

# SUSTAINABILITY AND MEANING OF LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

Who am I? Why am I born? Where am I going after death? What is the purpose of life? How to deal with the mind? How to be happy and peaceful? Indian philosophers have provided answers to the mentioned questions in Vedic scripture, Bhagvad Gita, and Patanjali Yoga Sutra in the form of spiritual science.

An attempt at finding our true selves, results in the awareness that some crucial element remains missing; something that is unacquired from one's religion(s). Millions of people are searching for truth and self-realization or as religionists put it, God. In spite of journeying to deemed religious centres, questions remain. Our understanding of religion remains stagnant and long as we remain unaware of ourselves. According to Patanjali, the source of knowledge is within one's self while the world and external knowledge can only inform and inspire. The complete understanding of the self, leads to an eventual opening of the gates to higher knowledge. Evolution does not mean transportation to the external world, but a return to the source. Individuals have the utmost potential, and Patanjali encourages the awareness of the potential within the self; thereby nurturing learning concerning the use of the same. Sustainability being a key element within the disciplined practice of yoga is the concern of the present research paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Vedic scripture, Patanjali, Yoga sutra.

## FULL PAPER

What is sustainability? Sustainability means the ability to maintain something at a certain rate or level. It is the avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain ecological growth. According to Herman Daly, (one of the earliest pioneers of ecological sustainability), environmental sustainability is the rate of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely then they are not sustainable. (Daly)

The world's standard definition of environmental sustainability is sustainable development, which indicated sustainable economic growth, an oxymoron, as no form of economic growth can be continued indefinitely. Furthermore, all activities leading to economic growth are extremely hazardous and degrading to the environment. Therefore, it is impossible to achieve economic growth by being sustainable even fifty years from now.

Daly's definition, even in its shortened version omits the level of quality of life that a sustainable system can support. It is generally implied that it should be high, after all who would want to live in a degraded world full of pollution, dead oceans and suffocating heat. It appears that we need a new term that includes that

extra dimension. It is only in the integration of the three pillars of sustainability i.e., social, economic and economic sustainability, that strong people will live in a system wherein a high quality of life would be the norm. There would be a clean and healthy environment, a satisfactory level of economic well-being and a robust level of social fulfillment.

In 1987, the report on World Commission on Environment and development Gro Brandt land published the book “Common future”, which is a milestone in the discussion of sustainable development, globally. Therein, the concept of sustainable development was “the ability of the present generation to meet its need without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”

The following Rio Summit in 1992 discussed the global institutionalization of sustainable development, in 1997 the Earth Summit held at New York and the 2002 World summit at Johannesburg was on sustainable development. The fourth Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental panel on Climate change (IPCC 2007) painted out the link between climate change and sustainable development as the lock and key. The fifth Assessment Report (2014) suggested an immediate need to harness and explore the alternative sources of energy which emphasizes on ensuring access to the affordable, reliable and sustainable thereby revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.

There have been so many discussions, summits and conferences since 1987. The researcher would like to draw attention to the statement of World Commission on Environment and Development Gro Brunt land. According to him, sustainability is the amount of consumption that can be continued indefinitely without degrading capital stocks including ‘natural capital’ stocks.

He further states the entry into a new era in which the limiting factor in development is no longer human made capital but remaining natural capital. Timber is limited by remaining forests, not the saw mill capacity; fish catch is limited by fish populations, and not by fishing boats; crude oil is limited by remaining petroleum deposits and not by pumping and drilling capacity.

When we consider methods of attaining sustainable development, broadly two models emerge- the Western Euro-American or the modern paradigm and the Asian Eastern one. The modern concept of sustainable development is dominant economic-scientific-technology based and can be understood better with the help of Sachs model of sustainable development. Jeffrey D Sachs (Director of the Centre for International Development 1999) explained the integration of socio-cultural factors with the economical, ecological and spatial dispersal parameters of Brandt land.

