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Views on Sustainability

By Michelle Valentino

We asked some members of our community to share their view on sustainability in the context of our spiritual practice. Each of them has a different involvement with our operations and a different perspective. All of their answers were thoughtful and inspired!

Claudia Henry



One level of sustainability that I deal with is consciousness about what is happening in our environment. It is about becoming aware of what we are using and what we are wasting. Becoming more aware of our environment is also part of our practice.

I remember Swamiji saying that in Rudi's house, they changed the lines leading to the hot and cold water taps so that the cold water would come out on the hot side and vice versa. He said that Rudi did that just to make people pay attention every time they turned on the water in the house, anywhere, in the bathrooms or in the kitchen. He wanted people not just to go there and just unconsciously start doing but to pay attention to everything. Paying attention in this way is an expression of love.

Anyone can do this, or do it better. We can observe what is around us that uses resources--whether water, electricity or gas--and ask questions like:

- Is something turned on that uses resources?
- Is it needed now?
- Can it be turned off or used better?

Many who live in the ashram simply don't know the cost of water, gas and electricity because they haven't had to pay those bills. The cost of water in Portland is among the top 10 highest for cities in the nation. The savings we can achieve from simple conservation measures are significant. Each one of them is like a donation—saving money that will then be available to sustain us in the future.

Some things to consider for your own space:

- Different equipment: LED light bulbs, which are now affordable, or a low flow showerhead.

- Reducing usage: Turning off or using sleep mode on a desktop computer or unplugging a laptop (also better for the battery) when you're not at your desk; turning off lights when not in your room.

Claudia worked as a software engineer until the early 2000s, mostly with signal processing applications such as audio and video. Her seva for The Movement Center includes electrical equipment maintenance and upgrades, computer consulting, and projects focused on saving energy.

Maggie Daly

Most conversations about sustainability have to do with technical methods to reduce the impact *Homo sapiens* has on the environment: design transit-oriented neighborhoods, recycle, install solar panels, ride your bike, plant native plants. Swamiji recently framed this discussion in a completely different way when he said that two things were required for sustainability: community and commitment.



The field of ecology is the study of communities: how plants, animals, the local weather, geology, soils and water systems all interact interdependently. At The Movement Center, a community that has been sustained for over 40 years, we understand and live our interdependence every day: by working and cleaning and cooking and eating and practicing together, by finding flow in our relationships and learning to become more skilled in communicating in that flow; by individuals' developing and using different skills sets that benefit the entire community; by understanding that everyone has their ups and downs, and giving people support, and receiving it as we traverse these rhythms in our lives; and mostly, by sharing the joy and upliftment of our practices.

Commitment is the matrix in which our community flourishes. Think about something you're committed to: a relationship, family, career, volunteer work or a hobby. Commitment doesn't mean that you like it all the time, it's what allows you to stay the course when you don't like it! So we all enact our commitment in diverse ways every day. And over time, in the presence of love, that commitment ripens into devotion: It's like the difference between eating a hard pear and a ripe juicy pear!

Community and commitment at The Movement Center have given us the resilience and adaptability that are the hallmarks of a healthy ecological system. That is sustainability.

A long time student of Swamiji's, and a current ashram resident, Maggie has done a wide variety of work in the world. She is an avid gardener (easy to do in the PNW!) and loves to provide beautiful flowers for the house.

Taylor Murphy

A key aspect of sustainability is our attitude toward the world around us. How do we view it? Do we see it as a place from which we should be getting as much as we can? Or do we engage with it in a spirit that seeks to keep the process of life in play? With this attitude, it's about aligning ourselves with the greater intelligence that is the natural world on this planet so that we can keep it all flowing. We have to



recognize the negative repercussions of our current way of life and work to mitigate them. To do this, we may have to modify our behavior.

From my perspective, working in the kitchen, I see a lot of opportunity to do things differently with respect to how and where we grow our food. Having more personal gardens and less reliance on industrial farming could reduce the impact of environmentally depleting practices associated with large farms. Using new technologies like aquaponics can also be

beneficial, making it possible to grow food with very little impact on the soil.

Sustainability can go even further than reducing negative effects. It is ultimately about having an attitude of service—to be integrated with our environment in a way that benefits the whole. Bees are a wonderful example of this kind of behavior.

Swamiji has talked about us all being part of one life—the life of the earth. We are all part of this single organism. Sustainability means doing our spiritual work deeply enough to have this understanding and then living from it.

Taylor is a student of Swami Chetanananda's and the lead chef of the ashram resident kitchen. Taylor also helps in the ashram in the garden and has a deep passion for sustainable food growth.

Namaste



Michelle Valentino is a member of the office staff at the Movement Center as well as a yoga teacher. She is the coordinator of a poetry group that meets monthly at TMC.