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*The illustrious ancients, when they wished to make clear and to propagate the highest virtues in the world, put their states in proper order. Before putting their states in proper order, they regulated their families. Before regulating their families, they cultivated their own selves... When their selves were cultivated, their families became regulated. When their families became regulated, their states came to be put into proper order. When their states came to be put into proper order, then the whole world became peaceful and happy (Will Durant, *The Greatest Minds and Ideas of All Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 12).*

—Confucius

*The work an unknown good person has done is like a vein of water flowing hidden underground, secretly making the ground green.*

—Thomas Carlyle

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## Abstract

This chapter explores the inherent interconnectedness of sustainability and spirituality, and the role of 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. Similarly, our political and economic thinking need to be attuned to spirituality rather than materialism—no economics is any good that does not make sense in terms of morality. After all, we are “Homo moralis” and not “Homo economicus.” We need to refuse to treat economics and politics as if people do not matter. We believe that the way to achieve harmonious living in all spheres is through ethics and spirituality at the personal level. The journey for world transformation starts at the individual level. The chapter contends that true ecological sustainability, in contrast to the cosmetic variety we see around us, depends upon our deeper understanding of fundamental spiritual values such as interconnectedness and oneness, nonviolence and compassion, contribution and selfless service.

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## Introduction

The chapter builds on the premise that the best service we can offer to the universe in the realm of sustainability is to purge our own mind of the toxic emotions of greed, anger, and hatred. When qualities such as generosity, compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and respect are in place, our respect for the environment and the community grows naturally and, as leaders, we are able to offer the best gift to our future generations, from which we currently have this planet on loan. Finally, it presents a viewpoint that sustainability is not possible without a deep change of values and commitment to a lifestyle at the individual level. It cannot be achieved simply as an expression of economic functionality or legislative contrivance.

The chapter unfolds the vision of Vedānta, the nondual 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.”<sup>1</sup> The Gītā (13.28)<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> When you feel the suffering of every living being in your heart, you have reached the summit of awareness. This is the message of the Gītā.

Why focus on the Gītā and the Upaniṣads, above all? 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*<sup>4</sup>

The Upaniṣads have been extolled as “Himalayas of the Soul.”<sup>5</sup> Consider the opening verse of *Īsopaniṣad*<sup>6</sup> which states, “Behold the universe in the glory of

<sup>1</sup>K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer, *Collected Works of K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer* (Holenarasipur: Adhyatma Prakasha Karyalaya, 2006), 239.

<sup>2</sup>All translations of the Bhagavad Gītā verses are by Gambhirananda (1984) and/or Swarupananda (1996). All verses of the Gītā are presented in the following manner: chapter number, followed by the verse number. For example, 13.26 means Chapter 13, verse 26.

<sup>3</sup>K. A. Krishnaswamy Iyer, *Collected Works.*, 251. This is Mr. Iyer’s rendition of Gita’s verse Chapter 13, verse 28. This author has not come across such a unique and apt interpretation anywhere else.

<sup>4</sup>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.

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

<sup>6</sup>Upaniṣads are spiritual treatises of Hinduism that contain the culminating wisdom of the Vedās. They are also known as Vedānta (Veda + anta: the end 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:

God: all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal: set not your heart on another's possession."<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded cheerfully, "That's easy: Renounce and enjoy."<sup>9</sup> 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*).

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## The Greatest Spectacle of Modern Times: Impoverishment of Spirit

During his distinguished career spanning seven decades spent studying and writing about world history, Will Durant, winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1968) and the Medal of Freedom (1977), came to identify what he considered to be the ten "greatest" thinkers of all time. The short list included Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, scientists such as Copernicus and Newton, and great thinkers such as Voltaire and Immanuel Kant. But topping them all on Durant's celebrated list of luminaries was the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius. Why did Durant put Confucius at the top of the list of humanity's great heroes of all time? It was because Confucius, as the opening quote states, put the cultivation of individual self at the center of the process by which human society can achieve the maximum peace and harmony. Being a moral philosopher, Durant explains, Confucius's "call to the noble life was based upon secular motives rather than upon supernatural considerations."<sup>10</sup> This primacy of the individual self also lies at the heart of the Indian wisdom texts in their conception of creating a harmonious society.