The five dimensions of eco development include: ‘social sustainability’, with greater equity in asset and inter and intra-national income distribution. Economic sustainability means the need to evaluate economic efficiency in macro-social terms. ‘Ecological sustainability’, expanding the carrying capacity of ecosystems, reducing consumption of fossil fuels and waste, increasing self restraint and developing technologies which produce low-waste and are resource efficient. Spatial sustainability means the attainment of a balance

between rural and urban areas, reducing congestion and concentration in metropolitan areas; eliminating ecosystem destruction and promoting modern regenerative agriculture and de-centralized industrialization. Cultural sustainability involves having eco development in cultural continuity.

According to Krishan Sehgal, the model elaborated by Sachs basically flows from economics (social equity and economic efficiency) with the constraints of ecological, spatial and cultural constraints of ecological, spatial and cultural constraints, wherein the value system is based on materialism and has no spiritual dimensions. According to Professor PC Joshi (World Focus p. 12), sustainable development is a very slippery concept, slippery because it demands curtailment of luxury and privileges in favour of needy others; therefore, commitment to sustainable development by the rich and mighty may easily slip away. At the same time, high energy, high calories, wasteful life style is not going to be sustained in the long term. Consequently, conflicts over fossil based energy and water resources are becoming obvious and prominent. The shrinking of water tables and emerging droughts are leading to large scale migrations in different continents. Sustainable life style and development are not mere catch words but crucial to the very survival of plane Earth. Professor Rajani Kothari, founder 'Centre for the Study of developing societies', criticized the lack of ethics in techno-economic development. According to him, "our common future cannot lie in an affluence that is ecologically suicidal and socially and economically exclusive. It can and must lie in a curtailment of wants, as Gandhi constantly reminded his countrymen and others." Here, the researcher would like to mention the self regulatory system of Gaia hypothesis, also known as Gaia theory or the Gaia principle which proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings to form a self regulatory complex system that helps maintain and perpetuate condition for life on the planet. The hypothesis was formulated by the chemist James Lovelock and co-developed by Micro-biologist Lynn Margulis. In the 1970's, Lovelock named the idea after Gaia, the primordial goddess who personified the Earth in Greek mythology. In 2006, the Geological society of London awarded Lovelock the Wallaston medal for his work on the Gaia hypothesis.

Krishan Saigal discussed about the seminar on Ethical issues in Development, held by the Marga Institute in Colombo, Sri Lanka (1986). The conclusion of the seminar was that any adequate definition of development must include five dimensions: "an economic component, a social ingredient, a political ingredient, a cultural dimension and a human dimension called the 'sull life paradigm' which refers to the ultimate meaning of life and life as expressed in symbols and belief"; where development encompasses more than the economic, social, cultural and political parameters of Sachs by including the human dimension of the ultimate meaning of life.

The inclusion of values into sustainable development paradigm has introduced the dimension of identity, self worth and the ultimate meaning of life. When we talk about the ultimate meaning of life, certain universal questions arise in the minds of people such as one's identity, purpose, destination in life etc. Indian philosophers provide answers for such questions by the way of Yoga. For solving the issue of

sustainability and getting the answers to the previously asked questions, one has to shift from mechanistic to the realistic, to the holistic spiritual approach. This holistic approach is the one that we shall use when looking at two concepts of sustainable development- the objective, value free Western to science based technology and economics and the various value added loaded spirituality based Indian philosophy.

According to Krishan Saigal, within the Hindi belief system no single religion has monopoly over truth and consequently everyone has to find one's own way to truth and salvation. In the Hindi scheme of things, the greater the diversity; the greater is the cultural richness of the community. Therefore, one must foster rather than destroy the diversity and this has to be achieved through the so-called spiritual or yogic practices to have a direct perception of reality; whereby, the stress is not on rites and ceremonies but on the inner, liberating experience.

Most people have misconceptions about yoga, understanding it as some physical posture, exercise or asana. Yoga is a way of living. In Yoga chitta vrittis, Nirodhakah means one that controls the vrittis of our chittas (consciousness) and turns it towards super soul with our awareness, but to drive that true potential we need to be aware of that connection.

