planes, trains, and ships combined:

Livestock production is the largest global source of methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O) – two particularly potent GHGs....The global livestock industry produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all cars, planes, trains and ships combined....Emissions from livestock, largely from burping cows and sheep and their manure, currently make up almost 15 % of global emissions. Beef and dairy alone make up 65 % of all livestock emissions. Average global estimates suggest that, per unit of protein, GHG emissions from beef production are around 150 times those of soy products, by volume.²³

According to a 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), our diets and, specifically, the meat in them cause more greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane, nitrous oxide, and the like to spew into the atmosphere than either transportation or industry. The FAO report found that current production levels of meat contribute between 14 and 22 % of the 36 billion tons of “CO₂-equivalent” greenhouse gases the world produces every year.²⁴

Although experts have known the heavy impact on the environment of meat production, but recent research shows a new scale and scope of impact, particularly for beef. The popular red meat requires 28 times more land to produce than pork or chicken, 11 times more water, and results in five times more climate-warming emissions. When compared to staples like potatoes, wheat, and rice, the impact of beef per calorie is even more extreme, requiring 160 times more land and producing 11 times more greenhouse gases, with one expert saying that eating less red meat would be a better way for people to cut carbon emissions than giving up their cars.²⁵

According to Professor Tim Benton, at the University of Leeds, “The biggest intervention people could make towards reducing their carbon footprints would not be to abandon cars, but to eat significantly less red meat.”²⁶

A Case in Point: Which Diet Is Best Suited for Humans?*Which diet is most sustainable for humans—meat-based or plant-based? While most humans are clearly “behavioral” omnivores, the question still remains as to whether humans are anatomically suited for a diet that includes animal as well as plant foods. One important argument in favor of a vegetarian diet is*

²³Rob Bailey, Antony Froggatt and Laura Wellesley, “Livestock—Climate Change’s Forgotten Sector: Global Public Opinion on Meat and Dairy Consumption.” A Research Paper. Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London: December 2014.

²⁴Nathan Fiala, How Meat contributes to Global Warming, *Scientific American*, February 1, 2009. Retrieved January 25, 2016: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-greenhouse-hamburger/>.

²⁵Damien Carrington, “Giving up beef will reduce carbon footprint more than cars, says expert,” *The Guardian*, July 21, 2014. Retrieved January 25, 2016: http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/21/giving-up-beef-reduce-carbon-footprint-more-than-cars?CMP=share_btn_fb.

²⁶Ibid.

based on the idea that human anatomy and physiology is best suited to a plant-based diet.²⁷ In his perceptive essay,²⁸ *The Comparative Anatomy of Eating*, Milton Mills notes that “observation” is not the best technique to use when trying to identify the most “natural” diet for humans.

Mills suggests that a better and more objective technique is to look at human anatomy and physiology. Humans are vegetarian by design. Our flat teeth are perfect for grinding grains and vegetables, not for tearing apart animal flesh. Similarly, our hands are designed for gathering, not for flesh-tearing. Our saliva contains the enzyme alpha-amylase, the sole purpose of which is to digest the complex carbohydrates in plant foods. (This enzyme is not found in the saliva of carnivores.) Basically we have all the right apparatus to consume vegetarian products, and none of the right apparatus for flesh foods. After a detailed comparative analysis of the oral cavity, stomach, small intestines, and colon structure of carnivores, herbivores and omnivores, Mills, on balance, states that,

*In conclusion, we see that human beings have the gastrointestinal tract structure of a “committed” herbivore. Humankind does not show the mixed structural features one expects and finds in anatomical omnivores such as bears and raccoons. Thus, from comparing the gastrointestinal tract of humans to that of carnivores, herbivores and omnivores we must conclude that humankind’s GI tract is designed for a purely plant-food diet.*²⁹

One of the arguments frequently advanced by meat eaters to explain their food choices is that meat gives the body strength, builds muscle, and so on. However, the evidence proves otherwise. For example, Dave Scott, a U.S. triathlete and the first six-time Ironman Triathlon Hawaii Champion, followed a strict vegetarian diet during his entire training period.³⁰ Another great example of the power of a vegetarian diet is Hawaii legend Ruth E. Heidrich. Ruth not only overcame the cancer, she went on to become an award-winning, record-breaking triathlete.³¹ Ruth has run six Ironman triathlons, over 100 triathlons, 66 marathons and won more than 900 trophies and medals since her diagnosis of breast cancer in 1982 at the age of 47!

Likewise, many gorgeous creatures of the animal kingdom explode this myth that meat begets strength, muscle, or size.³² Some of the big, beautiful,

²⁷See, Virginia Messina and Mark Messina, *The Vegetarian Way: Total Health for You and Your Family* (New York: Harmony, 1996), 16.

