

Creating the Right Mind Set for Sustainable Living

by Sister Jayanti, May 2010, Global Retreat Center, Oxford, UK

What spirituality has taught me is that you can't simply say let me change things out there. Instead you have to see what you can do to change yourself in order to make a contribution towards a better world. Similarly, sustainability is much more than the planning of cities, the planning of housing, etc. It involves three fundamental levels: sustaining the self, sustaining relationships, and sustaining communities.

Sustainability from the inside out

We need to first be able to spend time going inwards creating the right awareness, the right attitude, and the right consciousness. It is only then that we can start thinking about how to have a sustainable lifestyle and a sustainable world.

How then can I sustain myself? The most important word that comes to mind is “respect”. If I value and respect myself I will be able to sustain myself. As I develop that self awareness, I am also going to be able to respect you and on that basis build a sustainable relationship.

Have you ever seen, known, or experienced a relationship that lacked respect? I may love you later on, but first at least let me develop the capacity to respect you. Only then can I start the process of getting to know you better—maybe even reaching to the point of loving you. This level of respect can further lead to respecting the community as a whole—not only some individuals, but the community in its entirety because I believe in the strength of the gathering.

The multiplication of energies when the gathering comes together is far greater than what I can accomplish on my own. Ten people spending three hours together can achieve something quite amazing. I could spend thirty hours on my own and still would not come any way near what we could have done together. Thus, respect for the collective gathering, the community is absolutely the foundation of progress for the future. And as we look further and develop this concept of respect, then we'll think not only of the community but also of the world at large and the entire planet.

We need to ask ourselves, to what extent do we respect this home that has been provided for us? We haven't created it, but it has come to us as a gift. It has been described as the very precious blue pearl. That the astronauts were able to see from way out from a distance and the only blue pearl as far as we know up until now...this very precious space is our home. On a personal level we also need to ask, to what extent have I been able to respect my home, care for it and tend to it? Within my home, within my planet, am I able to have respect for all forms of life?

Finally, the best way to accomplish these three levels of sustainability is through meditation. I will be in a better position to do something about sustaining the planet and the world around me by starting with myself and creating the right mindset, which ultimately means accepting responsibility. If I think that the world out there is somebody else's responsibility—how they've done that, they shouldn't have done this, why did they do that, etc. — then I will not be able to make any contribution to creating positive change. However, if we stop for a moment and ask what role did we have to play within all this, we will then be able to see that we have a responsibility to help create a better world.

Unsustainable materialism

In my visits to cities around the world what strikes me the most is inequality. It is rapidly on the rise and showing no signs of decreasing. I believe that it is not government plans that will change inequality, but only human awareness, human consciousness. We need to change a mindset of hot heads and cold hearts. Instead warm hearts and cool heads can create a huge amount of difference.

The root causes of inequality today are materialism. It is rampant and exists not only within the rich elite; materialism also exists within the poor. I have seen shanty towns with color televisions. It was quite a surprise for me, something I had not expected at all. Materialism also touches upon the subjects of consumerism, climate change, and the depletion of resources. I do not need to tell you more about that picture; there has been enough research and you know about such things.

However, I do want to connect the word materialism with something else. Materialism is very much connected to matter. Instead of understanding that life is about cooperation and living together, human beings' desire for the conquest of external matter has led to a sad state of affairs.

We have become slaves to matter, and I am thinking particularly about the matter that makes up this physical body of mine. From the moment that I try to possess matter I become a slave to my own physical senses and my desire to gratify my senses. So, materialism and a conquest of matter have actually led to forgetting the inner being and allowing this matter to take over my consciousness and my mind.

Awakening human consciousness

The solution to materialism is the awakening of the human heart, the awakening of human consciousness, so that I can really understand that the happiness that I am seeking is not to be found by a bigger house or a bigger car or a larger television set. It is actually found by going within.

I am not talking about something which is abstract and I sit in a corner and I meditate on my own. I am instead talking about something which is very practical and it is very much needed for today's world. It is simplicity. The ability to reduce our personal needs so that we are able to reduce our carbon footprint, so that we can find the happiness that we need within ourselves and not think that happiness involves things outside.

The moment we discover that real treasures lie within, we will have an open heart, a generous heart, a heart that is able to share. We will then know that things really do not belong to us. We are here at this moment and we can care for things, but also they exist to be shared with all others around us. I believe that this is the change that that can bring about a transformation within society. It is a change that has to happen within ourselves, but as it happens within us, it can also be shared with the world.

Finally, I want to close with an experience from the UN Millennium Peace Summit in 2000. It was the first time that spiritual religious leaders were called to UN. When everyone came together they spoke about one thing; they all had the same story, every single one of them. We have more resources, more technology, more information, more money, etc., but the problems of the world have multiplied in each one of these areas.

At the summit we came to the realization that it is only when human consciousness changes that these problems will be able to improve. For me that was a very powerful defining moment that a political body should come to the awareness that there is a need for a change in consciousness. But of course consciousness cannot change by a blanket edict. It can begin to change when I reach to that awareness myself.