The ultimate goal of Yoga is however to help the individual to transcend the self and attain enlightenment. As the Bhagwad Gita says, "a person is said to have achieved yoga, the union with the self when the perfectly displayed mind gets freedom from all desires and becomes absorbed in the self alone.

According to Krishna in Bhagwad Gita, "Yoga Karmashu Kaushalam" which means yoga is not a religion but a way of living that aims towards a healthy mind and a healthy body. Man is physical, mental and spiritual being. Yoga helps promote a balanced development of all three. One has to feel the necessity of finding oneself, to know oneself, the necessity to find that missing link that one couldn't receive from one's church or religions. Millions of people are in search of truth and self- realization or as religionists put it, "God". People move to the religious centers regularly, but with a questioning mind. One doesn't understand one's religion as their understanding of the self is insufficient at many levels. The highest of all books is the book of all and as long as one doesn't open it, one will not understand the teaching of the scriptures. All the gates to higher knowledge will be opened as and when one gains a better understanding of oneself. According to Patanjali, the source of knowledge is within oneself. The world and external knowledge can only inspire an individual.

Yoga science does not alter any religion, it offers a methodology. Through yoga science, one can understand oneself better at all levels, inclusive of physical well being, one's actions and thought processes and emotions and desires. One can gain understanding of one's relation to the world and the way to lead a successful life in the world. Yoga science makes a ridge between the internal and external conditions of life. Yoga is a way of improving oneself, and of understanding one's internal states. Whosoever one is, each one has his or her own potential. The question is, are we aware of this? And do we know how to use them? Patanjali encourages one to be aware of their potential and to learn how to use them. The present research

paper will help see how one can apply Indian philosophy and its spirituality to make a better world, by making the life and environment sustainable.

Firstly, one has to view the issue of sustainability in the present scenario of the scientific economic world. Our greed is making us competitive and as a result of the same a large portion of the resources have already been consumed, the one that was to be of the next generation's. Nowadays, most people chase money, and search for happiness elsewhere and in the external materialistic world instead of within oneself. One needs to consciously change one's mindset.

Krishan Saigal wrote about Gandhian concept in his book 'Sustainable Development'. The spiritual dimension suggests that life is given as a service and not for enjoyment. It involves sacrifice for the welfare of others. By rising above self interest, human beings fulfill their destiny and become integrated with the true self within them. The aspect of self sacrifice given in Vedic scripture and advocated by Gandhi may be the least acceptable to the western mind.

In making a distinction between man and the system, Gandhi highlighted the primacy of the individual. The system whether it be social, political, economic or religious should be geared towards the betterment of the individual. When a system becomes harmful to the well being of a man, it must be mended or ended, altered or abolished. Gandhian principles recognize that the individual is primary and the rest of the social institutions are secondary and are there to serve the individual. Man, the operator of the system needs all the help available.

In Indian scripture 'Vedas' there are four fold objects of life (Purushartha), inclusive of Dharma, which is virtuous and ethical living; Artha, earning of wealth; Kama, which is pleasure and Moksha, meaning liberation. The four fold order of society (Varna) consists of the man of learning (Brahmin), of power (Kshatriya), of skilled productivity (Vaishya) and of services (Shudras) and a four-fold succession of the stages of life (Ashrama) namely students (Brahmachari), house holder (Grihastha), social servant (Vanaprastha), and the supra social individual (Sanyasin).

The social structure is conceived on three interlinked axes with four dimensions each, namely the object of life, the ideal order of society and the stages of life. The last is in the time dimension while the first two are in social space. In this multi-dimensional concept, equality (an important aspect of unity) is sought not as the means but as or in the end, termed liberation or moksha (bliss). This liberation is attainable to everyone not on the basis of psycho-technical capacity or position in the social order (which is bound to be different and unequal) but in how well each individual utilizes his abilities and opportunities. As Shri Krishna says to Arjuna in the Bhagwad Gita, "he who makes pure his work by Yoga, also watches over his soul, who by wisdom destroys his doubts is the liberated man."

