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How Spirituality Intensifies Sustainability: A case study of Ananda Valley in Northern Portugal

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How Spirituality Intensifies Sustainability: A case study of Ananda Valley in Northern Portugal

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December 11, 2022
Abstract

The religious affiliations of citizens in the West are currently shifting away from the fundamentalist, traditional structures of the past towards more alternative spiritualities. Furthermore, as a result of the climate crisis, ecovillages are becoming increasingly popular. Ecovillages are intentional, “sustainable” communities that seek to reduce consumption, live in harmony with nature, and create strong social bonds. They are characterized by varying levels of spiritual involvement (Greenberg, 2014, p. 274). As such, the objective of this paper is to study the relationship between spirituality and environmentally-friendly practices and attitudes, using the ecovillage Ananda Valley – an Ananda Marga Master Unit (Appendix A) in Northern Portugal – as a case study. The relationship in Ananda Valley is assessed during a seven-day field stay, through interviews and field notes, where participants were asked how they viewed their personal spirituality and the spirituality of the community as influencing the sustainable practices in the ecovillage. Members feel their spirituality inspires and intensifies the sustainability of the community as well as their personal habits. This data was supplemented with secondary sources on ecovillages, the effect of community on social justice actions, and alternative spiritualities versus religious fundamentalism. Using the data from ten interviews combined with existing literature, it was concluded that spirituality is an integral part of the culture and success of Ananda Valley, and thus, the base of the community’s environmental work.

Keywords

Spirituality, ecovillage, sustainability, service work, connection to nature, social change, social movements, Portugal

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I. Introduction

1.1: Religious Fundamentalism versus Alternative Spiritualities

The existing literature supports the connection between spirituality and sustainability, often illustrated through a comparison with religious fundamentalism. Spirituality does not have a precise definition, as it is “internal and oriented toward one’s personal world and experience,” while religious fundamentalism refers to religious rites practiced within an institution (Fleming, 2016, p. 121). Psychologists have written about the “Opposing effects of Spirituality and Religious Fundamentalism on environmental attitudes” in the United States and found that “spirituality predicted stronger belief in climate change, moralization of environmental actions, and behavioral intentions to conserve energy and reduce waste, while Religious Fundamentalism negatively predicted these same attitudes” (Preston and Shin, 2022, p. 1). Spirituality has also been linked to stronger connections with nature; “spirituality [has] personal benefits (health, wellbeing, happiness)... [and] brings benefits to the environment (altruism, pro-sociality, interest in nature conservation)” (Navarro et al, 2018, p.p. 39-40). On the contrasting side, religious fundamentalism negatively predicted environmental attitudes and is correlated with “right-wing authoritarianism” and “racial/ethnic prejudice” (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 2004, p.p. 48-49).

This paper considers these connections as well as the influential religious theories of sociologists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Émile Durkheim (further discussed in section 3.1.1) maintained religion is a social construct, and that “every society has a religion, whether ‘secular’ or not” (Watts, 2020, p. 9). Max Weber, on the other hand, wrote about secularization and believed religion originates from human compulsion to understand “‘unjust suffering’” (Hughey, 1979, p. 92). Weber coined the term “Protestant Work Ethic,” which provided an explanation for the development of capitalism; he theorized that “the Puritan ethic emphasized rational labor in a calling as the only activity which serves the glory of God,” and thus anything that “[led] away from both work in a calling and from religion...was as such the enemy of rational asceticism” (Hughey, 1979, p. 94). Weber’s work is relevant to Ananda Valley, as the community is highly against capitalist systems of society and heavy industrialization. Its members believe both of these experiences distance oneself from nature and their inner spirituality.

1.2: Ecovillages: A “Living Laboratory” for Sustainability

Understanding ecovillages in a global context is necessary to understand the social context in which Ananda Valley is situated. The number of ecovillages is growing globally: the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) has more than 468 registered ecovillages across the world (Global Ecovillage Network, 2022). Ecovillages are not homogenous communities, and vary in terms of spiritual orientation, location (rural versus urban), and economic systems (Greenberg, 2014, p. 274). The increasing popularity of the ecovillage lifestyle illustrates the number of people choosing to take on new ways of living – as “post-materialists” (see Appendix A) (Ergas, 2010, p. 37) – and joining alternative societies. These alternative societies, “are not utopias, rather they are ‘living laboratories’ modeling... how to live together lightly on the planet” (Kirby, 2015, p. 173). Ecovillages’ sustainability models include elements of “ecology, economics, community, and consciousness” (Kirby, 2015, p. 174), which combined create “‘a whole-systems approach to global sustainability’” (Kirby, 2015, p. 175). The ecovillage model
can set a positive precedent for future societies, as climate change progressively worsens.

1.3: Research Objectives

Prior to, and during, the field stay at Ananda Valley, background research was conducted about ecovillages, Ananda Marga, and the connection between religiosity and sustainable attitudes. This research was meant to canvas the existing literature and see if any connections have been made between spirituality and sustainability, particularly spirituality in ecovillages or similar communities. This paper attempts to extend the found literature to specific characteristics of the Ananda Marga philosophy, particularly through a discussion of religious dogmas and how they influence sustainability in Ananda Valley. Based on the found literature, it was hypothesized that spirituality would positively influence environmental solutions; the research sought an answer to this hypothesis and to understand why.

