

# Achieving Sustainable Consumption through Spiritual Practices

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## ***Abstract***

*In a world strapped for resources, sustainable consumption (SC) involves a set of practices aimed at well-being for all. Spiritual practices such as yoga can both drive and inform SC in terms of making links to one's own everyday consumption. Such practices have already made a difference in the health and medical fields. However, they have far more benefits than the maintenance of physical health. Many spiritual methods have well established frameworks and methods to help individuals develop both their inner selves as well as their relationships with others. Authentic practice of yoga is one such method. In this paper, the authors of the study, who are long time practitioners in the yogic and Buddhist traditions, develop a model based on holistic yoga teachings and show how it can be used to make more mindful decisions and thus drive sustainable consumption behaviors. They also provide additional triangulation perspectives on the practices of spirituality and sustainability through their own personal introspective reflections and suggest future research directions in this area.*

## **Introduction**

Sustainable consumption (SC) as a desirable goal for all countries has received widespread consensus (Millennium Consumption Goals 2011) since it first received global attention during the Rio Summit of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. In the last two decades, SC has not only been of interest to activists, environmentalists and policy makers, but also to general consumers, academia and business. The third annual Greendex survey conducted by National Geographic Society and GlobeScan (Greendex 2010) in 17 countries indicated that environmentally friendly consumer behavior increased in 2010 from that in 2008. Their survey showed that both economic and environmental concerns motivated many consumers to adopt more environmentally sustainable behavior. It appears that awareness of the importance of adopting SC practices has been increasing. Yet, as Assadourian (2010) notes, the dominant consumer lifestyle and culture that became common in affluent nations is going global in the twenty-first century. He also points out that if this lifestyle is replicated even by half of the

world's nine billion people, then the impact on the human health and well being would be severe. What would motivate people to make consumption choices that would reduce the impact on the environment and other people's lives and yet be personally enriching and satisfying?

### **Motivation for Sustainable Consumption (SC)**

Research has shown that a variety of factors could motivate people to consume sustainably. In reviewing the basic methods suggested by philosophers and employed by societies, Jackson (2006, p. 116) notes that there are essentially four main strategies that could motivate consumers to make SC choices: “*government laws, regulations and incentives based, programmes of education to change people's attitude, small group/ community management and moral, religious or ethical appeals.*” Although spirituality has been linked to ethical and moral behavior, it has not been studied as a strategy for motivating SC. However, research in SC has shown that spiritual orientation has been related to consumption both in terms of a divide between the sacred and profane (Belk et al 1989) and in terms of how one relates to the material world (Gould 2006). Also, spiritual orientation has been studied in the context of voluntary simplicity within consumer research (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Pepper, Jackson and Uzzell 2009). More recently, concepts common to all spiritual traditions such as mindfulness, sense of caring for others and reverence for nature have been used by researchers to suggest that they help in SC. For example, Ehrenfeld (2008) urges us to consider the consequences of our consumption. According to him, the reason for our unsustainable consumption is our addiction to *Having* more stuff rather than *Being* authentic to our true self and seeing the world without cultural binders that disguise it. Sheth, Sethia & Srinivas (2011) introduce the concept of mindful consumption (MC) in the marketing literature. They describe MC as one where consumers are conscious of the consequences of their behavior. They also characterize MC as having two components, a behavioral component based on temperance in consumption cycle and a mindful mindset based on a caring attitude towards the self, community and nature. While these studies are encouraging in that they acknowledge the importance of MC, they do not provide guidelines for how to achieve mindfulness or a sense of caring with respect to consumption. Can spiritual traditions provide insights or guidelines in this regard?

### **Spirituality and Sustainable Consumption**

While spirituality is a broad concept and difficult to define, recent literature in fields as diverse as management and nursing characterize it as a transformative experience and having key elements such as search for the ultimate reality or truth that transcends the material world, interconnectedness with others including nature, cosmos or divine realm leading to a higher sense of purpose in life (e.g. Dyson, Cobb and Forman 1997, Burkhardt

and Nagai-Jacobson 2001, Sheldrake 2007, Nandram and Borden 2010). In *Ethics for a New Millennium*, The Dalai Lama (1999), says that “*Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit- such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony- which brings happiness to both self and others.*” Thus, there seems to be a convergent view that spirituality involves a consideration of both the inner self and the relationship of oneself to others. This balance of inner and outer directedness makes spirituality an effective way to consider not only the consequences of one's action on oneself, but on the entire planet. Given that the inherent nature of human beings is to seek meaning and connectedness, spirituality can be considered nascent in all and something that can be nurtured.