The three axes can also be looked at in a systems analytical framework. The four fold order of society (varna) and the four stages of life (ashrama) form a 4x4 matrix which characterizes the social structure in



the time dimension. In fact, the two have always been referred to as 'varnashrama' together. Every element of the social matrix has a quadruple objective function laid down by the ends to be attained (purushartha). It will thus be seen to that everyone in the social system has to have knowledge so that he can understand the moral code (dharma), means of livelihood (artha) and enjoyment (kama) and ultimately liberate himself from all social and other bonds (moksha). In other words, every individual has to have the possibility of living a full life. Besides the multiple objective function means that, no generalized and unique answer as to how to go through life is possible; as it varies from person to person.

Dharma or the art of living is the complete rule of life. Each man and group, each activity of soul, mind, life and body has its dharma. Thus, while man is justified in satisfying his desires to completely conform to the dictates of one's desires is not, and cannot be the law of his being. One can get the best out of one self only if and when one conforms to the dharma; which tells us that though life in the first instance is for one's own satisfaction, it is more essentially more the good of the community. The community of man is the whole world and so Bhagwad Gita advises that we should work for Lok Sangraha or world solidarity.

The following one is wealth and material well being. Though wealth is not its own end, it helps sustain and enrich life. Property, according to the Vedas is a mandate held by its possessors for the common use and benefits of the common weal. The Bhagwad Gita tells us that we have a claim only to the extent of one afforded to us by our act of sacrifice; and if one selfishly desires more, then he is a thief.

The spiritual differentiation of society is based on the main values followed in life, which is defined by the Vedic sages as pleasure, wealth, ethics and liberation. These values create four classes and four mental natures. If we pursue pleasure, we develop a servile mentality, as we become dependent upon external sources of enjoyment and stimulation. If one pursues wealth, we develop a commercial mentality and judge the world in terms of property and prices. If we pursue fame or power, we develop a political or militaristic mentality and its distinctions of ranks and status. This has to be moderated by an ethical attitude. If we pursue liberation, we develop a spiritual mentality and seek the higher knowledge. We then perceive people by their freedom of mind and spirit.

Such a four-fold division of society is not artificial. Our values in life determine how we see the world and act within it. We cannot pursue commercial values as the most important things in life and yet find the knowledge that liberates our soul. Our commercial perceptions will colour our knowledge and distort it and will cause us to use religion for commercial ends. We may pursue wealth as a secondary goal, but if it is our primary goal we cannot expect to understand the truth of things which requires freedom from the need to gain materially from them.

The scheme of the objectives of life, classes and stages has as its aim the development of the individual. It helps him to order and organize his life instead of leaving it a bundle of incompatible desires. It looks upon a person not as a mere individual but as a member of a social group which reflects in its organization the scheme of values for the realization of which groups exist. By spiritual education and social discipline, the

individual is helped to develop the inner conviction essential for social stability. Yet, there is an insistence on the fact that the highest values be supra social and truly universal.

Happiness is essentially an emotional or spiritual experience of the individual. To our sages, happiness and peace were closely interlinked, unattainable without the other. The chant that every Hindu has to make every day is: “Let all be happy, free from diseases. Let all align with reality, let no one suffer from miseries. Om . . . peace, peace, peace.”

“ Om sarve bhavantu sukhinah ,

serve santu niramayah |

sarve bhadrani pashyantu,

ma kascit dukhabhak bhavet ||

Om santih santih santih ``

In Indian culture, scripture refers to the man as not the owner of anything, not even of natural resources. He may be the caretaker, but all else belongs to the Lord alone; and that is why we worship all the resources in the form of God (in our culture)- Indra for water, Varun for air, sun for light, Van devi as the goddess of forest and Dharti Mata (the earth as a mother).

In Isha Upanishad, Nachikea asks Yamraj how a human being can enjoy the material pleasures of life. Yamraj, the God of Death, responds saying that in the heart of all things in the universe, dwells the Lord. He alone is the reality and therefore renouncing vain appearances, rejoice in Him and covet no man’s wealth; enjoy through renunciation of desires and regard all material wealth as belonging to the Lord. Also, see one’s action as part of an integrated whole encompassing both the material and the spiritual end and against the backdrop of infinity, of the one who is everywhere. It means going beyond ‘me’ and ‘thee’, ‘mine’ and ‘thine’.

