



## Sustainable Living - 2



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Dear Friends,

Greetings from Amrita

Last month, we started this new series on the theme of Sustainable Living / Sustainable Lifestyle. After providing a brief overview of its planned contents, we discussed in some details, 'What is sustainability?' Continuing on the theme, here are a few additional points on sustainability.



Global (meaning the developed world) concerns on sustainability dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. [1] However, the Indian seers have always proclaimed the idea that the Creator and the creation are one and the same. This principle enjoins all of us to consider Nature with the same reverence as we revere God. Here is a confirmation from the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 10 Verse 42:

“What need is there for all this detailed knowledge, O Arjun? Simply know that by one fraction of my being, I pervade and support this entire creation”. [2]

In case one does not believe in God, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma), the Chancellor of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University says, “No problem, believe in yourself!” So, if you believe in yourself, you must be prepared to allow equal space for other living beings as well.

This is at the root of the concept of sustainability. In order to be sustainable, we must allow all forms of life to live. And for that to happen, we must allow the inanimate Nature, the land, forests, rivers and the seas to retain their natural state, because they provide the habitat for different forms of life.

Amma points out that the entire creation is based upon the principle of service. Everything in Nature serves continuously, tirelessly, without waiting for any returns. Beginning with the cosmos, the sun, the moon, the stars; coming down to a humble blade of grass, everything in Nature exists to give them unconditionally, without any discrimination. In fact, the very existence of Nature relies on this principle. A tree is the best example of this, so are the rivers, the lands, forests and the oceans. Except we humans. We have defined individual growth and development in terms of acquisitions, the GDP being the demi-God for us. Take, take, take ... this is our Mantra. This just cannot go on!

To be sustainable, to leave behind for our children and grandchildren, an Earth that is at least as inhabitable as we inherited from our forefathers, we must realign ourselves with the foundational principles of creation – the principle of service – the principle of giving.

Consider motherhood. Each one of us owes our very existence to our mother. Unless our mothers willingly carried us in her womb, and then nurtured us till we grew up, we would not

be what we are. The very continuity of life is based upon the sacrifices of motherhood. Nature is our greater Mother, as she bears our weight throughout our lives.

Let us hear Swami Vivekananda on this topic:

“Ask nothing; want nothing in return. Give what you have to give; it will come back to you — but do not think of that now, it will come back multiplied a thousand fold — but the attention must not be on that. Yet have the power to give: give, and there it ends.” [3]



(The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 1, [Work and Its Secret](#))

In olden times people lived in forests, and ate each other; in modern times they do not eat each other's flesh, but they cheat one another. Whole countries and cities are ruined by cheating. That does not show much progress. I do not see that what you call progress in the world is other than the multiplication of desires. If one thing is obvious to me it is this that desires bring all misery; it is the state of the beggar, who is always begging for something, and unable to see anything without the wish to possess it, is always longing, longing for more. If the power to satisfy our desires is increased in arithmetical progression, the power of desire is increased in geometrical progression. The sum total of happiness and misery in this world is at least the same throughout. If a wave rises in the ocean it makes a hollow somewhere. If happiness comes to one man, unhappiness comes to another or, perhaps, to some animal. **Men are increasing in numbers and some animals are decreasing; we are killing them off, and taking their land; we are taking all means of sustenance from them. How can we say, then, that happiness is increasing? The strong race eats up the weaker, but do you think that the strong race will be very happy? No; they will begin to kill each other.** I do not see on practical grounds how this world can become a heaven. Facts are against it. On theoretical grounds also, I see it cannot be.

Source: <https://lifeintegrity.com/SWAMI-VIVEKANANDA-COMPLETE-WORKS-Vol-2.pdf>

These are just a few pointers into the philosophy of India, as they relate to sustainability. We are, therefore, uniquely positioned to be the stewards for *truly* global sustainable development. The SDGs are a global consensus plan in this direction.

Now, we would propose a few definitions of sustainable lifestyle and then try to address the next question: ‘How do lifestyles impact sustainability?’.

### **Defining a Sustainable Lifestyle**

Here are a few definitions of [Sustainable Living](#) adapted from the Wikipedia [4]:

- *Sustainable living reduces the use of Earth's natural resources and human's ecological footprint through improved home designs, transportation, energy use and diet.*
- *It embraces the principles of simple living, self-sufficiency, balance, and symbiosis with nature.*

- *Sustainable living is fundamentally the application of sustainability (balancing ecology, equity and economy) to lifestyle choices and decisions.*
- *Sustainable living means living within the innate carrying capacity of Mother Earth.*
- *Sustainable living implies balancing our present needs and those of future human generations as well as non-human species.*
- *Lester R. Brown suggests a method of transitioning towards sustainable living as “shifting to a renewable energy-based, reuse/recycle economy with a diversified transport system”.*

In the following definitions, we attempt to blend these ideas with those of selected Indian thought leaders. We may note that while many elements of the definitions found in the Wikipedia are included, there is an added dimension of service orientation, giving, and containing personal consumption.

