

# Spiritual Sustainability and Sacrifice

By Ben Goldstein

## Introduction

Narrative shapes the collective consciousness. It promotes certain value structures at the detriment of others, while being shaped by external norms. The narrative that so defines the modern social consciousness is of greed over generosity, competition or even hatred over compassion for others, and this is the psychic fuel that perpetuates the dire economic and environmental situation of the world. The reified, abstract conception “self” is the center from which this narrative springs. Thinkers such as Naomi Klein, Stephanie Kaza, PA Payutto, E.F Schumacher, Apichai Puntansen, and Russell Brand, have shown how modern economic, social, and environmental problems are perpetuated by this cultural misapprehension of reality and idolatry of the self. Naomi Klein saw with clarity, “Fundamentally, the task is to articulate not just an alternative set of policy proposals but an alternative worldview to rival the one at the heart of the ecological crisis – embedded in interdependence rather than hyper-individualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy”.<sup>1</sup>

Reputable recommendations towards a sustainable future already exist<sup>2</sup>; the problem lies in the inability to generate the social and political will to affect the necessary changes as a product of the cultural narrative and reification of the self. Gautama Buddha, Friedrich Nietzsche and David Hume are found to express the common realization of the fictional nature of the self. Intellectual awareness of the pragmatic conventional function and illusory existential nature of the self could function effectively as an alternative cultural narrative. Harnessing spiritually this empirical reality through the ancient and powerful act of sacrifice, and learning from the Buddhist example of the holy life, worship can become the vehicle for a sustainable future.

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. P.461

<sup>2</sup> *UN World Happiness Report 2013 & 2014, UN Trade and environment Review 2013; Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now For Food Security In A Changing Climate*, E. F. Schumacher *Small is Beautiful*, James Robertson *The New Economics of Sustainable Development; A Briefing For Policy Makers 2005*, Ted K. Bradshaw *Theories of Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs in Community Development 2006*, Haskell and Russi. *Where Does The Critique of Consumer-Based Economic Governance Stand Today? 2012*, and Stephanie Kaza *Overcoming the Grip of Consumerism 2000*, to name only a few

## Spirituality and the Self

As Schumacher states in *Small is Beautiful*, “It is a strange phenomenon indeed that the conventional wisdom of present-day economics can do nothing to help the poor.” The ethical content of economics is intrinsically linked with the collective orientation of people in regard to interpersonal relationships, larger systems and finally the cosmos.<sup>3</sup> Many are the potential narratives that could bring about a sustainable future.<sup>4</sup> In general and historically, these various worldviews derive from spirituality and cosmology.<sup>5</sup> Effective sustainable economics will not be instituted from a ruling elite, but rather will be rooted in the public consciousness and therefore must be addressed on an individual level. Sustainability can emanate from the ground up if supported by candid acceptance of the empirical nature of reality as a spiritual foundation.<sup>6</sup>

Spirituality has the uncanny ability to motivate people in ways that run contrary to their standard norms of behavior. Informing spirituality through awareness of observable nature of reality, the cultural narrative can change its character.<sup>7</sup> Understanding the illusory nature of the self and the relationship to ethics is an essential foundation for this new worldview to be effective. From that understanding we will see how worship may be articulated for the individual and collective good.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Pāli* Canon, Buddha first explained<sup>9</sup> that form cannot be considered one’s essential self or even under the control of one’s essential self. For, if the true ‘self’ (*atta*) were either the physical form or in control of the physical form of a being, then that form would not lead to or

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<sup>3</sup> Schumacher, E. F. ‘The Role of Economics’. *Small Is Beautiful; Economics as If People Mattered*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. Print.

<sup>4</sup> The Pope has recently called for a social, economic and environmental justice derived from principles of the Christian faith such as a soul theory; likewise, Gandhi expressed his belief that what was lacking in the public consciousness was acceptance of the eternal nature of the soul (Schumacher, 1973). By contrast this work aims to compel those same ends from the opposite logic of no-self. This demonstrates that the same end can be served by even opposed cosmologies; the pragmatic necessity for change is no less from either perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Puntasen, Apichai. *Buddhist Economics; Evolution, Theories and Its Application to various Economic Subjects*. The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies – Special Issue One. Center for Buddhist Studies Chulalongkorn University, 2008, p. 39 – 49.