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*upa* (near), *ni* (definitive, doubt-free), and *shad* (to loosen or to destroy). So it represents that knowledge which destroys ignorance most certainly and brings the seeker close to the Ultimate Reality of his/her own existence. A book that contains such knowledge is therefore called Upaniṣad.

The greatest Indian philosopher and commentator of sacred Hindu texts, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, 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* on the part of the student to receive this knowledge.

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

<sup>8</sup>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* (Tomaes, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987), 205.

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

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

In 1968, shortly after Will Durant had won the Pulitzer Award for literature, an interviewer asked the great philosopher of history about the phenomenon that has had the greatest influence on the twentieth century, Durant paused for a moment and then replied: "...The basic phenomenon of our times is not communism; it's the decline of religious belief, which has all sorts of effects on morals and even on politics because religion has been a tool of politics."<sup>11</sup> This decline in "religious belief" can be translated into decadence of spirituality, since on the issue of morality, there is no quarrel between religion and spirituality. Both subscribe to the virtue of morality—religion to sacred morality and spirituality to both sacred and secular morality—as an organizing principle for human conduct. It is only when the values deteriorate at the individual level that we are not able to sustain morality at the social level (Dayananda, 2009). Hence, morality is a significant link between religion and spirituality on one hand, and spirituality and sustainability on the other. In this chapter, we will focus on how spiritual values contribute to the sustainability efforts of the leaders.

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## Conquering Nature vs. Befriending Nature

On May 29, 1953, the New Zealander Edmund Hillary and the Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing Norgay became the first human being to reach the summit of Mount Everest on the Nepal–Tibet border. Headlines worldwide declared "Man Conquers Everest." Although at the personal level Hillary considered it more of a conquest over the self,<sup>12</sup> this attitude of subjugation of nature permeates our thinking and has become the defining paradigm of humanity, typical of our contemporary approach to nature and the environment. Ever since the dawn of Industrial Revolution, our primary approach toward nature has consistently been that of the conquest and control rather than harmony and coexistence. Unfortunately, this approach has come to dominate all our economic and political policies as well as our way of life in general. The horrific consequences of this disempowering stance are too evident to recount.

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## Interdependence and Interconnectedness

There is an African saying that states, a person is a person because of other persons. The phrase "by benefiting others, we benefit ourselves" represents the idea of interconnectedness. This idea is also well described by Jose Ortega y Gasset: "I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself"<sup>13</sup>. Thus, 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 of all life.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>12</sup> "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." Edmund Hillary Quotes. Retrieved February 15, 2015, [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edmund\\_Hillary](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Edmund_Hillary).

<sup>13</sup> José Ortega y Gasset. (1961). *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín. New York: W.W. Norton and Company., p. 45.

One does not have a right to take unless one has contributed in some way that is socially beneficial. “One who enjoys the gifts of the gods,” says the Gītā (3.12), “without offering them (anything in return) is, indeed, a thief.” The idea of Vedic sacrifice is just this: the individual act of sacrifice (as an offering to the Whole) becomes imbued with significance of cosmic proportions—the mutual coexistence and maintenance of the universe. This is not just a precept related to Vedic life, but a universal principle underlying all life: the existence and well-being of each entity ensures the existence and well-being of all others.<sup>14</sup> Scientists call this web of mutually sustaining coexistence “deep ecology.”

### Case 9.1: Overconsumption Is the Greatest Waste!

One of the most overlooked facts of modern life is the unsustainable nature of overconsumption. This has brought humanity to an absurd pass where one-sixth of humanity has too much for their own good while nearly three-fourths starve for basic necessities.<sup>15</sup> In January 2015, Oxfam, an international confederation of 17 organizations working in approximately 94 countries worldwide, reported that the wealthiest 1% will own more than half of the global wealth by 2016.<sup>16</sup> In 2014, Oxfam reported that the 85 wealthiest individuals in the world have a combined wealth equal to that of the bottom 50% of the world’s population or about 3.5 billion people.<sup>17</sup>