II. Background

Ananda Valley is an Ananda Marga Master Unit (MU). Ananda Marga is a system of beliefs and spiritual techniques, involving yoga asanas, meditation, and more unique practices. Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar – better known by his spiritual name, Shrii Shrii Anandamurti – created Ananda Marga in 1955 in India (Ananda Marga.pt). Thus, it is a relatively recent philosophy. An “Ananda Marga Master Unit” is what an Ananda Marga ecovillage is called; this is where members eat, sleep, and gather. It is unclear how many MUs there are globally, although interviewees implied there were many scattered across different regions; there are online FaceBook pages for members that claim to be a list of MUs, yet these exclude hard data. Regardless, Ananda Valley is only one of many MUs.

Ananda Valley has low-waste, low-impact facilities such as: dry toilets, compost, solar panels, produce gardens, and communal living spaces, and this paper is operating on the assumption that these utilities are effective. Some scholars believe ecovillages “represent perhaps the most integrated, grassroots community responses to the crisis of unsustainability” (Greenberg, 2014, p. 272); this definition places ecovillages as an active solution to climate change. Members of Ananda Valley share similar sentiments in that they do not believe their community is a final product (#3). Nevertheless, they see their involvement as an act of service. Living a low-impact lifestyle is integral to the Ananda Marga mission. Their motto is “for the liberation of the self and the welfare of all,” and sustainability is a key component of both of those aspects. In the Ananda Marga belief, sustainability allows one to feel more connected to their surroundings, and thus themselves; furthermore, being sustainable involves environmental service work, which creates a positive impact on other people. Thus, sustainability is integral to the Ananda Marga philosophy, and by extension, Ananda Valley and its participants.

III. Methodology

2.1: Procedure & Participants

Data about members’ opinions and actions was collected through in-depth, half-structured interviews. Ten interviews were conducted with members of the community, all lasting between 20 to 90 minutes; these ten interviews meant ~30% of the population was
sampled, as there are currently ~35 members of Ananda Valley. An exact number of members cannot be given, as many of the people working or staying in Ananda Valley do not live there full-time. “Intentional communities are also well networked among each other,” (Ergas, 2010, p. 44), especially in Ananda Marga ecovillages since MUs are located world-wide; thus, it is very common for members to “hop” (Ergas, 2010, p. 44) from one MU to another, staying for a couple of months at a time. Regardless, the demographic makeup of interviewees was varied in terms of gender, age, and origin. Six men and four women were interviewed, with an age range between 21 to 67. Seven out of the ten participants were from European countries – five were from Portugal, which was reflective of the large Portuguese population in Ananda Valley – and all interviews were conducted in English. Participants were asked questions about their definitions of spirituality, how living in Ananda Valley has impacted this definition, and how they believe the Ananda Marga philosophy is related to their sustainability (see Appendix B). “Sustainability” was measured by member’s reported feelings about their personal and communal habits, as well as the actions observed over the seven-day study period.

### Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Sex (M/F)</th>
<th>Age Interval</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>(30-40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>(30-40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own elaboration

2.2: Data Analysis

Before interviews, participants signed an informed consent form, clarifying that they would be kept anonymous in this paper, and no identifiable information would be used. Further, they were asked if they felt comfortable having the interview recorded. The interviews that were recorded were transcribed and used to create a thematic analysis (TA) to discover the main themes across all interviews. A TA is a method of organizing and finding themes across qualitative data; thus, TA is the right method of data analysis for this project, since the objective is to find similarities across the ten participant’s responses. The similarities indicate commonalities in perception, thus taking this analysis from highly individual – as spirituality is different for every individual – to collective. A TA was conducted by finding “codes,” or succinct explanations/interpretations of what the interviewee was saying, across all interviews. Then, using these codes, themes were generated and turned into a thematic/mind map. The map was used as the rough outline for this final paper.

IV. Results

The Ananda Marga ideal, or goal members strive for, is “for the liberation of the self and
the welfare of all.” This motto is often simplified to, “self-realization and service to humanity.” Figure #1 illustrates these concepts, and the adjacent major themes participants mentioned during interviews.

The Ananda Marga Philosophy and Sustainability

Organizing concepts and finding connections

Figure #1: Thematic Map of Connections Between Ananda Marga Spirituality and Sustainability
Source: own elaboration - created using Canva

These two actions proved influential on Ananda Valley members, as participants’ reported definitions of spirituality, and the motives for their environmental actions, typically fell under one or both of these categories. Self-realization is the inner work involved in spirituality; in Ananda Marga philosophy, it is called Parama Purusha (see Appendix A). When one attains Parama Purusha, they become more connected with the supreme consciousness, the source of life. On the other hand, service to humanity is about outward action and creating a better world. Members believe when one removes the ego from their actions, they will inevitably persevere in their humanitarian goals. These two concepts create the base of Ananda Marga spirituality, and thus, where the motivation stems for all Ananda Valley environmental efforts.