According to Sri Aurobindo, one is to see oneself as part of the whole of creation, “To see yourself in all creatures and all creatures in yourself, that is the unshakable foundation of all- religion, love, patriotism, philanthropy, humanity, of everything which rises above selfishness and gross utility.” According to Professor B Mohadevan, the cardinal principle of sustainability has been death within the Gita. Lord Krishna argues that only with the basic notion of mutual dependency, success and prosperity can be attained.

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Deva bhavyaathanen the deva bhavyantu vah,

Parasparam bhavyantahshreyah paramavapsyath|| ( Bhagavad Gita 3.11)

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The Shloka explains that while we take care of the Devas (through the basic act of Yagna), Devas in return take care of us. This sense of mutual dependency begets ultimate success and prosperity in the long run.

Laws of Karma (axioms of work) - Hindu teachings stress self-control and the regulation of material consumption than its maximization. The Indian society would thus not be a “consumerist” one. The suggested way is one of self-restraint with desire being subject to ethics and morality. The method to be followed in achieving this is the Yogic one. Yoga is sadhana (spiritual practice). It is the control or integration that comes about through spiritual exercise, then as a result of that, it is the equanimity through which one sees all living beings as not being different from one self, and finally when perfect control and harmony has been found, it is the skill in performing work, which is yoga in action.

According to the Bhagwad Gita, it is necessary to yoke your intelligence with the divine and then strive for yoga. Yoga is skill in action. To remain in complete bliss and contentment while at work is Karma Yoga. Convert all work into Yoga by learning this art of action in inaction.

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Karmanyakarma yah pasyedakarmani cha karma yah (Bhagwad Gita 4.18)

To achieve this state of \_\_\_\_\_ or complete bliss in action, one needs to maintain an integral awareness of one’s mental activities all the time. One needs to bring about a total attitudinal change in one’s waking style. The four major laws of karma yoga are explained in Bhagwad Gita so that one can enjoy every moment of one’s work totally free from all stresses: 1) work with a sense of duty, 2) work without getting intensely attached but with focused attentiveness to it, 3) never allow the anxieties about results interfere with your mind during the currency of the job and 4) accept failure and success with equanimity. For effective action and best results one must work with an unperturbed composure of mind. The secret to work lies in the unattached way which is the essence of karma yoga. Equanimity is yoga.

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Samatvam yoga uchyate (Bhagwad Gita 2.48)

Working in awareness: The tool for grinding ourselves and washing out the stagnations makes us steady and dehypnotizes us from our delusions, established in poise. Therefore, bliss emerges due to which loss or gain neither depresses us nor excites us. Hindu thought is of the view that society needs be unified. This has to be through sacrifice, as that alone integrates and creates harmony. The Vedas go beyond the society in which a person lives to humanity as a whole. As Atharva Veda puts it: “Harmony for us with our own man, harmony with foreigners . . . harmony through union of mind and union of purpose.”

The Hindu system would also be in perfect harmony with nature, as it would be based on the concept that the divine is imminent in the universe. Therefore, it would sacralise Nature to that extent and treat it with respect and consideration. The objective would be to take form the earth as much as it can sustainably give and not exploit it beyond limits for attainment of a material affluence.



The researcher would like to conclude with the great saying by Swami Vivekananda:

“Take upon idea, make that one idea your life; think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves and every part of your body be full of that idea and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way of success and this is the way great giants are produced; others are merely talking machines. Be like a banyan tree, “Don’t have selfish ideal, but serve the people.”

His message of Vedanta at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1893 states:

“We are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. We divinities on earth-sinners! If it is sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up O lions and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are soul immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; we are not matter, we are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.”

Prof. Wright, while introducing Swami Vivekananda to the organizers of the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago said, “Here is a man more learned than all our learned professors put together.” What we want is western science coupled with Vedanta i.e., “Best of the East with the best of West” and Brahmarya (contenance) as the guiding motto and sraddha (faith) in one’s own self.

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