In the medical field, Dr. Dean Ornish and his colleagues (The Ornish Spectrum) have shown in a variety of pioneering studies how lifestyle changes based on principles derived from Integral Yoga have enabled people to recover and reverse chronic disease conditions such as coronary heart disease and diabetes. Dr. Ornish who is a disciple of the late Swami Satchidananda, the founder of Integral Yoga, explains in a video, *The Healthy Heart* (Ornish 1996), how he used Integral Yoga teachings on diet, stress management, exercise and social support to devise programs that when consistently followed can lead to improved well being including reversal of some kinds of heart disease. Similarly, Kabat-Zinn (1990) has combined physical yoga practices and mindfulness practices from the Buddhist tradition to create stress reduction programs that have resulted in improving a variety of health issues such as skin disease and psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. In the management area, Keizer and Nandram (2010) show how the Integral Transformational Coaching Training that incorporates yoga principles derived from the work of Sri Aurobindo as well as stress management techniques derived from Kabat-Zinn's work can improve performance of athletes and teachers. Would similar methods work to make us more responsible consumers? In the remaining sections, we develop a model for adapting yogic teachings to promote SC based on our spiritual practices. We also reflect on whether this model helped transform our behavior as well as our students. We conclude some with suggestions for future research in this area.

### **Yoga as a Spiritual Method**

Yoga has become a mainstream practice in affluent countries like the U.S. A Harris Interactive poll commissioned by Yoga Journal (2008) reported that close to 16 million people practice yoga in the U.S. alone. Currently, it is mainly practiced for its health benefits. Even mainstream medical practitioners and websites such as webmd.com mention the health benefits of yoga such as better flexibility, posture, strength and stress management. However, the real practice of yoga was designed to provide so much more- a complete mastery over the mind leading to everlasting happiness. The underlying

philosophical basis for this is that true happiness can only be achieved through the knowledge of eternal divine consciousness that is the source of all life. According to yoga philosophy, we have five layers or bodies known as *koshas* that we need to nurture before we experience cosmic consciousness or enlightenment. Starting with the most concrete layer, the physical body, we have subtler layers that relate to the flow of energy and breath, thoughts and emotions, intellect and intuition before we reach our innermost core of peace, love and joy. Various branches of yoga have been practiced depending on one's temperament in order to evolve to a level wherein we experience our true nature constantly. The main ones are given below.

- *Hatha Yoga* is path of physical discipline. This consists of doing bodily postures (*asanas*), breathing exercises (*pranayama*) and cleansing processes (*kriyas*). Yoga as it is commonly understood in the west primarily focuses on *asanas* (Satchidananda, 1970).
- *Karma Yoga* is the path of selfless service. By doing our actions in a way that is dedicated to serving others rather than the expectation of rewards, we are able to perform actions with personal integrity and responsibility.
- *Bhakti Yoga* is the path of love and devotion to God or a transcendental being. Here too we serve others, but because we see the divine being present in all.
- *Jnana Yoga* is the path of wisdom. It consists of self-analysis and awareness through which we cease to identify ourselves with outward phenomena and realize that it is one divinity or consciousness that manifests in different forms.
- *Raja Yoga* is the path of mind control through meditation and other practices. It is the classical form of yoga based on Patanjali's yoga sutras, one of the main texts on yoga philosophy. It consists of the following eight steps, or *ashtanga*, based on ethical and moral perfection, control of the senses and mindfulness which help us control the mind.
  - *yama* (moral restraints that govern our interactions with others),
  - *niyama* (inner restraints that help in self mastery or inner life),
  - *asana* (physical discipline through exercises),
  - *pranayama* (breath control),
  - *pratyahara* (withdrawal of mind from objects that agitate the senses),
  - *dharana* (concentration),
  - *dhyana* (meditation) and
  - *samadhi* (enlightenment).

The last two steps *dhyana* and *samadhi* cannot be practiced but are results of practicing the

earlier ones. Generally, when we say we are practicing meditation, we are practicing concentration which leads to meditation when the flow of concentration is uninterrupted and steady and then ultimately we transcend the limitations of the body, mind, and intellect and achieve enlightenment or the sense of oneness with all of creation.

