

APPLIED SPIRITUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

EDITED BY

NARESH SINGH
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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

Editorial matter and selection © 2024 Naresh Singh and Divya Bhatnagar.
Individual chapters © 2024 The authors.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-381-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-380-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-382-4 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To future generations who might live in self-realization and joy on a flourishing planet (Naresh).

To my parents and my brother (Divya).

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the support and encouragement of a wide circle of friends and colleagues from our Centre for Complexity Economics, Applied Spirituality and Public Policy, our students in the course of the same name whose needs for diverse relevant readings in one place provided the main incentive for this work. As editors we acknowledge the congenial, friendly and professional engagement with the chapter authors throughout the writing and editing process. We are indebted to Dr Nick Lee of the Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities who independently read most of the chapters and provided invaluable feedback.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Overview

Naresh Singh and Divya Bhatnagar

As Men's Prayers are a Disease of the Will, so are their Creeds a Disease of the Intellect. – Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. Attributed to Einstein²

We cite these quotations at the outset of this introduction as they provide the right tone for what we set out to do. The book draws deeply from spirituality as a universal human experience and understanding, a secular spirituality, and not from religious creeds or doctrines. The policy thinking moves beyond the traditional linear reductionist and deterministic world view to a more systems approach which includes human intuition and inner knowing.

Humanity is currently plagued with several well documented global-level crises such as climate change, rising air pollution, decreasing forest cover, massive species extinction, challenges of migration and displacement, poverty and inequality, gender inequality, and overall poor health and wellbeing. These problems have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which revealed severe fault lines in the current public policies and in the economic and social systems we have in place. For the last two centuries, since the first industrial revolution, our development model equated happiness with material prosperity and economic 'growth'. It measures progress in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and to some extent in terms of human development dimensions. Public policies are also designed, implemented and evaluated based on this model in all sectors including health, education, economics and sustainability. However, this development model fails to seriously consider the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. By constantly emphasizing this old paradigm of growth, we as a society have created complex policy problems for

¹Emerson, R.W. Self-Reliance.1841.

²Although widely attributed to Einstein, internet sources the original source is Bob Samples (1976) in *Metaphoric Mind: A celebration of Creative Consciousness*.

which we cannot easily find solution. It is time for a change. A change that is urgent and revolutionary and not only at an individual level but at a cultural level. A change that is sustainable and all-inclusive. A change that needs to come from inside and out and that which supports the wellbeing of oneself, others and the planet.

The global challenges are well defined in terms of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs).³ Perhaps the most immediate crisis is that of social, economic and ecological impacts of climate change. The UN Framework on Climate Change (1992), Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) and various reports of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have all warned of the crisis.^{4,5} It is incredulous that scientists and world leaders recognized this crisis more than 30 years ago, and we are still not on track to keep global warming below 1.5 degree Celsius which is likely to spare us from devastating effects on human civilization as know it. We seem to be sleep walking towards a cliff without being able to wake up in time. While it is true that we have made significant technological progress in areas such as clean and renewable energies, our addiction, indeed reliance on fossil fuel-based capitalism as the main way to support our societies, shows little signs of letting up. Even the singular achievement of global acceptance of the SDGs falls short of what is needed; anchored as the goals are in more material consumption. The 2021 documentary film 'Breaking Boundaries' provides a vivid description of our continuing failures to stop the violation of the planet's vitals systems.⁶ We seem to know what to do, we have produced a global consensus on what is to be done and committed to action plans and budgets to do so and yet we are failing. Our economics, technologies, sustainable development policies are important and have the potential to help, but they are clearly not enough. We need a radical rethink of what is missing.