One natural consequence of this outrageously glaring economic inequality is overconsumption of resources: A minority of the world’s population (17%) consuming most of the world’s resources (80%), leaving almost 5 billion people to live on the remaining 20% of resources.<sup>18</sup> Another disturbing statistics is that as many as 2.8 billion people on the planet struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day, and more than one billion people lack reasonable access to safe drinking water.<sup>19</sup> How can we deal with these ever-growing inequalities? Should we wait for the laws to regulate our greed? Or should we be living more consciously, mindful of the impact of our every act on the planet, our total footprint, not just the carbon footprint? In a personal interview with the author, Arun Gandhi, Gandhi’s grandson shared the following incident.

<sup>14</sup>Swami Muni Narayan Prasad in his commentary on the Gītā titled *Life’s Pilgrimage through the Gītā: A Commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā* (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2005), 105, tells us that “such examples of mutual satisfaction are found everywhere. When mango trees bloom as spring arrives, along with it come thousands of bees to enjoy the nectar of mango blossom. The pollination that takes place with the help of the bees ensures the happiness of the tree ... animals, and humans.”

<sup>15</sup>Michael N. Nagler cited in Eknath Easwaran, trans., *The Upanishads, Translated for the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987), 207.

<sup>16</sup>Cohen, Patricia (January 19, 2015). “Richest 1% Likely to Control Half of Global Wealth by 2016, Study Finds”. New York Times. Retrieved July 10, 2015: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/business/richest-1-percent-likely-to-control-half-of-global-wealth-by-2016-study-finds.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/business/richest-1-percent-likely-to-control-half-of-global-wealth-by-2016-study-finds.html?_r=0).

<sup>17</sup>Scott Neuman (January 20, 2014). Oxfam: World’s Richest 1 Percent Control Half Of Global Wealth. Retrieved July 11, 2015: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/01/20/264241052/oxfam-worlds-richest-1-percent-control-half-of-global-wealth>.

<sup>18</sup><http://worldcentric.org/conscious-living/social-and-economic-injustice>.

<sup>19</sup><http://www.worldwatch.org/node/810#3>.

### All Waste Is a Violence Against Mother Nature

Arun reminisced about a day when he was walking back from school: “I had a very small pencil which seemed too small for me to use. I threw it away, sure that grandpa would give me a new one if I asked him for it. That evening when I asked him for a new pencil, he subjected me to a lot of questions. He wanted to know how the pencil turned so small, why and where I threw it away. Finally, he gave me a flashlight and made me go look for it.”

When I found the pencil and brought it back, grandpa made me sit and said to me: “I want you to learn two very important lessons: First lesson: Even in the making of a simple thing such as a pencil, we use the world’s natural resources. And when we throw them away, we also throw away the world’s natural resources. And that is violence against nature. Second lesson: Because, in an affluent society, we can afford to buy all these things, we over-consume the resources of the world. And because we overconsume them, we are depriving people elsewhere of these resources and they have to live in poverty—and that is violence against humanity.”

“That was a profound lesson in nonviolence,” said Arun Gandhi. “I never thought that all of these little things we do every day—things we throw away, waste, and overconsume—that they would amount to violence!”<sup>20</sup>

### Points to Ponder

1. How can we reduce the glaring economic inequalities without invoking the law?
2. Explain how overconsumption is ultimately an unsustainable way of life.
3. What role self-discipline plays in the regulation of greed?

### Planet or Profit: Have We Already Passed the Tipping Point?

*Every generation had lived under the delusion that they were passing through the most turbulent period in history. With us the delusion has turned reality. We can claim the dubious distinction of being the first species on vasundhara [Earth], to have contrived to bring about its own doom and that of amazing biodiversity. This is in contrast to the five mass extinctions recorded in the last six hundred million years, precipitated by natural causes.<sup>21</sup>*

<sup>20</sup> Arun Gandhi, Personal Phone Interview with the author, February 2, 2013, (unpublished transcripts)

<sup>21</sup> Veerendrakumar cited in the Publisher’s Note to V. Panoli, trans., *Prasthanathraya Volume II: Isa, Kena, Katha and Mandukya Upanishad with the Karika of Gaudapada* (Kochi: Mathrubhumi MM Press, 2006), v.