<sup>6</sup> P.A. Payutto. *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place*. 2nd ed. Bangkok, Thailand: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Puntarigvivat, Tavivat. “Buddhadasa’s Theory of Dhammic Socialism” *Thai Buddhist Social Theory*. Bangkok, 2013. Print. Pg 91 - 106

<sup>8</sup> Payutto, 1994, p. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> There are several different intimately related arguments presented in the Pāli canon asserting the fiction of the self, for the sake of brevity, only one is explained herein.

inevitably lend itself to disease and suffering. However, as all conscious beings are no doubt aware, it is not possible to simply will away discomfort or end the progression of aging through sheer determination. Continuing the same line of reasoning the remaining four of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*), namely *vedanā* (sensation), *saññā* (perception), *sankhāra* (mental formations), and *viññāṇa* (consciousness) are analyzed and found to be empty of a self-nature.<sup>10</sup> The exercise demonstrates that each of these essential attributes of the human being – indeed the very aspects that make us feel most individual and uniquely ourselves are in fact no more under our control than any other phenomenal thing. The construct ‘self’, by which people participate in perceptual reality is thus only the product of ignorance.<sup>11</sup>

Both Buddha and David Hume realized that consciousness only arises when there is an object and accordingly consciousness is not something that is independent of sensation and objects.<sup>12</sup> Sebastian Gardner explains Friedrich Nietzsche’s theoretical conception of the self as *eliminativist*: the self is exposed as a fiction. Still, it is understood to be the essential reflexive quality to Nietzsche’s practical philosophy that can be considered on some level equivalent to the Buddhist concept of *sammuti* (conventional reality)<sup>13</sup>. This striking intellectual underpinning of the philosophies of different thinkers stands as validation of its self-evident nature. To quote Nietzsche, “I don’t concede that the “I” is what thinks. Instead, I take the “I” *itself to be a construction of thinking*, of the same rank as “matter”, “thing”, “substance”, “individual”, “purpose”: in other words to be only a *regulative fiction* with the help of which a kind of consistency and thus “knowability” is inserted into [...] However habituated and indispensable this fiction may now be, that in no way disproves its having been invented: something can be a condition of life and *nevertheless be false*”.<sup>14</sup>

It is an important distinction between the two philosophies of the Buddha and Hume that Hume does not accept a doctrine of enlightenment as the Buddha does<sup>15</sup>; rather he exposes a

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<sup>10</sup> Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59 *Anattālakkaṇa Sutta*

<sup>11</sup> Walpola, Rahula. "Anatta." *What the Buddha Taught*. Rev. ed. New York: Grove, 1974. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Rajapakse Vijitha, *The Critique of the Soul Theory in Early Buddhism, Hume and Mill: A Comparative Study*. Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 1, 1987

<sup>13</sup> Also termed *vohāra-sacca* (conventional truth), as contrasted with *paramārtha* (ultimate [nature]).

<sup>14</sup> Gardner. Gemes, Ken. *"The Nietzschean 'Self' Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print. Sec. 1.1. \*Gardner’s emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Hume is a philosopher and not attempting to do anything more or less than ascertain the empirically available truth of reality. By contrast Buddha wished to awaken to Truth through highest enlightenment.

similar ethical framework to that of the Buddha<sup>16</sup>, while maintaining no eternally existent soul by exposing the fallacy of the subject-object duality.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Nietzsche's belief that "man" is something to be surpassed is noticeably similar to the Buddhist ideal *arahantship*,<sup>18</sup> while his moral philosophy is grounded in different principles than the Buddha's.<sup>19</sup> The point of connection between the three is in the awareness of the fiction of the self and valuing what Kant saw as enlightenment: "man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage," defined as, "the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance."<sup>20</sup>

The notion of 'self' in an ultimate sense is clearly fictional<sup>21</sup> and an inhibiting construct. This intellectual conclusion becomes inescapable; still the fact of conventional reality brings pragmatic implications. The theoretical understanding of the fiction of selfness is adequate to inform intellectual spirituality. The 'self' is a mere idol, for what else are beings more tangibly anchored to than belief in one's own existence. Breaking with this most basic idolatry, greed and hatred find no foothold, while ethics in absence of a soul theory become pragmatic. All beings exist within conventional reality and ethics prevent that reality from collapsing into chaos. In so far as we accept the pursuit of truth, peace, love, or healthy communities as important, ethics are absolutely necessary.<sup>22</sup> On the Buddhist path to the purely ethical state of *nibbāna*<sup>23</sup>, virtue (*sīla*) is the first and essentially foundational purification of the being.<sup>24</sup> Further, a profound sense of compassion emerges from this awareness for all beings existing in the illusion of selfness.<sup>25</sup>

It is apparent how the wisdom of the non-substantiality of the 'self' applied meaningfully to the cultural narrative manifests as ethical and compassionate behavior. Conceiving of spirituality intellectually as the awareness of the reified fictional 'self' seems an innovative and

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<sup>16</sup> Morris, William Edward and Brown, Charlotte R., "David Hume", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/hume/>>.