While policymakers and practitioners spend much effort working on the symptoms of these problems and at best their immediate causes which can buy time, we need to go deeper to understand the root causes of the civilizational challenges we face. The root cause of almost all of the global challenges we are encountering is but one: our disconnection from ourselves and each other and our (humanity's) false sense of separation from nature. We have consistently failed to address perhaps the most important part of the solution: the inner core of who we truly are, our absolute consciousness. We wish to take a scientific and pragmatic approach to address the topics of spirituality and our oneness with all beings on Earth including nature. This inner dimension – of self-awareness and mindfulness – is, we believe, the first step towards humanity's quest to shift our civilization to a more sustainable trajectory. Recognizing our true and higher self can bring about massive changes and heal us and our planet from our self-inflicted wounds. Self-awareness will make us more collaborative and conscious on our journey together to a better future – a healthy planet, better health and wellbeing, decent

³<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

⁴<https://unfccc.int/>

⁵<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>

⁶<https://www.ipcc.ch/>

standard of living, equality, social justice, better conflict resolution and a paradigm of politics based on our conscious self. By appreciating and developing our inner self we can expect to leave our future generations with a better world to live in as well. If most of humanity were able to reach this kind of understanding and realization, we have little doubt our main problems will be removed much faster. But we are not optimistic dreamers or naïve romantics. Neither are we spiritual teachers. We are public policy scholars and we wish to interrogate the nexus between this inner understanding of human nature, the almost universal human experience of something greater than body and mind and policy, politics, law, etc., as anchored in sustainable development policy.

The book therefore addresses what is perhaps the most important missing dimension in humanity's continued failure to shift our civilization to a sustainable trajectory – that of the inner core of who we truly are, our spiritual nature. The focus is on human understanding and experience beyond the phenomena of the senses and the physical material world but asks what will be required to reflect this experience and understanding in the way sustainable development policy is designed, implemented and evaluated. While such an assessment will reveal the changes we need to make as individuals, it will go beyond that to assess the policy framework that is required to level the playing field and shift our core value system for large-scale national and planetary change. As Rabbi Lerner asked in his book *Revolutionary Love*: what would public policies in the USA look like if their objective was greater love and harmony in the society? Or, as we ask if the public policy process in India were to reflect the understanding of the shared cosmic consciousness of all its citizens, what would the policies look like and how would they be implemented and evaluated.⁷ Would these policies be supportive of poverty eradication, human freedoms and flourishing, healthy social and ecological systems, social justice and inclusion? Would India move in the direction to become the global leader it needs to be in bridging the gap between its rich spiritual legacy and a planet in crisis?

Applied spirituality is based on what we consider as secular spirituality seen as a universal human experience and not on doctrines or dogma of a given organized religion. However, happily, the concepts of secular spirituality are consistent with the core mystical teachings of all the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, (plus other religions of India), Buddhism, Daoism, etc.). Our approach is to explore reawakening our sacred gift (our spirituality) while working with our faithful servant (rationality). The secular spirituality principles which underpin the ideas in the book are derived from our review of pertinent texts of the world's major religions as well as current scientific research and built on areas of strong evidential convergence. Contemporary science sources include quantum field theory, quantum social science, complexity theory and cognitive neuroscience. The conclusions of importance to us for sustainable development policy are: (a) the unity or oneness of the underlying fundamental consciousness that living things share, (b) the ephemeral nature of duality and the underlying non-duality

⁷Lerner, M. (2022). *Revolutionary love*. University of California Press.

which constitute a oneness, (c) the illusion of separation of humans from each other and from nature and (d) the imaginary nature of the ego as the source of fear, insecurity and feelings of inadequacy that lead to greed, over consumption and default public policy which prioritizes GDP per capita growth above all else. Such growth is unfortunately driven by fossil fuel consumption and a capitalistic mode of production and distribution, which in turn leads to concentration of wealth in the hands of few resulting in a global situation in which 20% of the world's population consumes 80% of the world's resources and contribute 80% of the world's waste.