Thus yoga is not only a spiritual philosophy but also a scientific and practical method to achieve our highest potential. *Since in yoga the highest goal is to transcend the mind and achieve cosmic consciousness, it goes beyond Maslow's hierarchy of needs: health, safety, social, self-esteem and self-actualization.* According to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (translation by Sri Swami Satchidananda 1990), one can empirically validate the efficacy of the eight step path through consistent and conscientious application. Many classical styles of yoga emphasize a synthesis of all the branches. However, the eight-step path provides a systematic framework for self development. Also, the different branches of yoga can be embedded within this eight step path. In particular the emphasis on the ethical foundation makes this framework particularly suited for making mindful consumption decisions. We therefore use this as our main framework. We next elaborate on the ethical principles in the eight-step path.

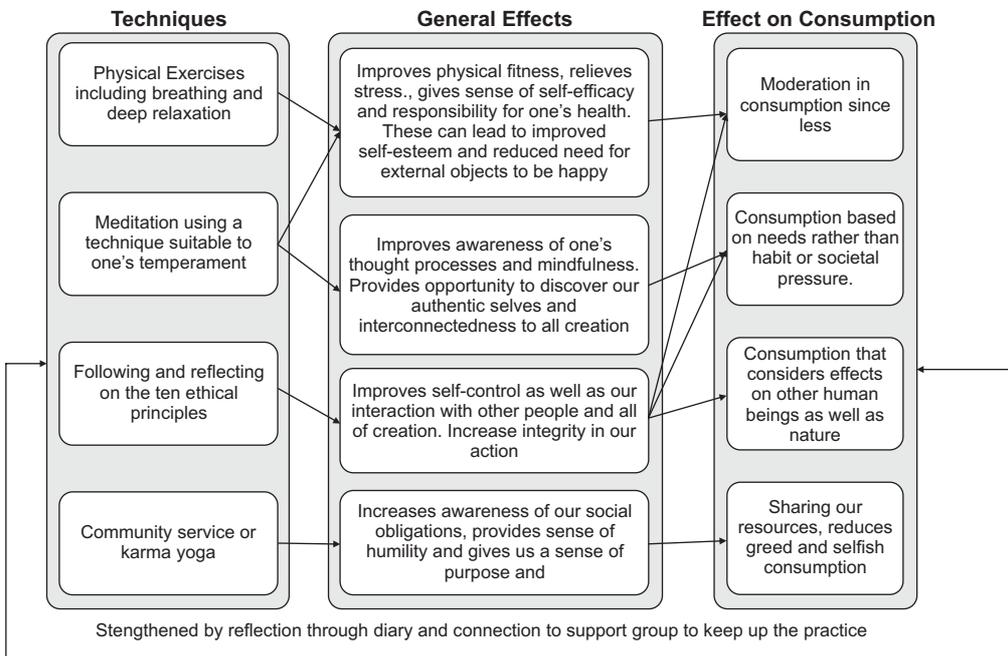
The first two steps, *yama* and *niyama* together form the moral foundations of yoga practice. In fact they precede all the other steps. There are five *yamas*: *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satya* (truthfulness), *Asteya* (not stealing), *Brahmacharya* (moderation), *Aparigraha* (non hoarding or non possessiveness). The five *niyamas* are : *Saucha* (cleanliness), *Santosha* (contentment), *Tapas* (self discipline), *Svadyaya* (Study of spiritual books or reflecting on life's higher purpose), *Ishvara Pranidhana* (devotion or surrender to the divine). The *yamas* and *niyamas* together form the ethical principles similar to the Ten Commandments in the Christian tradition and are universally recognized moral values. Without these moral underpinning, practice of postures alone degrades yoga into a physical discipline. But how can yoga philosophy and specifically the ethical principles help one to consume sustainably? In the next section we develop a model that shows how these classical yoga teachings can be adapted to develop the practice of making more mindful and sustainable consumption decisions. We then reflect on whether such a model would work in practice based on our own experiences and observations.