<sup>17</sup> Rajapakse Vijitha, *The Critique of the Soul Theory in Early Buddhism, Hume and Mill*, 1987

<sup>18</sup> We must be careful not to equate Nietzsche's superman ideal with *arahantship* as they are not identical concepts. The point of connection is in the self-surmounting expressed in both.

<sup>19</sup> Puntarigivat, 2013, pg. 184 – 208 & 246 – 263. Payutto, 1994, Ch. 2. Walpola, 1974. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Marion Faber. *Beyond Good and Evil Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

<sup>20</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *What is Enlightenment?*

<sup>21</sup> For a more complete explanation of the illusory nature of self as a product of the interdependence of mentality and materiality read Buddhagosa's *Visuddhimagga* Chapter 18 *Description of the Purification of View*.

<sup>22</sup> Gokhale, B.G. *The Concept of Disorder in Early Buddhist Political Thought*. Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies, Vol. 1, 1987

<sup>23</sup> *Nibbāna* is the unconditioned state the arahant has realized in enlightenment. (PTS. Dictionary)

<sup>24</sup> Buddhagosa: *Visuddhimagga* - Part 1 *Virtue (sīla)*.

<sup>25</sup> Majjhima Nikāya 4 *Bhaya-bherava Sutta*

appropriate way to affect a necessary shift in the cultural narrative. Such progressive intellectual spirituality lends itself to a system of worship that manifests a sustainable future while simultaneously providing people with spiritual validation. Sacrifice is the appropriate spiritual mechanism through which to apply ‘no self’ meaningfully to the cultural narrative.<sup>26</sup>

### **Sacrifice and the Holy Life**

Evans-Pritchard offers a progression describing sacrifice: Almost all sacrifices consist of four movements: formal presentation, consecration, invocation, and slaughter.<sup>27</sup> Understanding these traits of sacrifice in tandem with the intellectual realization of no self, Evans-Pritchard's identification of sacrifice can be interpreted coherently in terms of figurative self-sacrifice, wherein the ‘self’ (*atta*) or ‘self-centeredness’ is the victim to be offered through destruction. The ‘presentation’ is the realization by the individual of their unsustainable mode of existence based in an intellectual understanding of global problems and the selfless nature of the being. ‘Consecration’ is the solemn dedication of the figurative sacrifice as a spiritual act of return to the nature of reality, connecting with all others in the existential commonality of possessing no selfness. The invocation involves the wish for other beings (current and future) to find relief from their personal sufferings, through the offering of symbolic figurative self-sacrifice and subsequent abnegation. Lastly, but certainly not least, the individual's conception of self and the desires attached to that conception are slaughtered, destroyed at their root, for the benefit of all life.<sup>28</sup>

This sacrifice is bloodless and largely just cultivation of a mental attitude. The sacrifice imbibes the resolution to abstain from unwholesome and unethical activity rooted in the fictional self-view, with a distinctly spiritual character. This narrative is effective psychic fuel for a sustainable future if understood by the populace; thus education in the basic nature of being becomes the essential step that must be taken.<sup>29</sup> There is no church for an intellectual spirituality;

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<sup>26</sup> There are two well-known theories of sacrifice, communion theory and gift theory. In line with E.E. Evans-Pritchard's analysis in *The Meaning of Sacrifice among the Nuer*, the later category is here retained for it includes consecration and addresses expiation. “All gifts are symbols of inner states, and in this sense one can only give oneself; there is no other kind of giving.” What is more intimately possessed than the very notion of possession?

<sup>27</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Meaning of Sacrifice Among the Nuer*. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 84 (1954). Print. Carter, Jeffrey. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice a Reader*. London: Continuum, 2003. Print. Pg. 193

<sup>28</sup> Dhammapada, Verse 24

<sup>29</sup> Schumacher, E. F. *Small Is Beautiful; Economics as If People Mattered*. 1973

it must be developed from logical realization before worship comes to be. Understanding the makeup of the holy life offers insight into how to approach worship within this intellectual spirituality after figuratively sacrificing the self. Further, the holy life in Buddhism exhibits ethical and moral features that fundamentally define it, which derive from the same intellectual foundation of ‘no self’ as emulation and imitation of the completely enlightened being.