3.1: Self-Realization

3.1.1: “Ishvara Pranidhana” and Durkheimian spirituality

To understand how one achieves self-realization in the Ananda Marga philosophy, it is
useful to first discuss a Durkheimian view of spirituality. Émile Durkheim, a 19th century sociologist, thought that all religions, “could be defined broadly as the worship of the sacred” (Alexander, 2020, p. 5). Durkheim believed that people attached sacred meaning to ordinary objects – referred to as totems – and, when these totems were worshiped in a group, the feeling of community felt by individuals was interpreted as divine intervention. In other words, individuals, “...bind social life to social forces experienced as above mundane selves, sacred collective representations that possess mysterious and inexplicable power” (Alexander, 2020, p. 6). Thus, religion for Durkheim is more related, “to the cultural system of beliefs and rites that circumscribe a society’s sacred forms” (Watts, 2020, p. 9) than a higher power.

While members of Ananda Valley do believe in a higher power, as opposed to spirituality derived simply from community, Durkheimian spirituality is still relevant as many Ananda Marga spiritual practices are community exercises (this concept is further discussed in section 3.1.3). Thus, it is important to reference previous literature on group effervescence – the holy feeling one experiences when engaging in group rituals or prayers – and connect that proposed influence to the spirituality in Ananda Valley. Further, Ananda Marga philosophy believes in a supreme consciousness, a less personified version of “God.” The supreme consciousness is “the clay that is making the pot, the potter, and the act of making the pot” (#3) all in one being. This notion of a supreme consciousness means that everything, sentient and non sentient, is connected.

Once you believe there's something greater, you believe that you can establish this connection with the greater, right? And once you believe that, you realize that actually, it's all the same. You, the greater, the others: everything is connected. And that really helps to give you a purpose. To be better for the other two being better for the whole thing, because as you are connected, so might as well (#7)

This quote shows how Ananda Marga spirituality connects to the community’s sustainability; if humans are connected to the environment through the supreme consciousness, respecting the environment is no different than respecting oneself. Additionally, by protecting the environment, one can become closer to the supreme consciousness. In order to feel more connected to this omnipotent force and strengthen environmental feelings, dedicated members engage in Ishvara Pranidhana, a practice where they completely surrender themself to the supreme consciousness, shedding their ego by practicing yoga and meditation (Yogapedia, 2018). Ishvara Pranidhana allows members to achieve self-realization by strengthening their connection with their surroundings, and by extension, the supreme consciousness.

3.1.2: Freedom from religious dogmas

When discussing rituals like Ishvara Pranidhana, Ananda Valley members were very quick to clarify that the Ananda Marga spirituality differs from traditional religions because of the lack of dogmas. Interviewees reported that, during their spiritual journeys, Ananda Marga encouraged them “to be very much aware of dogmas and dogmatic practices” (#2), and when questioned about their feelings towards more mainstream religions, participants claimed the rigidity in belief system as a negative phenomenon. This theme is consistent with previous literature on the differences between spirituality and religion. Sociologist Crystal Marie Flemming observes “religion tends to require commitment to a specific institution, dogma, or set of practices, whereas spiritual life involves individual contemplation and reflection” (Flemming,
Thus, to extrapolate Flemming’s work, the dogmas existent in religion hinder one’s ability to connect with their inner spirituality. This statement does not mean that spirituality and religion cannot coexist. The “majority of individuals who say they are ‘spiritual and religious’ are inclined to embrace religion and seldom reject it” (Watts, 2020, p. 4), and those lived experiences cannot be ignored. However, respondents for this study share similar views to Flemming – “I always think about all these dogmas [associated with religion], right and wrong, and what you have to do, and what you should not do…” (#7) – that religion has negative social and spiritual consequences on an individual. Members were especially perturbed by people who justified extremist actions using religious rhetoric; “I refuse to believe that God is, is condemning this kind of behavior and punishing people that do this…my God is not exactly like what you’re describing” (#5). For many members of Ananda Valley, this concept of a cruel or judgemental God is antithetical to the Ananda Marga belief in a supreme consciousness.

In addition to the perceived negative social impacts of religion, respondents believe that following a dogmatic religion stifles curiosity of the world and a higher power, thus lessening an individual’s connection to the infinite/supreme. This is problematic for Ananda Valley members, as connection to the supreme is an ultimate goal. Respondent number two summarized this theory well, saying dogmatic religions mean people follow a belief system, “without questioning, without understanding what you are doing…” then adding on that “…behind all spiritual practices in Ananda Marga, there is a scientific explanation for everything you do.” This first point is integral to the “self-realization” component of the Ananda Marga philosophy; “adherents of the religion of the heart rail against what they perceive as external norms and regulations. Due to the fact they hold self-realization in such high esteem, they give great weight to self-expression, that is, the ability to express, and be recognized as, one’s true self” (Watts, 2020, p. 21). In Ananda Marga, learning how to express oneself is how one attains Parama Purusha (this will be discussed more in section 3.1.4). Regardless, this quote shows how religious dogmas stifle self-expression, and thus why members of Ananda Valley are so anti-dogma.