The wisdom traditions of the world whose insights support the conclusions on the nature of reality and human spirituality include (a) Christianity as described by John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Keating, Thomas Merton, the Desert Fathers among others; (b) the mystical side of Islam – Sufism as described by Rumi, Ibn Arabi and many other Sufi mystics; (c) Hinduism mainly from Advaita Vedanta as described in the Upanishads, the sutras of Patanjali, the Ashtavakra Gita, the Bhagwad Gita and teachers like Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta Maharaj and Rupert Spira among others.⁸⁻¹³ The convergence of the insights from all these sources as complemented by those from Buddhism and Daoism provides compelling evidence. The western scientific evidence and conclusions from scientists such as David Bohm on quantum physics, explicate and implicate order; Menas Kafatos on quantum physics and Kashmiri Shaivism; Stuart Kaufmann on complexity theory; Raima Larter on complexity and spirituality; Danah Zohar on Spiritual Intelligence and Quantum Society and cognitive neuroscientist Donald Hoffman in the Case Against Reality, the psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist among many others can no longer be ignored.¹⁴⁻¹⁹

Yet as Chris Lucas put it 'In our supposedly material world, the cultivation of spiritual excellence is often regarded as at best irrelevant or at worst a psychotic delusion. Complexity Science however can throw a very different light on this subject, revealing spiritual development to be not only advantageous, but perhaps

⁸See for example: Paths to transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart.

⁹See for example: Dark night of the soul.

¹⁰See for example: Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart: <https://www.pdfdrive.com/the-complete-mystical-works-of-meister-eckhart-e162766430.html>.

¹¹See for example: Open Heart Open Mind (2006).

¹²See for example The Wisdom of the Desert and the Seven Story Mountain.

¹³See numerous works: www.Rumi.org.uk.

¹⁴Theise, N. D., & Kafatos, M. (2016). Fundamental awareness: A framework for integrating science, philosophy and metaphysics. *Communicative and Integrative Biology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420889.2016.1155010>.

¹⁵Kauffman, S. (2008). *Reinventing the sacred*.

¹⁶Larter, R. (2021). *Spiritual insights from the new science. Complex systems and life*.

¹⁷Zohar, D. (2001). *Spiritual intelligence: The ultimate intelligence*. Bloomsbury.

¹⁸Hoffman, D. (2019). *The case against reality. Why evolution hid the truth from our eyes*. Norton.

¹⁹McGilchrist, I. (2019). *The master and his emissary*. Yale University Press.

the most valuable asset currently available to the human race'.²⁰ As we continue to fall short of the requirements for keeping anthropogenic induced global temperature rise below 1.5°C compared to preindustrial levels, should we not explore everything in our arsenal? Is it not in our enlightened self-interest to revisit long held assumptions such as our essential separation from nature and from each other, that human nature is essentially greedy and that we will always seek to acquire much more than we need for a life worth living? A brief root cause analysis of climate change dilemma will show why we need to dig deeper than we have been doing so far to make greater progress at a faster rate.

Growth at any cost is the high priest of progress in our current civilizational ethic. Over exploitation for over consumption based on corporate and individual greed work hand in hand to make change intransigent. This challenge is so fundamental to what we have come to accept as the good life that we put all our efforts elsewhere tinkering at the edges with all kinds of brilliant technological and economic innovations which merely add up to re-arranging the chairs on the deck. We have come to accept that it is human nature to be greedy and hence overconsumption will always be with us and that capitalism is the most efficient way to continue to satisfy our natural urge to over consume. On the other hand, if we wake up and see that we are not merely our bodies with only material needs, that there is something else to us, a new possibility arises. This insight is of course not new, and it has always been with us but then we lost it as the left hemisphere of the brain with its grabbing, individualistic, reductionist and deterministic characteristics became dominant in western civilization and is now mimicked by all. The bottom line of this argument simply put is that deep reflection on our own nature quickly reveals that we are inherently spiritual, that we share a common consciousness, that our sense of separation from each other and from nature is false, that our sense of insecurity and inadequacy which we try correct with the constant acquisition of material things is the result of imaginary ego mistaken as our selves.

Traditionally, spirituality is considered as a personal private matter and that continues to be true. But our world and public policy priorities badly need to reflect a novel set of values and what better than our own innermost values and realizations. Many wicked policy problems including the SDGs will not otherwise benefit from the revolutionary transformations necessary for their achievement. The challenge to be addressed of course is can this be done and if so how. This is new territory for public policy and so the agenda must be pursued in an open-minded manner, with respect for a diversity of views and weaving different perspectives together in a common search for a radically new approach to public policy for sustainable development.