### **Applying Yoga Philosophy to Sustainable Consumption**

In Figure 1 below, we show how the main techniques used in the yogic path can help in more mindful consumption. The techniques of focusing on physical exercises, deep relaxation and breathing can lead one to experience better health. This can lead to greater self-efficacy with respect to our health and wellness decisions leading to higher self-esteem. Thus reliance on external material objects to satisfy our needs can be reduced. Meditation

techniques can lead to improved awareness on one's mental processes, more mindfulness in all activities. This can also lead to a greater sense of purpose in our lives and confronting our authentic selves rather than one related to objects we own. One can break habitual thought and behavioral patterns that do not serve us well. In deep meditation, one can also experience the interconnectedness with all creation. Developing our ethical foundation can lead to take actions based on personal integrity and respect for others resulting in improved self esteem, mindfulness as well consideration of the effects of our consumption on others. Selfless service or karma yoga can provide a meaningful way to give back to society, increase our sense of connection to others and actively promotes sharing of resources. Maintaining a journal or spiritual diary enables us to see our progress and the feedback provides the boost to keep up with the practice. The importance of a spiritual diary has been stressed by Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh in his book Sadhana (1958). The book has an entire chapter on the importance of a spiritual diary in which he notes: *“A diary is a whip for goading the mind towards righteousness and God. The diary is your teacher and guide. It is an eye opener. It shows the way to freedom and Eternal Bliss. Those who wish to evolve rapidly must keep a daily record of their actions.”* Similarly, maintaining connection with a spiritual support group can be helpful in connecting with others who support these practices and sharing of ideas.

Figure-1



One useful way to practice the ethical values is to pay special attention to each of them for a

week or a month and see how they can affect one's consumption. For example, one can focus on *Satya* or *Ahimsa* for an entire month. This can help one realize the subtleties and nuances of each value and maintain awareness of our intentions. In Table-1 we describe exercises that can help in reflecting on each of the values and the possible effects it can have on our consumption. For example focusing on ahimsa and non-harming can lead to consumption that consciously considers the harmful effects on animals or the planet. Similarly, focusing on *Aparigraha* or non-hoarding can lead one to considering whether acquisition of some products is necessary.

Table-1

Value		Examples for reflection	Possible Effects
Ahimsa	Non-violence, non-harming	Would the things I consume (water, food, etc.) bring harm to others including the environment? How can I minimize the impact?	Vegetarian Giving up plastic bottles for carrying water How the food is grown Things we consume how are they made and how what happens when we dispose of them?
Satya	Truthfulness	How responsible am I as a consumer? Do I really need what I am consuming? Do I dispose of used things appropriately?	Heightened awareness of behavior
Asteya	Non stealing or non-greed	Do we steal resources by polluting them? What kind of car do I drive? Do I really need a gas guzzler? Do I prevent others from use of things that I possess but do not use? Can I rent or borrow instead of buying something brand new when I will use it infrequently?	Greater sharing of resources and becoming more aware of the 3Rs: reduce, reuse and recycle.
Brahmacharya	Moderation or control of senses to conserve energy	How am I using my energy? Do I fill up time with mindless activities including eating and drinking? Does my consumption serve a purpose?	More mindful of how one uses up one's energy and avoiding mindless retail therapy.
Aparigraha	Non hoarding	Do I have stuff I really do not need? How cluttered is my house or workplace? How can I simplify?	Simplifying, use less resources.
Saucha	Cleanliness	In what ways can I purify body and mind to be healthy? Do I live in a clean environment?	Greater health, awareness of pollution and effect on well being.
Santoshā	Contentment	Do I really need the latest model car, computer or phone? How will that serve me and others?	Putting a break on constant acquisition. Extending the use from stuff we already have

Tapas	Self-discipline	Can I take up a challenge to break up a habit? Examples: can I avoid eating junk food for a week, or carry my own grocery bag and avoid consuming plastic ones?	Sense of achievement that can motivate us to take up healthier practice in the longer run. Also, for this one has to be mindful of the promise to oneself and thus awareness of our behavior also increases.
Svadhayya	Study of spiritual or uplifting books	Are my actions authentic or being done to please others? Who are our role models in becoming responsible consumers? What did they do that inspire us?	Inspiration to reflect on the interconnectedness of all beings
Ishvara Pranidhana	Devotion or surrender to the divine / higher purpose	Does my consumption serve a higher purpose? Does it make me feel connected to others or do I feel separate? Do I feel as an individual I have the right to consume as I please as long as I am following the law?	Sense of humility and respect for shared resources.

Would the model and practices described above work? In next section, we briefly reflect on the applicability of the model based on our individual experiences and observations. We also discuss how such practices can be taught both in colleges and yoga communities and provide suggestions for future studies in this area to test the model.