- A sustainable lifestyle gives back more than it takes from the Earth’s resources. *Inspired by the teaching of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma)*
- A sustainable lifestyle consumes only what is necessary. *Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi*
- A sustainable lifestyle balances individual needs with those of mankind and Nature. – *Inspired by WEF founder’s recommendation to consider Nature as a stakeholder.*
- A sustainable lifestyle leaves behind a more resourceful earth for the future generations. *Inspired by the definition of Sustainable Development.*
- One leads a sustainable lifestyle being ‘servant of servants, accommodating a thousand minds, without a trace of jealousy or selfishness’. *Inspired by Swami Vivekananda.*



One can perhaps find a distinct difference, the Indian thought process emphasizing the spirit behind the idea, over and above its practical implementation. If the spirit is retained, it can allow for adjustments for diverse social, environmental and economic circumstances. One size may not fit all, but the spirit must be retained.

### **How do lifestyles impact sustainability?**

We now come down to the brass tags, so to say. In order to answer this question, we need to have a measure of the impact. We propose three measures: carbon footprint, ecological footprint and dharmic footprint.

### **Carbon Footprint**

The most commonly used measure of this impact is derived from the most visible adverse effect on Nature – i.e. global warming and climate change. Scientists have identified the accumulation of green house gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere as the root cause. From this observation, they have created a measure of total equivalent carbon dioxide emission. As a next step, they have identified those human activities that lead to the GHG emissions, either

directly or indirectly. Those activities are: housing, food, transportation and others – termed as purchases. These include clothing and different appliances, cosmetics and electronic devices like the mobile phone, laptops etc. In general, bigger houses, exquisite food items sourced all over the globe, fast air transportation, and use of modern gadgets, each one of these result in additional GHG emissions. Scientists have given a name to this: our ‘carbon footprint’. Several tools have been developed to assist a common person to estimate one’s carbon footprint, as we shall discuss later.

## Ecological Footprint

However, while climate change and global warming is the most visible impact, there are several other not so obvious, but equally, if not more harmful impacts, such as bio-diversity loss and desertification among others. Scientists have developed yet another measure for this – the decline in our Mother Earth’s capacity to provide ecological services. Out of 24 ecological services provided free of cost by Mother Earth, 15 are assessed to be declining, primarily due to over-exploitation by humanity. So, this is measured as humanity’s ecological footprint. However, this impact measure has not yet come into the limelight for mass adoption.



## Dharmic Footprint

We shall now attempt to offer a third measure of human impact on sustainability, drawn from Indian Ethos. This is a purely conceptual proposition, yet, we believe this to be much more fundamental, driving everything else. We may call it ‘*Dharmic Footprint*’. The *Dharmic* way of life upholds the highest ethical and moral principles, based upon Truthfulness. Indian thought leaders have classified the ages into four distinct phases: *Satya-yuga*, *Treta-yuga*, *Dwapar-Yuga* and *Kali-Yuga*. *Yuga* means an age. The totality of the dharmic way of life is divided into four quadrants. In *Satya-yuga* all the four quadrants are full, indicating that majority of people in society observe the *dharmic* principles in daily life. In *Treta-yuga* one quadrant is empty, indicating 25% decline in observing these principles. In *Dwapar-yuga* two quadrants are empty, indicating 50% decline in *dharmic* way of living. In *Kali-yuga*, three quadrants are empty, indicating that only 25% of the total population upholds the *Dharmic* principles in their day-to-day life. So far, these ideas are well documented in Indian literature. Here is our proposition in terms of sustainability. We try and connect this decline in upholding ‘*Dharma*’ in our daily lives, with the unsustainable lifestyles. The unending urge to acquire more and more of everything, without any concern for the wellbeing of fellow human beings and other forms of life, may be considered as a lifestyle bereft of *Dharma*.

Upholding *Dharma* in one’s life implies being truthful, compassionate, self-less, non-greedy, being frugal, and over and above, willing to give and serve all of humanity and Nature. You may call them, upholding all human values in one’s life, as best as possible. Unfortunately, the present societal norms place much more value upon individual acquisitions, and people

are considered to be great if they own greater assets of all kinds. A poor individual, upholding the highest moral values is considered to be a fool, a failure in life.

We need to be dharmic at all levels - individual, family, community, guild or our professional circle, society, environment and the entire universe.

At each level there are values, ethics and the spirit of selfless service ( involving a certain degree of sacrifice) for larger good.

One may ask a question: “how can I measure my ‘*Dharmic Footprint*’. Well, I don’t have a clear answer, but one can attempt to offer a few pointers. If we maintain a daily diary, and note how often I told a lie, how often I lost my temper, how often, I didn’t care to help a victim lying on the road, how often I succumbed to multiple temptations, how often I felt jealous, these may offer an indication of my *Dharmic Footprint*.

## References

[1] Caradonna, J.L. in Routledge Handbook of the History of Sustainability, 2017

[2] <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/10/verse/42>

[3] <https://lifeintegrity.com/SWAMI-VIVEKANANDA-COMPLETE-WORKS-Vol-2.pdf#%5B%7B%22num%22%3A8%2C%22gen%22%3A0%7D%2C%7B%22name%22%3A%22XYZ%22%7D%2C0%2C842%2Cnull%5D>

[4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable\\_living](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_living)

