

SUSTAINABLE ETHICS

A Fireside conversation at Vichaar Manthan's Sustainable Narratives Conference 2020

With Achārya Vidyabhaskar

(N.B. Achārya is the Sanskrit term for 'scholar')

by Abhilasha Kakkar

This fireside conversation with Acharya Vidyabhaskar explored the underlying notions of what it means to be 'good', from the paradigm of sustainable ethics. The aim was to examine which ethical principles human beings ought to live by, both for short-term and longer-term flourishing; by way of explanation, a set of ethical principles that are sustainable.

Vidyabhaskar began by commenting that although the use of the word 'sustainability' sounds wise and can often be synonymous with being 'good', most people do not know, with clarity, what it really means. Thus, sustainability was predominantly defined as "that which lasts or lastingly contributes to something positive and beneficial", both to others and oneself. He also highlighted that the word 'ethics' derives from the Greek *ethos*, meaning 'character'. Referencing the Greek *ethika philosophia*, meaning the 'philosophy of morals', he likened it to a term within Hindu *dharma*, known as *dharmachāra*, or 'sustainable ethics'. That is, behaviour or character (*achāra*) in alignment with sustainable (*dharmic*) thinking.

An inquisition on who defines what is good came forth during the discussion, by referring to Plato's Socratic dialogue *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates asks: "is the good good because it is good, or is it good because the Gods like it?". Here, Vidyabhaskar responded by offering a Hindu *dharmic* stance where good is *inherently* good, since it brings benefit and happiness in the long-term to others and oneself. This was further expanded by stating, that which sustainably brings happiness to others is good, and that which, in the long-term, brings harm, injury and unhappiness to others is bad. According to the speaker, the formula for what is 'good' is simple, yet infinitely complex and constantly evolving with the times. The explanation therefore of 'sustainable ethics', given by Achārya Vidyabhaskar, focused on living a life which is conducive to "the happiness of the world, the benefit of the world [and] maintaining the world" as well as "loving all beings like we love our family", rather than the narrow focus on our *own* family, proclaiming that "everyone matters!"

A practical method of translating these ideas was referenced by the speaker, from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's* concept of "Da Da Da":

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- 1) *Dama*: a Sanskrit term parallel to self-restraint, meaning to cultivate one's mind with compassion. The essence of *dama*, Vidyabhaskar explains, is to "be kind".
- 2) *Dānam*: a Sanskrit word which, the speaker explains, means to be generous by nature, and to "understand that you are not the only being in this universe", inclusive of humans and animals alike.
- 3) *Dayā*: the Sanskrit term meaning to be compassionate and to act compassionately.

The speaker claimed that at an individual level, meditating on these three components translates to one living in accordance with *dharma*. In order to instil these principles into institutions, Acharya Vidyabhaskar stressed the importance of their introduction from a young age, commending the Montessori method as a modern system of education that applies *dharmic* principles in practice, advocating for the proliferation of such ideas. Vidyabhaskar was explicit that "there is nothing religious" about observing one's body, breath and emotions, and such concepts can be introduced without labelling them with Hindu terminology, to encourage accessibility to the underlying ideas themselves.

The discussion then moved towards an exploration of societal institutions, Vidyabhaskar questioned why we have ministers of law and finance, yet lack a minister of happiness. Such a role could consider which mechanisms may need to be introduced in order for people to avoid becoming just "successful consumers", as Vidyabhaskar asserted the view that "consumerism never made anyone happy". An emphasis on notions such as mindfulness, health, compassion and generosity, were some suggestions that emerged from the discussion as a means to develop a society's overall happiness.

Although it could be posited that exploring inwards could lead to a abandonment of outer development, Vidyabhaskar reassures the audience that these ideas originate from an era when India "flourished the most", during the Gupta empire (approximately 320-550 CE) - an era when "da da da" was being implemented in India. He revealed that the Gupta empire

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(approximately 320-550 CE) - an era when “da da da” was being implemented in India. He revealed that the Gupta empire was a time when kings would be advised by a minister of philosophy, when poets recited poetry about wisdom, beauty and aesthetics amongst ministers in courts, and a time of “righteous kings”; “the greatest temples were built” and “the geniuses of maths, astronomy [and] psychology” emerged during that time, stated Vidyabhaskar. The era being referred to, he expands, is what the Arab philosophers later reference when claiming “India is the source of all science and wisdom; India is the source of all knowledge; India is the source of all medicine; if you want to learn anything you need to look to India”. Thus, the speaker defangs the original argument that going inwards may lead to abandoning outer development, using India’s era of flourishing as contextual evidence.

Achārya Vidyabhaskar concluded by advising the audience to “enquire into that which is truly beneficial to others and to yourself in the long-term”, caveating it with “be humble first, then enquire”.