Even though Ananda Marga is not considered a religion, this does not mean they are free entirely from dogmatic beliefs, as exhibited by respondent number two’s second point. A lot of the scientific basis of Ananda Marga beliefs were derived from Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, the guru and founder of Ananda Marga, or have heavy spiritual influences. For example, the diet all members of Ananda Valley follow is a Sattvic diet, which is a vegetarian diet that also excludes onions, garlic, and mushrooms, and emphasizes fresh, local, and lightly-cooked produce. Yogis created a Sattvic diet thousands of years ago because they believed it cleared the mind and assisted with meditation (#2). Nowadays, scientists have publicly discussed the health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet (McManus, 2021), which was the context of participant number two’s statement. However, the complete exclusion of onions, garlic, and mushrooms is not supported by health science, as onions and garlic have antibiotic properties and can be used to manage infectious diseases (Mahomoodally et al, 2018). The Ananda Marga rationale behind removing these foods is that garlic and onion overpower the natural flavor of foods, thus furthering oneself from the raw qualities of the food. It is thus a spiritual aspect of the Sattvic diet, as members feel more connected to their food – and by extension the environment and the supreme – when they can taste the flavors of the natural produce. Thus, while members are not removing any important nutrients from their diet by not eating onion and garlic, there is some dogmatic rhetoric espoused in Ananda Valley.

Further, even though participants are staunchly anti-dogma, and do not consider Ananda Marga a religion, there is still some dogmatic rhetoric espoused in the community. Firstly, the
fact that all ten interviewees mentioned the word “dogma” without being prompted implies that there is a right/wrong dichotomy taught in Ananda Marga spiritual training. Furthermore, one interviewee reported that the most “spiritual” members of the community believe that Shrii Shrii Anandamurti “knows everything, that he can predict the future” (#1). This belief borders on dogmatic, and implies there may have to be some acceptance of established Ananda Marga beliefs in order to achieve this divine state. While this is not problematic – all religions and spiritual communities require some blind acceptance by nature – it illustrates how there may be more dogmas in Ananda Valley than members believe.

3.1.3: Support from community members

In addition to being aware of religious dogmas, participants cited community support as an important tool in achieving self-realization. A close-knit and supportive community was an ideal that brought members to Ananda Valley – participant number one shared that he is “very driven by social interactions,” a trait that was common across members – and led them to stay in the commune. Many of the participants who had lived in similar communities said that the successful community dynamic in Ananda Valley is unique. This is because members in Ananda are willing to “walk the walk” and take responsibility for their own actions (#8). When talking about community life, participant number four mentioned an issue she’s had in the past: “...everybody says ‘we want to change,’ but most of the time, they want other people to change. And change by themselves,” then clarifying that, in Ananda Valley, members support each other’s changes while taking self-responsibility. Similarly, participant number five said what makes Ananda Valley special is that members are “doing the inner work so [they] are actually able to live together as a community, in a healthy way, where everyone is self-responsible...[they are] not projecting things onto each other or, if they are, at least they’re called out to what they’re doing.” These quotes show that participants feel they are involved in a healthy, emotionally sustainable community.

Moreover, participants feel that this emotional sustainability is key to creating environmental sustainability in Ananda Valley. Participant number six called spirituality “the basis of [community] interactions,” then commenting “there are so many communities that are less successful in that sense.” For members, without healthy community connection – which is created and upheld through Ananda Marga spirituality – there would be no ecovillage. Thus, community support is more environmentally-based than simply members encouraging each other to do service work (#4); it is the foundation of the entire concept of Ananda Valley.

Individually, strong community bonds support members on their journey to self-realization. All participants mentioned they feel very supported by the community and the emotional help they received was inspiring, both socially and spiritually (#10). Importantly, members believed this phenomenon has everything to do with love; “...what I fell in love with about the philosophy, about the community, was this sense of love, of being welcomed... and that made me believe that yeah, there’s something here, there’s something bigger” (#7). Love was consistently mentioned when members explained their personal definitions of spirituality. Thus, it is easy to conclude that members felt a sense of “limitless love” (#10) when engaging in spiritual practices, and this love was found in, and enhanced by, the Ananda Valley community. For example, members greet each other by saying Namaskar, which translates to “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you,” reminding each other of their individual connection to the supreme consciousness. Furthermore, participant number five mentioned a monthly women’s
circle called “The Red Tent,” which gives women in the community the opportunity to heal emotional wounds from patriarchal society and strengthen their sisterhood bonds. Communal opportunities like this make Ananda Valley a more liveable place, because members feel more love towards one another and are able to openly communicate. Simply enhancing personal connections can be considered spiritual, as explained by Jeffrey C. Alexander in his interpretation of Émile Durkheim’s writings: “…while modernity contains vastly different institutional arrangements and cultural beliefs—the former more differentiated, the latter more skeptical—the spirituality of social life, its fundamental religiosity, remains constant” (2020, p. 5). This concept is further exemplified by the community’s primary spiritual practice, kiirtan. Kiirtan is group chanting of Ananda Marga’s universal mantra, Baba Nam Kevalam (see Appendix A), and is done before meditation to prepare the mind and body (Kiirtan, Ananda Marga). During group mantra chanting, the voices of individuals merge together to create one collective voice, chanting “infinite love is all that exists.” This creates an effect where Ananda Valley members are opening up their hearts with their peers through shared love for each other and the supreme consciousness.