According to some scientists, we may have just one more generation before everything collapses. In fact, in a recently published research article titled *Accelerated modern human-induced species losses: Entering the sixth mass extinction*,<sup>22</sup> Ceballos et al. state, unequivocally, that the planet has officially entered its sixth mass extinction event. The study shows that species are already being killed off at rates much faster than they were during the other five extinction events, and warns ominously that humans could very likely be among the first wave of species to go extinct.<sup>23</sup>

As the global impacts of anthropomorphic climate disruption continue to intensify, corporations and the global elite continue to plunder our planet, subjecting areas of the planet that already face freshwater scarcity issues and other environmental contamination problems to still greater risks from various forms of pollution. It is not clear whether we have already passed a tipping point such that human survival beyond the next few decades cannot be assured, but what is overwhelmingly clear is that capitalism—and the drive for profits no matter what the threat to the ecosystem all humanity depends upon—is a force for global destruction.<sup>24</sup>

Climate change is not the only serious problem that is weighing down on us. The rapid depletion of the earth's natural resources, the acquisition of world aquifers by big corporations, and the GMOs are some of the other causes for grave concern. Watching all these developments, one is reminded of a statement attributable to Jonas Salk: "If all the insects were to disappear from the earth, within 50 years all life on earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the earth, within 50 years all forms of life would flourish."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, Anthony D. Barnosky, Andrés García, Robert M. Pringle, Todd M. Palmer, "Accelerated modern human-induced species losses: Entering the sixth mass extinction," *Environmental Sciences* June, 19, 2015, 1-5. Retrieved July 10, 2015: <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/advances/1/5/e1400253.full.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup>For further details, also see: Dahr Jamail, *Mass Extinction: It's the End of the World as We Know It*. Retrieved July 10, 2015: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/31661-mass-extinction-it-s-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it>.

<sup>24</sup>To read more about how specific environments and communities suffer from transglobal corporate profit-seeking, see: *Profit or Planet: Truthout Environmental Series*. Retrieved July 11, 2015: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/22419-planet-or-profit>.

<sup>25</sup>A quote widely attributable to Jonas Salk. Sir Ken Robinson in his famous 2006 Ted talk titled "Do Schools Kill Creativity," also attributes it to Jonas Salk. Transcript retrieved March 10, 2016: [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity/transcript?language=en). [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity/transcript?language=en)

## To Eat or Not To Eat Meat: Solving Global Warming!

*I cannot appeal to tigers and wolves. They are programmed to be what they are. Being endowed with free will, only a human being can make a difference by exercising his or her choice. The threatening inundation from melting icebergs in the North Pole is avoidable ... if only there is a change of heart on the part of every meat eater. If it is too much for one to switch to be a total vegetarian, one needs to give up at least red-meat eating. This is the only option one has.<sup>26</sup>*

Studies indicate that developed countries have a situation of unsustainable overproduction and overconsumption of animal products (meat, milk, and eggs). Most of the world's animal production is carried out in industrial systems that make very heavy demands on natural resources of land and water in order to grow feed-crops for farmed animals. Industrial animal production also causes widespread pollution from animal manure and from the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.<sup>27</sup>

In a 2006 UN Report entitled, *Livestock's Long Shadow: environmental issues and options*, Steinfeld H et al., note, "Livestock production is responsible for 18 % of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from all human activities, measured in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent."<sup>28</sup> According to this report raising animals for food generates more greenhouse gases than all the cars and trucks in the world combined. Nitrous oxide and methane emissions from animal manure, methane emissions from the animals' digestion, and nitrous oxide emissions from mineral fertilizer used to grow feed-crops for farmed animals make up the majority of this 18 %. The livestock sector is responsible for the following proportions of global anthropogenic emissions of the main greenhouse gases:

- 37 % of total methane (CH<sub>4</sub>)
- 65 % nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) emissions
- 9 % of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions<sup>29</sup>

"The released methane," the UN Report notes, "has 23 times the global warming potential of CO<sub>2</sub>."<sup>30</sup> How can we resolve this alarming situation? What role can each individual play in ameliorating this problem? All that we have to do is avoid eating