²⁸See Milton R. Mills, *The Comparative Anatomy of Eating*. Retrieved Oct. 21, 2015: <http://www.adaptt.org/Mills%20The%20Comparative%20Anatomy%20of%20Eating1.pdf>.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰See Dave Scott (triathlete) entry in *Wikipedia*. Retrieved November 24, 2015: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dave_Scott_\(triathlete\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dave_Scott_(triathlete)).

³¹See Ruth E. Heidrich, *A Race for Life* (New York: Lantern Books, 2000).

³²Top 10 Vegan Animals. Retrieved on October 30, 2015: <http://www.vegansouls.com/top-vegan-animals>.

strong, powerful animals are herbivorous such as elephants, rhinos, hippos, horses, and yaks. They do not seem to have any protein deficiency either.

Case Reflection Questions

1. Do you think that plant-based diet is the *most natural* diet for humans?
2. Based on their anatomy, are humans naturally omnivores or herbivores?
3. If you were to consider a plant-based diet as a choice, what will be the basis of your decision: health, environment, or compassion? Or all three?
4. Do you believe that a plant-based diet is a *better choice* in terms both personal and environmental health?

Choose Compassion: *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 “*mā himsyāt sarva-bhūtāni*”—do no harm to living creatures. This recommendation is also repeated to the seeker after truth in the Upaniṣads. A commitment to a nonviolent way of life emanates from the profound understanding of the moral and metaphysical basis of life. It is only when one is able to cognize 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 most dear to us—the practice of loving all, including our enemies, as “ourselves” hinges on realizing the fundamental oneness of all life.

According to one estimate,³³ 150 billion marine and land animals are slaughtered every year worldwide by the meat, dairy, egg, and fish industries with cruelty that has no parallel anywhere, not even within the animal kingdom itself. At this rate, the entire human population of the world will be wiped out in less than 20 days! Again, 150 billion animals are ruthlessly killed every year for a sandwich and human greed and gluttony! How can we claim to be the “crown of creation?” Perhaps, “bane of creation” is more like it. If one realizes the terror of the situation, living just by the “golden rule” alone—the ethical compass most people use to gauge right from the wrong—meat will be off the table for good. All this suffering and misery is preventable. We can all change what we eat, if we want to. The choice, as always, is ours!

³³Gary Yourofsky, Best Speech You Will Ever Hear (Updated). YouTube video retrieved October 25, 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K36Zu0pA4U.

It is well beyond the scope of this chapter 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 tigers and lions in the jungle to become vegetarians. Carnivorous animals are programmed as such by nature. This is not the case with the humans. Gary Yourofsky, an American animal rights activist and a vegan superstar, is succinct:

If you put a live bunny rabbit and an apple in the crib of a 2 year old, let me know when the child eats the bunny rabbit and plays with the apple. *We are purely herbivorous.* We have no carnivorous or omnivorous instincts whatsoever. And physiologically if your jaw moves from side to side in grinding motion when you chew, you are hundred percent herbivorous. If you were a meat eater like lion, your jaw will only go up and down, rip and swallow, then you are a carnivorous. If you sweat through your pores to cool yourself, you are herbivorous.³⁴

Besides, animals do not have the awareness to choose differently based on what is right and what is wrong. 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 explain, “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. It is good for us and it good for the environment too.

Conclusion

The true ecological sustainability depends upon our deeper understanding of the fundamental spiritual values such as interconnectedness and oneness, nonviolence and compassion, contribution and selfless service. The journey of world transformation starts at the individual level: The way to achieve harmonious living

³⁴Gary Yourofsky, Vegan Activist destroys Ignorant Reporter. YouTube video retrieved on October 25, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYPIGGdRMYo>.

in all spheres is through ethics and spirituality at the personal level. One does not have a right to take unless one has contributed in some way that is ecologically and socially beneficial. If we are to secure our survival as a species on this planet, there is a need to move from a mentality of competition to one of cooperation, from a lifestyle of being a consumer to becoming a contributor, based on the interconnectedness and preciousness of all life.

Chapter End Questions/Reflections

1. Do you believe that in order to transition from being a consumer to becoming a contributor, it is our *bounden duty* to contribute our allotted share to the environment at least equal to what we consume?
2. Based on some of the facts presented in this chapter, what specific actions do you plan to take to contribute your share toward environmental sustainability? Every small step matters.
3. Why it is important to understand the spiritual basis of all life to achieve a truly sustainable future?
4. What is the single most important thing that humans can do to ensure a sustainable future?



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