We aim to bring about a new development model that is not just based on narrow definitions of GDP and economic growth, rather a model that includes the overall development of the economic, social, environmental and inner dimensions of all individuals and the planet. This book is expected to have a readership

²⁰Lucas, C. (1999). *Dynamical Psychology Journal*.

among sustainable development practitioners and researchers, post-graduate students, faculty, policymakers and politicians searching for deeper methods and frameworks for sustainable development. In addition, it is likely that there will be a significant readership among engaged lay readers. The objective is to put forth an interdisciplinary perspective and address topics in spirituality, consciousness studies, public policy, law, gender, Indic and Buddhist philosophy, Gandhian thinking and inter-link quantum physics with consciousness models. The book brings the cross-cutting knowledge from the expertise of professionals from fields of Public Policy, Economics, Law, Philosophy, Environmental Science and Physics. The goal is to rejuvenate how we think about development, nurture appreciation and development of our true nature, and bring about changes at the policy level for all-inclusive growth and sustainable development.

In summary readers can expect to

- be able to get to the root causes of social, ecological and economic problems and formulate solutions that go way beyond addressing symptoms of these problems as is current practice.
- have a sound appreciation of their own spiritual nature and a better grasp of the nature of reality.
- have an advanced capacity to question the basic assumptions people live by and conceptualize an alternative future of humanity.
- be able to advise how an understanding of secular spirituality can foster the transition to overcome the social fragmentation and exclusion, the separateness among people and between people and nature.
- help corporations engage the stakeholders in their corporate ecosystem and advance beyond corporate social responsibility to enlightened business practice in sync with their emerging clientele.
- have greater capacity to support social movements and other people-based actions to foster transitions in governments and their policies that are more respectful of people and the planet while supporting prosperity and resilience.

To help the reader navigate the chapters and meet their interests effectively we set out below a brief synopsis of each chapter.

The book starts with the chapter 'Policy and Practice Informed by the Ancient Science of Spirituality' by Mihir Shah. In this chapter, he proposes that our policies and practices ought to be informed by the Ancient Science of Spirituality for not just sustainable development, but also to build a society based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity and, ultimately, for human survival. A distinctive feature of this science of spirituality is that the learning process and the knowledge gained from it are deeply experiential in nature, which infuses the spiritual journey with joy, adventure, discovery and innovation. This is also a reason to hold spirituality to an even higher standard of rigour and verifiability and to reject or accept a practice based on its helpfulness in moving ahead in the spiritual journey.

Next, 'Politics of Being: Harnessing Spirituality and Science for a New Development Paradigm' by Thomas Legrand presents a spiritual or wisdom-based approach to development. It proposes that societies explicitly make the fulfilment ('being') of all its members – humans and non-humans – their main goal, which should guide the development and implementation of public policies. It stands in opposition to the current development paradigm focused on economic growth (or 'having') which is rooted in values of individualism, materialism, reductionism, anthropocentrism. By nourishing our relational nature and cultivating spiritual values and qualities - such as love, peace, happiness, life, mindfulness – the politics of being can address the root causes of the meta crisis the world is facing, reconciling human flourishing with sustainability and supporting the cultural evolution that is needed.

In the fourth chapter, Josep M. Coll in 'Buddhist and Taoist Systems Thinking: Perennial Wisdom Applications and Implications to Sustainable Transformation' reiterates a well-known characteristic of the current anthropogenic world – that it exploits natural and human resources for financial profit and our all-pervasive reductionist thinking compartmentalizes knowledge and sees nature as a machine. However, this proposition has failed as we hurtle towards self-destruction. This is because, unlike our current socioeconomic system, nature works as a system based on the principles of interdependence and interconnectivity. Systems thinking focuses on interrelationships, perspectives and boundaries to understand how systems behave. Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking offer a way to develop the embodied mind and connect with reality. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to bridge the consciousness gap by exploring the meaning and application of Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking to regenerate systemic leadership, design, development and sustainable transformation.