The holy life in Buddhism is invariably characterized by abnegation. That is, the willful restraint of what is conventionally available in service to a higher cause. Indeed, even the most basic level of adopting the Buddhist lifestyle involves the taking of precepts, allotting to abstain from unskillful conduct. This lifestyle in Buddhist terms is directed to the purification of the being, eradicating defilements of the mundane life, and to the wellbeing of society.<sup>30</sup> This merging of tangible utility and existential validation demonstrates the full genius of the teachings. The process is only efficacious insofar as the practitioner is willing to pursue the practice. The degrees of the practitioners’ sacrifices are thus a direct reflection of their goal and desired outcome.

E. B. Tylor concluded that abnegation was in fact the highest form of sacrifice in an evolutionary perspective.<sup>31</sup> The utility of abnegation in the context of the holy life addresses and defines the radical distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The Buddhist path is thus understood as a path of practice rather than of speculation or empty theory. The standard assertoric logic of religious adherence - framed as apodicticity - is noticeably absent in Buddhist teachings and replaced with the dialectic of skillful livelihood based on empiricism.<sup>32</sup> Abnegation understood in this manner and intellectually applied to broader (not exclusively Buddhist) cultural narratives can serve as a pragmatic way to solve real world problems on a global scale, by combating individual greed and aversion.

The benefit derived from such abnegation is understood to be two-fold; both the practitioner and the broader community benefit from the restraint.<sup>33</sup> Abnegation is the external form that the holy life takes, but it is consecrated with the sacrifice of the self. The destruction of

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<sup>30</sup> Dhammapada Verses 183 - 185; Parivāra XII.2

<sup>31</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches in the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Arts, and Custom. Understanding Religious Sacrifice*. Jeffrey Carter, New York, 2003. Pg. 13

<sup>32</sup> Paṭimokkha Trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, 2009; Majjhima Nikāya 78, *Samana-Mundika Sutta*

<sup>33</sup> Dīgha Nikāya 2, *Samaññaphala Sutta*; Khuddaka Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta 2.4, *Mahāmaṅgala Sutta*

the selfish hedonic ego provides the psychic fuel for socially conscious action to manifest on the individual level and in both public and private economic sectors. The destruction of the base of possession has rippling effects through the socio-political orientation of all society. For example, what utility such has the social organism for private physical or intellectual property after having destroyed the reified self? Possession in common thereby becomes the norm, while the state and community structure protect the basic rights to human dignity and flourishing.<sup>34</sup> We see here how this fundamental orientation of humans in regard to the cosmos affects progressive social, political and economic change, yet it begins fundamentally with the narrative.

Sacrifice and restraint as a method for conservation and sustainability may in fact be the only means for humanity to achieve a sustainable equilibrium with the surrounding environment. Huebert and Mauss assert, “[T]here is no sacrifice into which some idea of redemption does not enter”.<sup>35</sup> The rate at which humans currently exploit the environment is unquestionably unsustainable and reprehensible. It is a matter of scientific consensus to draw paths of causation for the current global heating crisis directly to the advent of neoliberal capitalism promoting a robber baron mentality prizing profits above all other externalities. The capitalistic mentality is derived from the desire to service the self above all others. As Nietzsche explains in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the utopian vision of a mode of humanity that has evolved beyond the exploitative character is a ridiculous denial of the biological condition. Exploitation belongs to the very character of life.<sup>36</sup> Rather than vainly attempt to philosophize our way out of this inherent condition, let us embrace it in its potential to be bent to the benefit of all. Remaining enslaved to the idols and moralities of the past constitutes a fundamental denial of understanding no self. The noble man is a creator of morals. Would that our noble stewardship preserve our legacy for posterity.

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<sup>34</sup> Schumacher, 1973, pg. 60 - 80

<sup>35</sup> Henri Hubert, and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, translated by W.D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). Print. *Understanding Religious Sacrifice*. Jeffrey Carter, New York, 2003. Pg. 95

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*; What is Noble? Exploitation does not belong to a depraved race; it is an essential characteristic of the will to life, which is precisely, the will to power.

## **Conclusion**

Sustainable lifestyles can be understood within a framework of spirituality, giving credence to the notion that humans are at the most basic level beholdng to the entirety of the human race and even further to the environment in which we exist. The theoretical hurdles of this article are not meant to show the one and only way to understand a viable sustainable future, but rather to demonstrate that there are alternative narratives that can be subscribed to, addressing the fundamental sickness of society: to be slave to all manner of idols, be they the reified 'self', God, science, nihilism, capitalism, or what have you. We can sacrifice idolatry to live in an enlightened world.



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