<sup>26</sup>Swami Dayananda Saraswati, *Global Warming—A Solution*. [http://www.arshavidya.org/SiteResource/Site\\_104886/Customize/Image/GlobalWarming.jpg](http://www.arshavidya.org/SiteResource/Site_104886/Customize/Image/GlobalWarming.jpg)

<sup>27</sup>Global Warning: *Climate Change and Farm Animal Welfare*. Compassion in World Farming, 2008. Retrieved July 10, 2015: [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/animalwelfare/GlobalWarningExecutiveSummary1.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/animalwelfare/GlobalWarningExecutiveSummary1.pdf).

<sup>28</sup>Steinfeld H et al., *Livestock's Long Shadow: environmental issues and options*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Rome. 2006. [http://www.virtualcentre.org/en/library/key\\_pub/longshad/A0701E00.htm](http://www.virtualcentre.org/en/library/key_pub/longshad/A0701E00.htm).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

meat. In the absence of demand for meat, there is no more need for breeding millions of animals for daily slaughter. The reversal of global warming is a certainty. A single individual by simply not consuming meat prevents the equivalent of 1.5 tons CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in a year.<sup>31</sup>

There are a number of reasons to be vegetarian. First and foremost, one cannot in clear conscious be a nonvegetarian knowing the devastating consequences of meat eating. Perhaps the most important reason to be vegetarian is compassion. This is where spiritual outlook becomes paramount. Nonviolence, *ahimsā*, is 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 hiṃsyāt sarvabhūtaṃ*”—do no harm to living creatures. This recommendation is also repeated to the seeker after truth in the Upaniṣads. 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.”<sup>32</sup>

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. 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.

For example, 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. 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.”<sup>33</sup>

What other measures can we adopt at the personal level to cultivate higher moral stance and spirituality leading to a sustainable future?

In the following section, we provide some of banes of the modern society and their antidote.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Swami Nikhalananda, trans. and ed., *The Upanishads: A One Volume Abridgement* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 347.

<sup>33</sup> Acharya Buddhārakkhita, trans., *Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), 43.

## Overcoming Inner Demons<sup>34</sup>: Personal Spirituality as a Basis for Universal Sustainability

Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principles—these, according to Gandhi, are humanity’s blunders. The list represents “one of the best X-rays of contemporary society ever taken.”<sup>35</sup> Overall, these social maladies are the outcome of spiritual impoverishment and lead to an unsustainable mode of living. A careful perusal of these will also provide a pragmatic template to leaders and followers alike of the art and science of self-transformation. A society founded on self-responsibility and self-awareness alone can hope for a sustainable future.

Let’s consider these sins through the eyes of Gandhi.

### Politics Without Principles

Gandhi believed in the power of natural law governing the universe, a law that no one is above. He once said that the glory of humans lies in obedience to a higher law—the law of unity and oneness of all life. We can see the operation of this law in an Indian wisdom text that states: For the magnanimous, the entire world constitutes but a single family (*udāracaritānām tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*).<sup>36</sup> When politics is devoid of the higher moral law, it soon turns out to be politics devoted to the lowest and the meanest tendencies in us. The examples, historical as well as contemporary, where principles have been sacrificed at the altar of political expediency are too numerous to recount. Adherence to sound principles of justice helps us to maintain social justice as a matter of course.

### Wealth Without Work

The social malady of wealth without work can be stated as consumption without contribution. When prosperity is measured by how much we consume, consumption becomes a norm and an end in itself. It detracts us from becoming productive contributors to the economics of life. This attitude is also responsible for much of the greed and

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<sup>34</sup>This section is partially based on author’s recent book, *Gandhi and Leadership: New Horizons in Exemplary Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan, USA, 2015), which devotes a full-length chapter on Seven Deadly Sins of Humanity. This book explores the spiritual and moral mainstay of Gandhi’s leadership.

<sup>35</sup>Eknath Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe: The Power of the Individual to Heal the Environment* (California: Nilgiri Press, 1989), 24.