## Authors' Reflections

### *Saroja's reflection*

I have been a reasonably serious yoga practitioner for more than two decades. Since obtaining my yoga teacher's training at one the Integral Yoga Institutes in the U.S., I have committed myself to following the principles of yoga described in the model. My practices have certainly helped me to be mindful of my consumption and I believe it is moderate by U.S. standards. The *yama-niyama* practices have made me reflect on how my consumption affects the environment and scrutinize my behavior more closely than I would have done without the training. The practice of focusing on specific *yama-niyamas* for a week or a month has been helpful in turning the spotlight on specific aspects of my consumption. For example focusing on *Aparigraha* has led me to de-clutter my physical space and consider other emotional or mental clutter. At frequent intervals, keeping a self-imposed *Tapas* such as refraining from buying things that are not necessary has made me mindful of my consumption. In general, I think the practices have enabled me to consider the effects of my actions on others. However, as someone still struggling on the path to enlightenment, my actions are far from perfect. I am also influenced by the larger choices I have made with respect to where and how I live and work. For example, as a result of poor public transportation where I live, I drive to and from work increasing my carbon footprint. Similarly, I avail myself of many of the modern conveniences (e.g. air travel and use of

disposables) that are not sustainable. I discuss the tensions arising from the conflict between my modern lifestyle and spiritual practices at greater length in another paper I coauthored with other colleagues (Banbury, Stinerock and Subrahmanyam 2011). However, I still believe without these yogic practices as an anchor and ideal, my current lifestyle and choices would have been less mindful and sustainable. In addition, as I describe in the next paragraph, teaching these practices have inspired others to make more mindful decisions.

I have had the privilege of teaching an intensive 40-hour yoga elective course to undergraduate students at a liberal arts college in the U.S. This college has a tradition of offering courses that go beyond the traditional curriculum within a one month period between the semesters. In the last ten years, I have taught this course seven times. The course has a theoretical and practical aspect. In the theoretical part, students were exposed to the various facets of yoga such as its origin, philosophical basis, explanation of the different components of this system such as diet, exercises, meditation, and ethical concepts and how they are commonly practiced. In the practical component, students were guided through beginner to intermediate level yoga exercises as well as progressive deep relaxation, breathing and meditation techniques. In addition, students were given a number of exercises for reflection and practice and instructed to maintain a yoga journal or spiritual diary. Thus, the various elements described in the model shown in Figure-1 were introduced. Students submitted a final essay that summarized their learning and experiences in the course. The courses were not set up with the aim of doing research on the essays. As a result, I am unable to report on the content analysis of the student essays at this time due to institutional regulations. However, based on the anonymous feedback given by the students in the course evaluations, there was some evidence that the course provided a transformative experience. Demand for the course was high and class size had to be limited to less than 25 each year due to space constraints. So far 176 students have taken the course and the average course rating was 4.9 (s.d. = 0.09) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being excellent and 1 poor. A few sample comments below indicate the transformative nature of this course.

*“If there is one class that has changed my life the most, it is this class.”*

*“Much of what I have learned, I will carry with me always.”*

*“Very inspiring and uplifting. A true pleasure for those searching for answers from the divine.”*

*“This course should be taken as a requirement by all.”*

*“It inspired me to continue my practice and become a better person.”*

While these comments do not specifically indicate that students follow SC practices, it is indicative of the transformative nature of yoga practices and mindfulness that precede behavior change and growth. The comments about growth and becoming a better person indicate that the ethical values reflected on during the course were considered seriously by

the students. What is also interesting is that the teachings, even when conveyed by someone who is still far from perfect, can still be effective. This has given me a sense of awe about the power of yoga and a profound sense of gratefulness to be able to given the time to recommit myself to the practices each year.

### *Stephen's reflection*

To provide some theoretical triangulation from a related but differently framed spiritual perspective, I will add something about my own experience. Thus, as I have applied various yogic, Buddhist and other spiritual disciplines over 40 years I have discovered several features of my own consumption. First it and I have co-evolved over that span so that neither it nor I are completely recognizable as the same. So for instance, I have more consumption choices and I also through my practices have become more conscious of making or at least attempting to make 'wiser' choices. Moreover, much of my consumption is driven by my practices, whether it is to buy spiritual artifacts, go on spiritual journeys or try to consume less. I often marvel for instance, about how the Internet enables me to reach out in spiritual contexts to various Teachers and traditions and broaden my horizons in ways that were not possible before.