3.1.4: Personal journey to “Parama Purusha”

The ultimate goal of self-realization is attaining Parama Purusha, or connection with the source of life (#2). As mentioned above, a spiritual and supportive community can inspire and guide one to Parama Purusha. Despite this, “the good society… is to be achieved by each and every individual taking responsibility for their own healing, and thereby seeking to realize their true self (Watts, 2020, p. 23). In conversation, members of Ananda Valley emphasize this idea of individual choice and responsibility, implying that everyone can become in touch with their “true self” if they consistently engage in spiritual practices. In Ananda Marga, these practices include kiirtan, yoga asanas, and meditation. Respondents feel that these spiritual practices help them “…promote creativity, respect, [and] self-awareness, of ourselves, our emotions, our thoughts, our beliefs… [this allows them to be] aware and more in control of [their] bod[ies], thoughts, and emotions” (#2). Respondent number five stated this awareness allows her to feel like “a spiritual being having a human experience;” this is an important emotion, because it reflects both the Ananda Valley belief in a supreme, interconnected consciousness, and that connection with this consciousness is attainable. Further, respondent number three stated “the purpose of human beings is to become one with this ever blissful cosmic entity, with [the] infinite…,” exemplifying a common view in the community, which is: if humans cannot be satisfied without achieving this infinite bliss, why not work to attain it?

Connection to nature is interrelated with achieving Parama Purusha, both in existing literature and respondent’s answers. “It has been observed that connectedness to nature has a mediating effect on the increase in positive emotional states, consequent to experiences of being in contact with nature. Spirituality, in turn, implies contact with a supreme entity that could be nature itself” (Navarro et al, 2018, p. 38). This quote is consistent with the Ananda Marga view that nature is spiritual because of its connection to the supreme consciousness, though adding another psychological layer, that people feel more spiritual when they are surrounded in nature. Participant number 10 exhibits this in the below quote, by sharing her personal connection with nature:

And the trees just always inspired me to like, you know, because they're so grounded and
they’re so rooted in the earth. Yeah... they're so flexible with the wind and it taught me to know who you are. That's your grounding. That's your roots and know who you are, know you are strong, but the strength comes from flexibility. It comes from being able to wave... and bend with the wind, and bend with the flow of life... As soon as the tree becomes too stiff, too rigid, it breaks... so trees have always just been... a symbol of inspiration for me... (#10)

This feeling of bliss and inspiration explains why sustainability is such an important part of the Ananda Marga philosophy: when one, “refine[s their] mind” (#10) with spiritual practices, members more fully appreciate nature and feel more grateful, more loved, and more anchored. This enables them to be more emotionally connected to one another, and sustain Ananda Valley. Thus, connectedness to nature is incredibly full-circle in the Ananda Marga philosophy: it is both the ideal that participants strive for, and what keeps them motivated to continue to reach for Parama Purusha.

3.2. Service to Humanity

3.2.1: Collective Action and the PROUT Institute

The second tenant of the Ananda Marga philosophy is “...for the welfare of all,” otherwise referred to as “service to humanity.” This public service aspect can be achieved through traditional service work, such as volunteering with the local community; however, participants believe that joining an Ananda Marga ecovillage is service in its own right, since a spiritual community like Ananda Valley “is very useful... because humanity is completely lost. We are destroying ourselves, we are killing the planet and not stopping killing it because we want to make more money, because people want to be more powerful” (#2). Participants believe spirituality creates a feeling of universal love, which is a common belief: “...attention is drawn to the role of spirituality and mindfulness in connection with others, [and] fostering self-love...” (Flemming, 2016, p.p. 122-123). This love translates to service, as it allows people to feel more connected and empathetic to their fellow human beings. Feminist and spirituality author bell hooks wrote, “we need to gather our collective courage and face that our society’s lovelessness is a wound” (hooks, 2000, p. 234) following that statement with the pronunciation that “promoting spiritual growth in ‘beloved community’” (Flemming, 2016, p.p. 122) is how society will heal.

This phenomenon is similar to the sociological concept of collection action, where “...a group’s collective identity is constructed through active relationships and is constantly evolving” (Ergas, 2010, p. 36). Collective action stems from collective identity, because it makes “participants more supportive of each other (as fellow ingroup members) and more susceptible to arguments in line with ingroup norms (such as standing up for fairness, human rights and defending the environment...” (Vestergren et al, 2019, 93). In Ananda Valley, this collective identity allows for full-community service work, such as the group’s ongoing participation and collaboration with EcoAtivo, an environmental conservation organization in Portugal. Ananda Valley has hosted EcoAtivo events on their property – most recently, a bioconstruction workshop (EcoAtivo, PT) – and members have volunteered with them on nearby land. Participant number ten recalled when members “built boomerang swales, and... used [dead trees] as... water retention structures” on a local property ravaged by forest fire through EcoActivo. This shows
how collective action inspires members to be more involved with the local community.