<sup>36</sup>*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 Upaniṣad* (Chennai: The Theosophical Publishing House, n.d.). Accessed February, 14, 2015. [http://advaitam.net/upaniṣads/sama\\_veda/maha.html](http://advaitam.net/upaniṣads/sama_veda/maha.html).

overconsumption rampant in our consumer-oriented society and its attendant ills of inequality and ever-widening gaps between the haves and have-nots. Since consumption is merely a means to human well-being, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption, to paraphrase the sensible guidelines of the British economist, Schumacher, a protégé of J. M. Keynes. For him, working for the mere multiplication of needs was the very “antithesis of wisdom.”<sup>37</sup> Schumacher believed that the economy is measured by the health and creativity of its members as much as by the amount of things it produces and consumes.

The cult of consumerism—constantly bombarding us with goods, relentlessly vying for our attention, and offering easy gratification of the senses—necessitates the existence of thriving industrial machinery constantly churning out a slew of goods to satisfy our ever-growing wants. And soon we lose the good sense to make a distinction between our wants and our needs. In turn, this leads to gross exploitation of natural resources, exploitation of human beings, and a host of other social and economic ills such as war, poverty, and hunger.

Gandhi repeatedly reminded us that there is enough for everyone’s needs, not enough for everybody’s greed. In his own personal life, he developed norms for living a simple, temperate life and constantly strove to confront his inner demons through such practices as self-discipline, fasting, nonpossession, and nonharming. He learned from his favorite spiritual guidebook, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, that excessive desire is the root cause of all evil; it breeds the other two highly dangerous human tendencies of anger and greed, which make it hard to follow the dictates of the conscience. Gandhi strove to live by the counsel of the *Gītā*, to control the mind through dispassion and practice. He knew that the pursuit of pleasure without conscience erodes the collective human spirit.

## A Note on Executive Salaries

Conscience is essentially our inner guide and the repository of timeless wisdom. It requires a certain mindfulness or consciousness to remain true to one’s conscience. Pleasure without conscience remains one of the key challenges for today’s leaders. Too often they fall into the entitlement trap of believing “I have earned it” or “I deserve it.” The call of conscience can help leaders pause and reflect whether they have really earned their pleasures to the extent that they think. How about others who may be equally deserving? This entails asking hard questions: Do I really deserve the exorbitant high pay that I get? Is it really justified in terms of my contribution? Peter Drucker, whom this author had the honor of meeting, thought that top executives should not get more than 25 times the average salary in the company. While Drucker agreed that a compensation algorithm is hard to develop in scientific terms, exorbitant disparities in compensation

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<sup>37</sup> Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, 34.

undercut the mutual trust among people who work together. When we see that the CEO salaries have grown from being 20 times the salaries of the lowest paid employees during 1980s to almost 250–300 times during present times, we wonder if the current CEOs have grown that much smarter during last 30 years? No hard-and-fast rules can be laid down here in the manner of one-size-fits-all; nevertheless, one should be guided by one's inner conscience to modulate one's expectation of pleasure.

### **Knowledge Without Character**

The role of character in leadership can hardly be overemphasized. Character has come to be recognized as the most critical component of the leadership equation. Authentic leaders lead from a strong, personal, moral position. First and foremost, leadership requires trust since a leader's ability to lead depends upon the strength and trustworthiness of his character. Trust commands respect and is achieved by consistently demonstrating competence and good character.

Character has been defined as the "integrity to walk the talk." Having seen the horrors of knowledge without character playing havoc in corporations over the last 20 years, what we sorely need today is character-based leadership. We need leaders who are centered, not self-centered, leaders who dare to do what is right, no matter what the cost.

### **Science Without Humanity**

Over the centuries, the relationship between science and religion has remained at best strained. Knowledge gained through scientific methods needs to honor the human condition and its underlying qualities of wisdom, compassion, and character. When scientific knowledge and its resultant practices degenerate into mere technology, science ceases to be a salutary force and comes into direct conflict with humanity. As a result, human beings become victims of science and technology. Something that was supposed to serve human ends becomes an end in itself. Without an understanding of the greater purpose of humanity, scientific achievements yield very little in the way of human progress.