A second feature is the paradox of consumption and material existence as informed by spirituality. I have written about this quite a bit (e.g., Gould 2006). This paradox centers on the idea that consumption carries many meanings and that entirely giving up some consumer goods or practices may be for some a hindrance to enlightenment rather than a support. For example, giving up alcohol is often seen as a religious or spiritual boon but on the other hand used in a certain way may inform one's spiritual understanding and consciousness. Thus, *Brahmacharya*, for instance may be interpreted in this light of control while using alcohol as opposed to giving it up entirely. This is paradoxical in terms of other perspectives such as abstaining entirely, but it does introduce us to different spiritual interpretations and uses of consumer goods. Ahimsa too one of the greatest concepts ever advanced by humans can be viewed in such paradoxical terms. For example, I may wish not to harm any sentient beings but my very consumption of vegetables may involve harm to the insects killed to protect their cultivation even if I do not directly do the killing. To survive, we may contradict Ahimsa in many ways. In fact, such paradox may inform almost all consumption in thinking about what to give up versus what to continue. Another way to view is that one become egotistically attached to restraint of consumption as well as being totally consumed by the material world, neither of which are desirable.

A third feature perhaps in keeping with *Ishvara Pranidhana* is that I have a sense of humility and awe that looks upon my consumption as a mirror into a not so perfect self and person who may espouse various good qualities but may not always live up to them. Sometimes I

get lazy with respect to both sustainable consumption and spiritual development. I give into impulses and desires that on the one hand tell me something about myself but which on the other hand I should not give into so much. This is related to the paradox of consumption I outlined above but is more the negative side.

Looking at these three features together, I can outline a schema for my own consumption which is dynamic and ever-evolving as I live life in the material, phenomenological world. It is a constant construction of development, paradox and positivity-negativity which reflects the postmodern hybridization of Eastern and Western thought and practice, as well as my own personal idiosyncrasies. In one sense that is the narrative of many of us and on the other, it is my own journey.

### **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need for humanity to reconsider what, how and why we consume. As Assadourian (2010) notes,

*“Preventing the collapse of human civilization requires nothing less than a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns. This transformation would reject consumerism—the cultural orientation that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance through what they consume – as taboo and establish in its place a new cultural framework centered on sustainability.”*

Since many spiritual traditions have well established methods that enable us to think of the interconnectedness of all beings on the planet, we can adapt them to provide a new framework for the large scale cultural transformation that is required to save our planet. Given the growing acceptance of spiritual methods in the medical field, we need to consider its wider application in changing our lifestyles and recreating meaning and purpose in our lives. As we described in this paper, authentic yoga practices have a built-in method that can help us make the desired lifestyle changes. Such methods can be made more widely available by yoga teachers even if they are not perfect yogis. While yoga is very popular in the U.S., most of the classes that are typically offered deal primarily with the physical body and shy away from talking about moral issues. In his blog, eminent yoga scholar, Georg Feuerstein (August 20, 2010), notes that:

*“Several prominent Yoga teachers are on record as having dismissed the moral disciplines as old-fashioned and unnecessary. Is this a valid perspective? Or are those teachers out for lunch?”*

It seems that as teachers and spiritual practitioners we have a unique opportunity to engage students on different levels and act as a catalyst for transformation by promoting self-

reflection and dialog of the important moral issues even if we ourselves are imperfect. The inroads that yoga has already made in affluent countries like the U.S. can be used to engage people beyond the physical aspects of this spiritual tradition. Also, the power of social media can be harnessed to provide spiritual support among like minded people and to create the critical mass needed for broader social change.

Although yoga based courses such as the one we described earlier appear to be a promising way of initiating transformation in the ways we consume, we need to provide more opportunities for sustaining these behavior changes through ongoing courses and dialogs. In the area of management education, teaching ethics and corporate social responsibility has become common. Yet, often these the courses do not deal with ethics related to individual consumption. Given that yoga engages individuals at different levels, it can provide an enriching addition to our curriculum. We suggest future research examine whether long time yoga practitioners who not do take on monastic or other extreme vows are able to consume more sustainably compared to those who are more focused on the physical benefits of yoga. Research can also examine the efficacy of incorporating a model such as the one we described in the educational curriculum and whether it jumpstart the transformation necessary for the paradigm shift in our consumption.

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