Another avenue of collective action and public service is the PROUT Institute (see Appendix A), an organization that works towards “transformative social change” through “creating opportunities for people to develop and express their physical, mental and spiritual potentials, while maintaining dynamic balance among individual quality of life, collective well-being, and ecological integrity” (PROUT Institute, 2022). PROUT was also created by Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, and so it works closely with all Ananda Marga Master Units. The combination of theoretical classes and practical workshops means PROUT, ideally, has something for everyone; it can provide support to disadvantaged individuals, or simply education for those unsatisfied with their lives. “What leads individuals to cause harm either to themselves or others is… either oppressive social structures or psychological trauma” (Watts, 2020, p. 20), and accordingly, PROUT strives to dismantle both through community-based solutions. Some of PROUT’s initiatives include: active permaculture classes – a majority of interviewees had taken this class (#10) – community gardens, and food networks “to enhance food resiliency at the neighborhood level” (PROUT Institute, 2022). Many of their projects are directly related to environmentalism, further illustrating the Ananda Marga focus on sustainability.

3.2.2: New Models of Societal Organization

Another way that participants believe Ananda Valley was doing a service to humanity was by living disconnected from governmental grids, taking a first step towards new organizations of society. The ecovillage uses dry toilets – toilets that do not use running water – solar panels that powered their showers, and one wood burning stove instead of a thermostat. Members believe that “…not using electricity if you don’t need to… [and] finding ways to live in touch with nature… independently from governmental grids…” (#10) are important steps towards being more sustainable. However, members say this disconnection is most effective because of the community in Ananda Valley; “for example, everyone’s sitting around that one fire. It’s not lots of independent buildings all with their own fire” (#10). This illustrates the common belief that sharing resources is the future.

Members are hopeful that their way of life will serve as a sustainable model for the future, especially the social aspect, which is “integral” to the Ananda Marga philosophy (#6). Members report “the ecovillage movement has really flourished and matured in many ways” (#6), which corresponds with the Ananda Marga belief that ecovillages are the future of society. Shrii Shrii Anandamurti wrote extensively about the “ideal society,” and he explained “how the ideal place will not only be the ideal community, the ideal ecovillage, but also the ideal society” (#3). In Anandamurti’s society, “charity, material charity at least, is no longer needed. Because… there is no more material need” (#6). Every Ananda Marga ecovillage strives to uphold these ideals, which is why members so strongly believe that their spirituality allows them to lead a more sustainable lifestyle. In a society with no more material need, overconsumption would be eliminated, and inequalities would be reduced. While the PROUT Institute strives to create a more ideal society, as discussed above, members believe that the ideal society cannot be created without ecovillages.

This vision is idealistic. In order to create a society composed of ecovillages, with no more material need, there would need to be almost perfect synchronization and homogeneity across different Master Units (#3). A new, spiritual, decentralized system of government would have to be implemented – “decentralized” is key, as many participants believed strongly in the
dangers of heavy government intervention (#8). Although members expressed that this society is “not only achievable, [humanity] must achieve it” (#3), no participant shared concrete steps as to best adopt this new world system, or how a local, grassroots project would change when increased to a global scale. “If we accept… that government can be the exercise of power over the peoples of a particular area with or without their consent then, yes, it is possible to imagine some hegemonic power or a collection of powers governing the world, perhaps even benevolently” (MacMillan, 2021). Consent was an implied condition of this society, yet no interviewee discussed how the Ananda Marga philosophy would be so widely adapted, nor how the role of current religions in society would have to drastically change to accommodate this new society. Despite the reported urgency of the situation, this new model of society appeared more an ideal than a project in the works.

3.2.3: Ananda Valley as “modeling a regenerative lifestyle”

Finally, Ananda Valley’s slogan is, “modeling a regenerative lifestyle,” and participants parroted this viewpoint. Due to the Ananda Marga belief that “for a beautiful, good future, we [all] have to live in communit[ies]” (#1), many participants believed that, while Ananda Valley is not perfect, it serves as an important and necessary framework for the future (#3). When asked about the most “regenerative” aspects of Ananda Valley, members mentioned environmental efforts (living low-consumption lives in harmony with the land), though ultimately, they were focused on spirituality. As participant nine says, “we have to feel sustainable in our hearts, in our actions…” because today, sustainability is often seen as a box to check, a label, in order to make more money. Members believe that spirituality alleviates this performativity, because it allows one to feel more in contact with their surroundings, making sustainability a more holistic, lived experience. Spirituality creates a stronger commitment to a regenerative lifestyle.

Likewise, the community connections and culture were frequently mentioned as the most “sustainable” aspect of the community. Since participants said Ananda Marga spirituality was integral to creating a peaceful and loving community, members believe spirituality can be labeled as the most “regenerative” part of Ananda Valley.