Thus, science has a tacit responsibility to uphold the scientific ethic using totality of life as a baseline and a guide. However, in an age where most modern scientific projects require corporate or governmental funding, there's an inherent conflict with ethics *ab initio*. Gandhi perhaps did not have to deal with such scenarios at least not to the extent they are prevalent in modern times. In the contemporary world, however, we have this phenomenon where big corporations hire scientists to carry out research. Although the decision to work for an organization is a personal one made by the scientist, an immoral organization is more likely to prevail upon the scientist by its greater bargaining power. In a society where laws may also be made

subservient to corporate might, the probability of science without humanity will continue to loom large.

Although morality cannot be enacted into laws, it remains for the society and its members to work to ensure that science is not divorced from humanity.

## **Worship Without Sacrifice**

Spirituality, religion, and ethics were synonymous terms for Gandhi. In religion, we worship, but if we are not willing to sacrifice for the greater good, our worship has little value. Therefore, Gandhi regarded it a sin to worship without sacrifice. Sacrifice becomes all the more necessary when we want to serve others. It takes sacrifice to serve the needs of other people—the sacrifice of our own pride and preference. Religion without sacrifice is shallow and meaningless. Without sacrifice, even service is but an inflation of ego.

Gandhi was thoroughly familiar with the principle that all moral authority comes from sacrifice, and he practiced self-sacrifice throughout his life. He sacrificed his personal desires, career, wealth, everything for humanity. This is what gave Gandhi power over himself and his environment. He repeatedly pointed out that “as human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the “atomic age”—as in being able to remake ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> Politics without morality, as also economics without ethics, is a dead end road for it ignores the humanity that is our essence. As we evolve spiritually, we realize the terror of this disempowering stance.

When we understand these seven deadly social maladies, we understand that the road to sustainability is paved by personal spirituality. With this understanding comes the liberating realization that “there is no sustainability without ... spirituality.”<sup>39</sup> Only “an individual life rooted in the continuous harmony with life as a whole”<sup>40</sup>—a life based on selfless love and contribution is a life worth living.

## **Commerce Without Morality**

All the sins discussed earlier involve missing the underlying moral dimension, be it in the context of work, pleasure, or knowledge. They place the responsibility of developing a high moral sense on the individual and on the power of individuals to heal the society. In commerce without ethics, we move to understanding the role of businesses in reclaiming their social responsibility.

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<sup>38</sup> Eknath Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe: The Power of the Individual to Heal the Environment* (California: Nilgiri Press, 1989), 20.

<sup>39</sup> John E. Carroll, *Sustainability and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>40</sup> Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe*, 10.

Perhaps the central paradox of the contemporary business world is commerce without ethics. After watching the recent financial meltdown, innumerable corporate scandals and frauds, one begins to question the very *raison d'être* of corporations." When profit maximization becomes the sole objective of business, morals and ethics are thrown overboard.

Businesses in modern times have come to embrace the concept of social responsibility; yet, surprisingly, Friedman calls this a "fundamentally subversive doctrine." In his book *Capitalism and Freedom*, he goes on to say that in a free society, "there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud."<sup>41</sup> This book was originally published in the 1960s and unfortunately dominated corporate thinking for four decades. It provided many unscrupulous businesses an excuse to flout ethics under the guise of maximizing shareholders' wealth. Friedman's position is not widely acknowledged even within the community of preeminent economists. For example, Professor J. K. Galbraith, perhaps the most widely read economist of the twentieth century, provides the much-needed corrective: "Economics of production and consumption alone, without any higher values, can certainly make economics a dismal science."<sup>42</sup>

In the wake of flagrant violation of social responsibility by many large corporations during last two decades, few will agree with Friedman's view today that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. Even Jack Welch, the greatest proponent of "shareholder's value theory," abandoned it calling it "the dumbest idea in the world."<sup>43</sup> Profit maximization can be no more the purpose of a business than eating is the purpose of life.