Anneloes Smitsman's chapter titled 'New Paradigm Politics and Governance for a Planetary Civilization' prepares us for an emerging new era of transformational shifts in politics and governance, and therefore fundamental shifts in human consciousness. This new paradigm is designed for regeneration and thriving by applying the evolutionary dynamics of living systems. It focuses on the underlying drivers of sustainable development and demands a shift from politics of power to participatory and decentralized governance and decision-making models. In a sense, this chapter goes much further than describing new political models and governance systems, it is a call for us to become the future humans of a thriving world, a species that has become planetary conscious.

The challenges of sustainable development policy require leadership at all levels of society - not only public-office holders but about those who participate in public debate and action. 'Spiritual Leadership for Sustainable Development Policy' by Naresh Singh, the sixth chapter, explores the concept of spirituality and its potential to provide moral and practical guidance for leaders of public policy to achieve sustainable development goals. The chapter focuses on how spirituality can stimulate integrity, motivation and most importantly, resilience as core characteristics in various relevant leadership styles. Leadership is complex since it involves policy inconsistencies that are interconnected, various objectives, varied publics and a large range of stakeholders that leaders should learn to deal with.

The VUCA context (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) is essential to be considered for leadership skills to deal with complex challenges of sustainable development.

Next, we explore ‘Law and Applied Spirituality’ in which K. Parameswaran discusses how legal systems aim to regulate social behaviour for the collective peace and harmonious development of society. He claims that the elements of justice, equality, liberty, fraternity, dignity, integrity and unity, guaranteed by legal systems come from an integration of external and internal human behaviour on social, political and economic matters. Spiritual experiences of freedom and consciousness-awareness have the potential to solve human crises by promoting synchronization in individual and collective lives of citizens. Sustainable development requires harmonizing economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection through qualities of self-restraint, intergenerational equity, inclusivity and harmonization. The chapter offers us how spirituality can be integrated into legal discipline, academia and research for a more harmonious and sustainable world.

The idea of sustainable development is inherently interdisciplinary and holistic in nature and this change in view is possibly the missing key for progress towards achieving the SDGs set by the United Nations in 2015. Divya Bhatnagar and Sudip Patra in their chapter ‘A Holistic View to Approach Sustainable Development: Spiritual Roots and Evidence from Quantum Physics’ take a deep dive in the history and details of two seemingly different but conjoined disciplines of science and spirituality to understand what it may teach us about the concept of holism. They find ideas precisely similar to the notion of holism across time, space, culture and thinkers – ranging from mathematics, philosophy, sociology, medicine, education, religion and quantum physics to finding its roots in ancient Indian Vedic tradition and later usage in Greek and Roman cultures and more recently in the formulation of SDGs. This chapter, therefore, conveys the profundity of the most fundamental spiritual tenet – that of the unity and interconnectedness of all the universe – or in one-word holism – and its applications to approach sustainable development.

Next, David Rooney’s chapter ‘Spirituality, Wisdom and Quantum Theory: Wisdom Has a Measurement Problem Too’ calls on us to reflect on the significance of wisdom in approaching sustainability. He highlights the contextual nature of wisdom and the role that spirituality and subjectivity (including inter-subjectivity) play in being wise. Therefore, to begin the quest of becoming better at modelling this, Rooney ponders on the (im)measurability of wisdom from the perspective of quantum-like social science and quantum theory. Thereby, the chapter throws open the doors to further research in modelling wisdom in the context of sustainable development and creating new opportunities for a better future.

Pooja Sharma in her chapter ‘Public Policy for Sustainable Development: A Gandhian Perspective’ explores insights and ideas from Gandhi’s life that can act as catalysts to public policies and governance for sustainable development. New models of policy formulation and governance may take consultations from Gandhian philosophy of Trusteeship, Economy of Permanence, Sarvodaya, and