But as far as what we have in place right now, the most... brilliant example of a regenerative effort or culture is the culture itself, the culture of the community...the styles of interaction, the striving to remain sensitive, and open, and empathetic to each other, and the values that we embrace and that we enforce, on a daily basis, through our interactions (#6)

Therefore, Ananda Valley serves as a “model of a regenerative lifestyle” through its spirituality and the healthy culture it creates. In participants' beliefs, if Ananda Valley was to be used as a model in the future when more ecovillages/ spiritual communities are built, the aspect that should be prioritized is an open community. If “transcendence can create more passion and depth to our aspirations; it can moderate how we interact with ourselves and others; it can help to reinterpret our perceptions of our environment and redefine the goals we pursue” (Piedmont, 1999, p. 990), spirituality can create deeper and more honest social bonds. This documents the effects of spirituality on awareness of social justice and community, and extends to the environment: “spirituality includes a sense of connectedness with others, which can extend feelings of connection to nature” (Preston and Shin, 2022, p. 2).
However, data suggests that spirituality may not just increase sustainability; it may directly cause it. While all ten interviewees reported an interest in environmental attitudes before joining Ananda Valley, six out of ten were actively searching for a spiritual community as opposed to an “ecovillage” (personal communication). These members stated that, in their mind, since the sustainability of Ananda Valley stemmed directly from its spirituality, the spiritual component is their first priority.

*It's not only about wishing the best for... the planet, for the living beings, for everything, but also making the best for that for the welfare. Everything. And that... comes from... spirituality, especially in Ananda Marga practices, because the meaning of Ananda Marga is not only about your self-realization, it's the service to... the others. And these others are very vast, right. It's not only about human beings,... it's land, it's animals, plants, mountains, rivers*” (#7)

The above-mentioned sentence shows that, while sustainability is still a priority, Ananda Marga spirituality creates that sustainability by virtue of its “service to others” component. Participant number five made a similar statement, that she came to Ananda Valley because it’s where she felt she could “be at service the most.”

Although this data could indicate that Ananda Valley attracts service-minded people – likely a true statement – members who did not initially intend to join an Ananda Marga community reported similar statements; this is where the “self-realization” component of Ananda Marga becomes relevant to environmental attitudes. Participant number four, who proclaimed to be “very scared of people who have an ideology,” said that Ananda Marga’s universal mantra, *Baba Nam Kevalam*, allows her to feel “openness.” She believes this feeling, stemming from “common practice and common values,” is the base of Ananda Valley’s sustainability. Additionally, members believe striving towards *Parama Purusha* is necessary while engaging in environmental activism, because it keeps people positive, hopeful, and focused. This idea is best summarized by participant number three:

*Imagine you go too far. You... go to farm your organic land, make so much effort to farm in a way that is respectful and sustainable. But, you go with anger against the system and against the situation, you go with desperation and hopelessness for the future, you go with fear that the world might end...and you're in this low state. Imagine you... go to protest or whatever in this mindset. Imagine you talk to people, try to inspire people to do better from that place, or [inspire]... revolutionary, or regenerative, or sustainable behavior from that emotional place. Probably you will not have such a happy reaction...eventually [this emotional place] will lead to distraction. So, we bring ourselves to a place, to an emotional state where we are higher, and when you go higher, you see clearer...the higher you go, the clearer you can see. Like the ego. So without that, there could not be Ananda Valley, and I'll stretch it even more. Without that we cannot change the world. [It's] impossible. You know why? Because in order to manifest, to create that righteous, and just, and beautiful, and blissful, and happy, and peaceful, world outside, we must create it, and manifest it, inside first... If you don't have that inside, how can you bring it outside?*

Participant number three is sharing a common view for members of Ananda Valley:
without spirituality, many participants would not be as invested in environmentalism.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented above are consistent with the hypothesis that spirituality intensifies environmental attitudes and sustainable habits. Further, the data suggests that spirituality may create sustainability, instead of merely strengthening it. In interviews, members of Ananda Valley all stated – in more personal and varying ways – that the Ananda Marga motto, “for the liberation of the self and the welfare of all” is used as a guideline in their environmentalism, and inspires them to become more active fighters for justice in their communities and for the climate. Self-realization, or gaining an understanding of the inner self through spiritual practices, relates to spirituality because it creates a deeper connection to the “supreme consciousness,” frees the mind from religious/societal dogmas, and creates a deeper community connection. Connection to the supreme consciousness means a deeper connection with nature, increasing people’s motivation to create lasting and effective environmental solutions; freedom from religious dogmas revives one’s connection to this supreme; and strong community bonds create love and inspire collective action to be taken against climate change. When one becomes more self-realized, one becomes closer to attaining Parama Purusha, or connection to the source of life. Further, Parama Purusha is achieved by service work. The founder of Ananda Marga additionally started the PROUT Institute, a socio-economic service organization. Ananda Marga MUs work closely with PROUT, and similar organizations, to give back to their local communities. Additionally, participants believed that the societal model of ecovillages is in itself environmental work because ecovillages are less dependent on governmental grids; similarly, the tight-knit community, achieved by spirituality, is the key to sustainability and an aspect more societies should adopt.