Gandhi viewed life in its wholeness. His integral humanism comes loud and clear through these seven social sins. In identifying these blunders of humankind, he at once humanized politics, science, commerce, and religion. His rejection of wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principles as the "seven sins of the contemporary world" will remain relevant as long as material values continue to usurp the moral and the spiritual. We believe that the concepts of service, contribution, morality, conscience, character, humanity, and sacrifice offset the seven deadly sins and help to make life worth living. Gandhi was not an individual but an institution, not a man but a movement, not an episode but a phenomenon. In any era of darkness, his light will remain relevant and meaningful.

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<sup>41</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom, Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 133.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in J. S. Rajput, *Seven Social Sins: The Contemporary Relevance* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2012), 10.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Steve Denning, "The Origin of 'The World's Dumbest Idea': Milton Friedman," *Forbes* (June 26, 2013).

## Conclusion

The last century has highlighted both the creative and the destructive power of human ingenuity. Whereas humanity's greatest gains in this century came in the areas of science and technology, we also witnessed the horror of two world wars, the rise of international terrorism, and economic and financial meltdowns. Many believe that the greatest harm occurred in the erosion of moral and spiritual values. In his splendid little volume, *The Compassionate Universe*, Eknath Easwaran notes the urgency of the responsibility of humans to heal the environment—"the only creatures on Earth who have the power—and, it sometimes seems, the inclination—to bring life on this planet to an end."<sup>44</sup> Leaders need to be mindful of this inherent destructive human tendency born of self-centeredness and recognize the urgency of dealing with it solely on human terms. The choice here is between conscious change and collective ruin.

We need to tackle humanity's current problems most creatively and holistically. If there is one quality that can bring peace and harmony in our war-ravaged world, it is probably respect for all religions and faiths. As we know, most conflicts throughout history have been ostensibly for religious and ideological reasons and this continues unabated to this day. The twentieth century was one of the bloodiest in human history and we can only hope that lessons will soon be learnt to prevent an even worse situation arising in this century.

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. Gandhi recognized that economic and political systems that are not based on sound moral foundations are doomed to fail ultimately. Without ethics, a business degenerates into a mere profit-churning machine, inimical to both the individual and the society.

The journey for world transformation starts at the individual level, with the understanding that all life is essentially and fundamentally one. You cannot pluck a flower without disturbing a star. With this understanding comes the liberating realization that "there is no sustainability without ... spirituality."<sup>45</sup> We need to place the responsibility of developing a high moral sense on the individual and on the power of individuals to heal the society. Only "an individual life rooted in the continuous harmony with life as a whole"<sup>46</sup>—a life based on wisdom, selfless service and contribution is a life worth living.

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<sup>44</sup> Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> John E. Carroll, *Sustainability and Spirituality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Easwaran, *The Compassionate Universe*, 10.

### Chapter Summary

- Unless people's moral and spiritual qualities are nurtured and developed, the best of sustainability efforts will not work. There is no sustainability without spirituality.
- No economics is any good that did not make sense in terms of morality. After all, we are "Homo moralis" and not "Homo economicus."
- The journey of world transformation starts at the individual level: the way to achieve harmonious living in all spheres is through ethics and spirituality at the personal level.
- The true ecological sustainability depends upon our deeper understanding of fundamental spiritual values such as interconnectedness and oneness, nonviolence and compassion, contribution and selfless service.
- Ever since the dawn of Industrial Revolution, our primary approach toward nature has consistently been that of the conquest and control rather than harmony and coexistence. The horrific consequences of this perspective are too evident to recount.
- One does not have a right to take unless one has contributed in some way that is 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 of all life.
- Climate change is not the only serious problem that is weighing down on us. The rapid depletion of the earth's natural resources, the acquisition of world aquifers by big corporations, and the GMOs are some of the other causes for grave concern.
- The economy is measured by the health and creativity of its members as much as by the amount of things it produces and consumes.
- Leaders need to be mindful of this inherent destructive human tendency born of self-centeredness and recognize the urgency of dealing with it solely on human terms. The choice here is between conscious change and collective ruin.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the root cause of greed and how it translates into corporate profiteering?
2. What role corporate leaders should play in the adoption of sustainable practices?
3. How far corporations are responsible in causing economic inequalities?
4. As a leader what practices would you follow to reduce your organization's total footprint?
5. Do you believe humanity is fast approaching the tipping point of its own extinction?

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