These findings are consistent with the found literature on communal living and how spirituality impacts environmental attitudes – studies have correlated positive environmental attitudes and spirituality (Preston and Shin, 2022, p. 1), and discussed how collective action influences more humanitarian ventures (Vestergren et al., 2019, p. 78) – including additional information on how spirituality may actually create environmental attitudes.

Future research is recommended on the effectiveness of these sustainable practices and how they vary across different Ananda Marga MUs, since case studies are not generalizable, though it is doubtless similar themes will be found across MUs because of the shared philosophies. Additionally, this paper does not consider other factors as to the overall sustainability of Ananda Valley such as colonialist legacies in Portugal, the gray-area of cultural appropriation involved when a [majority White] community follows spiritual practices based in India, or other previous Ananda Marga controversies. Despite these limitations, this research can be used in order to create more effective climate solutions. If spirituality intensifies environmental attitudes, it would be beneficial to add a spiritual component to climate solutions; this could mean many things, but, based on the data, the author recommends simply involving people in nature as much as possible. Participants felt most spiritual when they were connected to their surroundings and helping others, and exposure to nature symbiotically involves both of those. Spirituality intensifies sustainability by enhancing connections to nature, others, and the self, inspiring more holistic and effective climate solutions.
References


Nataraja: Shiva as the Cosmic Dancer. (n.d.). Retrieved November 16, 2022, from


## Appendix A
Terms and Concepts: An Overview of Ananda Marga Spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ananda Marga</td>
<td>“The path of bliss.” Ananda Marga is the organization/spiritual philosophy that Ananda Valley is a part of. Their motto is “for the liberation of the self and the welfare of all,” which manifests in two different paths for members to practice: self-realization and service to others. Both of these aspects are integral to the practices of this “way of life” (Ananda Marga).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ananda Valley</td>
<td>The name of the particular Master Unit in Northern Portugal that is the case study for this paper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Baba nam Kevalam”</td>
<td>The universal mantra of Ananda Marga; means “infinite love is all that exists” in Sanskrit (Kiirtan, Ananda Marga)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dada</td>
<td>Monks in the Ananda Marga philosophy are called “dada” as a term of respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dogma</td>
<td>“A doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith and morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church” (Merriam-Webster)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiirtan</td>
<td>The spiritual practice members of Ananda Marga engage in, involving physical movement and singing the universal mantra “Baba nam Kevalam.” This practice occurs twice a day for the average members of the ecovillage, once in the morning before breakfast, and once in the evening before dinner. Spiritual leaders in the organization engage in kiirtan more frequently throughout the day. In Ananda Valley, kiirtan lasts 30 minutes, followed by 30 minutes of meditation; however, on Sundays, kiirtan is performed for longer and is followed by other, traditional dances in addition to the meditation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishvara Pranidhana</td>
<td>“To take shelter in the supreme” (#3); “the spiritual act of surrendering the self fully to the Divine, and trusting the wisdom of the divine to guide the life and actions of the self in order to work in the world” (Yogapedia)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master Unit (MU)</td>
<td>The term for an Ananda Marga ecovillage, particularly where the members of a certain ecovillage gather, work, eat, and [some] sleep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parama Purusha</td>
<td>The source of life; the creator of the world. The goal of human beings is to attain Parama Purusha, which is done by meditation (self-realization) and service work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Post-materialists: Typically middle-class, white demographic. People who consider themselves to be personally beyond typical habits of consumption for an upper-income nation. “Postmaterialists…tend to have a higher regard for nature and seek less hierarchical, more egalitarian relationships” (Ergas, 2010, p. 37)

Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT) Institute: An institute created by Shrii Shrii Anandamurti. “Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT) is a guiding vision for transformative social change, a comprehensive paradigm for socio-economic planning, and an integrated design system for socio-economic development” (PROUT); seen as an alternative to exploitative capitalism systems.

Shrii Shrii Anandamurti/Baba: The spiritual guru and founder of the Ananda Marga philosophy; Shrii Shrii Anandamurti is revered by “margis” – followers of the Ananda Marga philosophy – and is affectionately called “baba,” or “father” in Sanskrit.

**Appendix B**

**Interview Questions**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. Where are you originally from?
4. How long have you been living in Ananda Valley?
5. How long are you planning on staying in Ananda Valley?
6. Were you raised in a specific religion?
   a. If yes, do you follow that religion now? Why or why not?
   b. If not, do you consider yourself to be following one now? Why or why not?
7. Can you tell me the story of when you found Ananda Valley, and what led you to joining the community?
   a. Would you have sought out other ecovillages or did Ananda stand out to you?
      i. If yes, was it related to the community’s spirituality?
   b. Was the spiritual dimension of ecovillages a reason you wanted to join?
8. Do you think ecovillages are the future?
9. What do you think is the most “regenerative” aspect of Ananda Valley?
10. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?
11. Can you tell me about what spirituality means to you?
12. Has your definition of spirituality changed during your time spent in Ananda Valley?
13. How does your definition of spirituality impact the environmental work you do in Ananda Valley?
14. How does the communities’ spirituality impact the sustainability of Ananda Valley?